

A dark blue silhouette of a barn with a gabled roof and vertical slats, set against a red background. The words "beyond the" and "stable" are written in a white, cursive script across the barn's front. The word "stable" is significantly larger and has a halftone dot pattern.

beyond the
stable

Christmas Devotions
for All Ages to See
Christ in All
of Scripture

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Purpose

The purpose of these advent devotions is to help our church family grow in our devotion to Christ during this Christmas season. We believe that God has spoken to us completely in Jesus Christ. We pray that the Spirit will help you see beyond the stable to the Christ of Scripture, whose footprints are on every page. Whether you are leading your family, or pursuing a deeper intimacy with the Lord individually, our hope is that you are enriched by the Word of God and strengthened by the knowledge of Him.

Structure

Every devotion is designed to help you meet three goals: (1) Immerse yourself in God's Word, (2) introspectively answer questions that focus your attention on Christ, and (3) intentionally respond to what you have learned about God through prayer.

Personal devotions are set up with the steps, *Read*, *Ask*, and *Pray*, in order to meet the three goals. Prayer prompts are listed at the conclusion of each day. These are intended to be used by people of all ages.

Family devotions are more fluid in structure to account for every age represented in your family, but still encompass the three goals to read, ask, and pray.

Instructions

1. Prepare yourself/your family for your time together by putting your phones away, opening your Bibles, and asking the Lord to give you spiritual eyes to see Him more clearly.
2. If you are leading your family through these devotions, we would suggest working through the personal section first, and then walk your family through the corresponding section.
3. There are questions and references dispersed throughout the family devotions. These are intentionally placed for the purpose of pausing with your family for meaningful discussion and input.

Recommendations

- The family devotions are geared for preschool and elementary aged children, but can be adapted to the ages of any child or teen in your home.
- If you plan to adapt the devotions for older children or teens, familiarize yourself with the Scripture and what characteristics of Christ are being pointed out in both the personal and family, being prepared to adapt the personal questions with your older children in mind.

Day 1

Creation: Jesus Speaks

Personal

Read: Hebrews 11:3, Genesis 1:1-3, Colossians 1:15-16, John 1:1-5

If God did not speak, we would not know much about Him. In fact we wouldn't know anything about Him. In speaking, God created all that there is. Light jumped into existence and galaxies began to shine. How do we know God created? Because He spoke. He chose to speak it into existence. Out of nothing, something appeared, and He formed it together by speaking its form. Life happens when God speaks!

It's no wonder that when Moses figured out that the burning bush was God speaking to him, he panicked. How do you approach and speak back to God who made everything? When God says to Job, "Brace yourself like a man," it's no wonder that Job said he would cover his mouth. God's Word is powerful.

But God doesn't just speak to create. God wants to speak to His people. He always has. He spoke through prophets, kings, and priests, all telling His people His desire to be with them. But the people's hearing grew weaker the more they turned their faces toward other gods. So much so, that it seemed like God stopped speaking...for a long, long time.

The Christmas season is a reminder that God's voice is not silent. Hebrews 1:2 tells us God has spoken another word through His Son. And this time when He spoke, the light of the world came, and in Him was life. Brand new life, with the power to awaken us from our own dead darkness. This Word is one of rescue, hope, and redemption. His name is Jesus.

On this journey we will see many things about God, and ourselves. But right here from the start, remember, the only reason we know anything about God is because He didn't remain silent. The Word became flesh. He spoke into the Bethlehem night, through the cry of the baby boy. And it's in Him, this season, as in all seasons...that we can find life.

Ask:

1. If God has spoken through Jesus in His Word, how well are you listening? Is there something you need to give up or set aside this season to listen more intently to God's Word?
2. If God speaks about Himself, should we not speak of Him? Who is one individual this season you should speak to about Jesus?

Family

Read Genesis 1:1-2. Close your eyes. What can you see with your eyes closed? (Darkness.) Before God created the world, the Bible tells us that the earth was empty and darkness covered the surface. But one sentence from God changed all of that. Read Genesis 1:3, "Then God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light."

Open your eyes. In an instant, you went from seeing nothing but darkness to being able to see everything in this room because of light entering your eyes! Similarly, in an INSTANT, there was light.

So how did God create light? Did He rub His hands together? Or do 10 jumping jacks? Or simply snap His fingers? Look at the first three words of Genesis 1:3 again, and read them aloud. "Then God said." All He did was SPEAK and He created light. Continue reading through the Genesis 1:1-26 account, putting emphasis on "and God said" each time. God's Word tells us that when God is speaking, that Jesus speaking.

Read John 1:1. Who is "the Word?" (Jesus.) Read John 1:2. Who was with God in the beginning? (Jesus.) That means, the same Jesus Who we see in a manger is the One Who spoke in the beginning. This same Jesus is still speaking through all of the Bible!

Pray:

- Thank the Lord for how He has spoken to you.
- Ask the Lord to help you listen to Him.

Day 2

Sin: Jesus Saves

Personal

Read: Genesis 3, Luke 22:39-46

God made man perfect. He put him in a perfect place: God's garden. He created them male and female in perfect harmony with each other, the garden around them, and most importantly, God Himself. When the serpent came into the garden, he was not looking to spoil things a bit. He wanted total destruction of this harmonious paradise.

Appealing to the desires of their eyes, the serpent's initial blow was fatal. Both man and woman gave themselves over to their own will against God's clear command. They hid themselves in shame because they realized they were naked and it seemed like there was nothing that could remove their shame. They both knew they would have to pay a price for what they had done. God had told them they would die. And they did, their souls plunged into the darkness of sin.

But when the Judge's hammer came down, the final ring was not of death alone. Something died immediately. Blood was, in fact, spilled, but it was not theirs. God took animal skins and clothed their nakedness. He did not leave them in their shame, but His mercy did not stop there. God made a promise...a promise that a child of theirs would one day defeat that snake that had deceived them.

In another garden, at another time, that child, now a man, knelt in prayer. He, too, battled like His parents, over His will or God's. But He made a different choice. Blood again fell on a garden floor, but this time it was in the form of tears, as He said in a trembling voice, "I want your will to be done, not mine."

God's promise to send a savior had come. He stood and went to the cross, bled, and died, so that once again, man's sin was not just overlooked as before, but this time paid in full. And as they wrapped His body in linen cloth, our minds race back to the manger, where that man first came into the world...lying, swaddled in cloth, the Savior of the world.

Ask:

1. Have you ever been tempted to hide your sin? What sin would you confess today, before God or a fellow believer, trusting that God has forgiven you?
2. Looking at Christ in the garden, it's clear He wrestled with what obedience looked like. Would He follow God's will or His own? What can you lay down today and say to the Lord, "I want your will to be done, not mine"?

Family

Read Genesis 1:31. When God spoke, the earth and everything in it was created. God looked at all that He had made and saw that it was good. When you look at the world around you, is everything you see good? (Help your family understand that not everything around us today is good - there is pain, sadness, hatred, anger, etc. many places we look.)

So, what changed from when God created the world when everything was good? Sin came into our world and messed things up. What is sin? (Sin is disobeying God's law.)

God's enemy, Satan, saw all God had made and wanted to destroy it. Read Genesis 3:1-7. As a serpent, Satan went to Eve and made her think twice about what God had told her to do. And just like that, they disobeyed what God told them to do and sin entered our world. Have you ever disobeyed your parents? How did you feel when you disobeyed? As soon as they disobeyed, Adam and Eve realized they were naked and were embarrassed by their nakedness, and they covered themselves with leaves.

God did not leave them in their embarrassment. Read Genesis 3:21. Where did the garments of skin come from that God gave to Adam and Eve? (Help your family understand that God just performed the first sacrifice - innocent animal's blood was shed to pay the price for sin. From that animal, God made them clothes to cover their nakedness.) Even though an innocent animal's blood was shed for them, it wasn't enough to destroy sin forever. Only a perfect sacrifice could destroy sin forever.

Read Genesis 3:22-23. Because of their sin, Adam and Eve were separated from God. Because we were born into a sinful world, we are still separated from God. God could have left us this way...separated from Him. But He didn't! The only way to restore our relationship with God was to take sin away. That very day Adam and Eve sinned, God promised that a Savior would one day come to be the perfect sacrifice and take sin away and restore our relationship with God - His name is Jesus! Adam and Eve made a choice to disobey God. But in another garden, a long time later, Jesus made the choice to obey His Father. And because of His choice, you and I can be with Him forever.

Pray:

- Thank the Lord for not leaving us separated from Him and for sending Jesus as the perfect sacrifice for our sins.
- Ask the Lord to help you obey Him and to give you spiritual ears to hear His will today.

Day 3

Noah: Jesus is the Only Way

Personal

Read: Genesis 7:1-16, John 14:6

Imagine the world before the flood. What do you think it looked like? Can you even fathom a world where it had never rained? Now picture God telling you to build a massive Ark, a boat, to carry your family to safety from an oncoming flood, due to rain that no one had ever seen before. You see, God told Noah He was going to wipe out everything that wasn't aboard that Ark. God was telling Noah there was only one way to be saved. The question was whether or not Noah believed God. This isn't exactly the picturesque boat atop a simple wave we paint on children's bedroom walls.

In promising the flood, God was promising judgement on the world. In the garden, God had warned that this would be the outcome of man's sin. If they didn't listen, there would be disaster and yes, death. But just as in the garden, as soon as the curse was pronounced, the cure was offered. God said destruction was imminent, but He quickly provided the way out.

The Ark was not merely a vessel given to Noah's family, but for all wildlife. This was the world in a wooden box, and when the rain did come, Scripture says, God shut them in. Noah and his family and all the animals were hidden from the judgement outside. If you were standing on the outside, the Ark would have seemed massive, but in comparison to the flood waters, this was a speck on the waves. God kept His promise to Noah. That tiny speck floated and resisted the waters of judgement, until it rested safely again. Then the doors sprang open and life came out! It was a new world with a brand new start.

This, however, was not the final solution to man's problem. Sin remained, even in faithful Noah's heart. And as long as sin is found, judgement must come. The mystery of Christmas is that what God foreshadowed in the Ark came to us again in Jesus Christ. With judgement pending due to our sin, God once again sent a rescue. In the wooden box of that manger, life was ready to spring forth. But this life did not simply avoid the waves, He embraced them. He took our judgement, and gave us life instead. As Noah received the only way of escape, so Jesus is our only hope. At just the right time, with judgement looming, Christ came for us. When there seemed to be no way, God made one. When we ponder that Bethlehem star, it doesn't simply point to a baby. No. Inside that stable, is our only way, the Savior of the world.

Ask:

1. How do you think you would have reacted to being asked to build an Ark?
2. If we know Jesus is the only way to be saved, how should that change what we do, how we speak, and how we interact with others?

Family

How did sin first enter the world? (Help your family remember that Adam and Eve disobeyed God's directions to not eat of a certain fruit.) Once sin entered the world, it did not stop creating problems. Adam and Eve had children who had children who had children, and all of them grew more and more evil, sin taking charge of their hearts and minds. Read Genesis 6:5-6. God's heart became sad seeing how His good creation had become so bad. Something had to be done about the wickedness that was in the world. Read Genesis 6:7-8. Whose family did God choose to save? (Noah's) Why did God choose to save his family? (Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.)

Read Genesis 7:1-5. God told Noah to build a huge boat. Who did God tell Noah to bring onto the boat with him? (His whole family and all kinds of animals.) What was going to happen to the people and animals that were not on the boat? (They were going to die.) Just like God said it would, the flood came, and anyone not on the boat drowned. Only those on the boat were saved.

Do you think you should be punished if you sin? Read Romans 6:23. What is the payment of sin? (Death.) Even Noah, who the Bible tells us was righteous before God, still had a sinful heart, so he, too, deserved death. But God made a way for Noah to be saved in a wooden boat. Was there any other way that Noah could have been saved? (No!)

