

# Faces

AROUND THE MANGER



— AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL JOURNEY —

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from Keep Believing Ministries.**

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# From Eden to Bethlehem

Christmas didn't start in Bethlehem.

That's when it became real, but Christmas started long before Jesus was born.

This year we're going to take an Advent journey that starts with tragedy in paradise and ends with good news from the manger.

During the Advent season, Christians of all backgrounds and denominations, from every tribe and tongue, young and old, male and female, rich and poor, make this journey together.

This year we're starting in Eden because that's where the story of the Bible begins. Each day we'll meet another one of the "faces around the manger." I'm using that term in a loose sense. Obviously, Eve wasn't there in Bethlehem and neither was Balaam (a strange character, to be sure) or Rahab (whose questionable past is never forgotten in the Bible). But in a deeper sense, Eve and Rahab were there because they were in Jesus' family tree. Balaam was there because he prophesied Christ's coming.

Of all the ways to study the Bible, I find none so encouraging as looking at Bible personalities. If you look long enough, you discover even the best and the worst were just like us, and we're just like them.

Prepare to be encouraged and challenged as you take this Advent journey. By Christmas morning, we'll be in Bethlehem celebrating the birth of our Lord.

One other note. Each day I've added a "musical bonus" with a link to a YouTube video of different Christmas carols. I hope you'll take a few moments to watch the videos because the music reinforces the message of the written devotions.

Thanks for joining us. Now let's go back to a distant land where a catastrophe has ruined a happy place called Eden. Out of the wreckage of the first sin comes the first promise that leads to Jesus.

Stay tuned. Good news is on the way.

December 1

## Eve: The First Promise

**“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed”**  
(Genesis 3:15).

It's a long way from Eden to Bethlehem.

Eve paid a heavy price for her part in the first sin. After the serpent had deceived her, she ate the fruit and gave some to Adam. It all happened so fast. She ate, he ate, they were naked and ashamed, and the Lord pronounced judgment. They were cast out of the Garden, forbidden to return by an angel with a flaming sword. Robert Frost wrote about this in one of his most famous poems:

Nature's first green is gold,  
Her hardest hue to hold.  
Her early leaf's a flower;  
But only so an hour.  
Then leaf subsides to leaf.  
So Eden sank to grief,  
So dawn goes down to day.  
Nothing gold can stay.

Did you catch the biblical allusion? “So Eden sank to grief.” In just five words he described what happened to the human race when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. Sin entered. Death became our destiny. Sadness invaded the human DNA. Pain moved next door.

As part of the judgment, God promised continual strife that started in Eden and shows no signs of ending, thousands of years later.

Genesis 3:15 is the first promise given after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. It is also the first promise of redemption. *Everything else in the Bible flows from Genesis 3:15.* As the acorn contains the mighty oak, so these words contain the entire plan of salvation. The great English preacher Charles Simeon called this verse “the sum and summary of the whole Bible.”

Although you may not see it at first glance, Christ is in this verse. He is the ultimate Seed of the Woman who would one day come to crush the serpent's ugly head. His “heel” would be bruised on the cross. This verse predicts Jesus would win the victory over Satan but would himself be

wounded at the same time.

Beginning with Genesis 3:15, there is now a fundamental division in the human race. Francis Schaeffer speaks of “two humanities” that arise after the Fall:

From this time on in the flow of history there are two humanities. The one humanity says there is no God, or it makes God in its own imagination, or it tries to come to God in its own way. The other humanity comes to the true God in God’s way. There is no neutral ground (*Genesis in Time and Space*, p. 115).

The “seed of the woman” and the “seed of the serpent” have opposed each other continuously across the centuries. The struggle continues to this present hour.

Jesus didn’t come in the usual way; he entered the world through a virgin birth. *No one before or since ever entered the world as he did.* He is the ultimate “seed of the woman” since no man was involved in his conception.

When God wanted to save the world, he didn’t send a committee; he sent his Son.  
When God wanted to say, “I love you,” he wrapped his love note in swaddling clothes.  
When God wanted to crush Satan, he started in a stable in Bethlehem.

Even in Eden, God was planning for Christmas. He was thinking of you before you were born because he knew one day you would need a Savior.

As we begin our Advent journey, let’s remember Christ came in fulfillment of a promise made amid the wreckage caused by Adam and Eve. They sinned, and we suffer the consequences. Our sin may be great, but God’s grace is greater than our sin.

Sin, sacrifice, salvation. Jesus came because of our *sin*. His *sacrifice* paid for our sin. Because of his sacrifice, we receive *salvation*.

Maybe it’s not as far from Eden to Bethlehem as we think.

*Lord Jesus, with your blood you kept the promise God made. Glory to you, our Savior and King. Amen.*

Musical bonus: Here’s a newer Christmas song called [Noel](#), written by Chris Tomlin and featuring Lauren Daigle.

December 2

## Abraham: He Saw My Day

**“Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad”** (John 8:56).

There is more than one way to see something.

