

joseph

A Life of Surrender to the Son of God

A CHRISTMAS ADVENT DEVOTIONAL BY
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ADVENT 2020





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PREFACE

I think it was probably about fifteen years ago when, on a date with my girlfriend Candace Cross, I saw the movie The Nativity, about the birth of Jesus, at the theater. The filmmakers paid far more attention to Joseph than I was used to, and I couldn't help being impressed by him. The Joseph of The Nativity was so meek and patient, yet strong and full of faith, and above all an inspiring model of sacrificial love. As I left the theater, I couldn't get this character out of my mind. The experience sent me back to my Bible, to pay closer attention to Joseph and his role in the Christmas story. I was amazed to find that there really was so much more to this understated man of faith than I had noticed before.

Twelve Christmases after this, a lot had changed in my life: Candace Cross was now Candace Smith, we had three children of our own, and I was serving as the pastor of Sharon Baptist Church in Savannah, Tennessee. But I was more convinced than ever of the value of studying the biblical Joseph's life of faith. So during the Advent season of 2017, I preached a series of sermons to our church family about Joseph's Christian discipleship. You will find the content of these messages, along with a few more, in this little book. All together, there are 31 devotional chapters, designed to read each day in the month of December. It is my prayer that these little articles and the Scripture readings that accompany them will encourage us all to trust and obey the same God that Joseph did so long ago—the God who leads his people down many unexpected paths, but who always writes a better story for our lives than we ever could for ourselves. Like Joseph and like all of God's people, I know that we will find him faithful.

Merry Christmas!

Pastor Eric

DECEMBER 1:

the two Josephs

Bible Reading: Genesis 50:15-26, Matthew 1:16

The Bible doesn't tell us why Jacob (Matthew 1:16) and his wife decided to name their baby "Joseph." Then as now, people name their children what they do for all kinds of different reasons. They could have just liked the sound of it. Maybe, like in my alliteration-loving family (everyone has a "C" name in my house except for me), they already had a "Josiah" and a "Judah," and were just looking for another "J!" Or, perhaps, they felt pressure to honor a family member named Joseph. We don't know.

But it's very possible that Joseph's parents named him for the Old Testament hero Joseph, from the book of Genesis. Whether they intended this or not, it's clear that God intended for us to hear many echoes from that first Joseph in the life of this baby.

It was probably fifteen years ago that I was home from college on Christmas break, reading through Matthew's account of the Christmas story. I can still remember where I sat in my parents' living room when all the parallels between the Bible's two Josephs started jumping out at me. Both are the "son of Jacob" (Gen 37:1-3; Matt 1:16). God visits both of them in a series of vivid dreams (Gen 37:5-11; Matt 1:20-25, 2:13, 2:19). Both sojourn in Egypt (Gen 37-50; Matt 2:13-15). Both are "righteous men," and yet their lives are often marked by hardship, danger, and confusion. Both are chosen by God for spectacularly important tasks: God used the first Joseph to rescue the sons of Israel (Gen 50:20); he uses the second Joseph to be the earthly father of the Savior of the world. Both Josephs are

ordinary people who find themselves suddenly swept up into something much bigger than themselves: the grand purposes of a sovereign and saving God. (If it has been a while since you have read the Old Testament Joseph's story, or if you have never read it, please do—you'll thank me later! It's in Gen 37–50)

What do the Bible's two Josephs teach us? When we come to God by faith in Jesus, we place our lives in the hands of the same God they did. We belong to a God who, to borrow a phrase from that first Joseph, no matter what evil may enter the lives of his children, nevertheless “means it for our good” (Gen 50:20; cf Rom 8:28–31). He is sovereign (he has all power and control), he is wise (he always knows exactly what to do and when to do it, to bring about the best results), and he is on our side (he promises us that he is for us, in Christ, again and again). What comfort!

One of the first places that Joseph of Nazareth could have turned to learn about the God he belonged to was his own family tree. We can read it for ourselves in Matthew 1:1–17. To us, a long, dry list of strange names does not seem like a very promising start to a good story. Many Christians' Bible-reading plans have been de-railed by slamming into one of these genealogies! But Matthew, under the inspiration of God's Spirit, has woven this genealogy together with purpose: he wants to teach us about the character of the God who ruled the lives of the two Josephs—the God of the Christmas story—the God to whom we who trust in Christ belong. This genealogy is so rich, in fact, that we will spend the first week of December mining its riches.

DECEMBER 2:

joseph's faithful god

Bible Reading: Matthew 1:1-17, Genesis 12:1-3

The genealogy in Matthew 1:1–17 strikes us at first as just another boring list of names. But Joseph and his fellow first-century Jewish readers would have seen much more: this list of names summarizes the captivating story of God and his people! If you know the backstory of these names, you realize that this list is really a summary of the entire Old Testament, which is a story about the enduring faithfulness of God. Way back in Genesis 12:1-3, God’s good world was in shambles because of man’s sin. But instead of destroying the world, God called Abram. Abram was 75-years-old, with no children, and a barren wife. But God made Abram a spectacular promise: If you trust me, I’ll multiply your children into a great nation. I’ll put them in a good land. And I’ll use them to restore my blessing to the world. This promise is what the Old Testament is about. The rest of Joseph’s family tree declares that God has been faithful—he never gave up on his promise!

God has been faithful, even when his people were not. Read the story of those first generations of God’s people sometime—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (Matt 1:2). They did not always trust God while he worked his plan. They doubted. They disobeyed. They lied, cheated, and stole. They forgot about God’s plan while they chased their own plans. Left to them, the plan would have failed! But this family tree preaches the good news that God is more committed to rescuing sinners than we are to being rescued. Even when we, like those patriarchs, are faithless, God is still faithful (2 Tim 2:13).

God has been faithful even when all hope seemed lost. Years after Abraham, God told David he'd save the world through a King in his line (Matt 1:6; 2 Sam 7:11). But David's sons led the people away from God, until God finally used evil Babylon to destroy the Kingdom and carry the people into exile. All hope seemed lost! How could God save the world through a king and kingdom that no longer existed? But 70 years later, God brought a remnant back from exile. He had kept David's line, and the promise, alive!

God has also been faithful when it seemed like nothing was happening. If you've never heard of the people in Matt 1:12-15, don't feel bad; I haven't either. No one has! That's because God did nothing spectacular after the Exile. There was no king on the throne. No miracles that we're aware of. At the time of Joseph's birth, more than 350 years have passed since God has spoken a single word. It looked like God was inactive; it felt like he had forgotten. The promises seemed to have expired. But even in the silence, God was faithful. In the darkness, he was still at work. When God announces to Joseph (David's descendant!) that he's sending Jesus the Savior, *we see his enduring faithfulness.*

Maybe today, you are having a hard time trusting God. Maybe you've been faithless for so long, you're sure that God has given up on you. Maybe something so heart-breaking has happened in your life, you've lost hope that God can bring anything good out of it. Or maybe God just seems silent, inactive, or far away. Joseph's family tree reminds us to look up and see the enduring faithfulness of God. His plan is still advancing: he will restore his blessing to our world through King Jesus! We can trust his promises!

DECEMBER 3:

joseph's redeeming god

Bible Reading: Matthew 1:1-17

If you spent time with family during the Thanksgiving holiday, you probably told some stories that you always do when you're together: funny stories, proud moments, touching memories. But there are probably other family stories you never tell: "remember that time Uncle Mike got arrested at my graduation for public intoxication? Or when Aunt Flossie robbed that liquor store on Christmas Eve?" We've all got family stories that are embarrassing, awkward, even shameful. We don't mention these things; we just try to put them behind us. That's what's so interesting about Jospeh's family tree. Matthew seems to go out of his way to draw attention to the family's darkest moments!

There's Tamar (1:3). Genesis 38 tells us how Tamar dressed up as a prostitute to entice her father-in-law into impregnating her—that's how little Perez and Zerah got here (1:3)! Then there's Rahab (1:5). Rahab didn't pretend to be a prostitute like Tamar—she actually was a prostitute (Josh 2:1)! But the most tragic of all story belongs to "the wife of Uriah." Her real name is Bathsheba. While her husband Uriah was off fighting for David's kingdom, David saw her bathing, desired her, and took her into his bed. When David learned that she was carrying his child, he had Uriah killed, and then married Bathsheba to cover his sin (2 Sam 10-11). As judgment for this dark web of adultery, murder and deception, the child died. Later, David and Bathsheba had Solomon (1:7).

Why would Matthew call our attention to all these sordid stories?

Because the ugly sin and foolish choices we make is is the reason we need Christmas in the first place. We are a mess. We've lived on our own terms, apart from God, and we've placed ourselves under God's judgment in the process. We've brought sorrow and brokenness into our lives by our choices, and into others' lives, too. We're sinners in desperate need of saving!

And that's why the angel tells Joseph, "Call his Name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matt 1:21) King Jesus came so that sinners could be made welcome into God's family again (Rom 15:7). He did not come to reward good, pure people who always get it right, but to redeem bad, unclean people like us, who always get it wrong. The King came down to clothe himself in our sin and shame, and to receive God's judgment against us at the cross. He rose from the dead to give forgiveness, righteousness, a fresh start, a place in his family, to sinners. All by grace!

Do you wonder if you belong in God's family? Is there something about your life, or your past, that you're afraid people will find out about? Or maybe you have accepted God's forgiveness, but you have given up on ever being useful or valuable to him again. Will you hear the good news that God is preaching to you in this genealogy? Joseph's family tree reminds us that this Christmas, we can stop living in regret, and stop pretending we're better than we are: we have a King who has already loved us at our worst and lowest point. Let's rejoice in his redeeming love! Let's ask him to use our story, our life, our past, as a platform for his redeeming grace, to advance his glory.

DECEMBER 4:

joseph's welcoming god

Bible Reading: Matthew 1:1-17, Romans 15:7

As a Jewish man, Joseph would have known all about God's many Old Testament promises of a coming Messiah. For instance, Zechariah 9:10 promised that the Messiah's "rule will be from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth." Like all faithful Jews, Joseph and his family would have anxiously awaited for God's true King, who would rescue them from their enemies, and put right everything that had gone wrong in their world. But many Jews in Joseph's day thought that the King was coming just for them. He was coming to rescue them, and destroy all those pagan Gentile nations. From a Jewish perspective, Gentiles (non-Jews) were outsiders. They were ignorant of God's Law, immoral in their behavior, and unworthy of God's attention.