The Ark was the only way that Noah and his family could be saved. We, like Noah, still have a sin problem. Just like there was only one way for Noah and his family to be saved from death, there is only one way for us to be saved from being separated from God forever. Around Christmas time, we see our One Way in another wooden box...a manger. Do you know His name? (Jesus)

When Noah and the animals came off the boat after the flood waters dried up, what did God put in the sky to show Noah that He would never destroy all people by flooding the earth again? (A rainbow.) A rainbow in the sky reminds us that God keeps His promises. He loved Noah so much that He provided a way for him to be saved on the Ark, and He loves us so much that He provided a way for us to be saved from our sins. He sent His Son, not to destroy the earth, but to destroy sin, so that the earth and all who are in it, could be made right with God again!

Pray:

- Thank the Lord for keeping His promises and sending His Son as our one way.
- Ask the Lord to make us bold to share the good news of this great escape with others!

Day 4

Tower of Babel: Jesus is Necessary

Personal

Read: Genesis 11:1-9; Luke 19:9-10; Matthew 2:1-12

What's your greatest accomplishment? When we consider something great we have done, for some of us that is a long list, while others struggle to think of anything at all. After the flood, mankind tried to accomplish something together. They wanted to make a great name for themselves. They built a tower. And all the people of the world gathered there to see the wondrous masterpiece of man.

This was yet another demonstration of man's prideful heart. God graciously dispersed them and gave them different languages so that they could not work on the tower any longer. He then spread them out over the whole earth. For the history of mankind, geography and language has stood as a testament to what man tried to do...build a tower to Heaven, to worship themselves.

Even at the highest peak of their accomplishment, they still failed to reach God. They weren't exactly seeking Him, mind you, but they certainly didn't find Him. He had to come down, to see what it was they were doing. His majesty bowed low to see the feeble attempts of man to reach the sky. Thankfully God's humility is not limited to our correction, but He shows us humility also in our redemption. We could never reach God. He had to reach down for us.

At the point of our greatest need, God stooped low again. He became man, taking on human flesh, becoming even a baby! From far off, three wise men came to look for the king who had been born. They traveled over two years looking for the child born under the star. They came pondering what they would find. What they found was God Himself, Who had come to find and save the lost. And save them He would. Because this time when God came down, He didn't disperse us across the world, but drew us to Himself. Jesus had to come if we wanted to know God. And one day, all those people, from all those languages, will come and bow to the Prince of Peace that was born in the manger.

Ask:

1. If I was to ask someone close to you what the most important thing to you was, what would they say? Job? Marriage? God? In this next month, what would it look like to shift the focus off of yourself onto making His name great?
2. We have no less of a command today to "be fruitful and multiply." We do this by making disciples of all nations. When was the last time you took that call seriously? Where is God calling you next?

Family

Read Genesis 9:1. What did God tell Noah and his family when they came off of the Ark safely? (To multiply and fill the earth.) Fill the earth means to spread out! The entire earth had been cleansed from the evil that had spread, and it was time for Noah's family to fill the earth!

Read Genesis 11:1-4. Wait a second. Didn't God tell the people to fill the earth? To spread out? Read verse 4 again. Why were they building the tower? (So they could make a name for themselves so they wouldn't be scattered over the whole earth.) It didn't take long for sin to take over the minds and hearts of God's people.

Read Genesis 11:5. The people were trying to build a tower that reached the heavens, and God still had to "come down" to see it! Read Genesis 11:6-9 to see what the Lord did when He saw the people He made disobeying Him again. What did God do to their language? (He confused their language so they wouldn't understand each other.) Just like that, different languages were born! Because they couldn't understand each other any longer, they naturally went their different ways and spread out over the earth.

Were the people able to get to God on their own? (No.) God had to come down to see what they were doing. Even when we try as hard as we can, we can never reach God on our own. He has to reach down for us! And He did! He sent His Son as a baby to earth to be with us. His life and death allow our relationship with God to be made right again!

Read Matthew 2:1-12. When Jesus was born, wise men came to look for the king who had been born. They traveled over two years following the star and looking for the child. They found God Himself, a baby, Jesus, who came so that we could be close to God! Jesus' coming was needed!

Pray:

- Thank God for coming to earth as Jesus so that we could have a relationship with God.
- Ask the Lord to help you follow His instructions.

Day 5

Abram: Jesus is Our Promise

Personal

Read: Genesis 12:1-3, Romans 4:13-16

Can you imagine leaving everything you've ever known? Imagine if God asked you to pack up everything you own and move to a foreign land where you knew no one and didn't speak the language. Abram was asked to do just that. God told him to go from his land, his relatives, and his father's house. In other words, he told him to leave everything.

But as God always does, His command came with a promise. Isn't it interesting that God didn't just say "do this!" but gave some of the most comforting and inspirational words in all of Scripture as companions for Abram as he went. He promised him that He would bless him, and not only that, but that every nation on earth would be blessed through Abram. He promised He would be for him no matter what. What an incredible promise! Now Abram had a choice. He could obey God and trust the promise, or he could disregard the promise and disobey the command. Abram chose to believe God.

Our God is a promise maker. There are many things about Him we don't understand. There are ways He thinks that are simply too lofty for us to comprehend. But God doesn't leave His children in the dark to wonder, or even to blindly obey. He makes promises. And like a good guarantee, the promises are backed by the One Who made them. When God promises, you can trust Him. He is the guarantee of His own Word.

When Jesus appeared, sleeping in the stable, He was the fulfillment of all God's promises. What Abram could only hope in faith, now Mary and Joseph treasured. Do you ever wonder if God's Word will come true? Do you ever think that perhaps His promises might not happen? Do you have hope of a future? Yes, because Jesus was born. Do you have a purpose in God's family? Yes, because the Son of God came down. And will you find peace in all the days of your trouble? Yes, because in the child of Bethlehem there is good news of peace and great joy. Jesus is the answer. Jesus is our promise.

Ask:

1. What are some promises from Scripture that are dear to your heart? Why?
2. Has God ever asked you to do something you didn't quite understand? What truth did you cling to about God that compelled you to obey?

Family

Read Genesis 12:1. Noah's children had children who had children who had children, and one of those children was named Abram. God told Abram to leave his country, his family, and everything he knew to go to a place God would show him. If I came to you and said, "Pack your things and say goodbye to all your family and friends, I need you to go live somewhere else," what would you think? What would you be feeling?

When God told Abram to leave, He also made a promise to him. Read Genesis 12:2-3. He told Abram that he would make him into a great nation, He would bless him, and all the peoples on earth would be blessed through him! Wow! Does God keep His promises? (Yes!)

Do you think Abram understood why God was asking him to leave his home and his family? It is hard to do something when we don't understand why we are being asked to do it. If you were playing outside and your mom yelled across the yard at you to take three huge steps backwards, would you do it if you didn't understand why she was telling you to do it? In that situation, your mom saw a snake in the grass that you were getting very close to and knew that if you took three steps backward, you would be safe. Sometimes God asks us to do something and we don't understand why He is asking us to do it. We have to trust that He knows why and that He is working for our good.

Abram trusted God and the promise He made. He chose to believe God and obey what he was told to do. There are many things we may not understand about God, because His thoughts and ways are so much higher than ours (Isaiah 55:9). Something we can understand 100% is that when God promises, we can trust Him to keep His promises!

Do you remember the first promise God made to Adam and Eve in the garden when they disobeyed and sin entered the world? He told them of someone who would come from their family that would destroy sin and God's enemy, Satan, once and for all. Who was that person God was talking about? (Jesus!) When that sweet baby was born in Bethlehem, God was keeping His promise of sending the One that would save us from sin!

Pray:

- Thank God for keeping His promises.
- Ask the Lord to help you obey Him even when we don't fully understand why He is calling you to do something.

Day 6

Abraham & Isaac: Jesus is Our Perfect Sacrifice

Personal

Read: Genesis 22:1-19 (CSB), Hebrews 11:17-19, John 1:29-34

Just like any other journey, it was one foot in front of the other. Though, the steps that day certainly would have seemed heavier than normal. Son walking with father, completely trusting his father's intent. Side by side they walked, until Isaac asked the most important question of the day, "Where is the lamb?"

For the duration of human history, since the dawn of Satan's rule, the question Isaac asked is the most important one to be answered. "Where is the lamb?" Will we walk the hill, to the altar of death? Will we pay for the sin we've committed...or will Abraham's words hold true. "God Himself will provide the lamb." And He did.

Though Isaac willingly laid down, bound at his hands and feet, at just the right moment, God made another way before the strike of death came. But what of our story? Will God Himself provide the lamb, the substitute? If God did not follow through in this story, it would have been Isaac who paid the price. In our story as well, we are accountable to pay the price of our sin, if God does not follow through. We are condemned to death, bound to the altar with our own sin.

We celebrate Christmas because if Christ did not come, we are left on the altar with Isaac. But He did come! Now, we are freed as the son of Abraham. As we remember Christ's coming, we remember His purpose. He did not come to remain in the manger. He came to walk another hill, completely trusting His Father. The Father sent His one and only Son to take the punishment that we deserved. He came willingly, as Isaac did, to be bound to the cursed tree of death, but this time, no ram would be supplied. He would fulfill both: the willing Son and perfect substitute.

When we look to the manger scene, we remember John the Baptist. When he saw Jesus walking his way, he cried out, "Look! The Lamb of God." This is no simple turn of phrase or poetic notion. This is a prophetic cry, telling the children of Abraham, as the angel had long ago, that another way, the perfect sacrifice, had at long last appeared.

Ask:

1. Has anyone ever taken the blame for something you did? How did it make you feel?
2. Many of us spend a lot of time trying to make up for our sin and do better. How can you rest today knowing that Jesus was the final sacrifice?

Family

Read Genesis 17:1-6. After Abram made it to the land that God was leading him to, He made another promise to Abram that He would grow his family, make him the father of many nations, and that kings would come from his family! In making this promise to Abram, God changed his name to Abraham, meaning the father of many. God told Abraham that he was going to have MANY children, but Abraham's wife Sarah had not been able to have children yet. How old was Abraham when God made him this promise? (99 years old.) Once again, the promise God made probably did not make a lot of sense to Abraham. He was 99 years old and his wife had not been able to have children, but God was going to make him into the father of many? Even when it is hard to understand, God can be trusted. Abraham trusted God's promise and sure enough, his wife Sarah had a son named Isaac.

Now Abraham loved his son Isaac and God knew that, but God wanted to make sure that Abraham still loved God first. Read Genesis 22:1-2. God told Abraham to sacrifice his one and only son, to kill him! If you were Abraham, what would you be thinking? What would you be feeling? What do you think Abraham did?

Read Genesis 22:3. He was going to do it! He was going to obey God even when he couldn't understand fully what God was doing. Abraham and his son, Isaac, continued on their journey. When they arrived, Abraham built an altar, arranged the wood on it to make a fire, and laid Isaac on the altar. Then, obediently, he was ready to sacrifice his son when the Lord called out to him from Heaven! Read Genesis 22:11-14. God provided a ram to be sacrificed in Isaac's place.

As we remember Jesus' coming, we remember why He came. He did not come to stay a baby in a manger. He came to live a perfect life, so that He could take on our punishment of sin and die for us. The ram in the bush was a temporary substitute for Isaac. When Jesus came, He was the permanent sacrifice who took our place! He died so that we could have a relationship with God.

Pray:

- Thank God for sending the perfect and ultimate sacrifice.
- Ask the Lord to help you love Him first above all things.

Day 7

Jacob's Ladder: Jesus is Our Gate

Personal

Read: Genesis 28:10-22, John 1:43-51, John 10:1-10, Galatians 4:3-5

God is not limited in space or time. He is infinitely everywhere. And yet, from Genesis to Revelation, we see that our access to Him is limited greatly. The tower built to reach the heavens had fallen with its proud builders. Though sin was great, people still had an inclination to worship something. When we read the story of Jacob we find a man, who because of his sin, has indeed suppressed this inclination. He thought only of himself, and the things of this earth. He prayed not to heaven, nor gave his mind the time to worship anyone but himself.