We can see with our eyes, or we can see with the eyes of faith. That’s what happened to Abraham on Mount Moriah when he offered his son Isaac to the Lord. We catch a glimpse of this in Genesis 22. Twice in that chapter Abraham hints that he expects somehow, some way, God was going to work things out so Isaac would live. When he saw Moriah in the distance, he gave this instruction to his servants:

**“Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you”** (v. 5).

Did you get that? "We" will come back to you. Not "I" will come back, but "we" will come back. *Abraham believed he and his son would somehow return together.* As they walked along, with Isaac carrying the wood for the sacrifice, the son asked his father, **"Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"** (Genesis 22:7). Abraham's reply has become a synonym for the man of faith speaking faith into a hopeless situation. **"God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son"** (v. 8).

Hebrews 11:19 tells us why Abraham could talk like that. He believed God could raise the dead.

Didn't know how.

Had never seen it happen.

*He reasoned from what he knew about God to what he knew about the situation.* The only thing he could come up with was, "I'm going to put my son to death, and then God will raise him from the dead." That's amazing if you think about it, especially since no one in history had ever been raised from the dead, and this happened 2000 years before Christ.

*It turns out he was partly right about it.* God can raise the dead, a fact proved at the empty tomb outside the walls of Jerusalem. That part was 100% correct. But he was wrong about Isaac dying that day. At the very last second, Abraham saw a ram caught in a thicket, a ram placed there by God, and he offered the ram in place of his son. Thus figuratively he did receive Isaac

back from the dead. In 1636 Rembrandt depicted this dramatic moment in one of his paintings. If you study it closely, you can see the ram just under the angel's arm.

Long before Christ came, God preached the gospel to Abraham. Through the ram caught in the thicket, Abraham "saw" the coming day of salvation Christ would bring. No wonder he was glad!

Take a moment and thank God for Jesus. Remember that Christ came to die for you and me. He paid for our sins on the cross and then defeated death once and for all when he rose from the dead. On this side of Calvary, we know much more than Abraham did. We ought to rejoice too!

*Our Father, may we see Jesus with fresh eyes this Christmas season. Fill us with gladness because our Savior has come and made all things new. Amen.*

Musical bonus: Today's carol got its start in a Latin poem written in A.D. 413. It celebrates the Incarnation and calls on Christians to sing praise to God. If you need a "praise uplift" today, listen to [Of the Father's Love Begotten](#).

December 3

## Moses: A Lamb for the Family

**“Tell the whole community of Israel, ‘In the tenth day of this month they each must take a lamb for themselves according to their families—a lamb for each household” (Exodus 12:3).**

Either the lamb dies, or the firstborn of the family dies.

*The blood must be shed either way.* Suppose you were an Israelite being asked to sacrifice your prized lamb and smear its blood on the door for all the neighbors to see. Would you do it? Or would you be embarrassed by such a thought?

Suppose an Israelite had refused to sacrifice a lamb. His firstborn would have died. Being a Jew could not save on that fateful night. It’s not national origin that matters to God but faith in God’s appointed way of salvation.

In the same way, it is not your religious affiliation that matters to God. It’s not about being Catholic or Baptist or Lutheran or Brethren. It doesn’t have anything to do with your education, your wealth, your status, your achievements, the money you’ve made, the awards you’ve won, and it certainly doesn’t involve how many important people you know.

God wants to know one thing: “Do you have faith that the blood of Jesus can wash away all your sins?” Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). The blood of Jesus cleanses us from every sin (1 John 1:7). *What the Passover lamb represented in the Old Testament, Jesus fulfills in the New Testament.*

That explains a poignant part of the Christmas story. When Simeon took the baby Jesus in his arms and blessed him, he said Jesus would be the cause of the rising and falling of many in Israel--thus indicating that while some would follow him, others would bitterly oppose them. Then he added a special word for Mary: **“A sword will pierce your own soul too”** (Luke 2:35).

From the very beginning, Jesus was marked out as God’s lamb. He was born to die! Although Mary could not then know all the details, from the earliest days she knew suffering lay along the pathway of his life.

Since the lamb must die for the blood to save, Jesus must someday die and his blood must be shed. This is the destiny of the Lamb of God who comes to take away the sin of the world.

Jesus is the Lamb you need. He is God’s Lamb for your sin.



Sleep on, Lamb of God. Snuggle tight to your mother's breast. The road from Bethlehem leads to the Cross.

*Heavenly Father, thank you for providing a way for sinners like us to be saved. By the blood of Jesus we have passed from death to life everlasting. Amen.*

Musical bonus: Andy Williams recorded a Christmas album in 1963. More than a half-century later, his version of [Sweet Little Jesus Boy](#) holds up very well.

December 4

## Jacob: Messiah Will Come from Judah

**"The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his" (Genesis 49:10).**

Here is a little lesson in biblical genealogy.

God had promised Abraham all the world would be blessed through him. That promise passed down to Isaac and then to Jacob. But then a large question appeared. Jacob had 12 sons. Which one would be chosen to carry on the promise?

By rights it should have been Reuben, the firstborn. But he sinned and was passed over. The same is true of Simeon and Levi. When Jacob came to his fourth son Judah, he uttered one of the most amazing prophecies in all the Bible. *For 2000 years Genesis 49:8-12 has been regarded as one of the greatest Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament.* Although Jacob was old and dying, with eyes of faith he saw through the mist to a day when the tribe of Judah would take leadership in Israel. The people of Judah would be lion-like in courage and strength. Their tribe would lead the way; the other 11 tribes would follow.

