



# HE IS HERE

*25 Devotions for Advent*

ADVENT BLOCKS



*He is here.*

What we celebrate at Christmas—God coming to earth—  
has been God's plan from the very beginning.

And yet, it's incredibly easy for us to miss it.

Throughout Scripture, God changes everything for the people  
he meets. For Abraham. For Moses. For Mary. And for us.

Because of Christmas, God's presence with us is no longer  
volatile or fragile; it's an ever-present offer in the person of Jesus.

This Advent, prepare your heart to meet with God.

He is not distant. He is not absent.

He is here.

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# *Letter From the Team*

We've provided this twenty-five-day Advent guide to help you prepare your heart for Christmas. You'll notice that the scope of these devotions covers much more than the birth story of Jesus. That's by design. Most of these stories come from the Old Testament. Why? Because what we celebrate at Christmas—God coming to earth—had been God's plan all along.

These stories are meant to show you how all of Scripture was building toward the coming of Jesus, the King. In each story, we see God interact with someone from the Bible. Meeting God changes everything for these people. It changes everything for us, too. At Christmas, we celebrate that God's presence isn't volatile and fragile; it's an ever-present offer in the person of Jesus Christ.

Each day, you can expect three elements:

1. A short reading from Scripture
2. An accompanying devotion
3. One of the following applications:
  - a. **Pray** - Read a prayer aloud to God.
  - b. **Reflect** - Write your answer to a question in the space provided.
  - c. **Meditate** - Give God's truth the time and space to settle in your spirit.
  - d. **Connect** - Reach out to someone—text, call, or send some snail mail!

We're praying that this guide would help you anticipate the King this Christmas—so that you would not only understand but also feel the thrill of hope that accompanies the name “Emmanuel,” God with us!

– Clayton, Chris, Brian, & Lindsey

DECEMBER 1

# “Where Are You?”



## THE STORY OF ADAM & EVE

– Genesis 3:8–13, 23–24 –

*And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” ...*

*[T]herefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.*



## THE STORY OF ADAM & EVE

We're beginning this Advent season a bit further back than you might expect. Not away in a manger, listening to the cattle lowing. Not in the little town of Bethlehem, watching the silent stars go by. Not on a nearby hillside with the shepherds, keeping watch over their flocks by night.

Instead, we're going back to the beginning. Of everything.

The Christmas story is so much bigger than the birth of Jesus. It's the solution to a centuries-old problem, the answer to a question humanity has been asking from the dawn of time. To feel the full beauty of the Christmas answer, we need to steep ourselves in this difficult question: *Where is God?* Fortunately, we are led to that question in the very first pages of the entire Bible.

In Genesis 1–2, we read about God's brilliant creation of the universe. God speaks and entire worlds come into being. With precision and order, God separates what he has made into orderly realms—light here and darkness there, day here and night there, water here and land there. Then, with the creativity of an artist, he fills each of these ordered realms—with sun and stars, birds and fish, giant beasts and creeping bugs.

But the crowning jewel of God's creation was a pair of people, Adam and Eve. They alone were made in God's image. They alone heard God say, "Eat and enjoy every tree in the Garden, *but do not eat from this one.*" Because they alone were made like God, they alone were able to experience the presence of God.

Sadly, it doesn't seem to have lasted long. Adam and Eve were soon tempted to break the only prohibition they had.

## “WHERE ARE YOU?”

Rather than trusting in God’s good word and resting in God’s good presence, they ate from the forbidden tree. And in breaking God’s good word, they also lost his good presence. “Where are you?” It is a question most of us have asked of God in times of pain or uncertainty. Often the question sounds more like an accusation: “God, why have you abandoned me?” Genesis 3 provides an answer to this painful question: God feels distant, not because he has abandoned us, but because we, like Adam and Eve, have tried to abandon him.

Thankfully, Genesis 3 also provides something better than an answer. It provides another question—not an accusation or a threat, but a passionate pursuit.

In this story, it is *God* who asks Adam, “Where are you?” While Adam and Eve hide, God pursues. While we hide, God pursues. And nowhere is that truth more vividly displayed than in the story of God coming to earth—the story of Christmas.

## *Pray*

*Read this prayer aloud to God.*

*God, sometimes I don't know where you are.*

*But you know where I am.*

*Adam and Eve tried to hide from you.*

*But you went after them.*

*Sometimes I try to hide from you, too.*

*But Christ came after me.*

*Amen.*

DECEMBER 2

# *Both Faithful and Frightening*



## THE STORY OF NOAH

— Genesis 7:17–18, 22–24; 8:1a —

*The flood continued forty days on the earth. The waters increased and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. The waters prevailed and increased greatly on the earth, and the ark floated on the face of the waters. ... Everything on the dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens. They were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those who were with him in the ark. And the waters prevailed on the earth 150 days.*

*But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the livestock that were with him in the ark.*

## THE STORY OF NOAH

We often imagine that God's presence in our lives will prevent us from difficulty. After all, if God is for us, who can be against us? But the story of Noah reminds us that God's presence and life's dangers often coexist. God can be faithful *even while* we are utterly terrified.

Noah's story comes only a page or two after Adam and Eve's, but generations have passed by this point. And the generations have not been trending the right way. Because of Adam and Eve's sin, God's creation—which was initially full of order, goodness, and life—became consumed by disorder, injustice, and death.

God responds, dramatically, by pressing “rewind,” reversing the original creation story. From giant beasts to creeping bugs to precious human lives, everything is covered in water. It is difficult for us to grasp the scope of this loss. Frankly, it should be. But for many of us, something about the flood resonates as tragically true.

This world often feels like a flood we can't control. We sense the water rising around us in the form of broken relationships, broken promises, broken bodies. At times, we are tempted to think, *the world is simply like this. It is frightening and lonely and full of pain. It's a flood.*

Except.

The flood in Noah's day didn't destroy everything. Noah and his family were kept safe on the ark, proof of God's faithfulness to them. What keeps us from reading Noah's story with despair is a beautiful phrase: “God remembered Noah.” The flood surrounded Noah, but it did not consume him. The flood took nearly everything away from Noah, but it could not take away what mattered most—God's presence.

And yet.

God's presence with Noah did not make the flood *easy*. Just imagine being on a boat, surrounded by the stench of a large zoo, pummeled by rain, for weeks on end. In no way would Noah's journey have felt serene. Noah was kept safe. Noah was in God's presence. And yet the flood was still tremendously hard.

That's often the way with God's presence. We feel it most keenly in circumstances we would rather avoid. In prosperity, we become so blind that we think of God's presence with a disinterested shrug. But in fear, in loneliness, or in suffering, God's presence becomes a life-giving comfort.

Noah needed God's presence as much as he needed his boat. This Advent season, don't miss the promise God offers in the birth of Jesus—his very presence in your life.

## ***Reflect***

*Write your answer in the space provided.*

*List three to five moments in your life when you have seen God's faithfulness toward you, even when the experience itself was frightening.*

DECEMBER 3

# Slowly, Slowly, Very Slowly



## THE STORY OF ABRAHAM

— *Genesis 17:1, 4–7* —

*When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, ... “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.”*



## THE STORY OF ABRAHAM

There's a little rhyme my (Chris) three-year-old son loves. I make my hand into a "snail" by balling it up into a fist and having my thumb act as the snail's head. With excruciating slowness, this "snail" crawls from his toes up to his head: "Slowly, slowly, very slowly creeps the garden snail. Slowly, slowly, very slowly up the garden rail."

The second part is what he's waiting for, though. Suddenly the "snail" turns into a "mouse" and it scurries all over him: "Quickly, quickly, very quickly runs the little mouse. Quickly, quickly, very quickly all around the house!" Tickles and giggles abound.

What makes the rhyme fun for my son is just how long it takes to get to "the good part." The whole time that snail is crawling—slowly, slowly, very slowly—his eyes widen because he knows it's headed somewhere. At no other moment in his little life is he able to sit and wait so well.

Waiting is tough work, whether you're three or thirty-three. Or, like Abraham and Sarah, almost 103.

God made a radical promise to Abraham and Sarah. As they approached one hundred and ninety, respectively, God said he would give this barren couple a son. Abraham and Sarah knew enough about human reproduction for this to be an unbelievable promise. And it took them a good while to *really* believe it. But in the end, they did.

And in the end, God did, too. He fulfilled his promise, miraculously giving Abraham and Sarah a son, Isaac. Abraham and Sarah had wanted a son for decades. God had *promised* a son for years. And slowly, slowly, very slowly, God delivered on his promise.

## SLOWLY, SLOWLY, VERY SLOWLY

Isaac was not just a joy for Abraham and Sarah. He was an integral part of God's plan, too. Through this son, God would start a family line that would overturn the curse brought on by Adam and Eve. Through this son, God would provide a way to bring renewed blessing to the earth. And generations later, through another miraculous son in this line, God would keep another promise. *That* child, Jesus Christ, would forever and finally prove that however slow God seems, his "slowness" is not a sign of his absence.

The Apostle Peter reminds us, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). In other words, God is not slow. He is patient. That distinction gives us the ability to be patient, too, waiting on him to fulfill his promises.

For some of us, God will act sooner than we imagine— healing an illness, reconciling a broken relationship, ending an addiction. For others of us, God will ask us to wait until he returns. For all of us, God's promise of restoration in Jesus is certain. Though it seems slow, it will come.

Surely, surely, very surely.