Here we find him at Bethel, where God intervened and shattered his world. Promises were made and the covenant was renewed. But something else in this dream captivated Jacob's heart as well, and points us to the Christ of Christmas. Jacob saw a staircase, or some say a ladder. The form, albeit provoking, was far less important than the destination it led to. Heaven. Angels of God ascended and descended freely, as if to say that this staircase had opened up pure, unadulterated communion with God in His dwelling place.

When Nathaniel met Jesus, he was astounded that Jesus knew where he had been sitting. You can almost see the smile of Christ as He told him that he would see even greater things than that. Did you catch it? He said he would see angels, ascending and descending on the Son of Man. Sound familiar? Now we know that earlier when Jacob awoke, he pronounced the place Bethel, "The house of God." He was convinced that this location was where God was. He was almost right, but the gate was not a where, but a Who.

When Jesus came to earth, it wasn't a one way trip. He had not just come down, He had opened Heaven's doors. Jesus Himself said, "I am the gate," and indeed He truly was. With His death on the cross, and resurrection from the dead, Jesus would shatter the barriers between God and man. No longer could sin, Satan, or the law itself, keep the sheep of Israel from entering God's house. Not only would angels ascend and descend, but mankind would ascend with them, through the door provided in Christ. That babe in the manger was Jacob's staircase to God. But now what Jacob could only dream was a reality in the sleeping child in Bethlehem.

Ask:

1. We have access to God in Christ. How often do you take advantage of that access?
2. Do you allow your heart to get caught up in the things of the world and allow your worship to grow cold as Jacob did? What seems to be the things that most often compete for your affections towards Christ?

Family

How many places can you be at one time? (One.) God is not limited by space or time and He can be everywhere at all times! But all throughout the Bible, we see how hard it is for people to be with God. Read Genesis 28:10-22. Up to this point in his life, Jacob was not thinking about how he could be with God. But God was thinking about how He could be with Jacob. And on this day, God spoke to him in a dream and changed his life forever.

God promised to Jacob the blessings He had promised to his father and grandfather. But something else stayed in Jacob's heart from his dream, and points us to Christmas. What did Jacob see in his dream? (A staircase or a ladder.) The stairs led to Heaven and angels went up and down the stairs. This is so important. Because of our sinful nature, we are separated from God, but this staircase promised that someone was coming to be like a staircase, or a gate, we could walk through to get to God.

When Jesus came to earth as a baby, we realize that God had been planning a way that He could be with us. What could be seen in the sky on the night Jesus was born? (A star.) Just like the star was placed in the Heavens to show the wise men the way to Jesus, Jesus was placed on earth to show us the way to Heaven. Read John 10:9. Jesus told the men that followed Him that He was the gate, the gate to Heaven. Because Jesus died on the cross for our sins, we don't have to be separated from God anymore.

Pray:

- Thank God that He opened Heaven up to us!
- Ask God to fill your heart with wonder, like Jacob, that God made a way!

Day 8

Joseph and His Brothers: Jesus Forgives

Personal

Read: Genesis 44:18-45:15, Colossians 1:13-14

Guilt is a powerful motivator. It drives us to further our mistakes, to increase our efforts, or in some cases, can even motivate us to adjust our behavior for the better. As Joseph stood over his brothers, they felt the weight of their guilt for what they had done to him (42:21). And yet, ironically, not knowing it was him, there they stood before the most powerful man on earth, with yet another choice to make. They knew they could not repeat the same mistake. So Judah stepped forward. He wanted this time, not to sell a brother into slavery, but to stand in his place. The thought of “bear(ing)the blame forever” was too much for his heart. So in this moment, propelled by pain, his feet moved forward, to offer himself as a sacrifice.

But there was something incomplete here. Guilt could carry him to remorse. Guilt could even move him to self-sacrifice. But guilt could never heal the brokenness of his heart. A gulf had been forged between himself and Joseph, and there was only one remedy for such a disease. If the story ended with Judah taking Benjamin’s place, and Joseph letting the rest of them go home, this is not a redemptive story. Guilt could never attempt to resolve their sin. To offer what Judah needed, Joseph had to step down, identify himself with his brothers, and offer them the one thing that guilt could never give: forgiveness. He acknowledged their guilt (vs 4), relieved them of it (vs 5), and reassured them that their relationship was restored (vs 15).

Christmas is a reminder of our greatest need. Paul tells us the law was a great tutor, for it taught us that we were sinners. But in the end, it brings only guilt and death. It cannot supply a way for us to absolve our sins, or heal our broken relationship with God. It cannot offer forgiveness. Christmas, and moreover the Christ laying under the stars, is evidence that we needed not to simply change our behavior under the weight of our guilt. Christ’s coming declares to us that we could never produce the answer to our greatest need ourselves: to be forgiven of our sin against a holy God. But as Joseph walked down the steps to his brothers, so Christ humbled Himself to us. He took on flesh, so He might shed blood on our behalf, forgive us our sin, and declare loudly to His Father that he is not ashamed to call us brother. As you ponder the Savior child today, thank God for sending Him, our Jesus, the great forgiver.

Ask:

1. How does knowing that Jesus is not ashamed of you help you deal with insecurity and criticism?
2. Is there someone in your life that you have been withholding forgiveness from? What a gift you could give them this Christmas!

Family

Read Genesis 37:3-4. Jacob had twelve sons, and of the twelve, Joseph was loved by his father most. When his brothers realized this, they hated Joseph. They hated Joseph even more when he shared dreams with them that had all the brothers bowing down to him.

One day Joseph went out to the fields to check on his brothers while they were taking care of the sheep. When they saw Joseph coming, they wanted to kill him. Instead, they sold him to some people going to Egypt. Joseph's troubles did not stop there. (Help your family understand all that Joseph went through because his brothers sold him: sold as a slave, accused of things he didn't do, thrown into prison, forgotten in prison, etc.)

But God did not forget about Joseph in all that time. He allowed Joseph to help Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, understand that Egypt and all the countries around it were going to have a long time without enough food. Pharaoh made Joseph second in command of all Egypt so that he could store up food for the time coming when they wouldn't have enough. When other countries near Egypt began to run out of food, people would come to Joseph and ask for food. One day, a group of men were brought before Joseph needing food and it was his brothers - the very brothers that sold him and sent him away from his father, family, and home.

Joseph wanted to see if the hearts of his brothers were changed, so he tested them. Read Genesis 44:1-2. When Joseph filled their bags with food, he placed a silver cup from his house in the youngest brother's bag. He then sent his men chasing after the brothers to scold them for taking his silver cup and explained that whoever had the cup in his bag would have to be Joseph's slave as a punishment for stealing. Joseph wanted to see if they would give up their youngest brother like they gave him up so many years ago. But they wouldn't give him up. When they were brought back before Joseph, his brother Judah spoke up and asked to be Joseph's slave in the place of his youngest brother. When he did this, Joseph began crying and forgave his brothers for what they had done to him.

Christmas is a reminder of what we need most, it was what Joseph's brothers needed: forgiveness. Jesus coming to earth shows us that we can not give ourselves forgiveness of sin. Jesus came to earth to die so that we could be forgiven of our sins.

Pray:

- Thank God for sending Jesus, the great forgiver, to Earth.
- Ask the Lord to help you forgive like He forgives us!

Day 9

Judah's Blessing: Jesus is King

Personal

Read: Genesis 49:8-12, Matthew 1:1-16

There are few things like the birth of royalty. Even in nations we have no connection to, the world seems to buzz with interest over the inaugural glimpse of a new dynasty.

In Genesis 49, we find Judah: the brother who sold Joseph, later humbled at the rulers feet, now blessed by his father, Jacob. And the blessing was remarkable. Jacob pronounced that kings would come from Judah. The ruling scepter, promised by God through Jacob, would not depart from Judah's lineage.

When we read Matthew 1, the very beginning of the New Testament, what we find is not an ordinary lineage. It's a lineage of kings. After David, until the people are taken into captivity, you have kings upon kings listed, all coming from Judah. That means whoever is at the end of this family tree is not just someone pretty important: He is a king.

Jesus' birth is not a normal birth. It's a royal one. Herod understood this and tried to kill Him. The kings from the east knew this, and paid homage. But if He's merely a Jewish king from a Jewish lineage, we have no reason to celebrate. Judah's offspring has no value for us if that's all He is. But the blessing given by Jacob didn't concern just the Israelites, did it? The scepter would not depart until One would come to secure the obedience of all peoples. That's you and me.

When Jesus was born, He was no ordinary king of one people. He was the King of the universe. And through His death, He would secure the purchase of the rights to those nations. The work in His resurrection proved He was the rightful heir to the throne: the very Son of God. The One from Judah's family. The One David foreshadowed. The One Isaiah prophesied. The One His people waited for. And yes, the One to Whom the nations would bow. Yes, Jesus in the manger is the King, come to His people at last. Make no mistake. When we gather to sing and praise Jesus for His coming, we are joining in a cosmic and royal celebration. The King is born. The new kingdom has begun.

Ask:

1. Jesus is King over all the nations, but not all nations know that. What is our role in this new Kingdom?
2. If you knew you were adopted into a royal family, would you change anything about your life? Scripture says we are royal ambassadors as sons and daughters of this King. We know who He is. How can we show our neighbor?

Family

When a new baby is born, it is an exciting time! We celebrate with families who have a new baby by bringing them meals or desserts, balloons, or gifts for the baby. What do you think would happen when a baby is born in a royal family - a baby who would one day be king? How would that baby be treated? (Festivals, parades, visits from other royalty, etc.)

Joseph's father, Jacob, was growing old in age, and before he died, he called his sons together so he could give each of them a blessing. Read Genesis 49:8-12. Judah was the one who talked his brothers into selling Joseph, but later volunteered to take the place of his youngest brother, Benjamin. The blessing Jacob gave him was awesome. Jacob pronounced that kings would come from Judah!

At the very beginning of the New Testament in Matthew 1, we see how Abraham had children who had children who had children. In this line of people, we see Judah! Then after Judah, we see the names of many others. Do you recognize any of them? (Ruth, Boaz.) Are any of them kings? (David, Solomon, Asa.) But the last name is most important. Read Matthew 1:16. Whose name is at the end of the list? (Jesus!)

Jesus' birth was not just any other birth. It was a royal one. He was born a king! The earthly king of the time, King Herod, knew that Jesus was destined to be a king and tried to kill Him. The Wise Men saw the star in the sky that showed His royalty and found Him to bring Him gifts!

When Jesus was born, He was the King of the universe! When we gather at Christmas to sing and praise Jesus for His coming, we are joining in a celebration that the King is born!

Pray:

- Thank God for sending His Son, Jesus, to us!
- Ask God to help you remember that Christmas doesn't remind us to celebrate just any baby's birth, but the King's birth!

Day 10

Moses: Jesus is Our Deliverer

Personal

Read: Exodus 2, Exodus 14:15-31, Acts 7:17-36

God takes no delight in the death of the wicked. People who are evil and captive to sin, God would rather them be set free! In Egypt, things were no different. God, like a good Father, wanted to be with His children. In Egypt, though, His people were enslaved. But what looked like Israel's biggest obstacle to being with God would become the very avenue for their most treasured experience with Him. When they cried out, God heard them. In the midst of their darkest entrapment, God would teach them something new about Himself: He is a deliverer.

When God sent the deliverer, though, they rejected him. They didn't offer him their allegiance, or thank him for coming. They asked if he had come to judge them. Moses was born for a great task, but the people, in the midst of their suffering, could not see he was their way out. He was an unlikely rescuer, this man from Pharaoh's house. However, despite their rejection, God did not leave the people hopeless. Through plague and by the hand of cloud and pillar, God walked them straight out the front door, behind that same Moses they had scorned. And when they reached the sea, God showed them once and for all that when He delivers, it is permanent. The threat of their freedom wasn't just left behind, it was defeated, buried in a watery grave.

The Christmas story is one of rescue. It is a mission of deliverance. In Bethlehem, that winter night, an insurrection was born. One meant to take all who were captive and set them free. God had sent the Deliverer. This time, however, it was not from chains of metal that the people needed freedom, but from the heavy chains of the peoples' sin. Their burden was not heavy bricks, but the load of their guilt. The enslavement was not merely of body, but of soul. But just as they had rejected Moses before, the people didn't accept the One he predicted.