But Joseph's family tree hints that God has a different plan in mind. Jesus Himself will make this clear later in Matthew's Gospel: God's Messiah, Jesus, was coming to bring an unexpected welcome from Heaven to all kinds of sinners. Jew and Gentile. Moral and immoral. "Churchy" and non-churchy. All needed a Savior, and God's Savior was coming for them all. Where do we see this in Joseph's family tree?

Here in the very line of the Jewish Messiah, we find Rahab (1:5). Rahab was not a Jew but a Canaanite, a sworn enemy of Israel in the Old Testament. But Rahab was rescued from the judgment of Jericho when she turned to Israel's God (Joshua 2, Hebrews 11:31). And there's also Ruth (1:5). Ruth was not a Jew either, but a

Moabite. Moabites were Israel's bitterest enemies, forbidden to ever join in the worship of God's people at the Temple. But Ruth told Naomi, her Jewish mother-in-law, "your God will be my God" (Ruth 1:16). Ruth turned from her idols and took refuge under the wings of the God of Israel. Like Rahab, Ruth the outsider was brought into God's family.

This has, in fact, been God's plan all along. Abram's call in Genesis 12 comes right after the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. At Babel, God judged the nations by confusing their languages and scattering them all over the world. But in the next chapter, God tells Abram: "I will not leave the nations in the darkness of the curse of sin. No, through you, ALL the families of the earth will be blessed!" And now, at long last, God's Son has come to fulfill that promise. He came to secure the blessing, the warm welcome of a holy God into his happy family, for people who do not deserve it and never expected it. He does it by dying in their place, bearing their judgement, and rising to win their victory over sin and death. This is the Christmas gospel!

Matthew's gospel begins with this genealogy, but it closes with that famous passage we call "the Great Commission" (Matthew 28:18–20). There, Jesus the risen King sends messengers out into all nations with the good news that God's enemies can become his friends; those far from God can be brought near; outsiders will be included in God's family, by trusting and bowing to Jesus. Have you experienced God's welcome through faith in Jesus Christ? If you have, then the best response is to extend that welcome to others (Romans 15:7)!

DECEMBER 5:

living in god's big story

Bible Reading: Matthew 1:1-17, Acts 20:24

We've spent several days now learning about the character of God from Joseph's family tree. But we can also learn from it a great deal about ourselves, and the lives that God has called us to live as his people. Just imagine that Joseph was given access to this genealogy, and saw his name at the bottom of this long string of other names, stretching all the way back to Abram. What would this teach him about himself? The first thing it would teach him is that he was made to live in God's big story.

There are basically two ways that you and I can think about our lives. In the first way, I view my life primarily as a story about me. My life is a story about my own pursuit of glory, happiness, and personal fulfillment. My life story is about me chasing my dreams and achieving my full potential. It may involve athletic achievement, or getting into a good school, finding true love, landing a great job, becoming popular, making good money, buying a dream home, having a beautiful family. Whatever the details, life is a story about me. When I think of life this way, God may be involved, but only as a supporting actor. He becomes like one of those "little people" I thank at my Academy Award acceptance speech as I bask in the spotlight: "Finally, I couldn't have done any of this without God. He made this all possible. You're the best, God!" In this first way of viewing life, I invite God into my story, to help me achieve my glory. This way of thinking comes so natural to American Christians that we don't even realize we're doing it.

But the Bible shows us another way to view your life: a story about God and his glory.

Here, I'm not the star of my own little personal story. Instead, I'm one of billions of bit players in a huge story about God. God is the author and the director of the story, and he is also the star. In this alternative view of reality, my life goal is no longer to attain glory for myself, but for God. In this story, the path to fulfillment comes not through standing in the spotlight, but in aiming the spotlight at him (see Paul, in Acts 20:24).

If Joseph were to study this genealogy, it would become immediately obvious that his birth is not the beginning of a little story about him. Instead, he is stepping into a huge story that has been going on since the beginning of the Bible. It's a story that involves many different people—Abram and David, Tamar and Rahab—but the story is not about any of them. The story is about God. A God who keeps his promises to rescue sinful people for his glory, even when it means coming down and becoming one of us in Jesus Christ. Just as God invited Abraham, Rahab, and David into his story, he now invites Joseph. Which way will Joseph choose to view his life? If the story is about him and his glory, he's not going to do any of the hard things that God will call him to do. Why would he? But if the story is about God and his glory, he can play his part with joy. The irony is that all the men in Joseph's day who lived for themselves are forgotten. That tells us where real significance comes from! So which way do you view the story of your life? Joseph teaches us to find joy in God's story. Will you?

DECEMBER 6:

playing god's assigned part

Bible Reading: Matthew 1:1-17, 1 Corinthians 7:17, Ephesians 2:10

Before December is over, the Smith family will watch "A Charlie Brown Christmas" many times. At one point (after the Peanuts break off all those sweet dance moves!), Lucy walks around the room assigning parts in the Christmas play. Everyone has something to say about their part. "Do Innkeeper's wives have naturally curly hair?" Frieda asks. "Every Christmas it's the same—I always end up playing a shepherd!" gripes Shermy. I think of that scene as I look at this list of names. These men and women each had a role to play in God's story, and none of them got to pick. Some lived in times of great victory, others in days of great tragedy, others simply in a season of great boredom. Some are major public figures, others raised families in quiet obscurity. All contributed to God's big story, but God assigned the roles. On the one hand, this should make us feel very small before the Lord, because we don't have near the control in our lives as we think! On the other hand, it should fill us with immense dignity and purpose: nothing about my life is random, accidental, or meaningless. God has assigned me a role to play in his story, personally selected by him.

Think of the amazing language of 1 Corinthians 7:17: "Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, to which God has called him." According to Paul, the Lord has "assigned" me the life he wants me to lead. The place where I live, my family situation, my personality, my skills and talents, the work that I do, the people I rub shoulders with, all are part of that assignment.

Paul also uses another strong word for this: “called.” You don’t have to be a missionary to have a “calling” from God! Every believer has a unique “vocation,” or a calling, to glorify God in his story.

There are contributions that God has planned for you to make in his story that, in God’s economy, no one else can make. “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before hand, that we should walk in them.”

(Ephesians 2:10)

That’s how it was for Joseph. God had assigned him a role in his story. It would not be an easy role: Joseph will be uprooted and endangered; he’ll be misunderstood and maligned; then he’ll be overshadowed and forgotten. I wonder if there were times when Joseph, as we often do, wished to swap parts with someone else? But from our vantage point, what a part he played! Guardian of the Messiah. Earthly father of God’s Son. Only Joseph could play that part, because God had prepared him specifically for it. Some of that preparation is obvious: his family (the lineage of David), his hometown (Bethlehem, where Messiah must be born), his spiritual background (he is a righteous man). But even the fact that he was a poor carpenter and a quiet man (he never speaks a word!) surely went into his preparation. Joseph may have sometimes wished he was different, as I often do. But he was just who God wanted him to be, to play the part God has assigned him to play. What could be more encouraging? In a season when we’re so prone to discontentment and frustration, regret over things in the past, tempted to compare our lives to others’, Joseph teaches us to find joy in our calling. You and I cannot do anything more significant than play the part God has lovingly assigned to us for his glory. Let’s trust him today with the part he has given us, and play it for his glory!

DECEMBER 7:

moving toward god's happy ending

Bible Reading: Matthew 1:1-17, Revelation 21:1-7

You're probably used to seeing Joseph in a nativity scene like the one I remember from my childhood. He is so calm! A perfectly peaceful ceramic statuette, gazing tenderly at baby Jesus. I doubt this is an accurate reflection. Just think about how chaotic Joseph's life is about to get after we move out of this genealogy!

First, he learns that his fiancée is having someone else's baby. Then, an angel appears to him in a dream, and tells him to marry her anyway! Next, the government orders him to take a difficult and expensive journey to Bethlehem, his ancestral home, to be registered for a census and pay his taxes. There, he has to perform the duty of a midwife, in an emergency childbirth in a barn. After that, a psychotic king comes after his family, so he has to hide out in a witness protection program in Egypt for a couple of years. Finally, God tells him to move back to his hometown of Nazareth, where all of his neighbors whisper about him and his dubious family situation. I'd call that a pretty rough ride!

But that's where Joseph's family tree comes in handy for us again. Joseph's genealogy reminds us that, over the long haul of the whole Old Testament, there have been many points when it seemed like God had forgotten the plot line. But he never has. Stepping back and viewing this genealogy as a whole, it's so clear that God has always been moving toward the happy ending he promised in the beginning. It is also clear that God has never minded taking his time in advancing his story. But he can always be trusted.

No matter what may be going on in the story right now; you can trust that God is always moving you toward his happy ending.

A couple of summers ago, I learned that my favorite uncle was in the final stages of Parkinson's disease at a hospice facility in Collierville. Growing up, I had spent every Thanksgiving in his home. Duke was bigger than life to me: so happy and kind, so energetic and hospitable. He became a hero to me. Now, after a decade of battling this debilitating disease, he was confined to a hospital bed, with only a few days left in this world. As I visited with my family, I noticed on a table the pieces of an enormous jigsaw puzzle scattered everywhere, in total disorder. Next to this pile of pieces lay the boxtop, with a picture of what the end product would look like. What a metaphor, I thought, as I stood at Uncle Duke's bedside. Our lives are so much like those puzzle pieces—except we don't get to see the boxtop! Only God has the box, and he's not showing it. What God does is promise that he is making something beautiful out of the disorder and difficulty of our lives—we just have to trust him (Ecclesiastes 3:1–15).

It's a lesson that our New Testament Joseph may have learned from his namesake, the Old Testament Joseph. In life's darkest hours, God's people can always say that "God meant it for good" (Gen 50:20). It is a lesson that our Joseph taught to his son, Jesus, who trusted God all the way through the darkness of the cross and the grave. On Easter morning, God showed himself faithful to Jesus. In Christ, he will be faithful to us!

DECEMBER 8:

immanuel?

Bible Reading: Matthew 1:18-23, Isaiah 7:14

The Bible supplies many names for Jesus, but perhaps none is so comforting to God's people as the name "Immanuel." It means "God with us." The name first shows up in a prophecy in Isaiah 7:14: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." Here in our passage, the angel who appears to Joseph applies that name to Jesus.