## *Reflect*

*Write your answer in the space provided.*

*Where in your life do you think God is moving too slowly—or not moving at all? What would it look like for you to choose to trust that God's slowness is not a sign of his absence?*

DECEMBER 4

# *A Cup of Cold Water and a Thrill of Hope*



## THE STORY OF HAGAR

— *Genesis 21:14–19* —

*So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.*

*When the water in the skin was gone, she put the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said, “Let me not look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation.” Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.*

## THE STORY OF HAGAR

For many of us, the biblical character of Hagar doesn't ring any bells. We know about Adam and Eve. We know about Noah and his big boat. We know about Father Abraham and his "many sons." Hagar? Not exactly a household name.

One of the reasons you probably haven't heard of Hagar is that her story is messy. Or, rather, her story makes the Bible "heroes" we know look pretty messy.

Remember Abraham and Sarah? Pushing the century mark, this couple believed God for an impossible promise—a son! And God was faithful to his promise. But Abraham and Sarah didn't believe God right away, all the way. They began by taking matters into their own hands.

That's where Hagar comes in. Hagar was a servant of Sarah's. When God first promised Abraham that he would have a miracle baby, Sarah—who wasn't able to have children—suggested a compromise: Abraham could have a child with Hagar, instead. Abraham agreed, and the plan seemed to work. Hagar got pregnant with a baby boy.

Soon, however, all three of them realized the stark difference between making a plan "work" and receiving a fulfilled promise of God. Instead of helping, their plan created a spiral of dysfunction. Sarah became jealous of Hagar and began to abuse her. Together with Abraham, Sarah cast Hagar out into the desert twice—once just after Hagar conceived (Genesis 16), and then again not long after Hagar gave birth (Genesis 21).

On both occasions, as Hagar languished in the desert, she felt abandoned and hopeless. She assumed she would soon die. But on both occasions, God came to her, bringing her both water and hope.

## A CUP OF COLD WATER AND A THRILL OF HOPE

Hagar was so impacted by God's intervention that she gave God a name, the first time in Scripture this happens: "So she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, 'You are a God of seeing,' for she said, 'Truly here I have seen him who looks after me'" (Genesis 16:13).

Hagar's name may not be familiar to us, but the pattern of Hagar's story absolutely is. Abused and abandoned—perhaps you can relate. Your story may not be as life-threatening as Hagar's. Then again, it very well could be. Regardless, we all know what it's like to feel like she did—alone, unseen, hopeless.

Advent represents a longing and a promise. The longing is easy to identify: Like Hagar, we sometimes walk in the desert, in desperate need of a cup of cold water. But the promise is there, too: When we feel unseen, God sees us. When we feel unheard, God hears us. He comes near to us in our hour of need. He brings a cup of cold water and a thrill of hope.

And one day, thousands of years after Hagar, he would do it again. Except he would do more than merely come near to us with water and hope. He would come to live with us, experiencing all of our needs, joys, sorrows, and fears.

He would become Jesus Christ, bringing living water and an everlasting hope.

## Connect

*Reach out to someone—text, call, or send some snail mail!*

*Think of a few people who were with you when you felt alone, unseen, or abandoned. Reach out to one or two of them to express your thankfulness for the ways God used them during that time.*

DECEMBER 5

# Broken Heroes



## THE STORY OF JACOB, RACHEL, & LEAH

— Genesis 27:36, 29:16–18, 31, 35 —

*Esau said, “Is he not rightly named Jacob [meaning, “He cheats”]? For he has cheated me these two times. He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing.”...*

*Now Laban had two daughters. The name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah’s eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance. Jacob loved Rachel. And he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.”...*

*When the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb ... And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, “This time I will praise the LORD.” Therefore she called his name Judah. Then she ceased bearing.*



As we saw yesterday, the Bible certainly doesn't sugar coat the messy behaviors of its heroes—and "messy" is being pretty charitable about it! For most of us, when we read about God choosing such morally flawed people, we begin asking an uncomfortable question: *Is God not that concerned about right and wrong?*

This is an unsettling question when we consider just how tempting it is today to justify evil, both in our own hearts and among the heroes who represent us. Whether it's a pastor, a celebrity, or a political leader, I trust we've all had the experience: A hero of ours is "found out"—sleeping around, perhaps, or embezzling funds. Something we would categorically say is wrong. But instead, we feel the pull to *minimize* the wrong, to explain why it's not really as bad as it seems. Because if our heroes are morally messed up, what does that say about *us*?

So when we turn to a character like Jacob, it's reasonable to be a bit disoriented. Jacob was the son of Isaac and the grandson of Abraham. Like his father, Jacob was a miracle child, born to a previously barren woman. Like his father and grandfather, Jacob received the promise of God on his life: *Through your lineage I will bless the world.*

But Jacob was a moral wreck. He deceived his brother and stole from his father, severing ties so badly that he had to flee for his life (Genesis 25, 27). He found refuge in the home of Laban, a relative of his (Genesis 28). There, Jacob received a dose of deception himself: Attempting to marry beautiful Rachel, he ended up married to her sister, Leah, instead. True to form, Jacob responded by mistreating Leah, too, insisting on marrying Rachel.

*This is the person God chose?*

## BROKEN HEROES

Yes and no. Yes, God chose Jacob. But if we think God chose Jacob because God didn't care about Jacob's sins, we misread the story. The very fact that we know so many details of Jacob's sins is revealing: God is not attempting to minimize Jacob's wrongs, as if they weren't *that* bad after all. He is, in fact, intentionally showing that Jacob's status as "chosen" begins and ends as a gift.

We must learn to unread the Bible as a collection of fairy tales. Now, don't get me wrong. I love fairy tales. In college, I took an entire course on fairy tales, reading all 209 stories collected by the Brothers Grimm. I even wrote a few myself. Fairy tales are delightful for the way they capture wisdom in memorable and surprising ways. We need more fairy tales in the world.

But the Bible is not a book of fairy tales. Not only because what is written in the Bible is true but also (and more importantly) because the Bible isn't chiefly meant to give us tidy stories with specific moral lessons. In the Bible, we are not learning about human heroes. We are learning to know God.

Those God chooses, like Jacob, are not heroes. They are broken recipients of grace. The entire trajectory of the Bible leads us not to seek out heroes, men and woman who are broken like us (Jacob), but to anticipate the one hero who would be broken for us (Jesus).

And then there is this: Jacob is not the only chosen person in this story.

Jacob didn't choose Leah. But God did. In fact, God seems to have chosen Leah precisely *because* she was unchosen by Jacob. And eventually, though disappointed by her husband, Leah was able to say, "I will praise the Lord."

## THE STORY OF JACOB, RACHEL, & LEAH

Leah couldn't have known it at the time, but God was using her, not Rachel, to continue his line of blessing. He was using her to bring Jesus into the world.

When Jesus came, it was both for people who did wrong (like Jacob) and for people who were wronged (like Leah). In other words, he came to be with people like you and me.

### ***Reflect***

*Write your answers in the space provided.*

*List three to five situations in your life where you can't see what God is up to.*

*How might Leah's experience make you think of these situations differently?*

DECEMBER 6

# *The Shepherd and the Shadow*



## THE STORY OF JOSEPH

– Genesis 37:23–24, 28; 39:2 –

*So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. And they took him and threw him into a pit. ... Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt. ... The LORD was with Joseph ...*

## THE STORY OF JOSEPH

There's a reason people in pain gravitate toward Joseph's story. Joseph, the favored son of Jacob, suffered greatly. But in the end, every bizarre twist and turn in his story led to a beautiful resolution. It almost seems like a blueprint for enduring suffering: If you wait long enough, God will bring you, too, to glory and success.

So when we read that Joseph was attacked by his brothers, we think, *Just wait*. Sold into slavery? *Just wait*. Wrongly accused of assault? *Just wait*. Left in prison for years? *Just wait*.

And then, one day, Joseph's waiting is over. He is raised to sit next to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. He becomes the second-most powerful man in the known world. He might have been the underdog for a while, but in the end, he has *won*.

One of the popular adaptations of this story, the musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, plays up this underdog approach to Joseph's story. I have always loved this musical, in part because of the way it makes Joseph's experience come alive. (It's also the only way I remember the names of Jacob's twelve sons.) But *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* falls prey to the underdog view of suffering. Each time the story turns against Joseph, the chorus sings to remind him:

*Go, go, go Joseph, you know what they say,  
Hang on now, Joseph, you'll make it some day.  
Don't give up, Joseph, fight till you drop,  
We've read the book and you come out on top.<sup>1</sup>*

God really was doing something remarkable, even miraculous, in sending Joseph ahead to Egypt.

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<sup>1</sup> "Go, Go, Go Joseph," text by Andrew Lloyd Webber, track 9, on *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat (Canadian Cast Recording)* (London, UK: The Really Useful Group Ltd., 1992).

## THE SHEPHERD AND THE SHADOW

Through his long years of suffering, Joseph was being put in a place to save the world—and God’s people—from famine. Because of Joseph and his dreams, the lineage God had begun in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was allowed to continue—a lineage that would one day lead to Jesus.

Joseph, however, only realized this at the very end of his life. What preserved him in the previous years was not the underdog assurance that God would lead him to victory. What preserved Joseph was God himself. The refrain of Joseph’s story is not, “Hang on now, you’ll come out on top.” The refrain is, “God was with Joseph.”

In a sermon on Psalm 23, pastor Eugene Peterson wrote, “Our lives are lived in the company of both the Shepherd and the shadow.”<sup>2</sup> We love Psalm 23 for its beautiful depictions of God’s love and protection. But Peterson is right: God does not meet us on the other side of suffering; God walks with us through suffering. We experience the shadow *and* we experience the Shepherd.

For many of us, the Christmas season is marked by pain and loss. What we need is not a promise that our story will have some Joseph-sized silver lining. What we need is a God who enters our pain so we’ll know we do not suffer alone.

