

Why He Came



RAY PRITCHARD

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by Ray Pritchard



Gideon House Publishers

This Advent devotional guide is provided by
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Christmas Changes Everything!

There is no more pressing question today than this: “Why did Christ come to the earth?” It is not enough to know who Jesus is. By and large the world knows what Christians believe about Jesus. But what the world wants to know is: “Why did he come and what difference does it make?”

Many answers have been given to that question. Some argue that Jesus came to give us an example of God’s love. Others say he came to be the Perfect Man, the one shining example that can lift the rest of us up. Many people consider him the greatest teacher of all time, while others believe he came to establish a new religion. Some scholars say he was a reformist rabbi who wanted to start a movement to purify Israel.

In this year’s Advent devotional series, we will let the Bible speak for itself and tell us why Jesus came to the earth 2000 years ago. In studying this topic, I’ve been amazed at the many different reasons the Bible gives for the coming of Christ. Each day, beginning on December 1 and ending on December 25, we’ll look at a different reason Christ came. By no means will we exhaust the topic. The coming of Christ is the central event

of history, so important that it divides history into B.C. and A.D.

I hope you'll join us on this Advent journey as we look at the many different reasons our Lord was born in Bethlehem so long ago. May you be amazed all over again by the wonder of our Savior whose coming changed the world forever.

December 1



*To Bring Light
to the World*

“Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’” (John 8:12).

In 1646 the Dutch artist Rembrandt created a painting called “The Adoration of the Shepherds.” It depicts his vision of what it was like for the shepherds to see the baby Jesus. *The painting is dark because it is a night scene inside a barn.* The dark tones force the viewer to study the images carefully. In the center is the Babe in the feeding trough. Mary is by his side, Joseph not far away. The shepherds are gathered around, intently studying the baby whose birth was announced by the angelic choir. If you look into the gloom, you can see outlines of the sheep. The shepherds couldn’t leave their sheep outside so they brought them into the barn with them. To the right a rickety ladder leans on a crossbeam. Next to the ladder is a rooster.

Soon it hits you that the ladder and crossbeam make the dim outline of a cross. The rooster is a symbol of betrayal in the distant future. *Even in this joyous moment, the cross looms over the*

baby Jesus. But the most significant feature is the light. Unlike other Renaissance artists, Rembrandt didn't paint Jesus as an angel with a halo. He is a very normal, very human baby. All is dark in the painting except for the baby in the manger. The light isn't shining on the baby; it's shining out from him. This was Rembrandt's way of saying that all hope and light shines from the manger—lighting up a darkened world. This [beloved Christmas carol](#) says it well:

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.

Is there hope in the world? Yes! Hope invaded the world 2000 years ago at Bethlehem. If we want that hope to invade our lives, we must do what the shepherds did so long ago. We must come to Bethlehem and bow before the newborn King. Hope is available but only to those who will humble themselves and bow in faith before the Lord Jesus Christ.

Will you bow before him and crown him as your King?

Lord Jesus, there will always be room in my heart for you! Amen.

December 2



To Keep God's Promises

“To show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham” (Luke 1:72-73).

God is now doing what he promised to do. The prophets saw it coming, but not every detail. No one saw it clearly, but they knew the day would come when God would visit his people. Micah spoke of it, and so did Isaiah and Jeremiah. Even old Abraham looked forward to this day, as did Moses and David. They all saw it coming! All of them looked through the dim mist of history and saw a bright glimpse of the day when God would visit his people. They knew it was coming; they just didn't know exactly when it would happen.

This truth leads to a crucial conclusion about Jesus Christ: *He must be great because the preparation for his coming took thousands of years.* This is no small event. History is really His Story! All that came before him pointed to him. All that comes after looks back to him. He is the centerpiece of history, the demarcation between yesterday and tomorrow. *In the birth of Jesus Christ, we have come to the crux and pivot of history.*

Luke is telling us something very crucial: *God came to earth*

in the person of Jesus Christ and nothing will ever be the same again. If we look at Christmas this way, we see it in a new light. Nothing like this has ever happened before. God has visited his people and nothing will ever be the same again.

As the commercials keep telling us, there are only 23 shopping days left until Christmas. But think about what else that means. There are also . . .

23 praising days until Christmas,
23 singing days until Christmas,
23 worshiping days until Christmas.

How are you going to spend the 23 days before Christmas?

*My God, grant that I might not be so busy that
I miss the joy of Christmas. Open my heart so
that I might believe all over again. Amen.*

December 3



To Do the Father's Will

“I have come to do your will, O God” (Hebrews 10:7).

When James Montgomery Boice preached on this text, he pointed out that Christ came into the world knowing his purpose from the beginning. *That could not be said of any other baby.* In recent years I have thought about that in light of our grandchildren—Knox, Eli, Penny, and Violet. And I’m thinking about the newest one who has not arrived yet but will be here soon. At the moment they are scattered far from us—hundreds of miles away. I think about our grandchildren and wonder what will happen to them. When I pray for them, I ask God to keep them safe and healthy. I pray they will grow up to love and serve the Lord. *I do not know what God has called them to do.* Each one has a place in God’s plan, but I do not know how that will work itself out in the years to come. It is unlikely I will live long enough to see everything God has in store for them. That means I pray for them based on the promises of God, leaving the outworking of the details in his hands.

I look at Violet and I do not know all that God has for her. At this tender moment in her life (she is barely a year old), she does not know either.

But Christ knew his destiny from the very beginning. He came to do God's will.

Parents often have certain plans for their children. A farmer may hope his sons take over his farm someday. A business owner may dream that his sons and daughters will join him in his business when they are old enough. Very often, parents hope their children will attend a certain college and follow in their steps. These hopes, while understandable, are nothing more than that—the hopes of parents who dream good things for their children.

But those dreams sometimes do not come to pass.
Children often go their own way.
They choose a different school.
They choose a different career.
They aren't interested in the family business.