The scepter (the sign of regal authority) would rest with Judah until "Shiloh" comes. "Shiloh" is either a proper name for the Messiah, or it is a Hebrew contraction meaning "he to whom it (the scepter) belongs." If it is a proper name, then "Shiloh" means "the one who brings peace." That may well be correct, since Isaiah 9:6-7 calls Messiah the "Prince of Peace." If it is a Hebrew contraction, Jacob is prophesying the Messiah will be the rightful ruler of the world. Both thoughts are true, and it is possible both thoughts are intended by the expression "Shiloh."

Here is a simple outline of Jacob's prophecy concerning Judah in Genesis 49:8-12:

- 1. Judah will be the dominant tribe in Israel (v. 8).**
- 2. Judah will be lion-like in courage and strength (v. 9).**
- 3. The Messiah will come from the tribe of Judah (v. 10)**
- 4. His coming brings peace, joy and prosperity (v. 11-12)**

Although Jacob predicts dominance for Judah, this prophecy was not fulfilled for many centuries. Israel's earliest leaders came from other tribes:

Moses from *Levi*  
Joshua from *Ephraim*

Gideon from *Manasseh*  
Samson from *Dan*  
Samuel from *Ephraim*  
Saul from *Benjamin*

But after Saul was rejected, God chose a man from the tribe of Judah to be king. That man was David. Do you recall the first verse of the New Testament? **"The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham"** (Matthew 1:1). You could just as well add "son of Judah, son of Jacob."

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary to announce she had been chosen by God to give birth to the Messiah, these were the words used to describe what he (the Messiah) would accomplish: **"And he will reign over the house of Jacob forever"** (Luke 1:33).

One other note. When the Apostle John tried to describe Jesus Christ in Revelation 5:5, he called him **"the Lion of the tribe of Judah."** That picture of Christ goes all the way back to Genesis 49:10. When our Lord came the first time, he came as **"the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world"** (John 1:29). When he returns to the earth, he will come as **"the Lion of the tribe of Judah."** The story of redemption stretches from the first pages of the Bible to the last pages of the Bible.

When we celebrate Christmas, we don't start at Bethlehem. Since history is His Story, we remember God's plan started in Eden and continues to the end of history.

*Heavenly Father, we thank you that your plan spans the centuries. Help us to believe in Jesus, the great Lamb of God who one day soon will return to earth as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. Amen.*

Musical bonus: Andrew Peterson recorded a musical version of Matthew's genealogy. Enjoy this bluegrass version called [Matthew's Begats](#).

December 5

## **Balaam: A Star from Jacob**

**“A star will rise from Jacob; a scepter will emerge from Israel” (Numbers 24:17).**

Let's begin with the one thing people know about Balaam. He had a talking donkey. You can read about it in Numbers 22:21-30 and 2 Peter 2:16. That by itself is amazing if you think about it.

But there's much more. Balaam was a diviner who claimed to have special knowledge from God. Today we would call him a false prophet because he served the pagan religions. To make this more interesting, he appears on the biblical scene because the King of Moab offered him money if he would pronounce a curse on the Israelites. You can read about that in Numbers 22:1-17. Like all earthly potentates, he thought his money would buy him whatever he wanted. But God intervened and instructed Balaam not to curse Israel.

By the time you get to the New Testament, the “way of Balaam” becomes a synonym for someone who would sell his soul for money (2 Peter 2:15).

I'm summarizing a great deal here, and I hope you'll read Numbers 22-24 because this story illustrates that God can use anyone he chooses, even a false prophet like Balaam. D. L. Moody liked to say that “God can hit a straight lick with a crooked stick.” Balaam proves the point. He was not a godly man, but God used him to pronounce a blessing on Israel. That's where our story takes a fascinating turn. In Numbers 24:17 Balaam delivers the King of Moab a message from the Lord:

**“I see him, but not here and now.  
I perceive him, but far in the distant future.  
A star will rise from Jacob;  
a scepter will emerge from Israel.”**

Balaam didn't know it, but he was talking about Jesus. These words were fulfilled many centuries later when a baby was born in Bethlehem who was called “king of the Jews” (Matthew 2:1-2). That rattled Herod, who thought he was the only “king of the Jews.” The angel Gabriel explained it to Mary this way:

**“He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:33).**

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—his kingdom—will never end.

Here is my final appeal to you. Everyone reading my words has a choice to make. Either you join yourself to the kingdoms of this world that are doomed to fail. Or you join forces with Jesus Christ and follow him as your Savior and Lord.

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

*Sovereign Lord, you are the solid rock beneath our feet. 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.*

*Musical bonus: Today we have a special treat as Francesca Battistelli sings [The First Noel and What Child is This](#).*

December 6

## Rahab: A Harlot in Jesus' Family Tree

**"Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab"** (Matthew 1:5).

Many first-time Bible readers are surprised to learn the New Testament begins with a genealogy (Matthew 1:1-16). They are even more surprised when Rahab shows up on the list.

Most of us know about her. *She is almost always mentioned in the Bible as "Rahab the harlot."* But that's not all. Rahab was also a Canaanite—who were the hated enemies of Israel. Her most exemplary deed was telling a lie. Think about that. A Harlot, a Canaanite, and a liar. You wouldn't think she would have much chance of making the list, but there she is.