Mysteriously, this is precisely what God did, two thousand years ago, in the tiny town of Bethlehem.

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire: A Conversation on the Ways of God Formed by the Words of God* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2017), 101.

## ***Meditate***

*Give God's truth the time and space to settle in your spirit.*

*Spend a few minutes allowing yourself to picture and feel some source of pain.*

*Spend one more minute experiencing the reality that even in this space, God was (and is) with you.*

DECEMBER 7

# *Far as the Curse Is Found*



## THE STORY OF MOSES

– Exodus 12:3, 6, 11–13 –

*Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household. ... and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight ...*

*In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is the LORD's Passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt.*



## THE STORY OF MOSES

Musically speaking, “Joy to the World” is one of the simplest Christmas carols out there. Even a beginner can plunk out the first notes on a piano: Start at a high C and just keep marching left. (Can you tell my piano knowledge is slim?)

“Joy to the World” is also one of the most buoyant Christmas carols. At first blush, it seems to fit our cultural celebration of Christmas as a time of happiness and good vibes. Joy! Cheer! Presents! Cookies!

But the third verse of “Joy to the World” reminds us that this song only exists because we live in a world characterized by the curse of sin, injustice, and death:

*No more let sins and sorrows grow,  
Nor thorns infest the ground;  
He comes to make His blessings flow  
Far as the curse is found,  
Far as the curse is found,  
Far as, far as, the curse is found.<sup>1</sup>*

Nowhere is the extent of that curse more pronounced than in the context leading up to the exodus. Hundreds of years after Joseph, injustice was rampant. God’s people had become slaves in Egypt. Even when God began to move in their midst, things got worse before they got better. Pharaoh, in his despotic fear, slaughtered every male Jewish child he could. And as Moses rose to confront Pharaoh, he only tightened his iron grip on the Jewish people.

The people of God, enslaved in Egypt, knew full well “how far the curse was found.” What they did not know was how God would overcome that curse.

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<sup>1</sup> “Joy to the World,” text by Isaac Watts (1719).

## FAR AS THE CURSE IS FOUND

God chose to end their unjust slavery by visiting Egypt himself, executing judgment on the false gods. The measures God took to free his people—the ten plagues—prove not only the depth of this bondage but also the depth of God’s commitment to end injustice. God came to Egypt to replace the curse with blessing.

The people of God left Egypt liberated of their earthly oppressors. But God knew they would need liberating again. He knew that the curse of sin and injustice and death was not yet defeated. To defeat death would require a more personal presence than God visiting Egypt in judgment. It would require a greater sacrifice than a lamb.

It would require God not only punishing injustice, but personally suffering injustice so that his creation could be made whole again. This is why Jesus was born: He came to bear a curse so that those of us under a curse could be made free. To make his “justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24).

We do not sing of joy at Christmas because life is easy. We sing of joy because, in Christ, God has done something about the curse. He has done something about injustice. He has entered into our curse-ridden world to make his broken creation whole again.

To make his blessings known far as the curse is found.

# Pray

*Read this prayer aloud to God.*

*Eternal God, who led your ancient people into freedom by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night: Grant that we who walk in the light of your presence may rejoice in the liberty of the children of God; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

*Amen.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Episcopal Church*, “Order of Worship for the Evening, Easter Season” (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 111.

DECEMBER 8

# No Matter What



## THE STORY OF JOSHUA

– Joshua 6:1–5 –

*Now Jericho was shut up inside and outside because of the people of Israel. None went out, and none came in. And the LORD said to Joshua, “See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and mighty men of valor. You shall march around the city, all the men of war going around the city once. Thus shall you do for six days. Seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams’ horns before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. And when they make a long blast with the ram’s horn, when you hear the sound of the trumpet, then all the people shall shout with a great shout, and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and the people shall go up, everyone straight before him.”*

## THE STORY OF JOSHUA

God's people had been slaves in Egypt for centuries. As we read yesterday, God wanted them to live as a free people. But it would take more than one act of liberation for God's people to live into that free reality. Instead of marching into the Promised Land at God's command, the people of God balked (Numbers 14). So God, patiently but firmly, began a process of reshaping his people. The reshaping process was a 40-year period of wandering in the desert—an entire generation's worth of learning to trust God and follow him, no matter what.

Time and again, during those forty long years, God's people felt so much despair that they actually longed for their bondage in Egypt. Surely the security of their chains was preferable to this unpredictable wilderness! But however much God's people wanted their chains back, God had other plans.

So when the forty years were over, God brought his people back to the Promised Land. He gave them another opportunity to trust and follow him, no matter what.

By this time, many of God's people had learned to follow God's marching orders. Especially Joshua, the military commander who was tasked with leading the charge into the Promised Land. Joshua had been Moses' right-hand man for years. Joshua knew God, trusted God, and spent time with God (Exodus 24:13).

So as the people of God stood on the outskirts of Jericho, the border of their new nation, Joshua was ready to do whatever God asked him to do.

Then God asked Joshua to do something absurd.

Joshua was ready to fight. But God didn't want Joshua to fight—at least not at first. The battle plan God gave him consisted of, “Walk around the city ... a whole lot.” God wanted Joshua to trust him. Impressively, Joshua and the people did.

Aren't you thankful God has never asked you to do something as absurd as he asked Joshua?

Then again, were Joshua's marching orders that much more jarring than ours?

Often, the toughest parts of the Bible aren't the passages we find most confusing, but the ones we find most convicting. God's call to obedience is startling: Love your neighbor (yes, even *them*); give radically; open up not only your home but your life; be people of complete integrity, even when it doesn't benefit you. To walk the road of obedience, we need to have the same supernatural faith Joshua did, trusting God (whom we cannot see) in the face of the potential downsides (which we absolutely can see).

The army that walked around Jericho was not composed of people whose faith was superhuman. It was composed of people who had experienced God repeatedly over the course of forty years. Joshua was able to pursue radical obedience *for* God because he experienced radical intimacy *with* God.

If this was true of Joshua, how much more is it true for those of us who follow Jesus? The intimacy we can share with God far outpaces that available to Joshua. He spoke with God only a few times. But Jesus came to live among us as God in the flesh. He taught us to approach God not through periodic rituals, but through daily and intimate prayer.

## THE STORY OF JOSHUA

He even promised that for those who followed him, he would send his Spirit to be with them—no matter how great their trial, no matter how deep their sin.

No matter what.

### *Reflect*

*Write your answers in the space provided.*

*God called Joshua to obey him, but the specifics of that obedience seemed absurd. What areas of obedience seem absurd in the world we live in? How would your obedience change if you were certain God was present with you?*

DECEMBER 9

# *An American in the Old Testament*



## THE STORY OF SAUL

– 1 Samuel 15:1–3a, 7, 9, 17, 19, 23b –

*And Samuel said to Saul, “The LORD sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have.’”*

*And Saul defeated the Amalekites from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt. ... But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them. ...*

*And Samuel said, “Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel. ... Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? Why did you pounce on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the LORD? ... Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king.”*



**K**ing Saul was an American.

Okay, not literally. Literally, Saul was the first king of the nation of Israel. God had anointed him to be king a few centuries after Joshua. Sadly, those centuries (recorded mostly in the book of Judges) were often characterized by idolatry and injustice among God's people. So when God led the prophet Samuel to anoint Saul, he said of Saul, "He shall save my people from the hand of the Philistines"—protecting them from external threats—and "He shall restrain my people"—protecting them from the internal threat of sin (1 Samuel 9:16–17).

Saul found the first task much easier than the second, in large part because he never learned to restrain himself. This is why King Saul feels like such an *American* leader. Our national culture prizes confidence, capability, and authority. We think of ourselves as people who, when presented with a challenge, can *get things done*. And undoubtedly, this spirit has led to a great deal of good, not only in our country, but in our world.

Like Saul, however, we find it much more difficult to pursue humility, restraint, and obedience.

Saul had aspects of leadership that would make him a perfect candidate for CEO of most Fortune 500 companies. He was confident. He was capable. He exuded authority and strength. He got things done.

But when it counted most—when presented with a specific command from God—Saul trusted his natural abilities more than the Word of God. Where Joshua responded to God with a simple, "Yes," Saul responded with, "I'll take that into consideration."

Saul had tremendous strengths. He looked and acted like a king. But his strengths were never the point. In fact, the more Saul leaned on his strengths, the more he lost God's strength. Saul learned the hard way that we are not strong when we have control, authority, or power. We are strong when we trust God.

Full stop.

Centuries after King Saul, another man named Saul would write, in quite a different spirit, “[God] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ ... For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9–10). This Saul, also known as the Apostle Paul, understood that the only power that matters is the power of Jesus.

Jesus was born into a world much like King Saul's. That world was dominated by strong, confident, capable kings. And yet, God was not to be found in the powerful kings of the first century. He is not to be found in the people of power today.

God is found in a carpenter's workshop, in a lonely garden, on a bloody cross. He is found on a silent night, in a “holy infant, so tender and mild.”<sup>1</sup> He is found in the person of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> “Silent Night,” text by Joseph Mohr (1818)

## *Reflect*

*Write your answers in the space provided.*

*List your capabilities—at least five areas in your life where you consider yourself most confident and talented.*

*These capabilities came from God, but they can also prevent you from trusting and seeing God. Pray to God, offering these capabilities back to him so that you would live in his strength, not your own.*

DECEMBER 10

# *The Scandal of Forgiveness*



## THE STORY OF DAVID

— Psalm 51:7–12 —

*Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*

*Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.*

*Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.*

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and renew a right spirit within me.*

*Cast me not away from your presence,  
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.*

*Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and uphold me with a willing spirit.*

**A**lmost everything in me resists forgiveness, in both directions.

It's probably not surprising that I don't get excited about forgiving. Think about it: Every time in my life that I've forgiven someone, it's been preceded by hurt. Even if that hurt is seemingly small, like an unkind word from a friend, I hate being hurt.