To know that Jesus is "Immanuel" tells me that, as one of his people, I am never forsaken. I am never forgotten. I am never alone in the darkness. "For he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'" (Hebrews 13:7) John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, found so much comfort in this name that he clung to it on his deathbed. Wesley's final words on earth were, "Best of all, God is with us." Immanuel—what a comforting name!

But the irony of our passage is that the first time Joseph hears Jesus called "Immanuel," God is not making him feel very "comfortable." Joseph must be feeling about as uncomfortable as any man ever has!

It is not a misprint that today's Scripture reading stops short of the end of the paragraph. I'm afraid that we tend to rush past Joseph's discomfort in 1:18–23 in our hurry to get to the resolution of 1:24–25. But when we do that, we miss a vital element of the Christmas story, and a crucial insight about walking with God. The truth is, that even if we know better, we still assume that if God is with us, life should be relatively calm, pleasant, and predictable.

And that means when life is instead stressful, chaotic, painful, and difficult, we immediately assume God isn't with us. How could he be?

That's why it's important for us to pause and reflect on Joseph's discomfort here in Matthew 1:18–23. It reminds us that while "God is with us" in Christ, this will not always mean what we expect it to mean. Joseph's story reminds us not to mistake turmoil in our lives for the absence of God. In fact, when life gets hard, God may be closer, more involved, more at work than he has ever been. That was certainly the case for Joseph. We'll spend the next few days reflecting on some of the surprising results of the presence of God.

DECEMBER 9:

god's disappointing presence

Bible Reading: Matthew 1:18-23, John 13:7

About once a year, I teach an eight-week seminary course on Monday nights in Jackson. Most of my students are young, just out of college. Many are recently married; more than one has gotten married during our semester. Others are having their first children; more than one has had a baby born during our course. All of them are eager to start ministry. It's so fun for me to be around these students, because they are all looking forward to life. They are all dreaming and planning, excited for the future!

That's how we ought to think of Joseph when we first meet him in Matthew 1:18. He is only a poor, small-town carpenter. But he is also a godly young man, betrothed to a godly young woman. His whole life is ahead of him. In a betrothal, the couple is legally married, but still living apart, awaiting the wedding. So Joseph must be full of dreams, plans, and anticipation of a bright future.

And that is when Mary, his fiancee, is “found to be with child.”

Joseph probably learned of Mary’s pregnancy after she returned from a three-month absence from Nazareth, when she stayed with her cousin Elizabeth. The moment Joseph discovers Mary’s condition, all of his dreams, his plans, his excitement for the future, go up in smoke. It certainly would not have felt like “God was with him” in that moment. It would have felt instead like the defining disappointment of his life.

Joseph's situation reminds me of an old Puritan book I once read called *The Crook in the Lot*. The title is based on Ecclesiastes 7:13: "Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?" Joseph suddenly finds a "crook in his lot," a "crooked thing" in his life that he can't straighten out and can't understand, though he desperately wants to. We all know what that's like: to watch your plans crumble, your dreams vanish. To realize life isn't going to work out as you hoped. You may have a "crook in your lot" right now. God seems uninvolved in those moments.

But something is happening to Joseph in this passage that our high school English teachers taught us about. It's called "dramatic irony." That's what happens in a story when we, the readers, know something that the character doesn't. All that Joseph knows is that his wife is carrying someone else's baby, and his plans are in ruins. But we know (from v18) that this child is a miracle of the Holy Spirit. We know that for God to finish his plan to save us, he's got to smash Joseph's plans. We know that on the other side of this, Joseph won't be questioning or cursing God, but praising him. We know God isn't far from Joseph; he's so, so near. But all Joseph knows is that there's a crook in his lot. That should teach us something about the disappointments in our own lives. As Jesus told Peter in John 13:7: "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward, you will understand." From heaven's perspective, there's always dramatic irony in our disappointments. God is always doing so much more than we can see, or understand, from our vantage point. The next time Immanuel disappoints you, remember Joseph.

DECEMBER 10:

god's unsettling presence

Bible Reading: Matthew 1:18-23

When we read in v20 that Joseph is “considering these things,” he seems to be as unemotional as the wooden figure in your nativity scene. But try to put yourself in Joseph’s place. He has just learned that his fiancee is pregnant with someone else’s child, and that all his dreams are now up in smoke. This is not a calm, unemotional “considering.” In fact, this same word for “consider” is actually used in the next chapter to describe Herod’s rage after the wise men tricked him (Matthew 2:16). It conveys the idea of strong emotion: Joseph is churning, brooding, fuming. He probably can’t sleep, and doesn’t want to eat. He’s probably distracted at work, and maybe even throws a few tools every once in a while. And why not? He must feel hurt, betrayed, angry, embarrassed. Something precious has been stolen from him. Maybe he also feels a little confused, because he’s tried so hard to live the “right” way before God, yet gets repaid with this devastating loss.

And did you notice that God doesn’t rush in to explain everything and relieve Joseph’s stress? We all expect God to keep us apprised of what he’s doing in our lives and why. Yet God doesn’t seem to feel this obligation to us, does he? If he did, we wouldn’t have about 90% of the Psalms! No, God doesn’t mind unsettling his people. Apparently, God wants us to learn to trust him, not some detailed, five-year plan that he prints for us. He often uses these churning, unsettled seasons like Joseph is experiencing to do something important in us.

Joseph has a decision to make. According to Deuteronomy 22:23, a woman unfaithful to her betrothed is subject to stoning. The Jews rarely enforced this law, but it reminds us how serious this is. More common was the public divorce ceremony. Joseph could accuse Mary before the community, perform a shaming ritual, and send her away with a divorce certificate. For most Jewish men, this would be the best option: it upholds the Law and allows Joseph to transfer his shame onto Mary, then move on with his life. But Joseph doesn't want to shame Mary. Even though he thinks she's ruined his life, he doesn't want to return evil for evil. He wants to uphold God's Law, but in the most gracious way possible. So he decides on a private divorce, before two witnesses. The text commends Joseph for this; it calls him "a righteous man."

I think that this tense, unsettling, painful period in Joseph's life is a "test." The kind of test that reveals what's in Joseph's heart, that reveals the kind of man that he is, as when God "tested" Abraham in Genesis 22. God already knows what's inside of us, or course, but in our tests, God wants to reveal what is inside to us (see James 1:2–4). Why test Joseph? Because God wants to entrust Joseph with his own Son. But can God trust the man responsible for raising the Lord Jesus? (Incidentally, where do we think that Jesus first learns to be a man of "grace and truth" [John 1:17; John 8:1–11], but from Joseph?)

The next time you're unsettled, you might wonder, what kind of test might be going on here? What precious thing may God want to trust me with in the future? Joseph reminds me to trust God in my most unsettled moments.

DECEMBER 11:

god's terrifying presence

Bible Reading: Matthew 1:18-23

When Joseph falls asleep, God finally tells him what's going on in his life: the child Mary is carrying was conceived in a miracle of the Holy Spirit. The baby is God's long-promised Messiah, and God has chosen Mary and Joseph to be his earthly parents. We tend to focus on the comfort that this dream brings to Joseph. Of course, it would have been a great relief to learn that Mary has in fact been faithful to him all along. So we can think of this dream of Joseph's like the end of a romantic comedy, where a misunderstanding that almost split the happy couple is cleared up, everyone has a good laugh, and the wedding proceeds. But somehow, I don't think that "relief" was Joseph's primary reaction to this dream! After all, God starts the dream by saying, "Don't be afraid." Tonight, if I wake you up out of a dead sleep with a phone call, and my first words are, "Now, don't freak out," that means you should probably freak out! When God starts with "Don't be afraid," it's because he's about to scare the pants off you. God here calls Joseph to do two terrifying things.

First, Joseph is to take Mary as his wife. By doing this, everyone will assume that Joseph is the baby's father, meaning that they both broke God's Law during the betrothal period. Joseph's hard-earned good name will be gone, with a massive, life-altering impact. Of course, he could always tell people that Mary's baby was conceived by a miracle of the Holy Spirit—everyone will believe that, right?! By marrying Mary, God calls Joseph not to roll his shame onto Mary, but roll Mary's shame on himself.

Second, Joseph is to be the child's father. That's what's going on when God tells Joseph to name the baby. This is a father's duty. God is not asking Joseph to be some stage prop in Jesus's birth and childhood. Joseph is to be the father of Jesus, with all the responsibility this entails: protecting, providing, instructing, raising him as his son. Fatherhood is scary under any circumstances! But this baby was conceived by the Holy Spirit: a miracle mirroring the creation account of Genesis 1:1–2, when the Spirit hovered over the dark waters and brought light and life into being out of nothing. Now a new creation is dawning in Mary's womb in this baby: God the Eternal Son, united to a human nature. After that long list of failed saviors in Matthew 1:1–17, this baby is called "Jesus," God saves, because God himself has come to save his people from their sins and restore a new creation! And Joseph is God's chosen father for his Son.

I suggest that this dream scares Joseph far more than it relieves him. God is laying on this young man an overwhelming call, far more than he can handle on his own. It is a costly call, requiring him to let go of things he'd rather hold onto, and take hold of things he'd rather run away from.

But that's how it often is when Immanuel draws near in our lives. Joseph's calling, to be the earthly guardian of the Lord Jesus, is of course unique in world history. But in many fundamental ways, Joseph simply receives from God the same call that Jesus will issue throughout Matthew's gospel. The same, scary call he gives every one of us: follow me. Surrender all, trust me, and fear not: Jesus is Immanuel, which means "God with us."

DECEMBER 12:

getting into the christmas spirit

Bible Reading: Philippians 2:1-11

You can count on it: at some point in whatever Christmas movie or TV special you watch this season, someone will make a big statement about the true “Christmas spirit.” Usually, the speaker will identify the Christmas spirit with something like: being with the people you love, or being kind to others, or giving instead of getting. All of these, of course, are good, as far as they go. But from the Bible’s perspective, none of them go nearly far enough in communicating what Christmas is truly “all about,” and how God calls you and I to now live out the Christmas message.