You can read about Rahab in Joshua 2 and Joshua 6. Then take a moment to read Matthew 1:1-16. See if you can find Rahab's name on that list. Here's a hint. She's the great-great-grandmother of King David.

It's a great story with many lessons, but we mustn't miss the point that Rahab was a harlot. That was her "trade." The men hid at her house because people would be accustomed to seeing strangers come and go at all hours. We also can't deny the fact Rahab told a lie. Is there anything good we can say about her? Yes! *She was a woman of faith.* You don't have to take my word for it. Hebrews 11:31 says, **"By faith Rahab."** She was a believer! *Rahab is part of Jesus' family tree.* If you know Jesus, one day you will meet her in heaven. And there at last she will be no more Rahab the harlot. She will forever be known as Rahab the child of God.

Many people are intimidated by Jesus Christ. They mentally connect him with a lot of religious paraphernalia—big sanctuaries, stained glass, beautiful choir, pipe organs, formal prayers, and all the rest. When they look at the trappings, it's all very intimidating to them. Jesus seems too good to be true.

This genealogy is in the Bible to let us know he had a background a lot like yours and mine. He called himself "the friend of sinners," and he said he didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. He said, **"The Son of man has come to seek and to save that which is lost"** (Luke 19:10).

No matter what you've done in the past, Jesus can save you. No matter what your past looks like, or your present feels like, no matter where you've been or what you've done, God can give you a fresh start. *The same grace Rahab experienced is now available to you.* I invite you in

Jesus' name to come and be forgiven. He's already made the first move. The next step is up to you.

*Lord Jesus, if you were not the "friend of sinners," we could not be saved. Help us to love the unlovely as you have loved us. Amen.*

Musical bonus: Keith and Kristyn Getty have produced an [exuberant version of God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen](#).

December 7

## Isaiah: The Root of Jesse

**“In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious” (Isaiah 11:10).**

Isaiah referred more to the Holy Spirit than any other Old Testament prophet. In chapter 11 he predicts the fullness of the Holy Spirit will rest on the Messiah, Jesus Christ, the “shoot” growing from the “stump of Jesse.” In those days Assyria had nearly destroyed Judah, cutting it down to the size of a stump. Though Assyria and her allies seemed like a mighty forest, the Lord promised He would one day cut them all down (Isaiah 10:33-34). The Assyrian empire would fall, to be replaced by another one much greater—the worldwide empire of the Messiah.

But where will the Messiah come from? He will be a tiny shoot from the forgotten stump of Jesse (father of David). God promised in 2 Samuel 7 that a descendant of David would rule over the house of Israel forever. Though it seemed unlikely at the time, God’s Ultimate Ruler would indeed come from Judah, from the very line of David. Isaiah predicted Christ would be a “Branch” bearing fruit, that is, a ruler who would prosper and benefit many people. A few verses later Isaiah called him the “Root of Jesse.” Christ is therefore the tender shoot who is also the Root who is also the Branch.

When Paul quoted this verse in Romans 15:12, he said of Jesus, **“In him will the Gentiles hope.”** A young couple felt called to spread the Good News to those who had never heard it. They ended up going to a place so remote that you had to take nine plane flights plus a bus ride plus hike into the mountains to get there. They did it to reach a tribe that had never had a written language. They learned the language, reduced it to writing, and began translating the Bible. As they told the story of creation to their tribal helper, he became very excited. When they spoke of Adam and Eve, he nodded his head because it made sense that God started with just one man and one woman. When they told about how the serpent had tricked Eve into eating the fruit and how Adam ate it also, he was sad. When he heard about the severe penalty for sin, he understood the message. And when he heard about Cain killing Abel, he nodded in agreement because the men of his tribe killed each other. Finally he said, “I know there must be a Redeemer. There must be someone who can help us. Tell me. What is his name?” That’s the question of the ages. The world needs a Redeemer, and we know his name. There is hope in the name of Jesus. He is the light of the world and the Savior of all who trust in him.

When people come to Jesus Christ, they find one thing they can’t get anywhere else--hope. God calls us to be people of hope because his heart is big and includes all the people of the world.



*Loving Lord, make me an agent of hope wherever I go today. Amen.*

Musical bonus: In the spirit of today's devotion, let's listen to [Go Tell It on the Mountain](#) by Pentatonix.

December 8

## Nebuchadnezzar: The Fourth Man in the Furnace

**“But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods” (Daniel 3:25).**

No wonder the king was confused.

You throw three men, bound with ropes, into the furnace.

They don't die.

The ropes burn off, but the men don't burn.

They get up and walk around inside a blazing inferno.

Then a fourth man shows up. What's up with that?

When Nebuchadnezzar looked into the flames, he expected to see the young men roasting to death. Instead, he saw them walking around, unharmed and unbound, and a fourth man walking with them. He called him “a son of the gods,” which is an amazing insight for a pagan king. It's a Babylonian way of saying, “That's the Son of God!”