You might think being forgiven feels better. Not always. Forgiveness is beautiful and restoring and—quite frankly—one of the experiences that makes me believe God still works miracles in the world. But being forgiven is vulnerable and uncomfortable. It's like having a bad tooth taken out: I'm thankful for the result, but I'm never giddy about the process.

King David's story presses the issue of forgiveness as far as you can imagine. It forces us to ask, "Is there a limit to God's forgiveness?" The answer is scandalous.

David was the second king of Israel, the one immediately following Saul. It is difficult to overstate the importance of David. He wrote most of the book of Psalms. He was heralded as Israel's greatest king. His biography is recorded with more detail than any other Old Testament figure. Most significantly, God promised that one of David's offspring would "establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Samuel 7:13).

And yet, like those in his genealogy before him, David sinned greatly. In fact, you would be hard-pressed to create a worse litany of wrongs than those committed by David: After using his power to force a married woman to have sex with him, he then killed her husband (and probably others) to hide his sin. Rape. Murder. Deceit. That's a horrific list.

## THE SCANDAL OF FORGIVENESS

David—and those around him—experienced painful consequences from his sins. David also experienced forgiveness. When confronted about his sin, David owned what he had done (what the Bible calls “confession”) and pledged to God to go a new direction (what the Bible calls “repentance”). He knew he did not deserve God’s forgiveness. But he also knew he desperately needed God’s forgiveness. So he wrote Psalm 51, a poem that stands as one of the most profound meditations on forgiveness ever written.

Forgiving great offenses comes at a great cost. David knew his wrongs must be “purged” and “blotted out” if he was ever to be restored to God’s presence. What David didn’t know was how God would do this.

Reading the Gospels, we see the cost of forgiveness in a way that David never did. To “blot out all of [David’s] iniquities,” Jesus would allow his life to be blotted out (Psalm 51:9). To make David’s broken bones rejoice, Jesus would allow his body to be broken for us. In his life and in his death, Jesus was paying a staggering cost to make a way for the worst sinners to receive grace. Remarkably, that includes David.

And me. And you.

We often don’t think of Christmas as a “scandalous” time. But Jesus was coming to earth to forgive sins. What greater scandal—and what greater gift—can we imagine this Christmas?

## Connect

*Reach out to someone—text, call, or send some snail mail!*

*What is one way you need to receive forgiveness?*

*What is one way you need to extend forgiveness?*

*Whether in receiving or extending forgiveness, consider taking the first step of forgiveness today by reaching out to that friend, family member, coworker, or neighbor.*

DECEMBER 11

# *When God Lived in a House*



## THE STORY OF THE TEMPLE

— 2 Chronicles 6:41–7:3 —

*“And now arise, O LORD God, and go to your resting place,  
you and the ark of your might.*

*Let your priests, O LORD God, be clothed with salvation,  
and let your saints rejoice in your goodness.*

*O LORD God, do not turn away the face of your anointed one!  
Remember your steadfast love for David your servant.”*

*As soon as Solomon finished his prayer, fire came down from  
heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and  
the glory of the LORD filled the temple. And the priests could not  
enter the house of the LORD, because the glory of the LORD filled  
the LORD’s house. When all the people of Israel saw the fire come  
down and the glory of the LORD on the temple, they bowed down  
with their faces to the ground on the pavement and worshiped and  
gave thanks to the LORD, saying, “For he is good, for his steadfast  
love endures forever.”*



## THE STORY OF THE TEMPLE

**I**t's easy to zone out when we arrive at the temple narratives. Much of the Old Testament is filled with intense action—adventure, romance, war. But when we read about King Solomon (David's son) building the temple, we find ourselves lost in detailed instructions about doorways and curtains and priestly utensils.

For modern readers, especially, we are liable to miss what made the story of the temple so shocking. In this building, God was creating for himself an earthly landing pad. King Solomon called it God's "resting place," a unique manifestation of God's presence in the world (2 Chronicles 6:41).

Of course, until this point in the story, God has not been absent. He is, after all, the main character, there from the very beginning. And at crucial junctures throughout the Old Testament, God made his presence obvious. The trouble for God's people, though, was that no one could anticipate where God would show up.

Or when. Or how.

For Adam and Eve, God walked directly up to them. For Joseph, God spoke in dreams. For Moses, God appeared as fire—first in the burning bush and later on a burning mountain. For Joshua, God approached in human form as a military commander. For Saul and David, God spoke to them through prophets.

As Solomon commissioned the temple, though, something unique happened. God's presence, referred to here as his "glory," descended on the place. Suddenly, Solomon, along with all of God's people, got dazzling clarity: God's presence was *right there*.

## WHEN GOD LIVED IN A HOUSE

God's presence with Solomon, reminiscent of his fiery appearances to Moses, was hardly safe. Seen in all his glory, God's presence was so intense that no one could even enter the temple. And yet, amid the glory of God's supernatural fire, God's people recognized God's goodness and his love. The temple, the glory, the fire—all of them served as reminders of God's desire to reunite with humanity.

Unfortunately, God's people frequently forgot that even though God had commissioned a resting place for himself, his presence wasn't a guarantee. One day, centuries later, they would learn this when the temple itself was destroyed. But even while the temple stood, its purity regulations and requirements of sacrifice reminded people that lasting fellowship with God was still tenuous and fragile.

At Christmas, we celebrate God making a new resting place—only this time, the material would not be wood and gold, but flesh and blood:

*“Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,  
Hail the incarnate Deity,  
Pleased as man with man to dwell,  
Jesus, our Emmanuel.”<sup>1</sup>*

When Jesus entered the world, he became a new temple, the unique place where God's presence dwelled. Through him, we see God's desire to reunite with humanity.

And, ironically, though his body was fragile—eventually beaten, bruised, pierced, and killed—it would prove to be much more certain and enduring than any building. “Destroy this temple,” Jesus said, referring to himself, “and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19). Forever.

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<sup>1</sup> “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” text by Charles Wesley (1739).

## **Meditate**

*Give God's truth the time and space to settle in your spirit.*

*Spend one minute meditating on God in all of his majesty and glory. The Creator. Powerful. All-knowing and all-seeing.*

*Spend one minute meditating on God as he revealed himself in the incarnation. Carpenter and craftsman. Meek and mild. Humble. Human.*

DECEMBER 12

# Hope Is Not Dead



## THE STORY OF ELIJAH

– 1 Kings 19:9–12, 15–16, 18 –

*There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He said, “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.” And he said, “Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD.” And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. ...*

*And the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. ... Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”*

After King Solomon's death, things went poorly for God's people. The nation split into two rival kingdoms. The people were increasingly threatened by outside armies and misled by idolatrous kings. God's promise—to send a different kind of king—was never taken back. But as one wicked king after another claimed the throne, the promise became impossible for most to remember. And for those who did remember, it became difficult to believe.

There were certain people, however, that remembered. Like torches burning through a long night, these people kept the light of God's promise alive. They pleaded with God's people to hope in God's promises. They held a light up to the darkness of idolatry and injustice, calling for every wrong to be made right. Their reward for this faithfulness, more often than not, was persecution, isolation, and death.

They were known as the prophets.

Elijah was a prophet, and even though his life was characterized by miracle after miracle, he found it difficult to cling to hope. In 1 Kings 18, Elijah experienced a great victory: Challenging the idolatrous royals, Ahab and Jezebel, as well as the prophets of Baal, Elijah prayed to God for fire—and God answered.

Immediately afterwards, however, Elijah descended into a dark night of the soul. Running for his life from Jezebel, he convinced himself that he was the only faithful one left. "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts," he said. And where had it gotten him? "I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away" (1 Kings 19:10). You can hear his despondency: *I've done everything right, and I'm still alone. God, where are you?*

## HOPE IS NOT DEAD

So how did God respond? In a word, gently. God was not in the strong wind or in the earthquake or even in (his favorite) the fire. He was in the low whisper.

And what did God whisper to Elijah? *Hope is not dead. You are not alone. And I am not done using you.*

I can't tell you how many times I've needed God to tell me this. More than Elijah heard it. More than I've asked for it. Frankly, more than I can remember.

Can you relate to Elijah's dark night of the soul? You once had great hopes of being used by God. But something happened. Perhaps you tried something difficult—and failed. Perhaps you were wronged. Perhaps circumstances conspired against you. For whatever reason, your once bright hopes have nearly been snuffed out.

What God said to Elijah he says to you: *Hope is not dead. You are not alone. And I am not done using you.*

Jesus entered the pages of history at another moment when hope seemed lost. At Christmas, we sing, “Long lay the world in sin and error pining.” What changes that? What brings hope to a world like this?

“Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus' birth reminds us that when God is at work, even a glimmer of hope is enough to make a weary world rejoice.

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<sup>1</sup> “O Holy Night,” text by Placide Cappeau (1847).