Christ was not like that. *Even as an infant, he had come for a purpose.* Knowing that it would mean his bloody death on the cross, he said, "I have come to do your will, God!"

The babe in the manger would become the dying Savior—and he came anyway.
This is the great miracle of Christmas.

*Lord Jesus, you knew what was ahead—and you came anyway! By your obedience you purchased my salvation.
Grant me a holy desire to do your will today. Amen.*

December 4



To Save Us from Ourselves

**“Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth!
For I am God, and there is no other”** (Isaiah 45:22).

This quote from Tim Keller caught my eye:

“Christmas is the end of thinking you are better than someone else, because Christmas is telling you that you could never get to heaven on your own. God had to come to you. It is telling you that people who are saved are not those who have arisen through their own ability to be what God wants them to be. Salvation comes to those who admit how weak they are.” (From [Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus.](#))

“Christmas is the end of thinking you are better than someone else.” *That might make a good banner to hang over the front door of every church.* At least it would serve up a dollop of humility every time we passed under the banner. Those of us who believe in Jesus aren’t any better than anyone else. Sometimes we seem like we’re worse than a lot of people, but that’s not the point.

God came down to us.

That's the point.

I think that's what Tim Keller was driving at when he said "Christmas means the end of thinking you are better than someone else," because you're not and I'm not. *We're all in the same boat, and apart from the grace of God, we're all going down together.* It is a big advance spiritually to be able to say, "I am a sinner too." As long as we pretend we're okay, or as long as we blame others, or as long as we make excuses for our bad behavior, we are still living in the darkness of denial.

If you ever visit the Holy Land, one of the sites you will visit is the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The church was built over the reputed spot where Mary gave birth to Jesus. To get inside, you first walk across a broad plaza and then come to a very small entrance. In fact, it's so small you have to duck down low to get inside. The entrance is deliberately made low because several centuries ago the local big shots liked to ride their horses right into the sanctuary. The priests felt that was inappropriate so they lowered the entrance to force the great men to dismount before entering the church.

The same is true of salvation. If you want to go to heaven, you've got to get off your high horse. Until you do, you'll never be saved.

God of Grace, turn our hearts away from all self-trust so that we will look to you alone. When we start thinking too highly of ourselves, remind us again that every breath we take is a gift from you. Amen.

December 5



*To Bring a Sword
on the Earth*

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34).

The cross stands as a silent sentinel proclaiming that you have to come God’s way – or you won’t come at all. Many people cling to the filthy rags of their own righteousness and then wonder why God won’t take them in. The cross stands in judgment over the sinful pride of the human race. Just as Christ was stripped of his robe before he died, even so we must be stripped of ours.

When Christ died, he didn’t die alone. Two thieves died with him. We often focus on the thief who cried out, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.” We know that man was saved because Jesus told him, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). But there was another man hanging beside Jesus. He cursed and swore and blasphemed the Son of God. He died as he had lived, a wretched sinner, unforgiven.

One thief was saved – that none would despair.

One thief was lost – that none would presume.

The cross that saved the one doomed the other. Jesus spoke of this truth when he declared, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34). These words shatter the popular notion that Jesus came to make us feel better about ourselves. The exact opposite would be closer to reality. Jesus is the great divider of humanity. He came to turn a man against his father and a daughter against her mother (Matthew 10:35). As hard as those words sound, they come from the lips of Jesus himself. We dare not ignore them or water them down. The cross judges the world—and every one of us individually—by confronting us with our sin, calling us to repentance, and challenging us to a higher allegiance than anything we have known before. And then to top it off, Jesus calls us to “take up the cross” and follow him. Those who will not do it are not worthy of him (Matthew 10:38). These are strong and even troubling words. Most of us will spend a lifetime trying to understand what they mean. Those who choose the way of the cross, though it is filled with pain and difficulty, will save their lives. Those who reject the way of the cross will lose all they have lived for.

Jesus calls us from the cross and he calls us to the cross. Those who will not heed his call will hate him all the more. And they stand condemned by the very cross that would have saved them.

*Lord Jesus, may I never be ashamed to follow you
even when the road leads to a cross. Amen.*

December 6



*To Become Poor
for Our Sake*

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Though he was rich in eternity, he became poor in time. He left heaven for a remote village in a forgotten province, to join a despised race. He left to be born of an obscure teenage peasant girl, in a stable, wrapped in rags, placed in a feeding trough instead of a crib.

This much we all know. But notice the verb—He *became* poor. Not, He *was made* poor. That’s what happens to us. We are *made poor* by circumstances. But of his own free will, he became poor. That’s something we would never do. He voluntarily gave up the riches of heaven for the poverty of earth. *He who was richer than any man has ever been gave it up freely and became poorer than any man has ever been.*

We understand riches. And we understand poverty. But to

choose poverty is beyond us and something we would never do. *But that is the heart of the gospel.* The richest person in the universe, of his own free will, became poorer than the poor.

Theologians also have a word for this. They call it the incarnation. The idea comes from John 1:14 which says, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The phrase “became flesh” has the idea of God wrapping himself in human flesh.

God himself came down and entered the human race. *He became poor like us so that forever we would hear him saying, “I love you.”* We wouldn’t have done it that way. We’d schedule a press conference, call the TV stations, hire a press agent, have a parade, call in the dignitaries, sell tickets, and make a big deal so all the world could see. We would take the Madison Avenue approach.

But that’s not God’s way. Read the New Testament again. Instead of flash and splash, there is a frightened father, an exhausted mother, a stable, swaddling clothes, and a feeding trough. There he is, ignored by the mighty and powerful—the Deity wrapped in rags. Immanuel—God with us.

It’s so simple you know it must be true. Only God would have done it that way.

What an amazing God you are! You came all the way to the bottom because that’s where we were. Now we are better off than the richest man in the world because we know you. Amen.

December 7



To Guide Us into the Way of Peace

“To guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:79).