Who was the fourth man? *I believe it was the Lord Jesus Christ himself.* This is an Old Testament appearance of the Son of God in bodily form. He stepped across the battlements of heaven, walked down the starry staircase, stepped into the blazing furnace and said to the flames, “Cool it!” And they did. That made it very comfortable for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

*I am struck by the fact the Lord Jesus appears only once in this chapter. Where is Jesus in Daniel 3? He is in the furnace waiting for the young men. You can do the math yourself. Outside there were three, inside there were four, and outside there were three again. Jesus never manifests himself, except inside the furnace, at the very moment when they most needed to see him.*

What a lesson this is for all of us. So often we go through life for days and weeks without any consciousness of the Lord's presence with us. But when trouble comes, when the flames lick at our feet, when life tumbles in around us, then we discover Jesus has been by our side the entire time. *It is in the fires of life that we experience the presence of Christ most powerfully.* He is always there, but he makes himself known in the fiery furnace.

Are you in the furnace today? Be encouraged. You are not alone.

*Lord Jesus, when our faith falters, show us your glory! Open our eyes to see you standing by our side. When we are afraid, we will trust in you. Amen.*

Musical bonus: The carol *Child in a Manger* comes from an old Gaelic melody. Even though it is found in many hymnals, I think many people are not familiar with it. Here are the lyrics to the first verse:

Child in the manger, infant of Mary,  
Outcast and Stranger, Lord of us all,  
Child Who inherits all our transgressions,  
All our demerits upon Him fall.

I hope you'll listen carefully as [Sarah Brightman sings \*Child in a Manger\*](#).

December 9

# Hosea: Out of Egypt

**“Out of Egypt I called my son”** (Hosea 11:1; quoted in Matthew 2:15).

When Charles Spurgeon preached on this verse, he began his sermon this way:

“Egypt occupies a very singular position towards Israel. It was often the shelter of the seed of Abraham. Abraham himself went there when there was a famine in the land of his sojourn. To Egypt Joseph was taken that he might escape from the death intended for him by his envious brethren, and become the foster-father of the house of Israel. Into Egypt, as we all well know, went the whole family of Jacob, and there they sojourned in a strange land. There Moses acquired the learning which was so useful to him.”

He points out that while God sometimes sent his children to Egypt to protect them, he always delivered them from Egypt later. So Moses and the children of Israel came “out of Egypt” in the great passage through the Red Sea. They needed Egypt for protection, but they were never meant to stay there forever.

We don’t know how long Jesus and his parents stayed in Egypt, or where they stayed, or how old Jesus was at the time. But those details don’t matter. God protected Jesus by sending him to Egypt at just the right moment to spare his life. One writer called this the “cross-handed” providence of God because a desperate flight to escape Herod turns out to be a great mercy from the Lord. But it would only be seen in reverse.

My favorite definition of faith comes from Philip Yancey: “Faith means believing in advance what will only make sense in reverse.” Many things in this life make no sense to us. We all have deep and personal questions that defy all human answers. We want to know why things happen the way they do and why couldn’t things have happened some other way. It would be wrong to say that faith provides all the answers. It doesn’t. Perhaps in heaven we will fully understand, or in heaven our desire to know will be transformed by our vision of the Lord. By faith we see things that are invisible to others and by faith we believe in advance those things that right now make no sense but one day will make perfect sense because we will view them in reverse.

It’s only as we look back that we say, “I can see why it had to happen that way.” So it is for all of us. God often sends us to “Egypt” to protect us and to prepare us for what is to come.

Do not despair if you feel like you are in “Egypt” today. What seems like a punishment or a detour may turn out to be a great gift from the Lord. When we view our trials through the lens of God’s providence, they turn out to be gifts from heaven. This is true even when our trials seem like a great burden.

God knows what he is doing even when we can’t see it.

*Father, help us to trust you when the way forward seems unclear. Give us faith to take the next step with you even if it seems to lead to Egypt. Amen.*

Musical bonus: Today’s song started as a French carol, but became very popular in America after it was translated into English in the late 1800s. Let’s listen as [David Phelps sings O Holy Night](#).

December 10

## Micah: Born in Bethlehem

**“But you, Bethlehem . . . though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel” (Micah 5:2).**

It was an “on the way” place.

You passed through Bethlehem because you were on the way to or from Jerusalem. Two thousand years ago Bethlehem was indeed a “little town” as described in the familiar Christmas carol by Phillips Brooks. Although well-known as the birthplace of King David, the town itself was home to a few hundred permanent residents. Because it was close to Jerusalem, we can assume the inns and guest rooms were full of pilgrims making their way to and from Jerusalem on their way to various ancestral hometowns to pay the census tax required by Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1-3).

If God had wanted worldly pomp and ceremony, Jesus would have been born in Rome. If he had wanted good standing for his Son, he would have chosen Athens. If he had wanted religious acclaim, he would have chosen Jerusalem. Or he could have chosen Alexandria or Antioch. The Roman Empire was filled with famous cities.

But he chose Bethlehem, a truly out-of-the-way location. Even in Israel, Bethlehem was “least among the clans of Judah.”

Our God is not a frontrunner. He doesn’t need worldly power to accomplish his purposes. When Jesus was born, the world paid no attention to a young couple giving birth in a stable in some tiny village in a backwater province of the Roman Empire. No one noticed the baby wrapped in rags sleeping in a feeding trough.

In such an unlikely way, God moved into our neighborhood and became one of us. God’s ways are not our ways. If you doubt that, take another look at that sleeping baby. He will one day rule the world.

Do not despise small things. God chooses Bethlehem and a Savior is born.

When God starts small, he intends to do something big.