Jesus was mocked, scorned, and rejected by men. But in the sound of the nails piercing His hands is the tune of freedom ringing toward the sky. When the blood dripped from His thorny crown, the chains began to crumble. And when the Son of God emerged from the tomb, every grave was torn asunder. God will lead all who believe out from their grave as well, behind this Rescuer, Jesus. In His rejection, He took on the suffering of the people. In His victory, He secured theirs. At Christmas we rejoice that One more beautiful than Moses has been born. And in His birth, those in bondage can breathe a sigh of relief: the Deliverer has come!

Ask:

1. Has God ever delivered you from something using an unlikely source?
2. You may have many relatives, friends, or co-workers that are bound up in their sin and honestly can't see a way out. What do they need from you? How can you shine light on the Deliverer this season they so desperately need to know?

Family

After Joseph forgave his brothers, they and Joseph's entire family moved to Egypt. Once they were there, Joseph's family (also called the Israelites) grew bigger and bigger. Read Acts 7:17-19. After some time, a new Pharaoh came into power who didn't remember all that Joseph did for Egypt, and treated God's people unkindly, just as God had told Abraham. They became slaves! But someone was born who was going to be used by God to change everything, and his name was Moses. He would be their deliverer. A deliverer is someone who rescues you from danger or from harm. The Israelites had a problem. They were being treated unkindly and were in danger day after day. They needed someone to deliver them from Egypt, and that person was Moses!

Read Exodus 2:11-14. When he grew up, God told him that he would be the one to deliver God's people out of Egypt. When Moses went to the people of Israel to tell them that God was going to rescue them, they rejected Moses! (Talk with your family about a time you felt rejection.) Even though the people didn't believe him, he rescued them anyway.

We, too, have a problem - a sin problem. Living in a sinful world, we are in danger day after day of being separated from God forever. We need someone to deliver us from our sin, and that person is Jesus! Because He came to earth as a baby and grew up never sinning, He was able to pay for our sins and deliver us from being separated from God. Just as people rejected Moses, the people rejected Jesus. Jesus was beaten and mocked. They put thorns on His head. The people didn't want Him as their Savior, but Jesus rescued them anyway. Because Jesus died and came back to life, we can have a relationship with God! We are rescued from the chains of our sin.

Pray:

- Thank God for sending Jesus to deliver us from our sins.
- Ask the Lord to deliver you from your sins.

Day 11

Passover: Jesus is Our Hiding Place

Personal

Read: Exodus 12:17-28, John 6:54, Colossians 3:3-4, 1 Peter 1:18-21

If you recall Moses' first days, he was whisked away to safety. Placed in a basket, he was carried along the Nile. Right at the epicenter of Egyptian life, the deliverer of God's people floated by. Just like in the beginning, when the enemy of God wanted to destroy the promised child... Pharaoh, the enemy of God's people, wanted to cut them off as well. And so God hid the deliverer. He protected him from death.

In Bethlehem, lying in the manger, you might think God had hidden His Son. But when Herod became aware that this little village held the foretold Messiah, he ordered, like Pharaoh before him, all the baby boys to be killed. Just as Moses was put inside a basket to hide from the evil Pharaoh, so Jesus was called into Egypt to escape Herod's evil scheme. God protected His only Son.

Look now in your mind to the Passover. One of the most captivating details of the celebration is God's command to not leave the house. They covered the doorframe in blood, they ate the lamb, but they did not leave until the morning light appeared. The angel had his instructions. None beyond that blood spattered wood were touchable. So, they remained enclosed, that night and every night after. They were hidden from the imminent threat. God's mercy was on His people, to pass over them instead of pronouncing judgement.

When Jesus was born, He did not stay hidden in the stable. Nor afterward, did He forever retreat in Egypt. No, He revealed Himself to many. And on the night before His Mount of Olives arrest, He did not stay safe inside the home. No, this Passover was different. He breached the frame that was sprinkled with blood. He did not maintain His place of secret, but instead He walked outside. He knew the garden held betrayal, and He chose to walk out still. He knew the courtyard held denial, but He stayed His gaze nonetheless. And when He walked the hill of Calvary, He embraced the angel of death. He forsook the blood of the lamb on the door, to shed His own for you and me.

God established something new with His people that day. It would no longer be the sprinkled door frame that kept us hidden from judgement, but the stained wooden beams of the cross. We are not hidden from wrath because God chooses to pass over, but because He chose not to protect His Son. He put His wrath on Him instead of us. Whereas before He took Pharaoh's son, and protected Israel's firstborn, He now gave His only Son, to give us His shelter. We are now in Christ, covered in His blood, our lives hidden inside Him, protected from the wrath of God. Let your heart be gladdened. Let your spirit sing. For Christ traded the comforting swaddling clothes for the death robes of Calvary.

Ask:

1. Where is your security today? Do you find yourself hiding and resting in Christ alone?
2. Do you embrace discomfort or danger for the sake of the Gospel?

Family

We talked yesterday about how Moses delivered God's people out of Egypt on the path to the land God promised them. But before Moses became the deliverer, let's look back at how Moses' life began. Read Exodus 1:22-2:5. God knew Moses would be the one to deliver God's people from Egypt, so when Pharaoh asked for all baby boys to be killed, God allowed Moses to be hidden until he was taken in by Pharaoh's family. Are babies quiet? (No!) How did they hide a baby for three months without Pharaoh or his people finding out?

When Moses went to Pharaoh as an adult to ask him to free God's people, he said no. God showed how powerful He was through plagues that He sent on the Egyptians like covering the land with frogs, gnats, and flies, and many other terrible things. The final plague God sent, the plague of the firstborn, was the one that changed Pharaoh's heart and mind and was the one that God's people talked about every year following. The people were instructed to obey a tradition God called the Passover. God instructed His people to sacrifice a lamb and put some of its blood on the door frame. In the middle of the night, God was going to send an angel to kill the firstborn of every household. But the angel of the Lord would pass over the homes that had blood across the door frame, and they would be protected. Read Exodus 12:22. What is so important in that verse? (The people were told to stay inside and they would be protected from death.)

We also talked yesterday about the fact that Moses was not the ultimate deliverer who would once and for all fix our sin problem - Jesus was. When Jesus was born, a different king, King Herod heard the news that a king would be born in Bethlehem. Read Matthew 2:13-16 to see how he reacted. Once again, God hid the deliverer and sent Joseph, Mary, and Jesus to Egypt to protect Him from Herod's evil plan.

But like Moses, Jesus didn't stay hidden. When He grew up, on a Passover night many years later, He left the protection of the home He was in. And it was on that night that He was arrested for crimes He did not commit and began the path toward the cross. He knew that when He left the safety of that home, what would come. But He chose to leave anyway.

God began something new with His people that day. It would no longer be the door frame sprinkled with blood that keeps us hidden from judgement, but the cross covered in Jesus' blood. We are not hidden from the punishment for our sins because God chooses to pass over, but because He chose not to protect His Son. Jesus paid our punishment. And because He did, we are now in Christ, our lives hidden inside Him protected from the punishment of our sins.

Pray:

- Thank Jesus that He did not hide from danger, but He fought against it and defeated it for us!
- Ask God to give you assurance (trust) in only Jesus today.

Day 12

Manna from Heaven: Jesus is the Bread of Life

Personal

Read: Exodus 16:1-5, 35, 36; Numbers 11:4-9; John 6:32-58

Think of the spectacle that first day, when all the people arose with the sun and came out to collect these heavenly wafers. What wonder would *HAVE* to fill your eyes as you walked gathering something that you knew wasn't there the night before. God never leads to a place where He will not provide when you arrive. And after leading the people from Egypt, delivering them from their bondage, He now was prepared to give them everything they needed, with little effort on their part. What a glorious display of His grace!

But so quickly their hearts had turned bitter. After just a short time, they griped to Moses about the food God had given. "Every day the same thing," they would complain. Somehow the fact that they were fed from Heaven itself seemed to lose its wonder on the people of God. This people, a new nation born through the watery deliverance of the Red Sea, now wandered in the desert instead of wondering at God's glory.

It was no different when the Bread of Life appeared. The Pharisees were not impressed, though God Himself stood in their vision. Unfortunately Jesus had not just appeared to give them physical nourishment or alleviate their appetites. He had appeared to offer His body, as the Bread of Life that would be broken for them (Luke 22:19). They could feed their appetites elsewhere, but their souls would suffer starvation without the Bread that stood before them now.

On the night of Jesus' birth, the brightness of the star stood in great contrast to the darkness of the night. As it held its gaze on Bethlehem, you would think it had made a mistake. If the goal was to announce something great or something needed, Bethlehem would not be where you would look. But a truth had been hidden there, ages ago, that would now be more true than ever before. You see, Bethlehem, means house of bread, and that night, like a certificate of birth, promised that it was indeed really such a place. The true bread had come, sent from God Himself. And whoever partakes in this meal, will once more wonder at God's glory, and feed on eternal life.

Ask:

1. Is there something in your life, past or present, that you are aware you've taken for granted like the Israelites did the manna in the wilderness?
2. If Jesus is the necessary bread to our spiritual sustenance, how should that change the way we start each day?

Family

After God led His people out of Egypt and they travelled to the land He promised them, they began to complain that they didn't have food to eat. Read Exodus 16:1-5. When God leads you somewhere, He is going to take care of what you need! What did God send His people? (Food! Quail and manna.)

Even though God had given them what they needed, they began to complain about the food God had given them. When you get used to how great something is, do you forget how grateful you should be for it? (Parents, help your family think of specific moments where they forgot to be grateful for how God had provided for your family, and chose to complain.) Read Numbers 11:4-9. God's people forgot how awesome it was that they were being fed from Heaven!

When Jesus came to earth, He tried to help the people around Him understand that He was the Bread of Life. Now, this was a different kind of bread. We could not eat it. But like you break bread to eat it, Jesus' body had to be broken to save us from our sins.

Jesus was born in a city named Bethlehem. It was a small city that was not known for much. Bethlehem means "house of bread." So, when Jesus was born that night in a stable in Bethlehem, the city truly became the house of bread - being home to the bread of life, Jesus, whose body would be broken for us.

Pray:

- Thank God for sending Jesus, the bread of life, to pay the price for our sins.
- Ask the Lord to help you remember how grateful you should be for how He has provided for you and your family.

Day 13

Snakes in the Wilderness: Jesus is Our Healer

Personal

Read: Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-21

The journey they took must have seemed familiar to the Israelites. They came around by the Red Sea. Do you think they peered out on the rolling water and remembered the towering waves created by God's hand on either side of dry land? Do you think they pondered the Egyptian army still residing at the bottom? A journey that should have been a reminder of victory quickly became one of bitter rebellion.

Like at the beginning in the garden, snakes came among the people of God. Like a reminder of their first parents' fall, God sent these snakes as a consequence of the peoples' sin. But even in His justice, there was mercy, which came quickly on the scene. Day after day, the command was the same. If you sought healing, you had but one thing to do: look. Look to the snake formed on the pole. The curse of their body would be transferred to the bronze snake. While they were indeed healed in body, there was something greater that could not be healed by an image of a snake: their heart of rebellion. Where was the cure for that? There would need to be a greater image to look upon.

When Jesus came, He healed the leper. There was no disease outside His power! The great snake's minions seemed to flee at the sound of this Physician's footsteps. He reached out and gave sight to the blind. At His touch, He gave strength to the lame. But this Healer's great work came when His hands weren't moving, rather when they had been pierced with nails and bound to the pole. When the soldiers lifted that cross into place, His healing had not ended, it had just begun.

It is a curse to die on a tree. And a curse did Jesus become. He took upon Himself all infirmity that comes from sin. As the shadow of the pole fell on the faces of those in the wilderness, there was no sickness known to mankind that the shadow of the cross left untouched. Jesus, our great healer, did the work Moses never could. He lifted up Himself, as the healer not only of our sickness, but of our soul.