## *Meditate*

*Give God's truth the time and space to settle in your spirit.*

*God gave Elijah hope by reminding him of his presence in the midst of difficulty. Another prophet, Isaiah, spoke similar words of hope:*

*But now thus says the LORD,  
he who created you, O Jacob,  
he who formed you, O Israel:  
“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.  
When you pass through the waters,  
I will be with you;  
and through the rivers,  
they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall  
not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.”*

*- Isaiah 43:1–2*

*Spend a few moments imagining God himself speaking these words directly to you.*

DECEMBER 13

# *How Long, O Lord?*



## THE STORY OF JEREMIAH

– *Lamentations 3:49–57* –

*“My eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite,  
until the LORD from heaven looks down and sees;  
my eyes cause me grief at the fate of all the daughters of my city.*

*“I have been hunted like a bird by those who were my enemies  
without cause;  
they flung me alive into the pit and cast stones on me;  
water closed over my head; I said, ‘I am lost.’*

*“I called on your name, O LORD, from the depths of the pit;  
you heard my plea, ‘Do not close your ear to my cry for help!’  
You came near when I called on you; you said, ‘Do not fear!’”*



**A**fter Elijah, the dark years of idolatry and injustice continued. Even as one prophet after another came to God's people, God seemed farther and farther away. Then, one terrible day, an invading army took away the very emblem of God's presence—the temple. The Old Testament ends with a long period known as the exile, in which God's temple and God's people were scattered.

The prophet who saw this coming was Jeremiah. Jeremiah is often called “the weeping prophet” for the many laments he wrote. The book of Lamentations, for instance, which details the horror of Jerusalem's destruction, flowed from Jeremiah's pen—and from his broken heart.

We resonate with the laments of people like Jeremiah when we walk through a period of injustice or suffering. We cry out to God, “Do not close your ear to my cry for help!” We echo the psalmist's desperate question, “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?” (Psalm 13:1a).

Laments like these are not mere complaints, God giving us space to process negative emotions. Nor are they requests for information, as if God could pull back the curtain and show us enough of his plan for us to be satisfied. Primarily, these laments are pleas for God to act—to see our suffering and to do something about it.

When we look at the injustice of the world, when we endure great suffering, we respond like Jeremiah: We know, in our guts, that something is *wrong*. We weep and we plead with God to do something.

God answered Jeremiah's prayers. While in exile, Jeremiah got the privilege of bearing the message to Israel: It will not always be this way. God still has a good plan for his people—

## HOW LONG, O LORD?

not just a today-plan, but a tomorrow-plan. In fact, it's a forever-plan. One day, the exile will end and God will bring you home (cf. Jeremiah 29).

We cannot understand Christmas without walking with Jeremiah through exile and lament. This is not just a helpful path for people who have suffered. It is a reminder for all of us—no matter how great or terrible our year has been—of how broken the world is and how far away God seems. The light of Christmas shines brightly. But it must shine *in the darkness*.

Jeremiah didn't get to see the full beauty of that light. He never returned home. What Jeremiah did get was God's presence in the midst of his exile. Note God's response to Jeremiah's lament. As Jeremiah recounts, "You came near when I called on you" (Lamentations 3:57a).

In the midst of difficulty, God invites his people to lament, to weep, to plead with him to do something. In response, he promises to act—not primarily by taking away our difficulty, but by drawing near to us. Even, as we see in the life of Jesus, by lamenting with us (cf. John 11:35).

Like Jeremiah, Jesus was a prophet who experienced pain, suffering, and injustice. It was the very reason he came—to share in our suffering and vulnerability so that we might share in his life.

## *Pray—and Sing!*

*Pray these lyrics as you sing them out loud.*

*O come, O come, Emmanuel,  
And ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here,  
Until the Son of God appear.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

*O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free  
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;  
From depths of hell Thy people save,  
And give them victory o'er the grave.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

*O come, Thou Dayspring, from on high,  
And cheer us by Thy drawing nigh;  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,  
And death's dark shadows put to flight.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

*O come, Thou Key of David, come  
And open wide our heav'nly home;  
Make safe the way that leads on high,  
And close the path to misery.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," text translated by John Mason Neale (1861).

DECEMBER 14

# *But If Not*



## THE STORY OF DANIEL

– Daniel 6:16–23 –

*Then the king commanded, and Daniel was brought and cast into the den of lions. The king declared to Daniel, “May your God, whom you serve continually, deliver you!” And a stone was brought and laid on the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet and with the signet of his lords, that nothing might be changed concerning Daniel. Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; no diversions were brought to him, and sleep fled from him.*

*Then, at break of day, the king arose and went in haste to the den of lions. As he came near to the den where Daniel was, he cried out in a tone of anguish. The king declared to Daniel, “O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?” Then Daniel said to the king, “O king, live forever! My God sent his angel and shut the lions’ mouths, and they have not harmed me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no harm.” Then the king was exceedingly glad, and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.*

## THE STORY OF DANIEL

One of the most appealing lies out there is that God's grace ushers us into an easy life. Few of us would say it this bluntly, but deep down, we would like to think that if we're following God well enough, he'll do his part to give us smooth sailing along the way.

The trouble is, the dark underside of that lie holds sway as well: If our lives are in a terrible spot, we tend to assume we're at fault. Even for Christians, it's easy to subscribe to a sort of functional karma: Good circumstances are a sign of God's favor; bad circumstances are a sign of God's wrath.

God's grace doesn't quite work like that. Yes, in the end, God rewards righteousness and punishes evil. But in this life, it's not always so tidy. You may follow God faithfully and find yourself betrayed, lied about, even threatened with violence. Like the prophet Daniel.

We envy experiences like Daniel's because of the dramatic good ending. The lions didn't lay a paw on Daniel! He survived! We aren't nearly as envious of the road that led up to that ending.

Remember: Daniel didn't have any guarantee that he would survive his night in the lions' lair. We might imagine him having a similar spirit as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego earlier in Daniel, who, when forced to choose between idolatry and certain death, were prepared for death: "[O king] ... our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace ... But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up" (Daniel 3:16–18).

In choosing to receive God's grace, we are faced with a staggering cost. Yes, the gift of grace that God offers is free.

## BUT IF NOT

But in order to take it, we must let go of everything else. We must be prepared to follow Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—trusting an uncertain future to a certain God.

Ask any of the saints of old if this trade is worth it and you'll get a unanimous answer: "Absolutely." What we gain in following Christ far outweighs whatever cost we have to pay. The cost, however, is real.

It is worth remembering that no human in history would ever pay a greater cost for obedience than Jesus. At Christmas, we celebrate God the Son leaving the glory of heaven to inhabit a world far more dismal than any lion's den, far more dangerous than any fiery furnace. And what was his motivation?

*Mild he lays his glory by,  
Born that man no more may die.  
Born to raise the sons of earth,  
Born to give them second birth.<sup>1</sup>*

When we realize the sacrifice God made so that we "no more may die," we can step forward in courage and sacrifice for him.

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<sup>1</sup> "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," text by Charles Wesley (1739).

## **Reflect**

*Write your answers in the space provided.*

*In our call to follow Jesus, very few of us are given a life or death choice as Daniel was (lions and all). But all of us face moments when following Jesus seems costly. Where are you most tempted to shy away from obeying Jesus because the cost seems too great? How can you display the same courage Daniel did in these situations?*

DECEMBER 15

# Bad People



## THE STORY OF JONAH

— *Jonah 3:6, 10; 4:1–2* —

*The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ... When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.*

*But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.”*



## THE STORY OF JONAH

What's the big miracle in the story of Jonah? It's got to be the part with the fish, right? Jonah, having run from God's assignment, ends up in the ocean. But rather than letting him drown, God sends a giant sea creature to gobble Jonah up, belching him up days later on dry land.

That's the part my six-year-old daughter remembers from this story, anyway. And she's probably not alone. Of course, I do believe she is alone in her recent desire to swallow *me* whole so that I can live forever in her belly. (Mercifully, she has thus far been unsuccessful in this endeavor.)

So yes, the bit with the fish is certainly a miraculous element of Jonah's story. (And it's one that skeptics find, well, tough to swallow.) But the *biggest* miracle in the Jonah story actually happens a couple chapters later, when the king of Nineveh leads the entire city to repent of their sin.

If we miss how big of a deal this is, it's probably because we don't know how bad the Ninevites were. They were ruthless and violent. Nineveh was the capital of the ancient Assyrian empire, which repeatedly attacked God's people and would eventually conquer half their kingdom. These were bad people.

You might assume Jonah was avoiding Nineveh because it was dangerous. Not exactly. Jonah didn't want to take God's assignment to Nineveh because *he didn't want those bad people to experience God's grace*.

Ouch.

Jonah is proof positive that God works not only *through* his people but also, at times, *in spite* of his people.

## BAD PEOPLE

Jonah, the reluctant prophet, brought God's message to his worst enemies. And when God showed them grace, it infuriated Jonah. Jonah didn't want God to be kind to those *bad* people.

The book of Jonah ends with him sulking under a plant, but there's good reason to think that Jonah's story doesn't end there. How do we know? Well, simply because we have the book of Jonah. He wrote it down. It seems that at some point, perhaps years later, Jonah wanted people to know what had happened in Nineveh. He wanted to chronicle his embarrassing failure and God's lavish grace. He wanted others after him to learn: God isn't after the "right kind" of people; he's after *all* kinds of people.

It's a lesson that's easily forgotten. When God sent Jesus into the world, for instance, the religious leaders had some of the same objections Jonah did. "Oh, Jesus," the religious leaders said, "You really don't want to hang with that crowd. Maybe you don't know, but those are *bad* people."

To which Jesus replied, "I'm a soul doctor. I'm not here for so-called 'healthy' people. I'm here for the weak and wounded" (Luke 5:31, paraphrase).

Because Jesus didn't seem to go after the "right people," a lot of people missed him. Tragically, even as we prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth, we can still miss him. This year, let Christmas remind you that God came not for the healthy, but for the weak and wounded.