*My Father, you are indeed the God of great surprises. Your ways are higher than my ways, and your thoughts much greater than my imagination. I bow before you and say, "Your will be done!" Amen.*

Musical bonus: After visiting the Holy Land in 1865, Phillips Brooks wrote "O Little Town of Bethlehem." Here's a [beautiful version by Sarah McLachlan](#).

December 11

## Haggai: The Desire of All Nations

**"I will shake all nations, and the Desire of all nations shall come"** (Haggai 2:7).

*This fascinating verse apparently has a double meaning.* It applies first to the rebuilding of the temple by Zerubbabel. God promises the wealth of the nations will flow into the temple in Jerusalem. The rest of the verse promises God will fill the rebuilt temple with his glory.

Christians have traditionally seen in this verse a foreshadowing of the coming of Christ. In John 2:20-21 Jesus referred to his body as "this temple," meaning that in his life, death and resurrection, he would fulfill what the temple pictured through its design, its priesthood, its furniture, and its sacrifices. Jesus is the ultimate "Desire of All Nations" and the radiance of God's glory. *What the temple pictured, Christ fulfilled.*

But that's not all.

When the writer of Hebrews contemplated the end of the age, he quoted Haggai 2:6 and applied it to the coming of Christ:

**At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain** (Hebrews 12:26-27).

That's what God is doing in our day. *He's shaking the nations—literally!—so the world will be ready for the coming of Christ.* As Christ's first advent happened "when the time had fully come" (Galatians 4:4), even so his return to the earth will occur when God has prepared everything just as he promised.

Sometimes God puts us in difficult places so we will turn to Jesus. We received a letter from a prisoner who happened to read my book *An Anchor for the Soul* while he was in solitary confinement. Here's what happened next:

I got into a fight and went into the hole (solitary confinement). So I was trading my food trays for envelopes (a kind of money in jail) and I wound up trading a food tray for a book to read. It's something to do because you're not allowed out of your cell. I looked at the book and thought, Ah, a religious book, I got ripped off. Cuz I never believed in God. I was baptized but I was a baby and it was not by choice. I decided to read the first



little bit to see if I'd like it. Once I read that first prayer and everything before it, it touched me and I flew through the book. You covered every aspect I ever thought about. Thanks to you, I've found God. You're right, once you've hit rock bottom, you can only look up.

People need Jesus but they don't know it.  
People desire Jesus but they don't realize it.

Jesus' appeal is always personal. He never says, "Come and join the church" or "Come and be baptized" or "Come and give money." He simply says, "Come to me."

If you are weary, come and find rest.  
If you are guilty, come and be forgiven.  
If you are far from God, come back home again.

*Lord Jesus, when will we ever learn that nothing in this world can ever fill the God-shaped hole in our hearts? Only you can satisfy. Empty us, O Lord, so that you can fill us with yourself. Amen.*

Musical bonus: The phrase "Desire of Nations" doesn't appear in many hymns, but Charles Wesley included it in the well-known Advent carol "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus." You'll hear it in [this beautiful rendition by Fernando Ortega](#).

December 12

## Malachi: The Sun of Righteousness Will Rise

**“The Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in his wings” (Malachi 4:2).**

The Old Testament ends with one final picture of our Lord.

When he comes, he will “rise” as the sun rises in the sky.

When he comes, he will banish the darkness.

When he comes, his light will fill the world.

But his coming does more than bring light into the darkness. When he comes, he brings the light of God’s righteousness with him. Here is good news for every weary sinner who feels the heavy weight of his own failures. Are you a sinner? If you are honest, you must answer yes. Have you fallen short of the glory of God? You must answer yes. Do you despair of ever pleasing God? Think before you answer! In one of her books, Ruth Graham, the late wife of Billy Graham, writes of a day when she felt overwhelmed by a sense of her own sinfulness:

“I am a weak, lazy, indifferent character; casual when I should be concerned, concerned when I should be carefree; self-indulgent, hypocritical, begging God to help me when I am hardly willing to lift a finger for myself; quarrelsome where I should be silent, silent where I should be outspoken; vacillating, easily distracted and sidetracked.”

Who among us could not say the same thing, multiplied many times over? Then she adds these words:

"What would I do," wrote Chalmers, "if God did not justify the ungodly?" And "What would I do," said Thomas Boston of Scotland, "but for the imputed righteousness?" There it is. All that I am not, He is; all that I am and should not be, He forgives and covers (from *It's My Turn*, pp. 104-105).

In the final Old Testament picture of Christ, we meet a Savior who does for us what we could never do for ourselves. At Bethlehem a baby arrived from heaven “with healing in his wings.”

Here is the doctrine of justification in one simple question: "What would I do if God did not justify the ungodly?" Ask yourself that question. What would you do? Where would you go? Where would you be if God were not willing to justify the ungodly?

But here is the good news of Christmas: Jesus came to save sinners. Are you a sinner? He came for you! Is your heart heavy today? He rises with healing in his wings.

Jesus is all you need for everything you will face today. He heals the brokenhearted, and he sets the captive free.

*Lord Jesus, we come to you just as we are. We come broken and ask you to heal us. We come guilty and ask you to make us right with God. We do not come because we are worthy, but because you are the Sun of Righteousness. Heal us and help us and make us whole again. Amen.*

Musical bonus: I hope you enjoy this rousing version of [Hark! The Herald Angels Sing](#) by Pentatonix.