The curse of sin has left its mark. The dying man, the aging woman, or the friend lost too soon. But this season is a victorious reminder that because a baby cried in Mary's arms, all our tears will one day be gone. He will wipe them with the same hands with which He touched Bartemeous' eyes, and reached out to bring the young girl back to life. We need only look to Him, lifted high upon the cursed tree. Surely then, joy will flood our veins when we recall, that even there in the manger, He is the healer of the nations.

Ask:

1. Do you have loved ones who are hurting or in need of healing? What encouragement can you offer them today?
2. Are there parts of your heart still hurting that Jesus needs to heal?

Family

Read Numbers 21:4. After God's people left Egypt, even though God led them out in an incredible way, they began to forget all that God had done for them and all that He had promised to do for them. Verse 4 tells us that the people became impatient. Have you ever become impatient waiting on something? How did you feel?

Instead of remembering how many times God had rescued them and provided for them, they forgot and began to speak against God and Moses. Read Numbers 21:5. Since Creation when Adam and Eve first disobeyed God, sin was in the world. And since the beginning, it has had consequences. Read Numbers 21:6. What were the consequences of the people talking against God and choosing not to trust Him? (God sent snakes to bite the people, and many were dying from the bites.) Where else in the Bible have we seen a snake? (In the Garden of Eden.)

When the first people sinned, it was by a snake tempting them. Now when the people continued to doubt God and sinned against Him, He sent snakes. What a big reminder that our sin problem that began in the garden was still a problem with the Israelites, and is still a problem for us today! God reminded His people that they needed a savior to save them from their sins.

Read Numbers 21:7-9. Moses made a snake out of bronze metal that the Israelites were to look at if they were bitten by a snake and they would live. Did that bronze snake fix the sin problem completely? (No.) The Israelites continued to struggle with sin. God already had a plan to send a different Savior, One Who would once and for all take care of our sin problem. Similarly, His body was lifted high, but on a tree (the cross). Do you know Who it was? (Jesus!)

God physically healed the Israelites that day, and when Jesus came to earth, He physically healed many who were sick. But when we see and talk about baby Jesus in the manger, we should remember that He is the ULTIMATE healer - of our physical bodies, but also of our sin problem!

Pray:

- Thank God for sending Jesus to heal our sin problem once and for all.
- Ask the Lord to help you obey Him.

Day 14

Tabernacle: Jesus is God with Us

Personal

Read: Exodus 26:1-14, Exodus 40:34-38, Hebrews 7:23-8:2

God has always had a place where He could meet with His people. Because God is holy, the place He meets them must be as well. It must be set apart, unstained by sin. In the garden, what we find is a perfect place. It had no blemish, so this is where God met with His creation. But after sin entered the garden, God meeting with His people was made much more difficult. What we see in Scripture after that, is God creating places where He can be with His people again.

God's instruction to His people to build a tabernacle in the wilderness must have seemed tedious, to say the least. Exodus 25 through the end of the book is filled with nothing but details on the building and use of the tabernacle. It would be easy to look at these commands God gave Moses, and simply pass them off as part of the religious rituals we no longer observe. But if we rush past these things, we rush past the heart of God for His people.

This is where God would once again meet His people! Every day and every night, the Israelites would look out and know God was with them. The cloud during the day and the fire by night stood as outward demonstrations that He had not forsaken them, and never would. But this was a temporary solution. And even the temple, that would come later, would one day be destroyed.

So, when the prophet Isaiah told of a child that would be born and would be called "God with us," it was no ordinary promise. When the angel declared to Mary that she should call her son the same, it was no ordinary decree. When we ponder the babe in the manger and we see Him clothed in human flesh, it's not simply that God sent a Messenger. He had done that before. He did not merely provide for us a sacrifice, for He could do that as well. No, the infinite uniqueness of Christmas morning is that lying in the manger is God Himself. He had done it! After all the years of waiting and anticipation, God had come to Israel.

And when Jesus ascended into Heaven, He entered the holy place, the real tabernacle of Heaven and by His blood God accepted not only Him, but us. And when He ascended, He did not cease to be a man. Jesus proved that it was possible for mankind once more to be with God. We may meet with God again in a specific place. The place is hidden in His Son, our High Priest, Jesus Christ. His ascension is the promise, the Spirit in us is the seal, and the new creation will be our faith made sight. He will be our God and we will be His people, thanks be to Immanuel, our hope of Heaven.

Ask:

1. Are there times when you feel closer to God than others?
2. Do you yearn to be in the presence of God? Often times we don't because we are distracted by less important things. Are there any you can eliminate today?

Family

When you want to talk with or spend time with your family or friends, where do you go? Do you have to go to one special place to spend time with them? (No.) As God's people, the Israelites, continued to travel through the wilderness, God instructed them to build a place where He could spend time with them. From the very beginning when God created the world, He has had a place where He could meet with His people. God is perfect and without sin, so the place He meets with His people has to be as well.

The first place God made to meet with His people was the Garden of Eden. We learn in the first book of the Bible that God walked in the garden with Adam and Eve spending time with them. But after sin entered the garden and Adam and Eve were sent out, it was harder to find a place that wasn't marked by sin. But we see in the Bible that God continues to make places where He can be with His people.

Have you ever gotten a toy that came in pieces and had instructions to help you put it together? Or maybe a piece of furniture that your parents got? What would happen if you didn't follow the instructions all the way? (Parents, turn in your Bibles to Exodus 24 and explain to your family that in chapter 24, God begins the instructions for how God's people should build and run the tabernacle. Now, slowly begin turning page after page until you get to Exodus 40 and help your family see how detailed God's instructions were for building the place where He would meet with them.)

It was so important that the Israelites follow all of the guidelines that God gave them on building the tabernacle because this is where God would meet with them. Read Exodus 40:34-38 to see what happened after the Israelites followed all of God's instructions to build the tabernacle. When the Israelites looked out at the tabernacle during the day, what would they see? (A cloud.) What would they see if they looked at it at night? (Fire inside the cloud.) God's people could look at the tabernacle at any time and see that God was with them.

Now this place was awesome, but it was man made and wouldn't last forever. When we read in the New Testament the story of Jesus' birth, and we read that the Angel came to Mary and told her that she should name her son Jesus, Immanuel, meaning "God with us," we should get so excited! God no longer had to use imperfect places that would pass away to meet with His people. When we think about the baby lying in the manger, we should be reminded that Jesus is God is with us!

Pray:

- Thank God for making a permanent way for Him to be with us.
- Ask the Lord to help you depend on Him.

Day 15

The Commander of the Lord's Army: Jesus is in Command

Personal

Read: Joshua 5:13-15, Luke 2:12-20

There were only two men left who had seen God's deliverance from Egypt. There were only two men left who had wielded a sword beside Moses. And as one of them stood, looking out over the land they had finally reached, he surely held a strong stance. His mentor and leader, Moses, had died. Only Caleb was left of his own generation. Merely by his uniqueness he demanded the attention of his people. But now as he stood and another man stood before him, sword drawn, even Joshua's own greatness seemed to shrink and hide. Always the fighter, Joshua asked if the man was for the people of Israel or their enemies. He perceived this to be a mere man.

How you would respond to a man with sword drawn, if he told you he was the commander of the Lord's army? Would you laugh? Would you do as Joshua did and bow? In any regard it's understandable that Joshua immediately hit his knees. What did the commander say that merited such a response? You see this was no mere commander. He commanded the LORD's army. When you come across LORD in all caps in Scripture, it means that the original Hebrew word used there is YAHWEH, the name of God. Whoever this was, was in command of God's army, and Joshua was ready to bow in allegiance.

But then he uttered words to Joshua that had only ever been repeated to him, never heard directly from God by anyone but Moses. "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy." No, this was not some normal army commander, even of God's own. You see, this was God Himself, the Commander of hosts, and Joshua knew it, so he did exactly what He said.

It should not surprise us then, that when these hosts of angels appear to the shepherds, they are consumed with one thing alone: telling the shepherds to go find the baby. Such a magnificent sight as the angels outshined the stars. What drama in the sky and yet, they bring no attention to themselves. In fact, when the shepherds left the manger scene behind, they were glorifying and praising God. Why did the baby merit this reaction, but the angels did not? This wouldn't make any logical sense, unless the baby was somehow more magnificent than the hosts. It would only make sense if that child laying by His parents' side was their Commander. As we near that manger scene in our hearts this season, forget not that the One we anticipate is the God of Angel Armies, the mighty One of Israel, the God of Joshua and Moses, and the God who made you and me. At Christmas we must bow, because He is uniquely worthy to be praised.

Ask:

1. Think of all the things in the universe that Jesus controls. How does His greatness make you feel?
2. When was the last time you actually bowed before God?

Family

Is it hard for you to obey when you are told to do something? What makes it hard? As time passed, God's people continued to disobey Him. At one point, God had prepared an incredible place for them, the Promised Land (the land He promised to Abraham), and they let fear of the unknown overwhelm them and they disobeyed God by refusing to go into the land. Remember that sin has consequences and the consequence of this sin was that none of the people who disobeyed God would get to see that incredible place God promised them, except for two who trusted God and tried to convince His people to obey. God's people wandered in the wilderness until all of those people passed away. Even Moses disobeyed God and wasn't allowed to go into the land, but before Moses passed away, he made Joshua the leader of God's people.

Do you know anyone that you think is really important? What makes that person so important? Joshua was really important! Only he and one other man were alive to see God get His people out of Egypt in such an incredible way. With that in mind, read Joshua 6:13-15 to see what happened one day when Joshua came across a man holding a sword. What did Joshua do in verse 14? (He fell with his face to the ground.) If we know that Joshua is a very important person, and he fell to the ground when he realized who this man was, what does that tell us about the man holding the sword? (He was even more important!) He told Joshua that He was commander of the Lord's army. Then in verse 15, He tells Joshua to take off his sandals, because he was standing on holy ground. This told Joshua that this was no normal army commander, this was God Himself, Commander of Angels, so he quickly obeyed!

Think about the Christmas story. When the shepherds were keeping their sheep in the field and the angels appeared telling them to go find the baby, the sight of angels appearing in the dark of the night must have been beautiful! But the angels did not want the attention. Who did the angels want the shepherds to look for and praise? (Baby Jesus.) The baby lying in the manger was not a normal baby. He was and is the Commander of the Lord's army and is worthy of our praise!

Pray:

- Thank God for sending us a Savior that is full of power and worthy of our praise.
- Ask God to help you remember that Jesus is in command and control, no matter what is happening around us or to us.

Day 16

The Sun Stood Still: Jesus Achieves the Impossible

Personal

Read: Joshua 10:1-14, Habakkuk 3:1-11, Luke 1:35-38

God is a God of the impossible. And as soon as that is spoken, it sounds somewhat false doesn't it? For if God is truly God, then by definition all things are possible for Him! It is so difficult for us to understand how this could be because we are limited in so many ways. We are limited in strength. We have to sleep. We are limited in knowledge. We are forgetful. We don't have the capacity to endlessly learn. We are limited in time and space! We can only be in one place at one time. But these limitations are foreign to our God. He is the God of impossibilities, quite simply, because for Him they don't exist.

As Joshua, the leader of God's people, ran fighting the battle God had already told him he was going to win, something happened in Joshua's mind. Now God had already proven that His word was true, because He sent hail falling from the sky to eliminate more of the enemy than by the swords of the Israelites! Even still, Joshua desired total victory. And so he stopped, and did something unlike anyone ever had, or has ever since. He asked God to stop the sun.

Even in the secured, promised, proven victory, Joshua was still finite. He was limited. His feet could only travel so far in a day. So when the enemy scattered, it was going to take a supernatural interference to secure it all in one day. You have to marvel at what confidence Joshua had, to ask God for such a thing. But that's where you begin to realize that Joshua's confidence is not in himself to ask, but in the One he's asking.

As the people of God fell repeatedly into sin, the prophets continued to foretell of One who would come to set them free. They needed a perfect Messiah, and yet also a sacrificial lamb. God can remain in perfection, and yet we know God cannot die. And right there, on the cusp of the mystery, God achieves the impossible. God became man, by way of a virgin birth, to achieve the impossible rescue of a people condemned to die. And on another morning, as the sun rose again, Jesus rose with it, the keys to hell in His hand. All in one day, He had brought forth to light the victory He'd already won.