I received an email from a friend whose husband died a few years ago. Left alone to raise her children, she has persevered against all odds and struggled to keep her family together and to keep her faith strong. *I would say she has done a magnificent job but it has not been easy.* Not long ago she faced a debilitating health issue that threatened to set her aside for a period of time. She spoke of the lack of energy she felt and the times of discouragement. Then she told what the Lord had done for her:

The special blessings and gifts that I see God provide each day fill me with joy. This has been hard, and I’ve had to put myself on the bench from my normal responsibilities. God gave me an illness that causes me to daily see his provision and sufficiency to provide. He turned my fear upside down and provided joy.

When we think of guidance, we tend to focus on the decisions

of life. Should I get married? Is this the right job for me? Does God want me to be a missionary? Which college should I attend? *But the guidance Christ provides goes far beyond the usual questions we ask.* He guides us through the darkest moments of life, taking us by the hand, giving us strength to face the most difficult circumstances, and even giving us joy when we would otherwise build a condo in the valley of despair. The peace Jesus brings is the famed “peace that passes all understanding.” The believer has something the world doesn’t have, can’t buy, can’t duplicate, and can never take away.

I just noticed a phrase that made me smile. “He turned my fear upside down.” I love that! *That’s what happens when Christ comes into a life and makes it his own.* Joy, someone said, is the flag flown from the castle of the heart when the King is in residence there. My friend, having lost her husband (though she will surely see him again), having faced many challenges, and even now dealing with physical weakness, has discovered supernatural joy. There is only one explanation: Christ has guided her feet in the path of peace.

Christmas is only a few days away. It strikes me that we have a wonderful opportunity to set our hearts right. Christmas is not about snow and candy canes and stockings by the chimney. *Christmas is about transcendent truth; God has at last visited his people.* All the rest is window dressing.

Good news! The Visitor from heaven is here at last. Will you drop everything and welcome him into your heart? Or are you too busy this year to be bothered with Jesus?

Good news! The light of heaven has come to earth. Will you open your eyes to see it?

Good news! Bethlehem's Babe is the light of the world. Will you let him turn your fear upside down?

Lord Jesus, you have turned our fear upside down and replaced it with joy. May the challenges we face today lead us to say "yes" to your love. Amen.

December 8



To Upend the Human Condition

“He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate” (Luke 1:52). The coming of Christ brings about a great reversal of fortune in society. The proud are brought low and the humble are lifted up.

What men call luck, Mary calls the work of God. When someone loses it all, we talk about bad luck. When someone hits the jackpot, we say he had good luck. Not Mary. She understands that behind the faceless mystery called luck stands God himself. He lifts up, and no one can bring down. He brings down, and no one can lift up again.

As John Calvin says, the princes of the world don't understand this. They grow insolent, fat, lazy, and greedy. They indulge in luxury, swell with pride, and grow intoxicated with power. They forget that all they have comes from God. To quote Calvin exactly, “If the Lord cannot tolerate such ingratitude, we should not be surprised.”

By raising the lowly to power, God triumphs over the world.

When God wanted to send his Son into the world, he picked the most unlikely girl he could find to be the mother. He picked a forgotten province in the Roman Empire. He arranged for his Son to become a part of the hated Jewish race. Then he found the most unlikely hometown and arranged for his Son to be born in a stable and take his first nap in a feeding trough.

Jesus was born that way in order to show us how God does business. He doesn't do business with the proud. He doesn't run with the rulers of the world. He doesn't side with the rich. God is at home with the humble, the tired, the weak, and the lowly of this world. He does business with those who fear his name.

We sometimes say, "God helps those who help themselves," but that's not found in the Bible. It would be more accurate to say God helps those who can't help themselves, and aren't ashamed to admit it.

Christmas shows us that when God wants to save the world, he starts in a manger.

O God, lead us again to the place where Mary laid her child so we may know that you choose the weak things of the world to confound the mighty. Amen.

December 9



To Give Us Adoption as Sons

“When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Galatians 4:4-5).

These verses tell us Christ came to redeem us and to adopt us into God’s family. To redeem means to set free from slavery by the payment of a price. The word comes from the slave markets of the first century. You redeemed a slave by paying the purchase price and then setting him free.

Now suppose that in addition to freeing that slave, you also said to him, “Come with me to my home and live with me. I want you to legally join my family, take my name, and have an equal share in my inheritance.”

As amazing as it sounds, that’s what God did for us the moment we trusted Christ. He set us free (redeemed us) from the slavery of sin with the purchase price of the blood of Christ. Then he brought us into his family and gave us “full rights” as his own

children.

The concept of “full rights” means no matter how badly we may have sinned before conversion, there are no second-class children in God’s family. God has no stepchildren.

In Jewish culture, young boys are considered men by going through a ritual called a Bar Mitzvah. You might say when we come to Christ, we are “Bar Mitzvahed” into God’s family. We come in as full members of the family with rights and privileges equal to those who have been there for 40 or 50 years. We can pray and claim God’s promises on the same basis as everyone else.

Let’s suppose one of my three sons does something wrong and later feels bad about it. So he comes to me and says, “Dad, I’m very sorry for what I did and I’m going to try to do better in the future. I’m going to try to be more of a son to you from now on.” When I hear those words, I’ll say something like this, “Son, I love you and I’m glad you feel bad about what you did, and I know you want to do better in the future. I want you to know that no matter what you do, you could never be ‘more of a son’ to me than you are right now. Being my son has nothing to do with what you do or don’t do. You are my son by virtue of being a part of my family. Nothing you do can ever change that fact.”

The same is true in our relationship with God. *Our standing isn’t based on our performance.* That’s good news because we all fail sooner or later. Our standing is based on God’s grace. It doesn’t depend on us. Once a child of God, always a child of God. Our standing is secure because it is not based on our performance. It is based on Christ.

Poet Robert Frost defined home as “the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in.” God is our true Heavenly Father because he chose to add us to his family. Because of adoption, when we go to him, he always opens the door and says, “Welcome home, my child. This is your home forever.”