December 13

## Zechariah: He Doubted God

**“Zechariah said to the angel, ‘How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years’” (Luke 1:18).**

I probably would have asked the same question.

Many times the ways of God are not obvious. If a man and his wife are elderly, if they have had no children, if she is past normal childbearing years, it would be unusual *not* to ask a question.

But Zechariah must learn the hard way, which is exactly how most of us learn the same lesson. When God makes a promise, it is folly and disbelief to wonder how he will keep his word. Faith does not reckon with “how.” *Faith believes and leaves the “how” in the hands of Almighty God.* If we spend too much time trying to figure out “how” God will take care of us, we will talk ourselves into a corner.

In this case, Zechariah talked himself not into a corner but out of talking altogether. He lost his voice and could not speak until the baby was born. This in a way was a great mercy from God. The Lord saved a good man who made a mistake from making an even bigger one. Zechariah’s enforced silence kept him from proceeding from doubt to unbelief. Now he waits and watches and listens, but he does not speak.

Christmas continually reminds us that our ways are not God’s ways. He chooses an older couple, then a younger couple, then the census forces the younger couple to go to Bethlehem where there is no room in the inn, then the angels announce Jesus’ birth to shepherds, then the Wise Men show up, then Herod gets involved, then Joseph and Mary and Jesus make a run for the border to escape Herod’s sinister plot.

Nothing goes the way we would expect it to go if we were planning the birth of God’s Son. But that’s precisely the point. We have our ways, our plans, our ideas, and God has his.

Guess whose plan wins out?

Zechariah regains his voice when John the Baptist is born. All the details fall into place, including the last-minute flight to Egypt, which turns out to fulfill ancient prophecy.

God knows what he is doing, even when the details of life seem to make no sense. He works across the centuries to establish his purposes on the earth. Just because we don't see it on Tuesday at 6:37 AM doesn't mean it's not there.

It just means we don't see it.  
That's all.

*Holy Father, help us to trust you even when we can't understand your plan. Amen.*

Musical bonus: Sometimes called "the echo carol" because of its answering harmonies, *While by My Sheep* is based on a traditional German melody. You can hear the echoing sounds beautifully performed in [this version by the Westminster Choir](#).

December 14

## Elizabeth: Mother of the Forerunner

**“No; he shall be called John” (Luke 1:60).**

That surprised their friends. No one in their family was named John. Everyone assumed this miracle baby would take his father’s name. In our day, we would say Zechariah Senior and Zechariah Junior. Or maybe the first and the second.

But Elizabeth knew better. The angel had specified every detail when he announced the baby’s birth to Zechariah many months earlier:

**“Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John” (Luke 1:13).**

His name will be John, which means, “The Lord has been gracious.” It was a fitting name because God had indeed been gracious to this elderly couple. But it meant more than that. God was about to pour out his grace on the world in the birth of his Son. And their son—this baby named John—would prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.

He was set apart for God before his birth. Everything about his career would say, “This man stands apart. He’s not like the rest of us.” Many years later, he will preach and call the nation to repentance, and he will have upon him the “spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17).

Elizabeth had already seen what happened to her husband because he doubted God. She’s not about to make the same mistake. Faith stands on God’s Word even when others don’t understand. In this case, the neighbors meant well, but their advice would lead in the wrong direction.

Elizabeth affirmed God’s choice.  
Zechariah wrote it on a tablet.  
Suddenly he could speak again.

Fear came on everyone who heard him speak for they knew God had taken his voice away and suddenly given it back. No wonder they asked, “What then will this child be?” Even the neighbors could see God’s hand was on his life.

When we dare to trust God, others may not understand. Venturing in faith means traveling under sealed orders, obeying now and understanding later.

*Lord Jesus, open my eyes to see you, open my ears to hear you, open my heart to follow wherever you lead. Amen.*

Musical bonus: Written at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, Noel Rigney and Gloria Shayne Baker produced a song pleading for peace in a broken world. With that in mind, listen to [Do You Hear What I Hear?](#) by Home Free.

December 15

## John the Baptist: The First to Greet Jesus

**“The baby in my womb leaped for joy”** (Luke 1:44).

That’s what Elizabeth said to Mary when they met.  
Elizabeth’s baby was John the Baptist.  
He evidently started his career early.

We know babies in the womb can see and hear and react to sounds and light. Consider a child in his mother’s womb in the latter stages of pregnancy. Even before birth, he learns to recognize the voice of his father and mother. Marlene has told me that when she was pregnant and sitting in church, when I started to preach, each one of our three boys would recognize my voice from inside the womb and begin to move around as soon as I started my sermon. This happened so regularly that it could not have been by chance. They knew my voice even though they did not know me.

It was the same way with John the Baptist.  
His whole purpose in life was to point people to Jesus.  
He came to prepare the way of the Lord.  
He leaped for joy in his mother’s womb, meaning he did a kind of prenatal cartwheel that all pregnant mothers can understand.

This is more than natural effects at work. God filled Elizabeth with the Spirit, and her baby leaped within her for joy. Why should this surprise us? The God who can conceive Jesus within Mary’s womb can also cause John the Baptist to leap for joy inside Elizabeth’s womb. This miracle would have been a great consolation to Mary in her difficult circumstances. John was unaware of the meaning of his movement, yet his leaping was inspired by the Lord. The Holy Spirit was at work within him even before he was born.