## Connect

*Reach out to someone—text, call, or send some snail mail!*

*God still chooses the people we least expect, and he still uses his people to do it. But like Jonah and the religious leaders, we are prone to limit God. Which group of people do you consider “too far gone” for God to love? How might God be calling you to cross an ethnic, socioeconomic, or cultural barrier to extend God’s love to them?*

*Take the first step and text someone today.*

DECEMBER 16

# The Great Disappointment



## THE STORY OF ZERUBBABEL

— *Ezra 3:10-13* —

*And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David king of Israel. And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD,*

*“For he is good,  
for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.”*

*And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.*

Perhaps you've heard the old—and rather pessimistic—proverb, “There are two tragedies in life. One is not getting what you want. The other is getting it.”

This proverb sticks to the mind because it resonates with a common experience. We all know what it's like to see paradise just out of reach. We think, *if only I could get this job, or that house, or a spouse, or a child, then I would be happy*. But if we do attain our small slice of paradise, something strange happens: We find that paradise didn't deliver what it promised. Even the best moments in our lives fill us with a longing for something more.

The people of Israel knew this combination of longing and disappointment, too. It had been seventy years since they had seen their homeland destroyed and their families killed. Miles from home, God's people were not only oppressed by their captors but seemingly forgotten by their God.

So when Cyrus, king of Persia, allowed certain Israelites to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, you can imagine a flicker of hope rising up within them. Perhaps God hadn't forgotten them after all. Perhaps it was possible to experience God's presence again. After all, the temple had been ground zero for God's presence in the ancient times. Perhaps he would come again.

The people, led by Zerubbabel, fought against great odds to complete the temple's foundation. And they faithfully dedicated the temple with the same refrain sung during King Solomon's day: “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.” But something was missing.

They sang the song, but God didn't send the fire.

## THE GREAT DISAPPOINTMENT

Not everyone in Israel felt the missing piece that day. Many of them—the younger ones—celebrated with great shouts. But the older men, remembering the beauty of the first temple, were so disappointed that they couldn't hold back their tears. Perhaps, too, they remembered the stories of God's glory filling the first temple. They knew this new building wasn't the answer to their nation's longing.

What they may not have known was that no building would ever satisfy this longing. Because what they longed for was not a beautiful building, nor even a moment of seeing God's glory on magnificent display. What they longed for was the presence of God in their midst.

Ultimately, our plight is the same. Whether we are experiencing unfulfilled longings or unfulfilling successes, God desires to root our hearts in something more permanent. He desires to root our hearts in him.

Advent is a season of longing. Whatever else you long for this year, know that your heart is longing to know God and be with him forever.

## ***Meditate***

*Give God's truth the time and space to settle in your spirit.*

*Advent is a season of longing for God. Spend a minute reflecting on the longings in your life. Then actively set them aside and center your heart and desire on being with God.*

DECEMBER 17

# *God Is Coming to Earth to Stay*



## THE STORY OF ELIZABETH

— Luke 1:5–7, 13–14 —

*In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. ...*

*But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.”*



## THE STORY OF ELIZABETH

The Bible uses a stark word for women who were unable to have children: barren. To be “barren” meant more than an inability to bear children. Barrenness carried shame along with it, as if a woman was not living up to her purpose in life.

A lot has changed in two thousand years, but a lot hasn't. Sure, we generally avoid the word “barren” today, but the shame remains. Not only for women without children, either. For men and women who remain unmarried into their 30s, 40s, and 50s. For people who struggle, day after painful day, with chronic illness. For everyone who senses that, somehow, they aren't living up to their purpose.

Many of us can relate to Elizabeth. We feel like something should be different, either in our world or in our own hearts. So we stand before God with feelings of bitterness (*God, what have you done?*), guilt (*God, what have I done?*), or both.

I find it encouraging that God chose someone like Elizabeth to begin telling the story of Christmas. The good news of God's presence, the story of Jesus' birth, begins in a most unexpected place—in the womb of a barren woman. The very place of Elizabeth's deepest pain becomes the place God chooses to work. Not in spite of her barrenness, but because of it.

For centuries, God's people had been waiting for God to come near to them in a special way. To take away their sorrow and replace it with joy. To take away their sin and replace it with forgiveness. To take away the barrenness of death and replace it with abundant life.

And so, God begins with Elizabeth. The life within her acts as a promise of everything God was about to do.

## GOD IS COMING TO EARTH TO STAY

She would receive, in part, what God intended to bring to all of humanity—wholeness, healing, joy.

Elizabeth would not be the one to bring God into the world. But her miracle baby would prepare the way for him. Her son would grow up to be, in Jesus' words, "the greatest prophet ever born of women" (Luke 7:28). His prophecy, in fact, began before he ever spoke a word. It began before he was even born, because Elizabeth's pregnancy spoke a prophetic word to all who saw it. Her pregnancy declared, "God is coming to earth to stay."

Elizabeth rejoiced because God gave her a son. But the enduring joy God brought her—and those around her—was deeper than that of having a longing fulfilled. After all, both Elizabeth and her son would one day become "barren" again in death. What they needed was the assurance of God's presence with them, in difficulty, in joy, even in death.

That is precisely what Jesus came to be. Born under miraculous circumstances, like Elizabeth's child, Jesus would not only prophesy about God's presence, he would embody it. And even though he would never bear a child, he would go on to live the most fruitful and healing life the world has ever known.

## *Reflect*

*Write your answers in the space provided.*

*How do you feel barren? Where do you fail to meet the expectations others have of you?*

*Write out a short prayer, giving those expectations to God.*

*“God, I often feel ...”*

DECEMBER 18

# *Do You Hear What I Hear?*



## THE STORY OF ZECHARIAH

– Matthew 13:13–17 –

*[And Jesus said,] “This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:*

*“You will indeed hear but never understand,  
and you will indeed see but never perceive.”  
For this people’s heart has grown dull,  
and with their ears they can barely hear,  
and their eyes they have closed,  
lest they should see with their eyes  
and hear with their ears  
and understand with their heart  
and turn, and I would heal them.’*

*But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.”*

## THE STORY OF ZECHARIAH

It is fair to assume that Zechariah, like his wife Elizabeth, also struggled against shame, guilt, and bitterness in the long years of childlessness. But Zechariah was a priest! So, certainly, he knew enough of God to accept his good news when it arrived. Surely the priest in the family would be one of the first ones to recognize what God was up to.

Not exactly.

When the angel Gabriel told Zechariah about Elizabeth's upcoming pregnancy, Zechariah balked. "I am an old man," he said, "and my wife is advanced in years" (Luke 1:18). Gabriel, who was already well acquainted with Zechariah's age and Elizabeth's conception troubles, decided to help Zechariah listen a little better the next time around. He imposed nine months of muteness on Zechariah (Luke 1:19–20).

Zechariah exemplifies the difference between hearing and listening, a difference that would characterize not only Jesus' birth but Jesus' entire life. As Jesus often said in his teaching, "Those who have ears to hear, let him hear." My translation: Everyone nearby can *hear* my words, but not everyone will really *listen*.

Just think of Zechariah. As a priest, he had heard the biblical stories of God giving children to previously barren women. God had done it with *every* one of the patriarchs, for crying out loud! Abraham's wife Sarah, Isaac's wife Rebekah, and Jacob's wife Rachel *all* experienced the very miracle Gabriel promised to Zechariah. Zechariah had heard all of those stories. It's likely he had memorized all of those stories.

But when the hour came, *hearing* those stories wasn't enough to help Zechariah *listen* to God.

## DO YOU HEAR WHAT I HEAR?

It reminds me of the popular Christmas song, “Do You Hear What I Hear?” Written in the 1960s, the song was as much (or more so) a protest against war than it was a reflection on the birth of Jesus. But the questions that drive the song rightly capture some of the mystery of Christmas: *Do you see what I see—a star, dancing in the night? Do you hear what I hear—a song, high above the trees? Do you know what I know—a Child shivers in the cold?*<sup>1</sup> The implication is that many people could have seen or heard these things. But somehow, they missed it.

When Jesus was born, the signs of God were remarkable. But even so, only a few people recognized them. Hearing, many people did not listen. Looking, many people did not see.

Zechariah learned to listen to God. When his son, John, was born, God opened Zechariah’s mouth, and the first words to usher forth weren’t words of frustration for his nine months of silence. They were words of praise for God’s saving work in the world:

*“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
for he has visited and redeemed his people  
and has raised up a horn of salvation for us  
in the house of his servant David,  
as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old ...”*

*- Luke 1:68–70*

Don’t skip that last line: *as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old*. God had spoken. And now, at last, Zechariah was listening.

Don’t let God’s promises pass you by. Listen to his Word. He is speaking.

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<sup>1</sup> “Do You Hear What I Hear?” text by Noël Regeny (1962).

## ***Reflect***

*Write your answers in the space provided.*

*How well would you say you listen to other people?  
(Try to think of how other people would answer  
this for you!) Do you find it easier or harder to  
listen to God? Why?*

DECEMBER 19

# *God Picks People We Least Expect*



## THE STORY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

– *Matthew 3:1–6* –

*In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,*

*“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:*

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord;*

*make his paths straight.”*

*Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.*



## THE STORY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

God often picks people we least expect. In fact, he delights in it. So where we would choose people with potential, power, and a proven track record, God seems to go the other direction. He chooses barren women (like Elizabeth) to bear children. He chooses racist men (like Jonah) to take his gospel to other nations. He chooses sorrowful people (like Jeremiah) to become prophets of hope. He chooses unloved people (like Leah) to become emblems of his compassion. He chooses murderers (David) to become objects of his scandalous forgiveness.

God doesn't pick good people or wise people or healthy people, for the simple reason that there are none. If God picks any of us, it's an act of sheer grace.