And we, this season, in awe as we look toward Bethlehem, say with Mary, "How could this be?" It's there we remember our God, and declare even louder with the angel, "Nothing will be impossible with God." Hallelujah, the birth of the God-man Jesus Christ, who ever lives and pleads for me.

Ask:

1. What is there in your life, you know without a shadow of a doubt, that if God doesn't do it, it won't happen?
2. Are there any hopeless situations you've given up on? Any relationships you've sworn off? Can Jesus change them?

Family

Can you lick your elbow? Can you fly? Can you travel back in time? We cannot do any of those things because God made us to have limits. We need to sleep every night to be able to function. We have to walk on the ground to get places, we cannot fly. We only have so many hours in a day to get things done. But God does not have those limits! Nothing is impossible for God.

When Joshua was made leader of God's people, God began leading His people into the land He promised to them. But before they could live in the land, they had to win it from the people living there. God helped His people win again and again, slowly beating one kingdom at a time and slowly gaining the land He had for them. The king of Jerusalem heard that the kingdoms around his were being defeated one by one, and he heard that one nation made peace with the Israelites and were on their team. So, he went to four other kings and asked them to team up with him against the kingdom of Gibeon who was on Israel's team and try to beat them. So, they all came together and attacked. Read Joshua 10:6-8. What did the people of Gibeon do? (Ask for help.) What did God tell Joshua in verse 8? (That Israel would win the fight!)

Read Joshua 10:9-11. What did God send to hurt His people's enemies? (Hail - be prepared to explain what hail is to your family if they have never seen it.) Nothing is impossible for God! By sending hail from the sky, God showed Joshua that what He said could be trusted - God's people would win. Joshua realized the limits he and the army had. They could only travel so far and fight so long in a day, and he realized that when the enemy began to scatter, it was going to take something big to make it all happen in a day. Read Joshua 10:12-13.

Who did Joshua trust to ask something that big? (God.) Joshua already knew that He could do the impossible (Red Sea, hail, etc.) and He did! The sun stood still and the Bible tells us that never happened before and it hasn't happened since. But God continued to do impossible things. God became a man and was born of a virgin. Read Luke 1:35-38. What did the angel of the Lord remind Mary of when she marveled of how God would allow her to have a baby? (The Word of God will never fail - nothing is impossible with God!)

Pray:

- Thank God that nothing is impossible with Him!
- Ask the Lord to help you remember that even when circumstances seem difficult, to trust Him to help you through.

Day 17

Ruth and Boaz: Jesus is Our Redeemer

Personal

Read: Ruth 3:18-4:17, Galatians 3:13, Isaiah 44:21-23, Luke 2:36-38

Boaz loved Ruth. Moreover, in the words of Naomi, he **WOULD NOT REST** until the deed was done. Ruth loved Boaz. She trusted him. Yet there were a lot of factors that were still uncertain. And now she and her mother-in-law were in no position to work or provide for themselves. Moreover, there was a massive price to be paid if she were to be with Boaz. Their marriage was at stake, yes, but also her future. She heard the words of Naomi, to wait, but how hard that would be!? What if the other man would not yield? What if the cost was too great? Waiting for Boaz to return must have felt endless. Yet, she trusted before she saw proof.

In the waiting, Ruth could hope; and in the wondering, Ruth could trust. Because on that day, there was no other kinsman so bold, and no price too great. No, on that day, Boaz had set his gaze, and there would be no turning back. And now, upon his oath to the Lord, he would do everything he could to redeem their family, and purchase with it the right to marry Ruth. Boaz and Ruth give us a glimpse into the passionate, loving pursuit that God employs for His people. Before the foundation of the world, God had a plan in motion to purchase back a people for Himself. A people who would take on His name. A bride He would redeem.

Before Jesus arrived, the people had forsaken the law for their traditions and confused devotion with religion. The law, set forth by God Himself, demanded payment. In order for justice to be upheld, the people who were captive, would be forced to pay the price. Unless one like Boaz stepped forward, a redeemer, who would take on the responsibility and payment for the people. Anna was 84 when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple. Her eyes dimmed by the years, but her heart hopeful. Her hair gray, but her spirit strong. Her husband had also died. She, too, had waited. The long wait was surely saddened by the knowledge that God's people had forsaken their covenant. Yet, her days were filled with praise and song to the God she loved and trusted. She knew the redeemer of Israel was coming. She believed before she saw.

Eight days earlier, a son of Boaz was born in Bethlehem. And when His parents brought Him to the temple, the sight of Him did not disappoint. God's anointed Redeemer had come for His people. And there was no price too steep for Him to pay. His own blood was the ransom price, and He would gladly give it. The Pharisees couldn't hold Him back. Peter's doubt would not distract Him. Satan's greatest plan to thwart would only fuel what had been ordained. He **WOULD NOT REST** from the work God had set, until the prize was won, and the church of God, His bride, was purchased.

Ask:

1. Do you anticipate the Christmas festivities more than you anticipate the celebration of Jesus' coming?
2. How does it make you feel knowing God was working, even before you were born, to buy you back?

Family

After God's people entered the land God promised to them, God's people continued to disobey Him. But in the middle of these disappointing stories of God's people turning away from Him, we come across a story that points to Jesus so clearly. Read Ruth 1:1-5. There was a family: a man, his wife, and their two sons. What happened to them? Who died? Who was still alive? Naomi planned to travel back to where she was from and offered for her sons' wives to go back to their families. Orpah returned to her family, but Ruth would not leave Naomi.

When they returned to the land where Naomi was from, Ruth began to collect food that workers dropped as they moved through a field. The owner of the field found out who she was and that she was providing for Naomi and showed her kindness, and made sure his workers treated her kindly as well. When Ruth returned to Naomi with what she had gathered, Naomi was so pleased. Read Ruth 2:19-20. A family-redeemer is someone who has to redeem or rescue a relative who is in trouble. Eventually Boaz married Ruth and rescued her and Naomi out of the life of hardship and poverty they were living.

Boaz loved Ruth and wanted to rescue her from the hard life she was facing. Similarly God loves us so much that He had a plan from the beginning to redeem, or rescue, His people from sin.

Read Luke 2:36-38. Anna's husband had passed away and she was waiting as well. But she was waiting on someone different. She was waiting on someone to come and redeem, or rescue, God's people from sin. She knew someone would have to come and pay the price for our sin. Days before, a baby was born in Bethlehem. Who was it? (Jesus!) Jesus was the Redeemer, the Rescuer, that God had sent to ultimately pay the price of our sin so that we could be made right with God again.

Pray:

- Thank God for sending Jesus to redeem, or rescue, us from our sins.
- Ask the Lord to help you wait patiently on God to redeem any situations in your life that you need His help.

Day 18

David the Shepherd: Jesus is the Good Shepherd

Personal

Read: 1 Samuel 17:31-37, John 10:1-18, Psalm 23, Luke 2:8-12

Most of us know little of what it would look like to be a shepherd. However, we know more than enough of what it is like to be a sheep. They are slow to learn, stubborn, and often wander from the herd. Sound familiar? David knew what it looked like to be a shepherd. He knew the terrain was difficult, the days were long, and the nights were filled with more dangers than you could count. A shepherd must truly love his sheep. It is their good that he is after. He is gentle, always leading, and though sometimes it's necessary to use his staff of correction, it is always to lead his sheep to green pastures and still waters. David himself would rescue sheep from the mouth of a lion, putting himself in harm's way, bearing the burden of responsibility on himself to secure their safety. When needed, he would even lift them and carry them when they struggled to find their way.

When Jesus came, He came as King. When He entered human history, He did not cease to be God. Still, the heart He carried toward His subjects was that of a shepherd. And when the Shepherd's voice was heard, the people followed. Matthew left his booth. Peter and James left their nets. Simon laid down his sword, and Nathaniel left behind his pride. They did this to follow the One who called their name. The sheep had heard the voice of the Shepherd, and His tone was that of goodness. His leading was one of compassion, and they followed Him with gladness. But there came a time when their sheeplike hearts would falter. There was a certain mount they could not walk behind their Shepherd. But still in His goodness, He went on without them. On the treacherous road to Golgatha, He put Himself in harm's way, to secure their safety. On Calvary, the Shepherd prepared for them a table, in the presence of all their enemies. And it's a table we run eagerly back to every day.

But before the hill and before the cross, there was a stable filled with sheep of a different kind, and a baby laid nearby. As the angels declared that a child had been born in the city of David, the shepherds listening on could hardly fathom the implications. Neglected and worn, outcast by reputation, the men could not have known the grace that would be given them in the babe held in Mary's arms that night. They could not know that He would soon carry them to green pastures of grace and to still waters of forgiveness. Today, we may rest upon His shoulders, for He has come to lead us home, the good Shepherd of Israel.

Ask:

1. What in your life, current or past, causes you to doubt God's goodness? Does Jesus' coming shed light on any of those?
2. Can you recall a time when you've felt the staff of correction and later been able to say, "this is God's good leading of my soul?"

Family

What is a shepherd? What do you think of when you hear the word, "shepherd?" A man named David was a shepherd and knew that his job was hard. Read 1 Samuel 17:31-37. What did David have to do? (He had to protect his sheep from going dangerous places, he had to keep other animals from hurting or killing his sheep, and he had to lead them to places where they could safely eat and drink.) Do you ever get scolded or get in trouble for behaving a certain way? Your parents discipline you because they love you. Like a shepherd and his sheep, they want to protect you from hurting yourself and those around you and they want to lead you to wonderful places. By correcting you, they help lead you to those places.

When Jesus came, He came as King. Read John 10:14-15. He came as King, but how did Jesus describe Himself? (As the good shepherd.) Even though Jesus is perfect and royal, His heart for His people was that of a shepherd. Jesus wants to lead us places that are good and safe for us, and He wants to save us from our sin. Jesus chose to die on the cross to be sure that we could be saved from our sin.

But before the cross, there was a stable filled with sheep and a baby in a manger. What a sweet reminder that Jesus has come as our Good Shepherd to lead us.

Pray:

- Thank God for sending Jesus with the heart of a shepherd to care for His people.
- Ask the Lord to help you obey when He leads you.

Day 19

David & Goliath: Jesus is the Snake Crusher

Personal

Read: 1 Samuel 17:31-58, Acts 2:29-36

The battle lines were drawn. On one side stood the fearful band of troops. On the other, a fierce foe, the likes of which they'd not seen since the days of Joshua. No one dared approach him. No one dared to take his challenge. If they did, they'd surely die. Here, amidst the sight of trembling soldiers, a warrior stepped through the lines. See, David did not always stay a shepherd. The same God that saved him from the lion and rescued him from the bear, now strengthened his heart against the enemy giant. He would wear no armor, and his hometown was obscure, but he needed no glamor to prove his might that day.

His faith was not just puzzling to the scared ones looking on, but it was foreign and even ancient - like something from a dream they could not quite remember. In his footsteps they heard echoes of Joshua, fighting their battles. In his resolution, they remembered Noah, never wavering from his mission. As the stone flew from his sling, they could recall the flight from Egypt and rushing sound of the sea bringing at long last the deliverance they had waited for. But when he stood over the giant's body, something else from antiquity arose. The vision of this son of Adam, standing over the cracked skull of the enemy, brought breath to the promise of the defeat sworn by God to their parents long ago. The snake would bruise the heel, but the man child would crush the head. Was this the one to fulfill the promise? Was he the relief to all their toil? As David swung the sword down, the once hesitant army now felt courage in their veins. The victor had come, as small as he may be, and stood as champion for them all.

As mighty as he was, David was not the child who would defeat that ancient serpent. In fact he too, at another time, would fall prey to his schemes. Jesus is the better David, the One who would step forward for His people. He would come and fight for them while they were still afraid. By His death He crushed the serpent, and by His resurrection, the snake's head was severed. Death's power was vanquished for the people of God. And one day He will lead His people to trample afoot Satan, the great enemy.