The apostle Paul unpacks the true message of Christmas in today’s reading. Philippians 2:5–11 is so poetic and worshipful that many scholars believe it is one of the earliest Christian hymns. Whether or not this is the case, the passage sings beautifully of the humble, self-giving obedience of God’s Son. From all eternity, Jesus had been “in the form of God,” or equal to God, enjoying all the privileges of Heaven’s Prince (v5; see also John 1:1–3, 18). But instead of “grasping” his position and insisting on his right to remain in glory with the Father, Jesus did the opposite. He forfeited his glory. He vacated his station of honor. He “emptied himself” of all this, to volunteer as a humble, lowly servant, “born in the likeness of men.” (v7) The fancy theological word for Jesus agreeing to become one of us is the “incarnation.” Why did Jesus embrace this dramatic demotion? Because it was the only way he could save us. For his whole human life, the glorious Son of God

humbly obeyed his Father on our behalf, with no one recognizing his true glory. Finally, the Father called Jesus to stoop even lower: submitting to a shameful death on a cross, where he would pay the price for our sins. There, God treated his perfect, righteous Son like the sinful rebels that we are. But even at the cross, Jesus obeyed his Father(v8)! When he was laid in Joseph's tomb under the judgment of God, the Son had descended as far below his true position as he could. But after three days, the Father refused to allow his Son to be disgraced one moment longer. God raised Jesus from the dead and rewarded his humble obedience by exalting him to a position of even higher praise and honor than before (v9–11)!

Paul tells us that if we want to live out the true “spirit of Christmas,” we must adopt this same “mind of Christ” in our own lives. We must embrace Jesus’s own pattern of humble obedience to God and loving service toward the people in our lives. We must pursue the counter-intuitive lifestyle of v3–4: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” That’s a bit more demanding than anything you’ll hear about the Christmas spirit on a Hallmark or Disney movie this year! It’s so demanding, in fact, that only the supernatural power and grace of the Holy Spirit can help us to even want to try. But when, with his help, we make even the slightest move toward humble obedience and sacrificial love, we have found the true spirit of Christmas. As we look at the Christmas story in the gospels, both of the earthly parents of Jesus learned this lesson. Over the next few days, we will look at how God’s Spirit worked out the true Christmas spirit in the life of Joseph.

DECEMBER 13:

the christmas spirit: simple obedience

Bible Reading: Matthew 1:24-25, Proverbs 3:5-6

Joseph shows us today that the true “Christmas spirit” begins with simple obedience to God. Notice how straightforward v24 is: “When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.” He goes to bed planning to divorce Mary. When God tells him in a dream to marry her instead, he immediately reverses course. He overturns his own plans and obeys God, no questions asked. I think about Joseph’s decision here by picturing a set of scales. In one scale, Joseph piles all the reasons not to take Mary as his wife. There are a plenty! It makes no sense; it will cost him untold pain and trouble (nothing in our flesh wants that!); it will be incredibly unpopular (everyone in his life would try to talk him out of it). There’s a lot in the “why I shouldn’t marry Mary” scale. Meanwhile, in the other scale, Joseph has only one item: the clear command of God. That’s all. But that’s all Joseph needs! If God told him to do it, then the decision is made. By the time his feet hit the floor, he’s already headed to obey God’s command. Joseph embodies the wisdom of Proverbs 3:5–6: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” Simple obedience.

“Simple obedience” is essential to the true Christmas spirit, because it is also exactly what we see in Mary, when God calls her to bear the Son of God. Mary’s response? “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38) The true Christmas spirit starts with simple obedience to God’s word.

I recently heard a man tell how he cut sugar out of his diet: “The easiest decision is one you already made,” he said. “I walk past the dessert table because there is no decision: I’ve already decided.” I know it’s a bad illustration during the holidays! But the reason you and I don’t obey God’s Word in key moments is because we treat it as a decision. Disobeying, and leaning on our own understanding, is a live option for us far too often. But Joseph obeys God in this defining moment because he has already decided that when God commands something, he obeys. Joseph has probably practiced this simple obedience to God in a million less consequential ways before now. And if we want to obey God in our defining moments, we should probably start practicing in the daily moments, in all these tiny choices we make each day, when the stakes don’t seem near as high. This is where our character is formed.

Simple obedience is so important to God because it reverses the whole process of sin. Think of Eve in the Garden. God said: eat from every tree in the garden, but leave this one alone. Simple obedience says: God is God. He’s wise, he’s good, and he loves me. He tells me good from evil; I trust and obey. It’s “childlike faith.” But what did Eve do? She put herself in the position of determining good from evil. She observed the tree; she reasoned; she evaluated; she chose. She dethroned God and enthroned self. We do it every day. In Joseph’s obedience, self never comes up. He simply does what the Lord commands.

How about you? Is God commanding you to do something right now? Are you overcomplicating it? Or are you simply obeying?

DECEMBER 14:

the christmas spirit: self-denying love

Bible Reading: Matthew 1:24-25

The report in vv24–25 is so cut-and-dry, we can miss the incredible picture of love found here. If Joseph gets involved with Mary, he will lose everything. He will lose the world's approval. Everyone will assume that either he and Mary broke God's Law in their betrothal, or that he's a fool for believing her crazy story. It will strain relationships with family, friends, and business contacts; Joseph will be an outsider in his community for the rest of his life. Joseph will also lose personal freedom. If Joseph marries Mary, he accepts that his life will never be about him again. Whatever dreams, plans, and desires he had before simply aren't relevant anymore. His life will be about this woman and her baby now. Joseph will lose comfort and ease. He will give up many things that he is "entitled to," like when he puts God's good gift of marital intimacy on hold to care for Mary and the baby. And this is just the beginning of the sacrifices he will have to make.

Knowing all that it would cost him, Joseph could have run away and never looked back. Instead, he chooses the path of self-denying love. There's no fanfare, no applause, no recognition at all. But I think it's one of the finest, most underrated moments in the Bible. It's also essential to the true Christmas spirit: self-denying love.

This is why *It's a Wonderful Life* is my all-time favorite movie. A young, talented, ambitious, guy named George Bailey can't wait to get out of his small town, do big things, and leave his mark on the world. But from childhood to middle-adulthood, George is

repeatedly forced to choose between his own personal dreams, and serving the needs of the little people in his family and community. Each time, he chooses love. And it makes his life very hard! By the time George is 40, nothing has worked out like he wanted: he never got out of Bedford Falls, he skipped college, he never became an architect, and he's barely keeping his family business afloat. All his old friends are rich, successful, chasing their dreams. Meanwhile, George feels trapped, like he's wasted his life.

That's what it often feels like when we choose a life of love! Joseph must have had days when he felt trapped, too. And if you choose to love, so will you. But in the end, as the movie shows, people who live for their own dreams are a dime a dozen. It's those who walk the path of self-denying love, who lay down their lives for others, who really do big things, leave their mark, and have a wonderful life.

We all want to be loving people; we just want love to make us feel good, cost us nothing, and receive applause. But at the center of all love is the death of self. If you're going to love someone else, at some point, you're going to have to lose so that they can gain. You will have to serve so that they can be served. You will accept discomfort so that they can be comforted. You will have to pay so that they go free. You die so they can live. If that sounds familiar, it's because love is about living out the gospel! If you're looking for a way to love that doesn't hurt, you won't find it, because all love is shaped like a cross. In every relationship, at some point you will feel the weight of the cross of love. It won't be recognized; it won't feel like you're making a difference; it will feel like you're missing out. But as you die to self, God will raise in you a new creation!

DECEMBER 15:

the christmas spirit: surrender to jesus

Bible Reading: Matthew 1:24-25

There is a final lesson that Joseph teaches us about the Christmas spirit in Matthew 1:24–25; the true Christmas spirit is about surrender to Jesus Christ.

By taking Mary as his wife, Joseph isn't just making a commitment to her, is he? Notice that v25 does not say, "And Mary called the baby's name Jesus," while Joseph awkwardly hangs back. No, the verse says, "And *he* called his name Jesus." When the shepherds show up and ask the baby's name, and when the wise men kneel and want to know what to call him, and when the priest takes the baby from Mary's arms at his dedication—it is Joseph who says: "His name is Jesus."

Why does that matter? Because for first-century Jews, naming the baby was a father's duty.

We tend to think of Joseph as just kind of along for the ride in the Christmas story. But by naming this baby, Joseph shows that he's accepting responsibility of being his father. We could say that, in his own unique way, Joseph is committing himself to Jesus.

Joseph of course has no idea what this commitment to Jesus will require of him. He does not know, for instance, that committing to Jesus will totally uproot him—taking him from his comfortable home in Nazareth to Bethlehem, then to Egypt, and then finally back to Nazareth. He does not know that it will mean magi from the east will be presenting him with treasures one moment, and

then a bloodthirsty king will be hunting him down the next. Joseph does not know that God will awaken him with many more dreams, totally redirecting his path. All Joseph knows is that Jesus, who until now has had no claim on his life, now has the central, controlling claim over his life.

And this—surrender to Jesus—is essential to the true Christmas spirit, too. But it is amazing how rarely surrendering to Jesus comes up this time of year! Everyone loves to celebrate baby Jesus when he's cooing in that manger. But when Jesus grows up and starts talking—showing us our sin, calling us to repent, re-directing our lives—the crowd around Jesus begins to thin out considerably! Nothing threatens and scares us like yielding control of our lives to the Lord. Why on earth would we want to do this?

The answer is in the gospel itself. You and I can and should surrender our lives to Jesus, because he surrendered his life in order to save us. This baby Joseph names in our passage grew up and yielded his will entirely to the will of the Father—even when that path marked out for him led to the cross, there, he purchased our forgiveness for every single time we have stubbornly refused to bow to the Father's will. The Jesus who calls us to surrender to him is no tyrant, but our gracious, humble Savior. Anything he sends to us or takes from us is for our eternal joy. So whatever it is that he's putting his finger on in your life today, it's ok—you can trust him! Surrender to Jesus.

DECEMBER 16:

choosing the name: the purpose it communicates

Bible Reading: Matthew 1:18-25, John 3:16-17

A few years ago, our dog Maggie had eight puppies just before Christmas. My kids loved everything about the puppy experience, but what they may have enjoyed most was naming them. We brought all the puppies inside in a big box, then pulled each one out, one at a time. My children carefully studied their size, markings, and temperament, before bestowing on each of them a carefully-chosen name: Socks, Spot, Bandit, Pocket. It was very important that each name “fit” just right!

Of course, the stakes are much higher when naming a baby. The same year those puppies were born, ten babies were born into the Sharon Baptist Church family—all those parents put much thought into choosing the name that would fit their baby just right. That’s a decision Joseph and Mary did not have to make on the first Christmas. God chose their baby’s name for them. They never had to wonder if it was the right fit. “Jesus” was absolutely perfect. In fact, his Name alone tells us almost everything we need to know about him at Christmas.