Sometimes, though, God *really* sets about to make this plain. Perhaps he knows how difficult it is for us to accept that God chooses those we least expect. So every now and then, he picks someone whose life is so radical it makes people do a double take—like John the Baptist.

John the Baptist was the miracle child of Elizabeth and Zechariah. The angel Gabriel prophesied that John would “make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Luke 1:17). Zechariah added to this prophecy at John's birth, saying that John would “go before the Lord to prepare his ways,” letting people know that “the tender mercy of our God” was near, that “the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness” (Luke 1:76, 78–79).

Everyone knew John would get people ready for the coming King. Still, I have to imagine many of them were surprised at how he began doing it. Living in the wilderness and eating bugs tends to catch people off guard.

## GOD PICKS PEOPLE WE LEAST EXPECT

But then again, God had promised to start in the wilderness (Isaiah 40:3). And Abraham had met God there. So had Hagar. And Jacob. And Moses.

And the great prophet Elijah. A lot of people saw John in the wilderness and remembered Elijah. In fact, even Jesus himself made that connection (Matthew 17:11–13). So clearly John was a prophet. But what would his message be? *How* would he prepare people for the coming King?

To get everyone ready for Jesus, John preached a message anchored on one word: “repent.” The word “repent” means, “turn around.” That was John the Baptist’s entire message. He was preparing people for the most *unexpected* revelation in history, knowing that if they didn’t do a radical U-turn, they would easily overlook the coming King.

No wonder God sent “the greatest prophet ever born of women” to wake them up (Luke 7:28)!

After centuries of sending messengers to God’s people, God finally sent himself. Don’t miss this! The God who made earth has come to earth. The God who made you has come to live with you.

## *Pray—and Sing!*

*Pray these lyrics as you sing them out loud.*

*Angels we have heard on high,  
Sweetly singing o'er the plains,  
And the mountains in reply,  
Echoing their joyous strains.*

*Shepherds, why this jubilee?  
Why your joyous strains prolong?  
What the gladsome tidings be  
Which inspire your heav'nly song?*

*Come to Bethlehem and see  
Him whose birth the angels sing;  
Come, adore on bended knee  
Christ the Lord, the newborn King.*

*Gloria in excelsis Deo!  
Gloria in excelsis Deo!<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> "Angels We Have Heard on High," text by unknown (1862).

DECEMBER 20

# *The Sunrise of Christmas*



## THE STORY OF SIMEON

– *Luke 2:25–32* –

*Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,*

*“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,  
according to your word;  
for my eyes have seen your salvation  
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and for glory to your people Israel.”*

## THE STORY OF SIMEON

Luke includes several stories that the other Gospel-writers omit, especially surrounding the birth of Jesus. Simeon doesn't appear anywhere else in the Bible, but his Christmas appearance provides a perfect example of *watching* for God while we *wait* on God.

The text uses the word “waiting” for Simeon, specifically that he was “waiting for the consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25). Like many of his fellow Israelite believers, Simeon was waiting for God to send his promised One—a king like David, a liberator like Moses, a prophet like Elijah. The longing that Simeon expresses (“Now I can depart in peace!”) implies that Simeon had been waiting for this promised One for a very long time. Most scholars conclude that Simeon was a very old man at this point.

The text doesn't use the word “watching” for Simeon, but Simeon's actions show it. Given the promise that he would see the coming Christ (a word meaning “anointed one” or “king”), Simeon responded by returning to the temple, day after day after day. He became a “righteous and devout” man, not because he was attempting to curry God's favor, but because he wanted to be ready when God entered the scene.

There are two ways to wait: One is passive and the other is active. Passive waiting doesn't keep watch. Active waiting does. It's the difference between waiting for your number to be called at the DMV and waiting for the birth of your child.

What transforms waiting into watching is eager anticipation, the promise of something good and beautiful around the corner.

This was Simeon's life. He waited and he watched for years, perhaps decades, for this King.

## THE SUNRISE OF CHRISTMAS

And then one day, he saw Jesus, and he knew him because of the very hope he had in his time of waiting.

One of the psalms vividly reflects this posture of watchful waiting. In Psalm 130, the psalmist writes, “My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning” (Psalm 130:6). If you’re a watchman staying up all night guarding a city, you aren’t passive. Your very job is to strain your eyes into the darkness, looking for any hint of danger. Most of what you watch for is unwelcome.

Except for the sunrise. As the night draws to a close, your eyes shift to the horizon. You wait for the dawning sun with hope because that sun means safety (and, for you, a nap!).

The only experience I have in waiting for the sunrise is keeping watch over a fussy newborn. Comforting a crying baby through the long hours of the night wears on the body, the mind, the soul. But then, so slowly you may not believe it at first, the morning light comes. I can’t speak for the watchmen, but I can speak for myself: Things always look a little better in the light of day, even if I haven’t slept at all the night before.

Simeon’s life was one long night of watching and waiting. But like the watchmen of the psalms, Simeon kept his eyes trained on the horizon, looking for the coming King. Because of his vigilance (and God’s grace), he got to see the sunrise of the King that many others missed.

Christmas is the promise that something good is on the horizon. As Tish Harrison Warren writes, “The believer’s constant posture is to lean slightly forward in anticipation. We wait for God to act, to set things right,

## THE STORY OF SIMEON

to show up and work, whether that work is surprising and miraculous or a quiet change of tides.”<sup>1</sup>

This is not wishful thinking or blind optimism. We can watch and wait with confidence because God has already showed up in surprising and miraculous and quiet ways. Like he did by becoming a poor, helpless baby.

Keep waiting. And in your waiting, keep watching.  
The sunrise of Christmas is coming.

## *Pray*

*Read this prayer aloud to God.*

*Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work,  
or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels  
charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord  
Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe  
the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous;  
and all for your love's sake.*

*Amen.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tish Harrison Warren, *Prayer in the Night: For Those Who Work or Watch or Weep* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2021), 56.

<sup>2</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer*, “Compline” (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 134.

DECEMBER 21

# *A Beautiful Promise and an Unknown Future*



## THE STORY OF MARY

— Luke 1:26–33, 38 —

*In the sixth month [of Elizabeth's pregnancy] the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary.*

*And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.*

*And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."...*

*And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.*



For a long time, our cultural depiction of angels has been a bit too soothing. If given the option, most of us would say we'd welcome a visit from an angel. But whenever angels show up in the Bible, people respond with such immediate horror that they assume they're about to die.

This fear isn't just a response to the angel's appearance, either. Sure, it often *starts* that way, as a gut-level terror at seeing a brightly glowing creature with a voice like thunder. But even after the angel leaves, the fear often doesn't; because what the angel leaves behind, while not as loud, is usually just as unsettling.

Mary's angel left her with two things—a beautiful promise and an unknown future. The unknown future, in fact, was the *result* of the beautiful promise. We are more familiar with the beautiful promise: After centuries of watching and waiting, God was finally sending his King. God was coming to earth to stay. And he was choosing to do it, miraculously, through Mary!

But the beautiful promise immediately prompted uncertainty. After all, Mary was already engaged to a man named Joseph. Both Mary and Joseph knew where babies came from. A sudden pregnancy for unmarried Mary could easily have sent her into a spiral of fear. Would Joseph break off the engagement? Would anyone believe what she had heard from Gabriel? Would she be okay?

Mary's situation was one of a kind. But while none of us are asking ourselves how to handle a miraculous virgin birth, I'll bet most of us are asking a question much like Mary's. We're in that final mad dash toward Christmas. We're singing songs. We're sipping hot cocoa (even if it is 65 degrees, as it often is where I live).

We're looking forward to some much-needed time off work.

Still, as joyful as the holiday season can be, in the back of our minds we wonder, "Will we be okay?"

What comforted Mary as she considered her unknown future was not a guarantee that Joseph would stay. (He would, which we'll see tomorrow.) What gave her comfort and courage was the promise of God and the presence of God. This child would be the promised King.

None of us has ever heard a promise quite like Mary heard. And yet, we share a lot in common with Mary: Our futures are unknown to us; God's actions in our lives are nothing short of miraculous; God's promises are often as troubling to us as they are beautiful. And at Christmas, we wonder, "Will we be okay?"

The answer? God is near to us.

Gabriel began by telling Mary, "The Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28). That is the promise and the comfort of Christmas. God is near.

Not only do we serve the same God as Mary but we have the same word of comfort. In the midst of confusion and fear, Jesus says to his disciples—and to us—"I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:18).

## ***Reflect***

*Write your answers in the space provided.*

*What aspect of the future is most unknown or frightening for you? What does the story of Christmas do to change that unknown?*

DECEMBER 22

# *An Unlikely Success Story*



## THE STORY OF JOSEPH

— *Matthew 1:18–25* —

*Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:*

*“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall call his name Immanuel”*

*(which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.*

## THE STORY OF JOSEPH

**W**e Western readers are drawn to biblical stories that reinforce our cultural myth of success: *Work hard, be clever, and with a little bit of luck, you'll win in the end!*

If we're looking at the whole narrative of the Bible, that pattern doesn't always hold water. But it completely bursts to pieces when we consider Joseph. Unlike many of the biblical heroes before him, his story doesn't end with vindication or victory.

Joseph's story, captured here in the Gospel of Matthew, flips the camera away from Mary (where Luke had it) and points it to the engaged husband. It's the same moment of uncertainty and fear we saw in Mary, but from unsuspecting Joe's perspective.

Joseph responded to Mary's pregnancy graciously. He assumed—as any of us would have—that Mary had started an affair with another man. Rather than publicly shaming her for this (which was common), he attempted to undo their engagement discreetly.