David makes us remember the promises. But David also makes us hopeful. Because we know that God did not leave His people without a champion. The final Snake Crusher came. And though He was small, wrapped in swaddling clothes, He was mighty. He did not come with flashing armor, but He came in the power of God. He was not impressive in where He came from, but He would defeat the darkest of all enemies. In the stable, we have a warrior, the Prince of Heaven. His birth is the first act of war in a campaign He was never in doubt of winning.

Ask:

1. Do you ever feel defeated by sin? Have you truly trusted in the victory of Christ today?
2. If God has already won, through Christ, how does this change how you perceive shame, doubts, and shortcomings?

Family

Have you ever come face to face with a snake? If you did, what would you do? Would you run from it? Would you protect someone else? The scripture we read today tells us about a Snake Crusher Who protected us.

The same David that was a good shepherd to his sheep was also a bold warrior for the Lord. An enemy of God's people was saying horrible things about God, but all of the fighters were afraid to fight him - that is, everyone except David. God helped David be brave and strong to stand against the enemy, Goliath. Read 1 Samuel 17:38-47. Have you ever had to be brave to stand up to someone for being unkind?

David ran to the battle line to meet Goliath and pulled out a stone. He slung it and struck him on the forehead. The stone sunk in and he fell face down onto the ground and died. David defeating this great enemy reminds us of the promise God made to Adam and Eve in the garden that day, He would send someone to crush the head of the snake - to beat God's enemy, Satan, once and for all.

But as great as he was, David was not the One God was talking about when He said He would send someone to crush the snake. Jesus is. This story of David beating Goliath helps us remember that God did send a champion, someone to crush the snake. And even though He came as a baby, He was mighty. Read Revelation 12:1-10. This is a picture of what is coming! Our first glimpse of this mighty warrior is in the stable. This baby is the One God had planned to send from the very beginning to crush the snake once and for all.

Pray:

- Thank God for sending Jesus to be our mighty warrior.
- Ask the Lord to help you be brave to stand up for those who are being treated unkindly, like David stood up when Goliath was saying horrible things about the Lord

Day 20

Jeremiah the Weeping Prophet: Jesus is a Man of Sorrow

Personal

Read: 2 Chronicles 36:11-21, Jeremiah 9:1-3, Luke 19:41-44, Hebrews 5:7-9

At the time of Jeremiah the prophet, Israel smelled of incense to other gods. This was long after King David had died, the man after God's own heart. His obedience was now a distant memory. The covenant God had made with Abraham and his children had been broken...again and again. This was an era of rebellion, and God's prophet felt the weight of his people's sin. So much so that he cried.

Through Jeremiah, God warned them that their rebellion would have an end. Destruction was coming, and like in the days of Noah, there was only one escape, and that was to turn their ears to God. But God had warned Jeremiah that they would not turn. And they did not. Like their first parents long ago, they had exchanged the sweet sound of the everlasting words of God, for the sweet momentary taste of sin. And as swiftly as their feet ran to disobey, came the soldiers who would become their captors.

And so Jeremiah wept. He wept for the souls of the people lost in darkness. He wept for their sin, and how much it grieved his Lord. But the prophet's tears were not in vain. His suffering and sadness told of another Who would also weep.

At the time of Jesus' birth, Israel sounded like prayers full of empty words. And though their words were directed toward Heaven, their hearts were anchored to earth. And it was in these cold temperatures of religious indifference that God intervened. Resting and sleeping in that trough, the Christ had come in human form. He felt emotion and pain, sadness and delight. When they wrapped Him in those swaddling clothes, He cried as all babies do. And when He grew and saw the ones that He Himself had made, falling deeper into sin, He, like the prophet of old, wept for Israel.

He would bow His head for Jerusalem and weep for her to repent. But He did what the old prophet could not. In His grief and in the midst of His suffering, the man of sorrows took on the punishment that was due them. The tears of Jeremiah that soaked the Israeli soil had given way to the tree where the Savior hung. And from that same dirt had come the thorns that were pushed down upon the Messiah's head. His tears of blood proved the sadness of His eyes. The heavy cross bore the weight of their sin. But He did not just cry for their impending doom, but embraced it Himself instead.

And one day, that babe Who grew to know our grief, will wipe the tear from every eye, and will say come rest in peace.

Ask:

1. When was the last time you were moved by the weight of your sin or someone else's?
2. Jesus experienced grief for us. Do you need to surrender something to Him you have been grieving on your own?

Family

David, the shepherd and the mighty warrior, eventually became king. He was a king that wanted to honor God in everything he did. But after he died, other kings ruled and they did not all love the Lord and want to honor Him in what they did. Over time, God's people didn't look like His people at all.

During this time period, God would send people to speak to the Israelites on His behalf. These people were called prophets. Have you ever been so upset about something that it made you cry? One of the prophets God sent to His people was named Jeremiah. Read Jeremiah 9:1. He saw what was happening in the hearts and minds of God's people and it made him sad, so sad that he cried. An entire book of the Bible, the book of Jeremiah, is written about how sad he was at how God's people were acting.

Sin has consequences. If the people didn't turn back to God, they were going to be destroyed. He tried to warn the people that if they did not repent, they would be kicked out from the land God had given them for seventy years. God warned Jeremiah that they would not say sorry for their sins, and they didn't. And sure enough, they were taken out of the land and were not able to return for seventy years.

So Jeremiah cried and bravely told them to turn back to God again and again until they killed him. The Israelites' sin made Jeremiah sad. Our sin makes God sad, it has from the beginning. When you are sad what do you want to do? (Be alone, busy yourself, etc.). In God's sadness, He sent His Son to earth to take our punishment. When Jesus lived on earth, He felt what we feel. He had emotions and felt pain. Have you ever been around a baby? They cry don't they? Jesus actually felt the things we feel every day. Jesus knew about grief. Read Luke 19:41-44. Jesus was a man of sorrows because He cried over God's people sinning against Him, and He cried before He died on the cross for our sins. But He died because He loved us and wanted to pay the price of our sins. His sorrow was well spent.

Pray:

- Thank God for sending Jesus who understands every emotion we feel because He felt them!
- Ask the Lord to help you remember that our sin makes God sad, and to turn from it when you realize what you are doing doesn't honor the Lord.

Day 21

Ezra: Jesus is Our Restoration

Personal

Read: Ezra 3:8-13, Nehemiah 8:9-18, John 1:14-18, Luke 2:41-50

Remember how Jeremiah wept over the people of God? He tried to warn them that if they did not repent, they would be exiled from the land for seventy years. Through Jeremiah and Isaiah both, God promised also that He would bring them back. God had kept His word. He had brought them back from captivity. Just as He had kept His word to exile them from the land, He was now faithful to restore them to it. They built the city, and the temple, and dedicated them both before the Lord.

In the brokenness of their return, we see the beginnings of a full joy. They celebrated rightly, that God had restored them to their land. But their joy was mixed with sadness for the restoration was not complete (3:12). Something was missing. When the temple was dedicated, you would expect there to be some type of demonstration of God's presence.

Remember the tabernacle? They had seen God's presence there when it was built. The same thing happened when Solomon dedicated the temple the first time. Yes, there was something missing, and God's people knew. The glory of the Lord was not there. They knew from other prophets that God had promised His glory would appear in the temple again. So, this was not the restoration they had hoped for, this was not all they had imagined it to be. Restoration had begun, yes, but it was far from complete. As the years passed, the generations grew restless, waiting for the appearance of the glory of God. Had they missed it altogether?

One day the son of a Jewish carpenter, a boy from Nazareth, came walking into the courts of that same temple. The priests could not believe Him. The scribes listened in awe. Here it was at last, although not an it, but a Who. God's glory had appeared indeed, clothed in humanity's skin. Israel had their walls, and they had their temple building, but the long awaited glory had come to them at last. What was lost in their sin, could now finally be restored by this boy from Bethlehem.

But we know that baby, and what He came to achieve, and even still - we wait. There are things in us still broken, effects of the curse still found. We are saved, and filled with His Spirit, yet our flesh rages. Disease still takes, and shame still clings. We wait with the earth for the appearance of the adopted sons and daughters. There's a restoration yet to be. There's a forgiveness that is ours in the present, that will be more realized face to face. There's a battle now where victory is ours in Jesus, that will one day no longer need to be fought. When we look to the stable's trough, we find peace in knowing that the greatest restoration is yet to come and God who spoke it in Christ Jesus, will see to it that it comes to pass.

Ask:

1. What are some ways you can testify to God's restoration work in your life?
2. What are some things you are praying that God would restore? Are you waiting faithfully?

Family

When something is broken, worn out, or not doing what it was made to do, it is in need of restoration. It needs someone to make it new! Houses, toys, cars, and furniture can be restored. But they aren't the only things that need to be restored. Just like Jeremiah warned God's people, they were forced out of the land God had promised them. But God promised that He would bring them back! What do we know about God and His promises? (He keeps them!)

When God's people came back to the land God promised to them, they built the city and the temple and gave them to the Lord. Read Ezra 3:10-13. God's people knew something was missing. Have you ever put a puzzle together and come to the end to realize there is a piece missing? The picture does not look complete without all of the pieces. This is how God's people felt. After building the temple fully, something was missing. God's glory did not fill it. Their city and their temple in the land God promised them was beginning to be restored, but like the puzzle, it was incomplete.

Read Luke 2:41-50. One day, a boy walked into the very temple that God's people had built when they came back to God's promised land. Those who heard Him speak were so surprised at the wisdom He had about God and His Word. On the day that young boy walked into the temple, God's glory finally filled the temple, because Jesus, God's Son, had come in! God restored His people to the land He had promised to give them, and Jesus came to restore our relationships with God. And do you know the best news? Jesus is coming again one day to restore our earth, the world God created, and we will be with Him forever.

Pray:

- Thank God for sending Jesus to restore our relationship with God that was broken by sin.
- Ask the Lord to restore the health of those you know who are sick or who are in need of healing.

Day 22

John the Baptist: Jesus is Our Joy

Personal

Read: Isaiah 40:1-11, Luke 1:39-45, John 1:19-26, John 3:22-30

There are moments in life when not being the center of attention actually increases the enjoyment of the moment. When a husband experiences the birth of their first child. When parents or grandparents watch a performance of their children or grandchildren. Or when you are invited to a friend's wedding. These are all moments where you are not the focal point, and yet that is exactly the position which, in that moment, offers the most joy.

What a strange statement Elizabeth made to her cousin, inspired by the Holy Spirit. She claimed the baby inside her did something we would never say in common experience. He jumped for joy. Our understanding of a baby's comprehension alone would be enough to steal those words from our mouths and replace them with something much more mundane. But this was no ordinary or mundane child. This child was prophesied, to become a prophet himself. He would declare the coming of the righteous messiah and prepare the people for His arrival.

Even as a baby, somehow John knew this to be true. He was born to always point to his cousin, Jesus the Nazarene. What a strange child indeed he was. He did not yearn, as most children do, for the attention of all those around him. His greatest joy came not in looking at himself, but at the baby in the manger. The rest of John's life was not easy, and not always was it happy. It ended in rejection, imprisonment and beheading. If his life depended on people's approval, he surely would not have survived. But joy was his, from life to death, because it was complete in Jesus Christ.

This season, as we near the day of celebration, fight the temptation to think only of yourself. We join with John, as ones who prepare for His coming, and make ready others for His arrival. Your greatest joy will be found in losing yourself and finding Jesus, that babe that caused another to jump for joy. At Christmas, we would do well to follow John's example. "He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less." is not a passing phrase of false humility. It is a spirit led declaration of our own joy-filled obscurity.

Ask:

1. Do you struggle with being unknown or unnoticed? If so, when does it present itself the most?
2. What is one way you know Jesus would gladly give you joy, but you find it difficult to receive?

Family

Have you ever felt really, really happy for someone? (Help your kids remember a time - when a sibling succeeded, when a family member or close friend found out they were having a baby, etc.) In those moments, even when the exciting things aren't happening to us, we feel joy!