*Our great God, when we are tempted to doubt,
remind us that our standing with you does not depend
on our performance but on your grace. Amen.*

December 10



To Sprinkle Many Nations

“So shall he sprinkle many nations” (Isaiah 52:15).

The word “sprinkle” speaks of the purifying power of the blood of Christ. In this context, it means the effects of his death have no national limits. Though he was a Jew dying on a Roman cross, because he was also the Son of God, his bloody sacrifice provides cleansing and healing for many nations.

Not just for Israel.

Not just for the Jews.

Not just for the Romans.

Not just for the Greeks.

But for every nation on earth.

Pick up a globe and spin it in your hands. When it stops, let your finger fall at random anywhere on the globe. What nation did you land on?

Malaysia?

Bolivia?
Ukraine?
Mozambique?
Turkmenistan?
Sierra Leone?
Tunisia?
Latvia?

A few months ago Marlene and I attended a conference aimed at reaching children with the Good News of Jesus. The leaders asked for special prayer that they might someday be able to minister in North Korea. They regard it as the most difficult nation on earth for gospel ministry. Believers in South Korea have at times launched “gospel balloons” that will float into North Korea and hopefully be recovered by someone who will read the gospel literature attached to the balloon. Just reading the literature would be a dangerous proposition for anyone in North Korea. While we were at the meeting, the news broke that North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jung-un had ordered the execution of 33 Christians who worked with a South Korean missionary and helped establish underground churches. Meanwhile, prayers go forward for the day when North Korea will be open to the gospel.

Why do we pray that way?

Isaiah 52:15 gives us the answer. *Christ died so that his purifying blood might be sprinkled on many nations.* That certainly includes North Korea just as it included the pagan Roman Empire of the first century.

As Christmas draws near, let us remember that Christ did not come for one ethnic group or one nation or one language. He

came to be the Savior of the whole world.

*Forgive us, Lord, for doubting your power for we know
you can reach beyond the barriers men erect to keep
you out. May we not stop until everyone, everywhere
has heard the Good News of Jesus. Amen.*

December 11



*To Silence the Kings
of the Earth*

**“King shall shut their mouths because
of him”** (Isaiah 52:15).

This verse describes the reaction of the kings of the earth when they finally stand before Christ at his Second Coming. *All the jabbering and boastful talk will come to an end.* The majestic presence of the King of Kings will “shut the mouths” of all earthly kings.

When Christ came the first time, the Magi (the “kings” from the East), brought gifts for the newborn “King of the Jews.” They brought gold because he was a king, frankincense because he was a priest, and myrrh because he was born to die for the sins of the world. Those “kings” bowed in wonder. In the days to come all the kings of the earth will bow before the Lord Jesus Christ, and they will be silent before the victorious Son of God.

When he came the first time, they laughed at him. They didn’t think a true king would be born in a stable or come from a

backwater village like Nazareth. They were offended that he wasn't a front-runner so they called him a "friend of tax collectors and sinners."

They didn't mean it as a compliment. They hated him, rejected him, and eventually crucified him. The religious leaders teamed up with the political leaders to nail him to the cross.

"Now we're done with him," they said.
Or so they thought.

But much to their astonishment, he wouldn't stay dead. He rose from the grave, rallied his disciples, gave them their marching orders, and then he returned to his Father in heaven. Meanwhile his followers began to spread the news, "He's alive!"

Two thousand years have come and gone and still the flame spreads to every corner of the earth. Not even some crazed tyrant can stop Christians from sharing their faith. The leader of North Korea can kill 33 Christians and 33 more will arise to take their place. And 33 after that. And 33 more. So it has ever been for the followers of Jesus.

A day is coming when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord (see Philippians 2:9-11).

If you think the kings are shocked now, just wait for that day!

God, thank you for reminding me that the kings of this earth are not the final authority. They will someday bow at the name of Jesus. May I not wait for some future day but bow before him this very day in worship and adoration. Amen.

December 12



*To Be a Root Out
of Dry Ground*

**“He grew up before him like a young plant, and
like a root out of dry ground” (Isaiah 53:2).**

Jesus was not born in Rome.
He wasn't even born in Jerusalem.

When God decided to enter the world, he came in a most unlikely way. He came not as a conqueror or a world leader but as a helpless little baby, born in a stable, in the little village of Bethlehem.

Years later his critics dismissed him by asking, “Is this not the carpenter's son?” (Matthew 13:55)

It wasn't a compliment.
They meant it as a slur.

These were people from his hometown of Nazareth.
They had seen him grow up.
They knew Mary and Joseph.

They knew his brothers.

They said, “Who does Jesus think he is?”

That’s not fair, but that’s life in small towns. It’s not always negative, but sometimes it is. When people decide you come from the wrong side of the tracks, that judgment tends to stay with you forever.

So it was with Jesus.

The people who knew him best (or thought they did) couldn’t take him seriously.

“Where does he get off trying to teach us anything? He’s Joseph’s son.”

He was a root out of dry ground, meaning he didn’t come from a promising background. A root out of dry ground is like a plant growing in the arid regions of West Texas. Lots of dust, very little water. A little shoot pokes its way out of the ground, but it won’t last because there isn’t any water to sustain it.

Jesus wasn’t born to royalty.

He didn’t have a blue blood heritage.

Sometimes we look at someone and say, “He’s an average kind of guy.” That’s exactly what the leaders said about Jesus. *They didn’t see any reason to take him seriously, so they didn’t.* He didn’t come with the usual marks of greatness so the rulers completely misunderstood him and his mission on the earth.

Do not make the same mistake the Jewish leaders made so long ago.

Do not put Jesus in a man-made box.

Do not demand that he meet your expectations.

Christ has come!

God has revealed his mighty arm of salvation.

Will you believe the Good News?

O God, the world still misunderstands your Son. We long for the day when Jesus will reign over all the earth. Until then, help us to live in hope that better days are coming. Amen.