One of our struggles as we read the Christmas story is that we’re just too familiar with it! We are so used to this baby being named Jesus that we never stop to think about the fact that God chose this Name! And of all the names God could have given to his Son, he considered “Jesus” to be the perfect fit. After all, this child would

do so many things, fill so many roles, receive so many titles. He will be called Teacher, Master, Lord, Judge, the Eternal Word, and more. God could have highlighted any of these! Instead, when God sends his Son, he tells Joseph to name him “Jesus,” which means “the Lord SAVES.”

It's as if God is saying to Joseph, and to us: “there's so much to know about this child, you will spend eternity growing in the knowledge of all he is. But the one thing you need to know about him before anything else, the essence of who he is, is he is a Savior. He has come to save you.” Jesus: the Lord saves! This is exactly what the Christmas angels stress about Jesus in their message to the shepherds, isn't it? “For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior.” (Luke 2:11) If this lesson alone will settle on your heart, you will have the whole Christian message.

When God came among us, he was not called “The Lord Demands,” or “The Lord Judges,” or “the Lord Avenges.” If that is how God came down to us, we'd all be running away from the manger in terror. Instead, God came among us as Jesus: the Lord Saves. That means we can run to him, with relief and joy! The last few days, we've been thinking about all that God called Joseph to do for Jesus in becoming his earthly father. Today, God tells Joseph that the most important thing about this relationship is not what Joseph will do for Jesus, but what Jesus will do for Joseph. Every other religion asks: “What must I do for God?” The factory-setting of all of our legalistic hearts is to ask: “What does God required me?” But at Christmas, God came clothed in the gospel. He came to give, to do something for us. He is Jesus: the Lord saves!

DECEMBER 17:

choosing the name: the problem it confronts

Bible Reading: Matthew 1:18-25, Joshua 1:1-9

When God told Joseph to name the baby “Jesus,” Joseph would have immediately recognized the name. That’s because Jesus is not the first “Jesus” in the Bible. Until now, the most famous “Yeshua” (“the Lord saves”) in the Bible is Joshua, who has a whole Old Testament book named after him (as in, Joshua and the Battle of Jericho). Joshua saved God’s people from their Canaanite enemies, and then settled them in the Promised Land. Joshua was one of many ‘small-s’ saviors in the Old Testament, who saved God’s people from all kinds of troubles— from military foes (David), to famines (Joseph), slavery (Moses), and genocide (Esther). But Joseph would have known something else about all those Old Testament saviors. After all that salvation they brought, the people still need saving! None of the salvations they had “stuck.” In fact, we could say that the message of the whole Old Testament is that you can be saved from every trouble outside of you, and still need saving.

If I asked you to list the top-three troubles in your life right now that you’d like to be saved from, I’m guessing that you would instinctively list things outside of you: debt; a bad family situation, a stressful job, a health problem. But can I share with you one of the most important insights that you can ever gain from the Bible? God could save you from every external problem you’ve got in the next five seconds, and your deepest trouble would remain.

That's because the real source of our trouble isn't anything outside of us at all, but inside.

A London newspaper once ran a contest in the early 20th Century, asking for essays on the subject, "What's wrong with the world?" The Christian author G. K. Chesterton submitted a four-word essay: "Dear sirs, I am." Chesterton had made the same discovery that I have: I am my own biggest problem! There's plenty wrong with the world, but it's more urgent that I recognize something is wrong with my heart! Have you ever noticed how everything in your life can be great, yet your own selfishness, or pride, or discontentment, or fear of man, or envy, or lust, or anger, will somehow blow it up? This inner-twistedness, this self-destructiveness, this compulsive refusal to listen to the God who knows how life works best, is what the Bible means by sin. Sin is not just the superficial stuff we usually associate with it—stealing, cussing, getting drunk—that's kid stuff! Sin goes way deeper than that. Sin is a disease in my heart that drives me to relentlessly put myself before God and others, even when it offends God, hurts people, and ruins my life. Sin is our real problem. And no matter how hard we try to overcome our sin by being good or religious, we just can't. We need to be saved!

And the Old Testament has shown that no one but God can do the saving. Hebrews 4:1–13 says that Joshua conquered the Canaanites in the land, but he could not conquer the Canaanite in the people's hearts, or his own. And that's what makes this Jesus the "capitol-S Savior" we've been waiting for! He is called "the Lord saves," because in him, God himself finally come to perform the rescue no one else can: he has come to save his people from our sins!

DECEMBER 18:

choosing the name: the promise it contains

Bible Reading: Matthew 1:18-25, Hebrews 7:25

A couple of Christmases ago, I walked into Lowe's with my father-in-law to pick out the miter saw that his four daughters wanted to purchase for him as his gift that year. There were so many options! As we compared cutting capacities, special features, and price differences, one selling point stood out to him above all the rest: the guarantee. Part of my anxiety when making a significant purchase is, "what if I spend all this money, and then it breaks?" So when a store, or manufacturer, guarantees satisfaction, it brings major comfort: "if our product fails, we promise to make it right." The guarantee lowers my anxiety, calms my fears, and encourages me to make the purchase.

When God tells Joseph the name of his Son, he includes a profound guarantee. Did you notice it? "You shall call his name Jesus..." but why? Not, "for he will try to save his people from their sins." Not, "for he has *the best of intentions* of saving his people from their sins." Not, "for *he will do his part* to save his people from their sins; hopefully they will do their part." No! God guarantees the saving work of his Son! "You shall call his name Jesus, for *he shall save* his people from their sins." What a promise! If you put your trust in Jesus Christ, your sins are no longer a problem. You *will be saved!*

How can Jesus make good on such an enormous promise? It's simple: he doesn't leave any of your salvation up to you. Jesus takes the whole work on himself!

When you could not live the righteous life that a holy God requires of you, God's eternal Son came down from heaven to unite himself to our human nature, to live it for you. After living the perfect life that we should live, Jesus at the cross died the wrath-bearing death that we should die, rose from the grave in victory and ascended into heaven on our behalf. But that's not all! From there, Jesus sovereignly directed someone to preach the gospel to you (like I'm doing now, through this book), and then sent his Holy Spirit to help you believe and turn from your sins, so that you could be completely forgiven. But that's not all! Jesus then took up residence in your life through the Holy Spirit, so that you will keep repenting and believing and obeying. Finally, Jesus commits to directing the whole of the rest of your life: mixing in just enough trials to keep you humble and dependent on him, yet ensuring that all things work together for your good, until he gets you safely home. When you arrive, you will fully and finally be saved from all your sin, so that you are just like Jesus himself. In that moment you will know that the writer of Hebrews was right when he said, "Consequently, *Jesus is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him.*" (Hebrews 7:25)

Jesus's salvation of his people is guaranteed, because he takes all the work on himself. And God embeds this magnificent promise in his Name, so that you will never forget it. Every time a believer calls on the name of Jesus, that promise should calm your heart, and move you to trust and worship. For Joseph, and for us, there is immeasurable comfort in knowing that name. At any moment, no matter what may be going on, I can know that Jesus has saved me, he is saving me, and he will save me. What a Savior!

DECEMBER 19:

the quiet god of christmas

Bible Reading: Luke 2:1-7, Lamentations 3:21-23

There is no getting around it: Luke 2:1-7 is the least exciting of all the Christmas passages. The other stories are so much more lively: full of angels singing, shepherds running, stars rising, magi questing, and evil kings scheming. This is where the action is!

Luke 2:1-7 is different. It is so plain, so straightforward. Just a report of bare facts: a census, a journey, a birth. Nothing exciting, nothing supernatural, nothing miraculous. If you were reading this for the first time and did not know any different, it would not seem like anything special was taking place. There is certainly nothing here to indicate that God is doing anything. In fact, God is never mentioned at all in Luke 2:1-7.

But that's the reason why I have come to love this text. Luke 2:1-7 is a lot like our lives. If you were to sit down and watch a movie of your life, it would seem pretty plain and ordinary. It often wouldn't look like God was doing anything spectacular. In fact, it might not look like God was doing anything at all. Maybe you often don't *feel* like God is doing anything at all in your life. But that brings us to Luke's point.

Luke reports this story in such a subtle, understated way to show us something about how God was at work that first Christmas. When no one was paying attention, when no one could tell that anything special was going on, God was quietly keeping his most glorious promises: he was literally breaking into our world to rescue us!

The hymn-writer Phillips Brooks captured this element of the Christmas story in his Christmas carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem:" "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given." The Christmas story points us to God's silent activity in his people's lives.

This is good news for us. If your life is anything like mine, it is not often marked by the obvious, spectacular, visible work of God. But even when we are just living in the daily grind of our routine, Luke wants us to see that God is always being faithful to his promises. He is always advancing his good purposes. He is always working for his glory and for the good of his people. God is working even when no one notices, even when it doesn't look like it, even when it doesn't feel like it. That's just how it was for Joseph and for Mary, on that very first Christmas. "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord *never* ceases; his mercies *never* come to an end; they are new *every* morning; great is your faithfulness (Lamentations 3:21–23)."

Maybe you need to hear that this week. Over the next few days, we'll be exploring together the good news of the quiet God of Christmas.

DECEMBER 20:

*god is working...
when his people are helpless*

Bible Reading: Luke 2:1-7, Micah 5:1-5

The story begins in the palace of Caesar Augustus, Emperor of the massive Roman Empire. Augustus decides that he wants to know how many people he rules over. Rulers like to know that sort of thing, so that they can know how much money they can collect in taxes, and how many soldiers they can get in a military draft. So Caesar sends out a decree: All the world is to be registered. A wave of his hand, and the *whole world* has to stop what it's doing to travel to their hometowns and be registered.

Now, if you're a Jew like Joseph living in these days, this is pretty discouraging. As you close down your shop, load up your family, and get on the road, it's just another reminder that you are a conquered people. You have never even seen Caesar Augustus, and you never will—but your whole life is controlled by his decrees! Whatever you've got is his—your money flows directly into his treasury, your sons are drafted into his military. It would make you feel very small, and helpless.

We can feel that way sometimes, too. Unjust and ungodly rulings made by our national government can make us feel helpless. Unfair treatment from an employer can make us feel helpless. A debilitating health condition can make us feel helpless. Broken relationships that you can't change can make us feel helpless. Our own, ongoing sin-struggles and failure to grow in godliness like we

want to can make us feel helpless. Sometimes, we can feel like our lives are controlled by forces too big, too powerful for us to stand up against.