Read Luke 1:39-45. When Mary found out from the angel that she was going to have a baby, she went to see her cousin, Elizabeth, who was also pregnant! What did Elizabeth's baby do when Mary came in? (Jumped.) It is incredible that Elizabeth's baby jumped in her stomach when Jesus entered the room, even as an infant still inside his mother's belly. It is incredible because as we continue to read in the New Testament, we see that Elizabeth's son, John, tells others about Jesus in ALL that he did and said his entire life! And even in his mom's belly, he told her of Who had just walked in the room!

Read John 1:19-27. John was born to always give attention to his cousin, Jesus. He did not want the attention for himself. He found the greatest joy when he pointed others to Jesus. Read John 3:30. John was saying that Jesus was greater than him and he wanted his life to show that. As we near Christmas day, it would be easy to only think about ourselves - what we want to get, what we want to do, and where we want to go. But we need to be like John and help others get ready for Jesus' coming! When we live to point others to Jesus, we can live with joy, no matter what is happening around us or to us.

Pray:

- Thank God for sending John to go ahead of Jesus, to show us how to point to Jesus in all that we do, no matter what is happening around us or to us.
- Ask the Lord to help you point others to Him as Christmas day nears, and to help you think less about yourself.

Day 23

Mary and Joseph: Jesus is Our Obedience

Personal

Read: Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 1:26-38, Hebrews 5:5-9

What the angel asked of Joseph was unprecedented. Perhaps only in Hosea the prophet, who God asked to marry a prostitute, do we find something so seemingly scandalous being asked of a righteous man of God. Marry her? She was pregnant already! Could he not just divorce her quietly as he had planned? In fact, wasn't that the only decent, respectable option? You can almost feel his heart pounding in his sleep, as the angel tells him not to fear breaking against tradition and law.

What was expected of Mary was equally shocking. Was she to believe that she would be a mother without having been with her husband? Not only that, but was it really to be God's Son she would carry? Forget the fact that its an angel speaking for just a moment and we can readily acknowledge that either Mary or Joseph obeying the commands is, simply put, incredible. For both of them to quickly, and earnestly trust and obey? That was something supernatural. But that is precisely what they did!

They heard the message of the angel, and despite what they might not have understood, they both responded in obedience, and immediately at that. Just as when God called Abraham out to make a new family, He was calling these two to be the guardians of a new family, but not just of their own, but the whole world. In the midst of their obedience, came Christ. And from Christ, came the hope of the world, to begin anew the family redeemed by God, to be with Him forever.

Mary and Joseph were not perfect. But their obedience at the birth of their son, is a precursor to the obedience Christ would learn. In perfection of His Godhood, the Son neither sinned, nor was tempted to. He was always obedient to the Father, declaring here on earth, "For I did not come on my own, but He sent me." But as a baby lying in the manger, He was untested. Time would tell whether He would obey like His earthly parents had. He, of course, did not disappoint. He obeyed His entire life. Never once did He falter in His devotion to His father. Never once did He taste the cup of sin.

Allow your hearts to marvel at the perfection of the Christ child. He is so much like us in appearance, and yet so much better in His heart. The obedience He lived was nothing like what we are, yet it showed us everything we are to become in Him. Christ in the stable is a pledge from God. To people who cannot stop sinning, He provided One who always obeyed. And with His death and resurrection, He tasted the cup of our sin, and gave us the robe of His righteousness.

Ask:

1. Is there something God has asked you specifically to do today? If not, what are some simple things you know He's asked of all of us each day?
2. Jesus' coming declares our need. Do you find it difficult sometimes to admit that? How do you find yourself struggling to admit our righteousness is not enough?

Family

Read Luke 1:26-38. When an angel came to Mary and told her that the Holy Spirit would place a baby in her belly, she must have been very surprised. Nothing like this had ever happened before! Women had babies after they were married - it took a husband and a wife. But Mary was not yet married; she was only engaged! Mary could have asked a million questions or argued with what the angel was telling her, but read verse 38 again to see how Mary responded. "May everything you have said about me come true." She obeyed quickly and without a long, drawn out conversation. Do you obey like that?

Read Matthew 1:18-25. When Joseph found out Mary was pregnant, he was planning to break off their engagement and not marry her, but a dream changed his mind. An angel of the Lord came to him and told him that the baby who was going to be born should be named Jesus. The angel told Joseph that Jesus would save people from their sins! What did Joseph do when he woke up? (He obeyed and married Mary.)

Both Mary and Joseph heard news from the angel that seemed impossible, but they both obeyed right away. Mary and Joseph were not perfect, but their obedience to the Lord before Jesus was even born was an obedience that Jesus would learn. Because Jesus came to earth as a person like you and me, He was tempted to sin against God in every way that we are - to disobey His parents, to lie, to be unkind to others, but He didn't! He spent His entire life on earth obeying God, His Father.

Think about sweet baby Jesus in the manger. He is so much like us in how He looked, but so much better in His heart. We cannot stop sinning on our own, but God gave us someone who always obeyed to pay our punishment for sin and help us live obeying God.

Pray:

- Thank God for sending Jesus who obeyed in every circumstance as an example for us!
- Ask the Lord to help you be obedient to your parents and be obedient to God by living in a way that honors Him.

Day 24

Simeon: Jesus is Our Consolation

Personal

Read: Luke 2:21-35 (CSB), Isaiah 40:1-2, Isaiah 51:1-3, Jeremiah 31:7-9

Imagine the old man's eyes as he came up over the steps of the temple. His breath taken as he quickly went over to the parents he saw emerging. Could it be the pain was over? Could it be the wait was done? Confident, he asked to see the child in their arms. And as he gently held the child laid in his arms, he felt the comfort of God Almighty. This was no ordinary admiration from a passerby in the temple that day. This was a dream fulfilled, after years of expectant waiting.

Simeon was an ordinary man, like many of us. He had long awaited the arrival of the Messiah, and he had done so with a righteousness of heart. He had been promised by the Spirit that the consolation of Israel, the comfort to His people, would come before he died. So, his waiting was a hopeful waiting, because he knew he would not be disappointed in the end. But why was he waiting for comfort and consolation?

He knew the reality of their sin and the consequences they were now living in. They had the patriarchs, the promises, the law, and the land. And yet, once again, like many times before, they were captive in their own land. The contrast between what could have been, and what was, could easily have crushed them. The greatest fears of the faithful in Israel had been realized after all these years. The covenant was broken, and they had a choice. Would they believe their sin was too great? Or would they believe that God would fulfill His promises, even in the midst of their disobedience? What angst and agony of the soul this must have produced for many. Would God still come for them? It's in the mixture of these hopes and fears that Jesus stepped into their midst.

Simeon was not simply holding a baby boy that day. He was holding the hope of all the people. He was holding the presence of God, and the promise that He had not forgotten them. A strange thought that a baby would comfort the person holding them, as opposed to the reverse. But there, Christ, the child, even before He could speak, brought visions of realized hope to this old man's eyes. Like a child in trouble relieved to see a parent coming towards them, this old man was relieved by this child, because he knew God had come for him.

Let your heart feel the weight of knowing the chasm is there, created by your sin. The chasm between what should be and what is, created by the fall. Mourn that which has been lost, and embrace the reality of what was missed. But know that Jesus, laying in Simeon's arms stands as hope for you as well. Simeon stood that day for all of Israel, and he stood for all of us. No tears could express the joy that comes from knowing as he did that day, that God is for us still, and His consolations in Jesus will forever cheer our souls.

Ask:

1. Are there burdens you are carrying of sadness? Regrets? Do you carry the disappointment of unrealized expectations? How does Christ change those things today?
2. What truths about God are comforting the most to you today?

Family

I want to teach you a big word today: consolation. Consolation is comfort you get by someone after you lose something or are disappointed. If your team loses a game or a competition, you may be given a consolation prize of a ribbon - something to comfort you after you lost.

Read Luke 2:21-25 (CSB). What was Simeon waiting on? (The consolation of Israel.) We just talked about how consolation is comfort after you lose something or are disappointed. What had Israel lost? Why were they disappointed? (Israel had lost hope that God would send someone to save them.) Jesus was going to be the comfort to Israel because He was going to restore what was lost!

Read Luke 2:26-35 (CSB). God had promised Simeon that he would not pass away until he had seen the Messiah, Jesus. So, imagine Simeon's excitement when he saw Who Mary and Joseph carried into the temple that day! When Simeon held baby Jesus, he was reminded that God had not forgotten about His people. Usually when you hold a baby, you are the one comforting the baby, but it was the other way around on this day. Simeon was comforted by Jesus because he knew God's people would be saved from their sin once and for all through the life and death of this baby boy. Jesus is our consolation! He comforts us!

Pray:

- Thank God for sending Jesus to comfort us and pay the price for our sin!
- Ask the Lord to help you remember that Jesus can comfort us when we are sad or disappointed.

Day 25

The Wise Men: Jesus is Everything

Personal

Read: Matthew 2:1-12

We don't know where they came from, except to say from the east. They have no names, and in fact we don't even know how many of them there were. But we know they journeyed long. They had seen a star as it rose in the sky, and it had taken them on a path. And when they arrived, it had brought them to the most humble of destinations. This small town and this modest family were their prize at the end. When they saw the star, their hearts were filled with joy. But when they saw the child, their hearts were filled with something even more amazing: worship. The star began their journey, but now face to face they knelt. And what they saw, revealed to them by God, was the one who made that star they had followed for so long.

And now that these men approached, they could not have known how this child would be everything humanity had ever needed and even more than we could have hoped. Here was Abraham's promised one, and Isaac's better substitute. Here was Jacob's ladder to the heavens, and the king from Judah's line. He was the foretold prophet, greater than Moses himself. And as He stood at their feet ankle high, it was the Commander of God's armies looking up into their eyes. The Shepherd of His people, the redeemer of His kin. Jesus though small in form, captivated the minds of these wise men with His majesty. He did not seem like the death slayer He would become, but here in front of them in human flesh was the oldest promise God had ever given.

In the garden's darkest hour, His coming was foretold. In Egypt's darkest night, His deliverance was promised. And in the weeks of dark and flooding waters it was HIS rescue shadowed. You see, all throughout the pages of Scripture, God was whispering His coming. And even the darkness of human sin could not hold back His triumphant entry into this world. They may have missed the birth itself, but the Wise Men did not miss its value. On Bethlehem's brightest day God appeared to take that darkness. He came to push it back again, bringing a New Kingdom where light would always win.

Perhaps they knew not all that we have seen, but then surely our response should be double theirs. They left their gifts, not because He needed them, but because they wanted to. The sight of Christ out of the stable, the sight of Him face to face made it impossible for them to suppress their worship, and they would leave everything they had. As they returned and told this story, we must do the same. For lo, the Christ of Christmas, is with us always, even till the end of the age!

Ask:

1. Has the Lord pressed on your heart this season to push back the darkness around you? What's one way that you know you can start? In your family? In your community? In the world?
2. Has Christmas become mundane to you? What is one aspect God has shown you this year that has caused your heart to marvel and worship again?

Family

Read Matthew 2:1-12. After Jesus was born in Bethlehem, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem looking for the King of the Jews (God's people). Have you ever seen something while riding in the car that made you want to stop and look at it? A sign? A billboard? The Wise Men had seen His star when it rose in the night sky and wanted to worship Him! The star began their journey, and their journey ended when they saw Jesus as a little boy.

When they saw this child, they knew God had kept the first promise He ever made to His people. The wise men understood that this boy was going to be the One to fix our sin problem and crush God's enemy once and for all. The wise men left their gifts for Jesus, not because He needed them, but because they wanted to. He was worthy of the gifts, even as a child, because He was a king - THE King!

Just like they returned to their land and told others the story of how they met the King, we should do the same - telling others about Jesus, our King, Who has come, and is coming again!

Pray:

- Thank God for sending Jesus our King to be born to ultimately destroy God's enemy!
- Ask the Lord to help you remember during this Christmas season why we celebrate Christmas day - the day Jesus our King was born!