December 13



To Look Just Like Us

“He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:2).

For 2000 years people have wondered what Jesus looked like. Artists in every era have painted Jesus as they imagined him to be. Most of those paintings tell us more about the artist than they do about Jesus. Perhaps that is inevitable since the gospel writers tell us nothing at all about Jesus’ physical appearance. We know he was Jewish and raised in the Middle East, and we know he grew up in a workingman’s home. But that doesn’t tell us anything about his height, his weight, the color of his eyes, the color of his hair, or anything about his distinctive features. Children in North America usually see pictures of a Jesus who is taller than his disciples, with long flowing hair, light skin, and dark brown eyes.

In the movies, Jesus often sounds British.

I don’t say that to be critical because you have to start somewhere if you’re going to paint a picture or make a movie. You can’t have Jesus as a shapeless ghost. But it is typically human to move from the known to the unknown. We start with what we know—our own race, our own culture, our own language,

our own ideal physical specimen—and from that we craft the unknown. So it is no surprise that in various cultures around the world, Jesus often looks like people within those various cultures.

A Chinese Christ.

A Brazilian Christ.

A Haitian Christ.

A Filipino Christ.

A Norwegian Christ.

In American churches, Jesus often looks very American. Most of us have seen Warner Sallman's famous painting called [**Head of Christ**](#). This is what millions of children think Jesus really looks like. He has long flowing hair, a nicely trimmed beard, chiseled features, piercing eyes, with a soft glowing light that seems to radiate from his face. The overall effect speaks of reverence, holiness and power, all of it mixed with love and compassion that says to the onlooker, "You can trust me."

I have no quarrel with the way Jesus has been portrayed across the centuries, so long as we remember no one knows what he really looked like. Isaiah 53:2 gives us the only meaningful hint.

In most Hollywood productions, Jesus stands out from the crowd. But Isaiah makes the opposite point. The people who rejected him did so precisely because he wasn't very impressive.

Though he was the Son of God, he appeared on the earth as an ordinary man.

Though he came from the majesty of heaven, he hid that majesty behind a workingman's face

Charles Wesley captured this idea with these words from [**Hark! The Herald Angels Sing**](#):

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail th'incarnate Deity.

*Lord Jesus, I am glad you came as an ordinary man
so I could relate to you. Thank you for opening my
eyes to trust you as my Lord and Savior. Amen.*

December 14



To Take Our Pain

“Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted” (Isaiah 53:4).

When Isaiah speaks of what Christ has done for us, he does not start with our sin and our guilt. That comes later. *He begins instead with our infirmities.* The text says Christ has “borne” our griefs. It’s a Hebrew word that means to lift up and carry away a heavy load. It was used in Leviticus 16 for the scapegoat who carried away the sins of the nation. That’s the idea here. Jesus came to lift the heavy burden of sadness brought about by our sin and the pain of living in a sinful world. Perhaps you know the famous gospel song that starts this way:

What a friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear.

We have many griefs because we live in a fallen world.
We have many sorrows because we ourselves are fallen people.
We need someone who can bear our grief
when the burden is too heavy for us.

Colin Smith explains it this way:

He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrow. That must include the division in your family, the loss of your job, the death of your husband, and the pain of your past.

In Christ we do not have some far-off God, but in him we find a God who drew near to us, who came to us, who entered our world and became one of us, that he might carry our sorrows for us.

Your pain will not have the last word.
Your sorrows will not last forever.
Jesus has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.

Os Guinness tells the following story in *No God but God*:

In one of their periodic efforts to eradicate religious belief in the Soviet Union, the Communist Party sent KGB agents to the nation's churches on a Sunday morning. One agent was struck by the deep devotion of an elderly woman who was kissing the feet of a life-size carving of Christ on the cross.

"Babushka [Grandmother]," he said. "Are you also prepared to kiss the feet of the beloved general secretary of our great Communist Party?"

"Why, of course," came the immediate reply. "But only if you crucify him first."

No other God has wounds.
Where else can you find a Savior like this?

My Lord, you know how hard it is on earth because you were here once before. I am glad your shoulders are strong enough to bear all my burdens today. Amen.

December 15



To Take Our Punishment

“But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).

“He was pierced” – as with a spear.

“He was crushed” – pulverized, broken, ground to pieces.

“Upon him was the chastisement”— beaten with a whip.

“By his wounds” – His body cut, bruised, his skin flayed.

People don't always understand that our Lord Jesus died in terrible pain. Consider what happened between 1 AM when he was arrested and 3 PM when he died:

Arrested in the middle of the night.

Slapped.

Pushed around.

Mocked.

Slapped again.

Crowned with thorns that went into his scalp.

Scourged with a large strap studded with bits of bone and stone and metal.

His beard ripped out.

Beaten again and again.
Forced to carry his own cross.
Nails driven through his hands and feet.
Crucified.

Jesus did not fail in what he came to do.
He perfectly fulfilled the Father's will.

As a result, we have peace with God. The word means wholeness, health, the absence of war, and safety. In a messed-up world filled with broken people and broken promises, we have peace through Christ that passes all human understanding.

We are healed. We are healed from our guilt, our hatred, our doubt, and healed from our shame. Through Christ broken people are put back together again.

He took our sin, bore our pain, and through his death on the cross, he healed us from the inside out so that we now live in peace.

My Lord, nothing I do will ever compare with what you have done for me. Help me to make my life one great "Thank you" in return. Amen.

December 16



To Take Our Place

**“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—
every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid
on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6).**

Someone has said that Isaiah 53:6 is the “John 3:16 of the Old Testament” because it makes the way of salvation so clear that we cannot miss it.

Note that “all” is the first and the last word of verse 6.

We have all sinned.

We have all gone astray.

We have all missed the mark.

We have all turned to our own way.

We’re all in the same boat, and the boat is going down.
If God doesn’t do something, we’re all going to die.

At this point we encounter the great,
glorious news of the gospel.
God has done something!