But Luke wants us to see that all is not as it appears: it may look like Caesar is in charge, but he is not; God is! Proverbs 21:1 says, “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.” Caesar Augustus thinks that he is simply carrying out his own will by issuing this census, but in fact he is carrying out the will of God. Centuries before, God promised that the Savior he would send would come from Bethlehem: “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.”

(Micah 5:2) To get Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, God stirs in the heart of a pagan ruler to issue a census.

God’s people look helpless in this story, as they often do. But behind the scenes, their God is quietly working out all things according to the counsel of his will (Ephesians 1:11). Lurking in the shadow is a God who is in the heavens, and who does whatever he pleases (Psalm 115:3). There is a God who is bending the will of a Caesar to work out the good purposes for his little, helpless people.

And if you are in Christ today, that’s the God who’s working on your behalf, right now. Do you believe that your God is that big?

DECEMBER 21:

*god is working...
when his people are weary*

Bible Reading: Luke 2:1-7, Isaiah 50:4

As we read Luke 2:1–7, Mary and Joseph do not seem like two people at the center of God's plan. They look small and helpless, as we have seen. They also look very weary.

From the moment that the angel made his announcement to Mary and Joseph, life has been hard. They have likely both experienced some kind of alienation from their community, because of the suspicious circumstances of Mary's pregnancy. They are also poor. When Mary and Joseph dedicate the baby to the temple, they have to bring the alternate sacrifice that God allowed the poor to bring, two turtledoves (Luke 2:22–24; Leviticus 5:7). Now, eight months into Mary's pregnancy, the couple learns that they have to take a 90-mile journey from Galilee to Bethlehem, Joseph's hometown, to register for the census. In this day, traveling just fifteen miles is a major undertaking, even under the best circumstances. And whether Mary walked or rode on a donkey, a long journey at the end of her last trimester of pregnancy is not the best of circumstances (moms, can I get an Amen?!). Those words that the angel had spoken to her—"Greetings, O favored one!"—must have seemed pretty ironic to her on the trip! Somewhere between Galilee and Bethlehem, did they think, "If God was really at work, surely it wouldn't be this hard?" Mary and Joseph are weary.

Some of us are likely weary as we read this page. Maybe you are

trying to care for your aging parents while you keep all your other plates spinning. Others of you have jobs that are full of constant pressures. For some, your own health condition makes simple tasks exhausting. Others are weary in laboring for a child who seems determined to go his own way. Some may be weary with grief because the one you love won't be with you this Christmas. Some of us are weary from serving the Lord, while receiving little recognition or seeing few results. We should probably expect this—after all, Paul has to encourage us "let us not grow weary of doing good (Gal 6:9)." There is no denying that the Christian life can be a weary journey. Somewhere between Galilee and Bethlehem, you may be tempted to think, "If God were really working in my life, surely it wouldn't be this hard."

But take heart! Just because the road is long and rough, does not mean that God is not at work. With every plodding step that Mary and Joseph took toward Bethlehem, God was doing something glorious that they could not see. He was ensuring that his long-promised Messiah would be born in David's town, just as God had said he would so very long before (Micah 5:2). Eventually, God will make his purposes abundantly clear to Mary and Joseph: angels filling the sky, shepherds bowing in worship, wise men bearing gifts. But first, he calls them to take this long, quiet, weary journey from Galilee to Bethlehem. They simply have to trust that God is at work, keeping his promises. We have to learn to do this, too. One of my favorite descriptions of Jesus is in Isaiah 50:4: "The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary." Jesus is able, and eager, to sustain us in our weariness, with only a word. Let's listen to him today, and keep focusing!

DECEMBER 22:

*god is working...
when his people are confused*

Bible Reading: Luke 2:1-7, Luke 23:44-24:9

In December, Hallmark Christmas movies play at my house on a continuous loop. If you have not noticed, they're all pretty much the same. Within the first five minutes, you know that the ruggedly handsome man and the beautiful, wholesome woman will fall in love. The driven, materialistic ladder-climber who gets stranded in the quaint, sleepy little town will realize that she needs to stop and smell the roses, and that people are more important than the bottom line. The bitter widower who promised he'd never let anyone hurt him again decides to give love another chance. You know what I'm talking about! The story is predictable. Everything happens exactly as you expect.

That's so different for Mary and Joseph on this first Christmas, isn't it? Nothing seems to happen the way they expected when they first followed God's call. Once they reach Bethlehem, the time comes for Mary to give birth. That was enough of a shock! But then it gets worse. All of our lives, we have come to think of the "nativity scene," of baby Jesus lying in a manger in a barn, as something wonderful. But let's stop and think about why baby Jesus is born in this cattle stall: it's because when Joseph begs the people of Bethlehem for shelter so his wife can give birth, these people are so hard-hearted that they shrug and slam the door. This is the only place they can go!

There may be a halo of glory shining around the Nativity scene on your coffee table, but I have been in a cattle stall! When Joseph lays the blanket on the ground for Mary in the cattle stall, I doubt that she looks up at him and says, Honey, won't this make a wonderful nativity scene? No, they're both thinking the same thing any of us would: this is a total disaster! Could God really be at work, bringing his Son into the world, when we can't even get a motel room? When we have to wrap this new baby in rags and lay him down in a feeding trough? If the angels and shepherds did not show up, they may have wondered if they had dreamed the whole thing up!

Maybe today, there's nothing about this Christmas that's going the way you expected. It's less like a Hallmark movie and more like a Lifetime movie! Instead of singing Christmas carols, you're singing with Merle Haggard, "If we make it through December, everything's gonna be alright, I know." You never expected to be looking for a job. You never expected to be sleeping on the couch in the hospital room of your loved one. You never expected that your child wouldn't want to come home. You never expected to be at odds with that loved one. Life can be confusing for God's people.

But in Mary and Joseph's confusion, God was quietly working for their good. The baby rejected in Bethlehem would be rejected again at the cross (Isa 53:3). His people would again be thrown into confusion, as Jesus hung in agony and shame. But God was working salvation for his people, laying our sins on his Son, rejecting him for those three hours, so he could welcome us forever. For those three horribly silent days in the tomb, while his disciples puzzled over what God could possibly be doing, God was doing his very best work. That's often how it is. Trust him, even when you are confused--God is working!

DECEMBER 23:

the surprise of god's ways

Bible Reading: Luke 2:1-7, Luke 22:24-27

I love a good Christmas surprise! I can still remember when I was in middle school, finding a personally-signed photo from Peyton Manning during his senior year at UT. A few years ago, Candace gave me a wooden fountain pen made from a historic Nashville building. Once, we surprised our kids with a fluffy white Pyrenees puppy named Cotton. Of course, not all Christmas surprises are good. At one Christmas Eve service, my son dropped his little candle during "Silent Night;" when I frantically grabbed for it, my candle ignited his hair gel and I had to extinguish his head while everyone sang about heavenly peace. Luke's Christmas story is familiar to us, but it's actually loaded with surprises. He wants us to see how utterly unexpected, even shocking, the gospel message really is. Over the next few days, we will try to enter into that surprise.

Luke has told us that Jesus is the "Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:32). So when the time comes for him to be born, we expect lots of attention and fanfare! For instance, in May 2019, Prince Harry and the Duchess of Sussex had a baby. This baby was seventh in line for the British crown, but "#royalbaby" still lit up the internet! There were national guessing contests for the name. There was wide speculation about what Meghan, the mom, would wear out of the hospital. Months later, millions clamored for the first Christmas card featuring baby Archie to post online. But there's none of that for Jesus!

As we have seen, his parents are poor, helpless subjects of the

Roman Empire. They have to trudge home to Bethlehem for the census, to be taxed just like everyone else. Then the labor pains hit, and chaos ensues. Instead of folks rushing to help the young couple, Bethlehem shuts them out in the cold, like unwanted strangers. They have to duck into a cattle stall—not a trendy, shiplapped Joanna Gaines barn! Just a regular old dirty, smelly, noisy barn. It's a ridiculous place for any child to be born, much less the "Son of the Most High!" After this terrified 14-year-old delivers her baby, she wraps him up and lays him in a feed trough—not to be "rustic," but because it's all they have. And that's it. Mary and Joseph, alone in the dark with their baby and the livestock. No one notices. No one comes. No one cares. How surprising are God's ways!

This is God's Son, the world's rightful King! But in his surprising birth, Luke is already showing us that Jesus is not the kind of king we expect. He's not like Caesar: proud, distant, flexing his muscles, ordering people around. Jesus has more glory and power than Caesar can imagine, but flung it away to come down among us. To identify with real, sinful people in the difficulty and suffering of our real lives. He's come not to strut and preen, but to stoop and serve. Not to make demands of us, but to meet God's demands for us. Not to pile more burdens on our weary shoulders, but to place them on his own. At the cross, he'll shed his blood to make peace on earth between God and sinners. The Son of the Most High born among cattle and laid in a manger will die between two thieves and laid in a tomb. As the angels tell us, he's come to be a Savior. To enter this upside-down Kingdom, you have to know you're unqualified. To be strong, you have to be weak. To be free, you have to surrender. To be great, you have to serve.

DECEMBER 24:

the surprise of god's welcome

Bible Reading: Luke 2:8-14, Luke 14:12-24

We have seen that no one in Bethlehem comes to see God's Son when he arrives. So today, God sends a personal birth announcement and invitation through an army of angels. But he does not send the angels to Caesar, or to Herod. Not to the High Priest, or to a ritzy party full of the beautiful people of Jerusalem. No, God bypasses all these expected guests to go miles outside the city limits, to a dark, quiet field of shepherds.

We don't feel the shock of that. That's because we associate shepherds with Linus in "A Charlie Brown Christmas," with cute kids in bathrobes and headpieces for the church Christmas play, or with our Willow Tree nativity scene. But none of Luke's first readers would have thought about shepherds that way! First-century people stereotyped shepherds the way twenty-first century people stereotype the "carnies" who blow into town to work at the Hardin Count Fair (I'm sorry about this, carnies—I know it's not fair!). Shepherds were considered to be rough, untrustworthy drifters. They were thought of as dirty and scraggly, smelling like sheep and body odor. Shepherds were so infamous for lying and thievery, no first-century court would accept their testimony, and fathers advised their sons never to buy any merchandise from them. In Genesis 46:34, when the Old Testament Joseph's brothers come to visit him in Egypt, he says, "whatever you do, don't let the Egyptians find out that you are shepherds!" And yet, when God's Son is born, God sends an army of angels to personally invite these

lowlifes to be his guests of honor. “Good news!” the angels cry, “Today, a Savior has been born *for you! You are welcome!*”

The heart of Luke’s Christmas story is that God loves to welcome the unwelcome. I don’t read that he will simply be polite if some undesirable person happens to wander up to the manger; I mean that God actively pursues the most unclean, unworthy, and unqualified people in the vicinity of the manger to be his guests! That is because God is not like us. God does not welcome people based on what they can do for him. He does not want to be friends based on how cool or impressive you are. He does not even care about how good or obedient you have been. Instead, the Christmas story teaches us that God welcomes us on terms of grace. Through the cross of Christ, God loves to be generous to sinful people who know they deserve nothing.