Joseph wasn't seeing the situation like God was seeing it, so God sent an angel to clarify. But the angel didn't rebuke Joseph for his plans. He did, however, give Joseph a little more perspective: *She wasn't cheating, Joseph. That's God's baby. In fact, it's God himself.* To his credit, Joseph responded much like Mary: He believed God for the miraculous.

Chances are, though, most people around Joseph still assumed that Mary had cheated on him. Joseph likely endured these rumors for the rest of his life. His neighbors would have thought him a deceived fool. Plus, judging by Joseph's absence from the later Gospel narratives, it seems that Joseph died before Jesus began his public ministry.

## AN UNLIKELY SUCCESS STORY

Joseph experienced all of the difficulty with none of the glory.

And yet, Joseph's story is a success, a reminder that even if everyone thinks you're a fool, when you have God's approval, you've got enough.

In fact, Joseph had more than God's approval. For as many years as he lived as a father, Joseph had God's unique presence right there under his roof—"Emmanuel," God with us.

## *Pray—and Sing!*

*Pray these lyrics as you sing them out loud.*

*Silent night, holy night!  
All is calm, all is bright.  
Round yon virgin, mother and Child.  
Holy infant so tender and mild,  
Sleep in heavenly peace,  
Sleep in heavenly peace.*

*Silent night, holy night!  
Shepherds quake at the sight.  
Glories stream from heaven afar;  
Heavenly hosts sing “Alleluia!”  
Christ the Savior is born,  
Christ the Savior is born!*

*Silent night, holy night!  
Son of God, love’s pure light.  
Radiant beams from Thy holy face  
With the dawn of redeeming grace,  
Jesus, Lord at Thy birth,  
Jesus, Lord at Thy birth!<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> “Silent Night,” text by Joseph Mohr (1818).

DECEMBER 23

# *The Very First Christmas Gift*



## THE STORY OF THE WISE MEN

— *Matthew 2:9–12* —

*After listening to the king, [the wise men] went on their way.  
And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before  
them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.  
When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.  
And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother,  
and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their  
treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.  
And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed  
to their own country by another way.*



## THE STORY OF THE WISE MEN

Gift-giving is probably the most common element of Christmas today. Christian or not, most Americans give and receive gifts on December 25. But we don't find any gifts in the Bible stories about Christmas.

That is, until we meet the enigmatic wise men.

We don't know much about the wise men. About all that we know is that they had positions of influence (hence "wise men"), that they were extremely rich (hence the lavish gifts), and that they came "from the east." Beyond that, they remain largely shrouded in mystery. Were they kings of some sort? Consultants to a foreign king? Priests, maybe? And did they come from Persia or India or Ethiopia or Arabia? Or from *all* of these places?

The Bible keeps us in the dark about many of the details we might most like to hear—details like these. Instead, we are told merely that these mysterious men made a long journey to worship Jesus.

So why does this matter?

The arrival of the wise men reminds us of God's purpose in salvation. In many of the other stories, Jesus is hailed as Israel's coming King. He is the Son of David, come to deliver his people. But the wise men remind us that Jesus came for more than just Israel. As Simeon said when he met baby Jesus in the temple, this child came to be not only "glory to your people Israel" but also "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" (Luke 2:32).

The birth of Jesus blasts apart the dividing lines we are used to. How could it not? This is God *himself*, crossing the greatest divide we could ever imagine—

## THE VERY FIRST CHRISTMAS GIFT

the span of heaven and earth, holy God and sinful humanity. If God, through Jesus, was crossing *that* great divide, it only seems right that his arrival would knock down a few other dividing walls along the way.

Jesus came to earth to heal what sin had broken.  
That includes the chasm between God and humanity.  
That includes the chasm between one nation and another.  
Jesus came to heal both our vertical and our horizontal brokenness.

The wise men recognized this. Whoever they were, we know they were not part of the nation of Israel. And yet, like Simeon, they knew that a new light had dawned—not only for Israel but for the whole world, and for them.

The wise men are known for the great gifts they brought. Gold, frankincense, myrrh. But they would be the first to tell you that they did not *give* the first Christmas gift; they *received* the first Christmas gift. That gift is Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, the only one who could reconcile us to God. And to one another.

## *Pray*

*Read this prayer aloud to God.*

*O God ... Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love ... that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne ...*<sup>1</sup>

*Amen*

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<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer*, “Prayers for the World, for the Human Family” (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 815.

DECEMBER 24

# *Emmanuel, God With Us*



## THE STORY OF JESUS

– Luke 2:1–7 –

*In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

## THE STORY OF JESUS

We don't read the name "Emmanuel" once we move beyond the birth narratives about Jesus. And yet, the whole of Jesus' life flows from that name. "Emmanuel," God with us.

Jesus was born like us—vulnerable, weak, and dependent on his family. He needed his mother's milk to stay alive. He needed swaddling cloths to keep his body warm. In his perfect humanity, he needed others to care for him. Just like us.

Jesus lived like us, enjoying life's pleasures and enduring life's moments of tedium. He played games. He got bored. He enjoyed a good meal. He also fasted when God called him to it. He was able to sleep like a stone. He also stayed up all night, at times, praying to his heavenly Father. He spent decades learning the skills of carpentry, the trade of his earthly father. He forged friendships with people, laughing and weeping with them. Just like us.

Jesus suffered like us. He got sick. He grew tired. He lost loved ones. He experienced the heartbreak of betrayal. He fought against temptations to sin. He felt the brokenness of this world and the limits of his own body. Just like us.

Then Jesus did something you and I haven't done. Something very human, but still very foreign. He died.

Humans die. We all know this. But we haven't done it yet. Don't skip past that irony: Jesus has experienced something universally human—but that we living humans haven't gone through yet.

That's a bit ironic—and a lot comforting. Because even in his death, Jesus died as God with us.

God himself experienced the full weight of the curse, the shadow of death, the loneliness and horror of death, so that we would be able to approach death knowing we are not alone.

And then, remarkably, Jesus did something utterly unlike us: He rose from the dead. This is something we've never seen. But we will. The Apostle Paul refers to Jesus' resurrection as the "firstfruits," a promise of a future reality (1 Corinthians 15:20). Joining Jesus in his death, we will also join him in his resurrection life. Jesus became like us so that we could become like him—alive forever.

Jesus' birth was the beginning. But his death wasn't the end. In fact, even his resurrection wasn't the end. His birth, his death, his resurrection—*all* of them are just the first pages of the story God intends to write. A story he will keep writing tomorrow. It's a story of redemption, justice, beauty, and life. A story where God takes all the wrong and makes it right, all the darkness and makes it light. A story of a God who came to be with us, who overcame death for us, and who invites us to lives with him forever.

# Pray—and Sing!

*Pray these lyrics as you sing them out loud.*

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come!  
Let earth receive her King;  
Let every heart prepare him room,  
And heaven and nature sing,  
And heaven and nature sing,  
And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing!*

*Joy to the world, the Savior reigns!  
Let men their songs employ;  
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains  
Repeat the sounding joy,  
Repeat the sounding joy,  
Repeat, repeat, the sounding joy!*

*No more let sins and sorrows grow  
Nor thorns infest the ground;  
He comes to make his blessings flow  
Far as the curse is found,  
Far as the curse is found,  
Far as, far as the curse is found!*

*He rules the world with truth and grace  
And makes the nations prove  
The glories of his righteousness  
And wonders of his love,  
And wonders of his love,  
And wonders, wonders, of his love!<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> “Joy to the World,” text by Isaac Watts (1719).

DECEMBER 25

# *Death Shall Be No More*



## OUR STORY

— *Revelation 21:1-4* —

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”*



The word, “advent,” means “arrival” or “coming.” Naturally, we use the word “advent” around Christmas, since Christmas is the time we celebrate Jesus’ birth—God coming to earth.

But traditionally, Advent is meant to have a dual focus. The first focus of Advent is backwards, looking to Jesus’ coming at Christmas. The second focus of Advent is forwards, looking ahead to Jesus’ future, glorious return.

These two “advents” only make sense when considered together. What God began in the birth of Jesus, he will finish when Jesus comes again. God’s kingdom, *inaugurated* by Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, has not yet been completely *fulfilled*. As some have helpfully put it, God’s kingdom has both “already” and “not yet” elements to it.

The first advent, Christmas, highlights this “already/not yet” tension. In Christmas, we see God taking a radical step to end injustice and death, not by defeating them outright, but by entering a world in which he would experience them personally. Only by doing this could he hope to bring people like us, riddled with injustice and death ourselves, back to him. In Jesus, God is *already* doing the work of reconciliation.

God’s work, however, is *not yet* finished. Hence the second advent: What Jesus began in his first coming, he will finish in his second. He will return, bringing perfect justice and wholeness with him. He will make the wrong things right and the dark things light. He will lift our heads and wipe away the tears from our eyes. At long last, what we all long for will come true: “God himself will be with them ... and death shall be no more” (Revelation 21:3–4).

## DEATH SHALL BE NO MORE

In our longing and in our suffering, Jesus' first coming reminds us that things will not always be this way. God came to be with us. And a second coming is on the horizon, with the exact same promise: God will be with us.

As we long for that return, we extend an invitation to everyone around us. Our neighbors are longing, too—for justice, for wholeness, for healing, for hope. And that which they long for has a name.

His name is Jesus. Emmanuel. God with us.

## *Reflect*

*Write your answer in the space provided.*

*The Christmas season is drawing to a close, but the beauty of Christmas—God’s presence with us—is meant to be ours year-round. What would be different if you truly believed God was with you? Remember: In Christ, he is!*