He could have looked at the mess we made and said, “They

deserve it. They messed up. Now let them face the consequences.”
If God had said that, he would be 100% justified. God was under no obligation to rescue us when we wandered astray.

We said, “Leave me alone!”

But God said, “I can’t do that.”

“And the Lord has laid *on him*.” That’s Jesus! That’s the great Servant of the Lord who came from heaven on a divine rescue mission.

God laid our sins on Jesus.

That’s the doctrine of substitution.

That’s the heart of the gospel.

He took my place when he died.

God laid my sins on him.

When President Dwight Eisenhower was hospitalized for the final time before he died, Billy Graham paid him a visit. At one point President Eisenhower asked, “Can an old sinner like me ever go to heaven?” Billy Graham assured him that even “old sinners” can go to heaven by trusting in Jesus. But there is good news for “old sinners,” “young sinners,” “big sinners,” “small sinners,” and everyone in between. *Jesus paid the price in full so that you can go to heaven.* It doesn’t matter who you are or what you’ve done or how bad your record might be. If you know that you are a sinner, you can be saved.

We can be sure because the Lord has laid on him the iniquities of us all.

Thank you, Heavenly Father, for not giving up on us when we sinned against you. Thank you for Jesus whose death paid in full the price of our salvation. Amen.

December 17



To Establish an Unshakable Kingdom

**“Let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom
that cannot be shaken”** (Hebrews 12:28).

Everything of this world is shakable. Buildings crumble into dust, companies declare bankruptcy, our degrees fade into illegibility, our houses age and creak and crumble, our cars rust out, and worst of all, our bodies eventually wear out. *But the kingdom of God lasts forever.* When the angel Gabriel came to Mary, he said that she would give birth to a Son who would “rule over the house of his father Jacob, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:33).

God desires to establish a kingdom on earth that will last forever. That kingdom will be made up of men and women who have decided to live by God’s eternal values. Therefore, the whole human race may be divided into two groups—those who decide to live by earthly values and those who decide to live by kingdom values. The difference is this: living by earthly values produces earthly rewards that pay off quicker and disappear faster; living by kingdom values produces kingdom rewards.

They don't usually come as quickly, but they last forever.

You can live for this world or you can live for the kingdom of God. The choice is yours.

Jesus has a kingdom.

He is building it in human hearts around the world.

Someday he will return and visibly reign on the earth.

That kingdom will never end.

There are some men and women who are not like everyone else. They have been gripped with the thought that the kingdom of God is the greatest thing in the world, and that one thought has revolutionized their lives and reoriented their values. Kingdom issues are at stake. That's the only possible explanation for the way they live.

His kingdom will never end. Why would you follow anyone else?

Sovereign Lord, you are the solid rock beneath our feet in our turning world. We trust in you, and we will not be moved. When the kingdoms of this earth have crumbled to dust, your words will still be true. Amen.

December 18



*To Lead Many
Sons to Glory*

“For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering” (Hebrews 2:10).

This verse sums up the whole earthly life of Jesus. He was made “perfect through suffering.” But wasn’t Jesus perfect when he was born in the manger? Didn’t he live a sinless life? Wasn’t his death the death of an innocent man? Yes. He was morally perfect. That is one kind of perfection.

But there is another kind of perfection or completion. It comes only by experience. Jesus entered fully into the sufferings of this world and emerged victorious over them. He was made complete in his experience on the earth by the things he suffered. That is why he is called the “founder” of our salvation. He came and suffered on this sin-cursed planet so that by virtue of his sinless life and death, he might blaze the trail for us back to God.

But the trail leading to the cross is marked with suffering, with tears, with rejection. When you follow Jesus, the road to glory goes by way of the cross.

This explains so much that happens to us. What is God doing in your life and in mine? He is putting us through the Curriculum of Grace in the School of Suffering. School starts the moment we trust Christ and ends the day we die. We pass the test and win our degree by keeping our eyes on Jesus. He's the valedictorian of the class. He never failed a test. He blazed the trail through the School of Suffering so that we could follow in his path.

There is glory at the end of the Christian life, but it only comes by way of suffering. Keep your eyes on Jesus who blazed the trail for us.

Our Father, may we never forget that every trial has a divine purpose. Help us to keep looking to Jesus as he leads us on to glory. Amen.

December 19



To Be One of Us

“He is not ashamed to call them brothers” (Hebrews 2:11).

Suppose a man went outside one night and looked at the stars. Could he know there is a God? If he went to the Grand Canyon and saw its incomparable beauty and then traveled to Yosemite and saw its splendor, if he visited the mighty Niagara Falls, could he be sure there is a God? The answer is yes. If a man looked at nature and saw the intricate design and pattern of creation, he could know for certain this didn't happen by chance. By careful study, a man could conclude there must be a God.

How much could he know about God simply by studying nature? He would know about his wisdom, power, and infinite creative ability. *But no man could discover the love of God simply by studying the bombardier beetle or analyzing the antelope.* He would never know if God cared about him. A God of the stars, moon and sun would be great and powerful, but he would never be personal.

That explains why Jesus came to earth. *Because we share a common humanity with Jesus, he is not ashamed to call us brothers.* God came down to where we live and became one of

us. He didn't shout "I love you," and he didn't mail us a letter we couldn't read. He took on our nature, was born just as we are born, lived as we live, and died as we die. When He says, "I love you," we understand him because in Jesus Christ God has become one of us.

Lord Jesus, you did not hesitate to demote yourself so that you could become our true Brother. Thank you for making the long journey so that one day when our journey is over, we will see you face to face. Amen.

December 20



To Free Us from the Fear of Death

“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery” (Hebrews 2:14-15).

Down deep in the human heart there is a fear of death that Satan uses to keep us enslaved. Don't miss the point. Satan has no power to kill you or anyone else. He can't do anything without God's permission. But he plays upon our fear of death to keep us in the chains of sin. That's why the Bible says the sting of death is sin (1 Corinthians 15:56). When the unsaved die, they die with their sins still upon them, like a heavy burden, a vast weight bearing them down to hell. They die miserable, angry, frustrated, and fearful because they don't know what to do with their sins.