The surprise of God’s welcome is probably Luke’s favorite theme as he tells the story of Jesus. On every page, he shows Jesus welcoming a motley crew of uneducated fishermen, blind beggars and crooked tax-collectors, prostitutes and prodigal sons, Roman soldiers and crucified thieves. Each of them are shocked to discover that God loves them, God wants them, and God has provided all the qualification that they’ll ever need by the death of his Son. In Luke 14, Jesus will describe God as a generous host, who prepared a huge feast and then went out into the highways to bring the poor, crippled, lame, and blind—they could never repay his hospitality, but he just wanted his house to be filled with joy. And that same, generous heart of God to the unworthy is already on full display at Christmas! The only ones left out of God’s Kingdom, in fact, are those who assume that they deserve an invitation, and others don’t.

How about you? Have you received the welcome of God’s grace?

DECEMBER 25:

the surprise of god's word

Bible Reading: Luke 2:15-20, Luke 8:4-15

As soon as the angels vanish, all the attention in the story shifts to the word they spoke to the shepherds: God himself has come down to earth—not in judgment, but in mercy! Not as an avenging angel, but as one of us, a baby born to fulfill God's requirements in our place. Not for the righteous insiders, but for the sinful outsiders. “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!” That’s the wonderful message of the Christmas angels: the question is, what will the people do about it? This news is so good, so earth-shaking, so overflowing with unexpected grace, that we expect everyone in Israel to go streaming to the stable. But that’s Luke’s final surprise: when this good news about Jesus is announced, it produces a variety of responses.

Just recently, I noticed that Luke uses the end of his Christmas story in the exact same way that he uses the famous “parable of the soils” in Luke 8:4–15. That parable says that the message about God’s Kingdom is like a seed sown by a farmer, which falls on four different kinds of soil. It’s the same good seed in every case, but the quality of the soil determines what the seed produces. In the same way, different people can hear the same good news about the coming of Jesus, but respond differently based on the condition of their hearts before God. That’s what happens the night Jesus is born.

The town “wondered at what the shepherds told them (17–18).” Wonder sounds good! Except that they don’t do anything about it.

For the town, the message about Jesus is like a drive-through Christmas light show: it's cool and exciting for a few minutes, but then you drive out and the experience quickly fades. "Wonder" is the word Luke uses throughout his gospel to describe those who get excited about Jesus...but then never make changes. Never get decisive. Never follow him. It's all surface-level (see Luke 8:13).

Mary "treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart (19)." This is more than just a new mom soaking up the events of the special day. These words "treasure" and "ponder" are technical terms that mean to carefully consider, to place one idea beside another, to fit the pieces together. That's what Mary does with the shepherds' message: she lets their words go deep. She already believed the angel's announcement about Jesus back in Luke 1, but there's still much about Jesus and his mission she doesn't understand. So now she considers it. Mary doesn't blow past the Christmas message, but is like that soil in Luke 8:15: "As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience."

In a final surprise, the model response to the Word comes from those lowly shepherds. They are transformed by the word! (2:20) They begin sitting alone in the darkness, occupied with their own little world, disconnected from God. But when they hear the word about Jesus, they're up on their feet, running to obey the message and share it with others. Ultimately they return to their flocks, doing the same old job as before. But now, they return to their life with a whole new perspective: they glorify God and praise him for all they've heard and seen. So on this Christmas Day, how will you respond to the Word? Join the shepherds in praising God for his salvation!

DECEMBER 26:

post-christmas whiplash

Bible Reading: Matthew 2:1-18

If we tend to overlook Joseph before the birth of Jesus, we definitely don't think about him after the nativity scene has disbanded! But as we move past the Christmas holiday, Joseph can teach us so much about what to expect as we follow Jesus into a new year.

The wise men's visit had to be one of the most thrilling moments of Joseph's life. He has probably never met anyone from the East; now he opens the door to these wealthy Persian stargazers and their huge caravan. And their gifts must have floored him! Joseph is so poor that he can only afford two turtledoves at Jesus' dedication (Luke 2:22-24, Lev 12:8); so the magi's gold, frankincense, and myrrh is more money than Joseph has ever seen in one place. Joseph's eyes must have looked like saucers as they slid all that loot across the table to him! But more importantly, the magi's visit put steel in Joseph's faith.

Not to ruin your nativity scene, but the wise men were not with the shepherds at the manger. Time has elapsed since Jesus's birth, maybe up to two years (see Matt 2:16). Also, nothing miraculous has happened since Jesus's birth. Baby Jesus is not walking on his bathwater or multiplying loaves in Mary's pantry! He is just like any newborn. Joseph may well have wondered, "Is this for real?" Then the Magi show up. They connect the dots of Old Testament prophecy to Jesus. They lay tribute at the baby's feet like he's a king. They fall down and worship him. And Joseph thinks, "OK,

this is for real.” His faith grows. The magi visit was a mountaintop moment for Joseph!

And that’s what makes this next episode so jarring. Joseph falls asleep happily, but God tells him in a dream to get up and flee to Egypt. (13) Herod is out to kill baby Jesus. Joseph knows how realistic this is; Herod is a paranoid psycho-path! He had already killed his wife and a few kids because he suspected they were plotting against him. So Joseph wakes up in a cold sweat and packs frantically. Perhaps hours after the magi leave, he’s leading his family by night to the Egyptian border, praying that the baby doesn’t cry.

From high to low, from comfort to danger, from worship to worry, from peace to turmoil...*just like that!* It’s like one of those rides at the fair that jerks you around—Joseph’s been jerked in so many directions since we met him, he’s got to have a case of spiritual whiplash!

But that’s how it can be when you’re with Jesus: without warning, everything can change. Most of us would prefer a calmer ride, something gentler, more predictable, like the “Lazy River” at the waterpark. But as I read the Bible, I find that life is rarely that way for God’s people; it’s more like shooting the rapids. David, Elijah, Paul, the psalmists—all complained of spiritual whiplash at one time or another. As we look back on this past year, some of us may be feeling a little whiplash ourselves, because so much has changed so suddenly. If that’s you today, or if it will be you in the new year, remember Joseph. God is with his people in all these changes. When we’re shaken loose from our expected comforts and securities, we learn to cling to him, one day at a time.

DECEMBER 27:

post-christmas waiting

Bible Reading: Matthew 2:13-18, Isaiah 40:28-31

If you travelled over the holiday, you may have experienced waking up away from home in a different bed and in a different room, and for the first several seconds not knowing exactly where you are. For a brief moment, you are disoriented. I think that must be how Joseph felt every morning he woke up in Egypt. Until now, Bethlehem was probably the furthest Joseph had ever been from his home. Now, he looks out his window and sees sand dunes and pyramids! He is surrounded by people who look different, speak another language, and worship other gods. He's a stranger in a strange land (Nazareth carpenters don't have a long list of international contacts). How does he communicate? How does he find a place to stay? Does he find work? Does he worry about leaving Mary and Jesus home alone? He doesn't know who he can trust in Egypt, and Herod is always in the back of his mind. And of all the places for a Bible-reading Jew to feel welcome, Egypt probably isn't the place! Nevertheless, the text says that Joseph "remained there until the death of Herod." Remaining takes faith.

You and I of course know that this is only a temporary stay. We know that Joseph's son will be known as "Jesus of Nazareth," not "Jesus of Thebes," or "Memphis." But Joseph doesn't know that! Joseph has no idea how long he'll be Egypt! Each day, he must be desperate to learn some new information about Herod, but he has no smartphone or newspaper. Every night, he goes to bed hoping for another dream, but no dream comes. All Joseph can do is wait.

In Egypt, Joseph finds himself in a place he'd rather not be, doing something he'd rather not be doing, surrounded by people he'd rather not be with, waiting on God's next move. Remaining is a hard place to be.

If you follow Jesus into the new year, you can expect to do some waiting, too. Like Joseph, you may find yourself in a place you'd rather not be, doing what you'd rather not be doing, surrounded by people you'd rather not be with! Most of us found ourselves waiting at some point in this past year, in some uncomfortable, in-between place. In your work, in your marriage, with your kids. There's some tension in your life that is just not resolved. Direction isn't clear. Nothing is happening. You have questions and no answers, lots of loose ends laying around everywhere. All you can do is "remain." Just "wait." And *nothing* is more frustrating than that!

But Joseph reminds us that God does not mind making his people wait. In fact, "wait on the Lord" is one of the most repeated commands in Scripture. Why does God love to leave us in the waiting room? Because waiting times are usually the most fruitful times. They put us in a position where we realize we're actually not in control! We actually can't fix and manage everything! Waiting reminds us of how dependent on God we really are. And when we "remain," like Joseph, we learn to trust God when we can't tell what he's doing. We learn to stop clamoring for answers, and learn patience, contentment, thankfulness, and hope. At some point, Joseph may have taken comfort in realizing that God had used the magi's gifts to finance his witness protection program in Egypt. When you have to wait this year, remember Joseph. And remain.

DECEMBER 28:

post-christmas wonder

Bible Reading: Matthew 2:13-18, Exodus 1:1-2:10

To Joseph, his exile in Egypt must have seemed so random. And probably frustrating! But Matthew 2:15 tells us that this Egyptian layover was part of a carefully-laid plan. God wanted Joseph in Egypt, because he wanted to say of Jesus, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.” (2:15) When we think of God “calling someone out of Egypt,” we think of Israel, in the Exodus. In those days, God’s people were slaves in Egypt, and God called them out with spectacular power: the Ten Plagues and the Passover, the parting of the Red Sea, the wilderness journey, and finally settling them in the Promised Land. Joseph was as familiar with that story as you and I are with the Christmas story. He had heard about it “in church” all of his life. He had sung about it and celebrated it with his family. But there was something crucial about the Exodus story that Joseph didn’t know yet.

What Joseph did not know is that Israel’s Exodus from Egypt was actually just a dress rehearsal, for the real Exodus that Joseph’s own adopted son Jesus would bring. Joseph could not have imagined that the first Exodus, spectacular as it was, was in fact only a black-and-white negative compared to the full-color photo that God was about to develop through the redeeming work of Jesus. The truth is, as great as that first Exodus was, it didn’t really deliver the people at all. All these many years later, they were still slaves. Not just to Herod, and not just to Rome. They were slaves to sin (John 8:31-38). They needed a greater exodus than Moses could provide. We do, too. That’s why Jesus came. It’s why Matthew shows Jesus

‘reliving’ the exodus in the first few chapters of his gospel—have you ever noticed that? Like baby Moses, when a wicked king wants to kill a bunch of male babies, Jesus is preserved; like Israel, he’s called out of Egypt; then Jesus goes through the waters of baptism like Israel through the Red Sea, then out to the wilderness to be tempted. Next, Jesus goes to a mountain and delivers a new “law” for his people. We could go on and on! Luke says that on the Mount of Transfiguration when Moses and Elijah showed up, they were speaking to Jesus about “the Exodus” he was about to accomplish (Luke 9:30–31). That’s exactly what Jesus does accomplish when, as the God-man, he bears the sins of his people on the cross and rises from the dead, to lead us into the promised rest that Moses could not. “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden,” says Jesus, “and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28) That is the true exodus that we need!

But back to Joseph. God was accomplishing that glorious salvation while Joseph was sitting on his hands in Egypt! The most uncomfortable realities in Joseph’s life were the instruments that God was in fact using to save Joseph! Isn’t God amazing?

If you are in Christ, then everything that happened in the past year, and everything that will happen in your life in the upcoming year, is an instrument in the hand of God to accomplish your salvation. With God, nothing is lost, and nothing is wasted. Remember the promise of the baby’s name? “Call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:21) There is never a moment when you can’t stop and say, “Jesus is saving me right now, and he’s even using this to do it.” That is truly a wonder.

DECEMBER 29:

embrace a directed life

Bible Reading: Matthew 2:19-23, Romans 8:28-31

The text we're looking at over these final days is the last time Joseph is center-stage in the Bible. He shows up once more, in every parent's favorite Bible story—when he and Mary forget Jesus at the Temple in Jerusalem! But Mary does all the talking that day (Luke 2:41–52). In our text, quiet Joseph is already moving offstage. In his final act, most of the Christmas excitement has passed, and he and his family are settling into routine life in Nazareth. As we settle into our new year routines, we can still learn from Joseph's faith. He teaches us, first of all, to embrace a what I call "a directed life."

The first of Joseph's final two dreams comes when he's still in Egypt, hiding from Herod. He may have been there several months, or even a couple of years, when God delivers the news that he's been waiting for: Herod is dead! That means it's safe to go home to Israel. As they head back, Joseph does not plan to return to his hometown of Nazareth. He plans to settle in Bethlehem or Jerusalem. This is understandable. I love living in a small town, but there's a reason many people can't get out fast enough. When Mary returned from Elizabeth's house carrying a child during her betrothal, it lit up "Nazareth Topix!" When Joseph went ahead and married her, his name got dragged through the mud, too. Thirty years later, Jesus's neighbors still ridicule his origins: he's called "Mary's son" (John 8:41), and "born of sexual immorality" (Mark 6:3). The New Testament picture of Nazareth is not a friendly Mayberry. Just about everyone we meet from Nazareth mocks,

rejects, or tries to kill Jesus (Matt 13:53–58; Luke 4:16–30). It's a small place filled with nosy people who make assumptions, spout off about stuff they don't know about, judge, and say cruel stuff. No wonder Joseph wants a fresh start!

But God has other plans. Back in Israel, Joseph has another dream. Because Herod's son Archelaus reigns, neither Bethlehem nor Jerusalem is safe. Joseph must withdraw to some out-of-the-way, sleepy little town. Like Nazareth! So, perhaps with a sigh, he moves back home. It's not what Joseph would have picked for his life. But as we've seen, Joseph is not in charge of this story; God is directing Joseph's life for his own purposes. And God relocates Joseph to Nazareth to fulfill the Old Testament prophecy that Messiah would be "called a Nazarene." Actually, there is no Old Testament text that mentions Nazareth, but many prophecies speak of the Messiah coming from an obscure place where no one expected anything important to happen (i.e., Isaiah 9:1). As Nathaniel would ask, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (John 1:46)

Joseph's life has not turned out as he expected, or as he wanted! Perhaps many of us can relate to that, as we reflect on the year that's coming to a close. When our plans don't work out, we have a choice: we can get frustrated, bitter, and depressed. Or we can embrace the truth that our lives are directed by God: a wise, sovereign, and good God, who is our Father. He is always doing a billion things that we can't see, faithfully keeping his promises, causing all things to work together for our good (Romans 8:28–31). Your life may not be guided by dreams like Joseph, but it is directed every bit as much by Joseph's God, and his promises. What peace comes in embracing this truth!

DECEMBER 30:

embrace an ordinary life

Bible Reading: Matthew 2:19-23, Colossians 3:1-25

My favorite movies are suspenseful “spy thrillers.” In the old Alfred Hitchcock movie *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, a small-town Indiana doctor is vacationing with his family in Morocco, when he stumbles onto a plot to assassinate a world leader. When the bad guys realize he’s found them out, they kidnap his son. The next 48 hours are the most intense of this doctor’s life: he and his wife chase villains all over the world, solve mysteries, escape danger, and finally foil the assassination and rescue their son. The movie ends with them going back to Indiana as if none of it ever happened.

That’s not so different from the plot of Joseph’s story. His life from Matthew 1:18–2:22 is like a spy novel—dramatic, suspenseful, and intense: “small-town carpenter finds himself at the center of God’s eternal purposes!” Joseph is guided by supernatural dreams and meets exotic people. He narrowly cheats death, travels to foreign lands, and fulfills ancient prophecies. Then, in Matthew 2:23, it’s like the whirlwind that picked Joseph up in Matthew 1:18 sets him right back down where he started, like nothing ever happened. Each day, he now finds himself in the same, quiet workshop as before. Each night, he goes home to supper with his family. Every Sabbath, they worship at the local synagogue with their neighbors. Did Joseph ever wonder before he fell asleep if God would meet him in another dream, with another message, a new mission? As far as we know, God never does. The rest of Joseph’s life is completely ordinary.

This may be where Joseph can help us the most as we think about the approaching new year. We can get the impression from the Bible that amazing things happened to God's people all the time. But Joseph reminds us that, while sometimes God interrupts the normal rhythm of our lives, most of the life of faith is not like a spy novel. It's not excitement and suspense around ever corner. Most of the Christian life is very ordinary. When the Apostle Paul describes the daily Christian life (like in Col 3:4, Rom 12:16, or Eph 4:6), he doesn't say much about dramatic spiritual experiences, miracles, or risky adventures. Paul doesn't talk as if the Christian life is one big event after the next. Instead, he talks about ordinary life: husbands and wives learning to love each other. Parents patiently raising their kids. People getting up and going to work. Being part of a church where you hear the Word, sing, pray, and learn to get along with people who are different from you. Telling neighbors about Jesus when you get the opportunity. Working on your own personal sin issues along the way. It all sounds pretty ordinary.

This is what author Eugene Peterson calls "a long obedience in the same direction:" trusting and obeying God in the every day, day after day, and finding joy in it. American Christians sometimes have a hard time with this, because we tend to think that if something big and exciting is not always happening, something must be wrong. We can get discouraged with our own run-of-the-mill discipleship. But remember how God worked in Joseph's life: brief episodes of excitement, followed by a long, quiet rhythm of everyday faithfulness. When we realize that this is what God wants for us, we can embrace an ordinary life, "a quiet life of godliness (1 Tim 2:2)," with peace and joy.

DECEMBER 31:

embrace a hopeful life

Bible Reading: Matthew 2:19-23, Hebrews 11:8-16

The Bible doesn't tell us how long Joseph lived, but we can be fairly certain that he dies before Jesus's public ministry begins. He is never mentioned with Jesus's family during Jesus's adult years (see, for example, Mark 3:31–34). At the cross, it's clear that Joseph is no longer alive, and that Jesus, the oldest son, is now responsible for Mary. He makes sure that his disciple, John, will care for her after he's gone (John 19:25–27).

What does this fact tell us about Joseph? It tells us that, after all the tumult he endured during that first Christmas, followed by all those quiet, uneventful years in Nazareth, Joseph never saw any results of his faith. Unlike Mary, Joseph never saw Jesus do a single miracle. He never heard Jesus preach. He never got to experience the crowds thronging around his son. And, of course, he did not witness Jesus conquer sin and death at the first Easter.

Joseph in many ways is like an Old Testament believer. Like the first Joseph! He has all these promises from God, and he re-orders his entire life on the basis of those promises. Yet Joseph never sees those promises fulfilled with his own eyes. He "died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them, and greeted them from afar..." (Heb 11:13)

That means Joseph had to live by hope. Whether he lived to see it or not, Joseph was confident that God would ultimately keep his promises. He believed that none of his costly faith and obedience at

the first Christmas and beyond would be wasted, but that God would use Joseph's life for his glory, even if Joseph could not tell at the moment that anything was happening at all. Paul says that all who belong to Christ must also live by this kind of hope: "For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." (Romans 8:24–25)

But *was* Joseph's hope misplaced? *Was* he right to hope in God as he did?

Well, only God knows the full extent to which Joseph's life really "counted," but we do know a few ways in which God used his quiet, faithful life. He protected, nurtured, and shaped the perfectly righteous, fully human Savior of the world, for starters (Luke 2:50–52). Besides that, Joseph also raised a couple of other fairly successful writers. You may have heard of their books—James and Jude.

That strike me as pretty significant!

It's just a little hint of what God can do with an ordinary life, fully submitted to him. Joseph reminds us, as we head into a new year, that in Christ, we can and should embrace a hopeful life. Surrender to Jesus, live on his promises, obey his Word as best you know how. And trust that he is always doing far more than you could ever dream. As you enter this new year, don't you forget what Joseph has taught us: that we belong to the God of *hope*. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, you may abound in hope." (Romans 15:13)