What a difference it makes to die having your sins forgiven. How many times have I heard Christians say when a loved one dies,

“What do people do who don’t know the Lord?” Death is hard enough to face if you are a Christian, but it is intolerable without the Lord. And yet every day countless thousands march into eternity with the leaden weight of sin hanging around their necks.

A friend who watched a loved one die said it succinctly in just two words: “Death stinks.” Yes, it does, which is why the Bible says death is the last enemy that shall be destroyed (1 Corinthians 15:26). Some people claim that death is a “natural” part of life. This is certainly true in the sense that death comes to all of us due to this fallen world. Where sin exists, death is indeed “natural.” But that is only part of the biblical picture. Death reigns because of Adam’s sin (Romans 5:12-14). Now through Jesus Christ we have his infallible Word that “everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:26). Like most pastors I have quoted those verses often during funeral services. I like to do it when the dead person is in the casket right in front of me. After all, that’s when the full impact of Jesus’ words really hits home. Do we believe Jesus or not? John Stott comments that for the Christian, death has become a “trivial episode,” a minor inconvenience and nothing more. If we know Jesus, death is like closing our eyes and one moment later opening them in heaven.

Unbelievers don’t have that privilege nor do they understand our confidence as we enter death’s door. For them death is the end—or so they think. For us it is the next step in our eternal life with God.

Lord Jesus, you are the Lord of Life! Death has no power over you. Because you live, we too shall live. Set us free from fear so that we can live boldly and love freely because nothing can ever separate us from you. Amen.

December 21



To Be a Propitiation for Our Sins

“Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Hebrews 2:17).

You have the birth of Christ and the death of Christ in the same sentence. He was born as a man that he might be made like us. He died as a propitiation for the sins of the people. *To propitiate means to turn away wrath by offering a gift.* When Christ died, he voluntarily took upon himself the wrath of God that was meant for you and me. We know that God is too righteous to overlook sin. Psalm 7:11 says “God is angry with the wicked every day” (KJV). If a man sins, he faces the wrath of God. God cannot wink at sin. *Before I can have peace with God, my sin must be dealt with.* There is no escape from this fact because God is 100% righteous and will not clear the guilty. Any solution to the sin problem must face that fact.

But another Biblical principle tells me God is merciful toward sinners. His mercy means he loves me in spite of my sin.

God so loved the world (John 3:16) that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). Any solution to the sin problem that involves his mercy must also satisfy his righteousness.

What gift can I bring to turn away his wrath?

Money? No, because all the silver and gold comes from him.

Animals? No, because he owns the cattle on a thousand hills.

My possessions? No, because he made the stars.

What can I bring to turn away his wrath? Nothing. God knew that. He knew I didn't have anything to offer, so he offered the gift of his one-and-only Son, Jesus Christ, to die in my place. That's the mercy of God. When Jesus died, his death on the cross was the perfect sacrifice for sin. That satisfied the righteousness of God. His anger was turned away by the offering of his own Son. The Father was propitiated.

In 1863 Charitie Bancroft wrote a hymn called [Before the Throne of God Above](#). Recently it has gained new popularity because it has been set to a Celtic melody. The second verse offers one of the greatest statements of the gospel I have ever heard:

When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look and see him there
Who made an end of all my sin.

Because the sinless Savior died
My sinful soul is counted free.
For God the just is satisfied
To look on him and pardon me.

I can rest my soul on this wonderful fact. God isn't angry at me anymore. Why? Because I've believed in Jesus. I've trusted in what he did on the cross. He took the wrath of God in my place. *Forever and ever God is my Father and I am his Son.* The blood of Jesus has paid the debt and turned away God's righteous wrath against me. That's propitiation.

Lord Jesus, no one could ever take your life from you. You willingly laid it down for us. Because you were forsaken, I am forgiven. Glory to your name forever! Amen.

December 22



To Move into Our Neighborhood

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).

I love the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases the first part of John 1:14, “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.” *For 33 years God moved into our neighborhood, or as some would say, he lived in the ‘hood.’* The NIV says he “made his dwelling among us.” Some translations say that he “pitched his tent among us.” That’s actually very accurate because the Greek word for “made his dwelling” literally means to pitch a tent. It’s the same word used for the Tabernacle in the Old Testament, which was a tent where the glory of God dwelt in the days before the Temple was built in Jerusalem. The Tabernacle was sometimes called the “Tent of Meeting” (Exodus 33:7) because it was the divinely-appointed meeting place between God and man. In the same way—but in a much deeper sense—Jesus is the place where we meet God today.

In the Bible three kinds of people lived in tents—shepherds, sojourners, and soldiers. They lived in tents because they never stayed in one place very long. Jesus lived in the “tent” of his

humanity for 33 years. He too was a shepherd, a sojourner, and a soldier. He came to be the Good Shepherd, he came as a visitor from heaven, and he came as the Captain of our Salvation to defeat the devil once and for all.

Ponder that for a moment. The Almightyness of God moved in a human arm. The love of God now beat in a human heart. The wisdom of God now spoke from human lips. The mercy of God reached forth from human hands. God was always a God of love, but when Christ came to the earth, love was wrapped in human flesh.

He was not invisible nor was he obscure. When you look at Jesus, you see the face of God. In the words of Martin Luther,

He whom the world could not enwrap
Yonder lies in Mary's lap
He is become an infant small
Who by his might upholdeth all.

*Lord Jesus, thank you for moving into our neighborhood.
If you had stayed in heaven, we would never have met you.
You are welcome in my heart and my home today! Amen.*

December 23



*To Save Us From
Our Sins*

“Call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

We desperately need a Savior, don't we? We received a letter from a prisoner in Wisconsin who had read [An Anchor for the Soul](#). The oldest of five children, he came from a single-parent family. Seeking self-esteem and acceptance, he joined a gang as a young man. When he dropped out of school in the ninth grade, he could not read or write. He got into serious trouble when he was 17. He was arrested, tried, and convicted of first-degree murder. Sentenced to life in prison, he has been behind bars for 19 years. This is his comment: “Dr. Pritchard, many had given up on me, but God never did! I was told that I would never amount to anything but God says otherwise. I was told that I would find death in prison but instead I found eternal life.” Investigators recently discovered DNA and other fingerprint evidence that evidently proves he did not commit the crime. He may soon be completely exonerated and released from prison. How does he feel about his 19 years behind bars?

I have been so overwhelmed by the grace and mercy of Christ—I've been given a wonderful peace that surpasses all understanding. I am absolutely convinced that had I not come to prison, my life would have been completely devastated beyond repair. It's now been 19 years of incarceration and these years have been the most refreshing and enlightening years of my life—I am truly blessed beyond words.

Only the grace of God can enable a man to talk like that. That's why Christ came—to be a Savior for everyone who will turn to him.

He is the Savior, he is the Lord, and he is the Christ—the one sent from God. This is the heart of Christmas. God loved us enough to send his Son. Think of it this way:

He didn't send a committee.
He didn't write a book.
He didn't send a substitute.

When God got ready to save the world, he sent the best that he had—his one and only Son. And in sending Jesus, he was really sending himself. This is the stupendous truth of Christmas—Immanuel—God with us.

*Jesus, my Savior and Lord,
I take you to be mine forever! Amen.*

December 24



To Destroy the Works of the Devil

**“The reason the Son of God appeared was to
destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8).**

The word “destroy” doesn’t mean to annihilate, it means to “render powerless.” When Jesus died on the cross, he “pulled the plug” on Satan. In this present age Satan seems to be very powerful, but he cannot do anything without God’s express permission. He is like Samson shorn of his locks, unable to do anything on his own. The day is coming when his utter impotence will be revealed to the universe and those who followed him will discover that they were following a toothless lion.

In 1833 the familiar Christmas carol [God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen](#) was first published in Britain. It became widely known in America in the late 1800s and is still popular today. Many people miss the meaning of the first line because they leave out the comma between “merry” and “gentlemen.” This is not a song about “merry gentlemen,” but rather an exhortation to godly men. It helps to know that the word “merry” originally

meant strong or valiant, as in Robin Hood and his “Merry Men,” meaning his strong, brave men. The word “rest” meant to make. *So the first line really means, “God make you strong and valiant, gentlemen.”* That explains the second line, “Let nothing you dismay.” What is it that makes us strong in the face of the struggles of life and our own repeated failures? “Remember Christ our Savior was born on Christmas Day.” The whole essence of the gospel is in the opening verse.

God rest ye merry, gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay,
Remember Christ our Savior
Was born on Christmas Day;
To save us all from Satan’s power
When we were gone astray.

*O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy;
O tidings of comfort and joy.*

I particularly love the line that explains why Christ came: “to save us all from Satan’s power when we were gone astray.” We have all repeatedly and foolishly gone astray, and we have suffered because of it. Jesus came to save us from Satan’s power that continually pulls us in the wrong direction.

Be encouraged. Christmas is almost here. Things are going to change.

*Deliver us from evil, O Lord, so that our hearts
may truly be merry today. Amen.*

December 25



To Be Our Savior

**“For unto you is born this day in the city of David
a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11).**

Pause for a moment and consider who was speaking and who was being addressed. When the shepherds heard these words from the angel, they must have been flabbergasted. *We forget that shepherds were near the bottom of the social order of ancient Israel.* They were often poor, uneducated, and quite young. Most people would not pick “shepherd” on their Career Preference Form. There were easier ways to make a living in ancient Israel. So when the angel says, “To you is born,” he’s really saying, “Christ came for lowly shepherds.” But what about those theologians in Jerusalem who knew but didn’t care? He came for them too, but they missed it altogether.

When Christ came, his birth was first announced to the outcasts of society. They were the first ones to hear the good news of Christmas. There is a great lesson in this for all of us. Our Lord came for the forgotten people of the earth. Most of the time they are the ones who receive him with the greatest joy. Rich people often have no time for Christ, but the poor welcome him as an honored guest.

Let me now make a simple application. The angel said, “Unto you is born . . . a Savior.” *This is where Christmas becomes intensely personal.* It’s not enough to say abstractly that you believe Christ came. Millions of people say that and are still lost in their sins. It’s not enough to say that Christ came for someone else.

You can never be saved until you say, “Christ came *for me*. He died *for me*. He rose from the dead *for me*.”

He came for you. Do you believe that?

Two thousand years ago God sent a gift wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Jesus is God’s Christmas gift to you. *You will never experience Christmas joy until you personally receive God’s gift—the Lord Jesus Christ.*

A man traveled a great distance for an interview with a distinguished scholar. He was ushered into the man’s study, where he said, “Doctor, I notice that the walls of your study are lined with books from the ceiling to the floor. No doubt you have read them all. I know you have written many yourself. You have traveled extensively, and doubtless you’ve had the privilege of conversing with some of the world’s wisest men. I’ve come a long way to ask you just one question. Tell me, of all you’ve learned, what is the one thing most worth knowing?” Putting his hand on his guest’s shoulder, the scholar replied with emotion in his voice, “My dear sir, of all the things I have learned, only two are really worth knowing. The first is, I am a great sinner, and the second is, Jesus Christ is a great Savior!”

If you know those two things personally, you know the best news in the whole world; a Savior has been born for you, who is Christ the Lord.

We close these Advent devotions with a traditional Christmas benediction:

May you be filled with the wonder of Mary, the obedience of Joseph, the joy of the angels, the eagerness of the shepherds, the determination of the Magi, and the peace of the Christ child.

*Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit
bless you now and forever. Amen.*

We hope you have enjoyed this journey through the Advent season with us!

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