Does Jesus seem far away to you?  
Do you wonder if he understands what you are going through?

This passage shines a light on Christmas because it means our Lord was part of the human race from conception. *He was born on Christmas, but his human life began nine months earlier.* He was truly a Savior who became like us even before he was born.

The Lord we worship was once an embryo in Mary’s womb.



How weak, how frail the Savior appears!  
How great a distance the Son must travel to enter our world!  
He is truly Immanuel—God with us!

*Lord Jesus, may I never take for granted the miracle of your entrance into our world. Amen.*

Musical bonus: *O Come, All Ye Faithful* started as a Latin carol centuries ago. Frederick Oakley gave us the standard English translation in 1841. Let's enjoy this [beautiful rendition by Libera](#).

December 16

## Caesar Augustus: A Tax Plan That Changed the World

The traditional Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke begins this way: “**In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world**” (Luke 2:1). Most of us read those words without giving them a second thought.

Augustus was the greatest Roman emperor, greater even than his granduncle, Julius Caesar. *When he came to Rome it was a city of brick, but when he left it was a city of marble.* Caesar Augustus reigned as emperor for 41 years. During that time he gave to the world the famed *pax romana*, the great Roman Peace that spread across the Mediterranean world.

*His greatest act—the one which would have the most lasting effect on world history—was to call for a census of the empire.* The census would produce a list of property owners for the purpose of collecting taxes. It was a thoroughly secular decree, the kind of thing governments have been doing since the beginning of time.

*Historians tell us it is not likely the whole empire was enrolled at the same time.* Given the slow system of communication in those days, it might have taken several years for the census to be completed in some of the outlying provinces. A lot would depend on the willingness of local rulers to cooperate.

When the time came to take the census in Israel, it is possible a compromise was made to take into account Jewish custom. *The Romans ordinarily enrolled men where they were currently living, but the Jews counted families according to their ancestral hometowns.* That would explain why Joseph and Mary had to return to Bethlehem at a most inconvenient time—in the ninth month of Mary’s pregnancy.

This much is certain. Caesar Augustus never met Joseph or Mary, and he never knew of a certain Jewish baby born in a village outside of Jerusalem. When Augustus died, they mourned as if a god had died. *Little did they know his call for a census had been used by God to bring his Son to the earth.*

So, Merry Christmas, Caesar Augustus. You played a part you never knew and paved the way for the birthday of a King.

*Lord, you hold the mightiest rulers in your hand. Open our eyes to see your Invisible Hand moving through our world today. Amen.*

Musical bonus: On October 30, 2010, the Opera Company of Philadelphia brought together over 650 singers to perform [Handel's Hallelujah Chorus at Macy's in Center City Philadelphia](#). When I watch this video, I want to stand and cheer because the world needs to know that "He shall reign forever and ever."

December 17

# Angels: Whispers of Another World

**“Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God” (Luke 2:13).**

Suddenly!

It means without warning or prior announcement. One moment the angels weren't there, and then they were everywhere. Let me amend that last statement a bit. The word “suddenly” means the angels were nowhere to be seen, and all at once they filled the sky. Some questions come to mind at this point. If we had been there, would we have seen the angels? Could the people in Bethlehem see the angels? Could they be seen in Jerusalem—six miles away? Could the sound of their voices be heard in other places, or did the angels reveal themselves only to the shepherds? We cannot fully answer these questions, but this much is certain: The angels were really there, and the shepherds really did hear them.

It is impossible to miss the supernatural element in the birth of Jesus. Angels pop up all over the Christmas story. An angel tells Mary she will give birth to Jesus. An angel tells Joseph to call his name Jesus. An angel announces the birth of Christ to the shepherds, and then the angelic choir serenades them. An angel warns Mary and Joseph to flee to Egypt. An angel tells them when it's safe to return to Israel.

Sometimes we need a “divine disruption” so God can speak to us. When Christ came to this sad world, God sent the angels to say, “Pay attention. Something big is happening here!”

If our greatest need had been education, God would have sent a teacher.

If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent a banker.

If our greatest need had been advice, God would have sent a counselor.

If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent an entertainer.

But since our greatest need was forgiveness, God sent a Savior. His name is Jesus. He is Christ the Lord, the Son of God who came from heaven to earth.

Are you overcome with worry? Weighed down with fear? Are you afraid for your future? God's answer to your fear is not a theory or a doctrine. God's answer is not a seminar or a book to read.

God's answer is wrapped up in a baby named Jesus. And not just any Jesus, but only the Lord Jesus Christ revealed in the New Testament. He alone is the Lord from heaven. He alone can save us. All that God has for us is wrapped up in his Son. No matter what difficulties we face or the decisions we must make, in the end God leads us back to that simple one-word answer: "Jesus."

In an interview with David Frost on PBS, Billy Graham said he hoped the last word he uttered before dying was simply this: "Jesus." We can't do any better than that.

*Heavenly Father, may faith rise to banish our fear. If God be for us, and if God be with us, who can be against us? Amen.*

Musical bonus: We don't often hear *Angels We Have Heard on High* as a solo. Here's a [contemporary arrangement by Laura Story](#).

December 18

## Herod: A Bully Scared of a Baby

**“Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared”** (Matthew 2:7).

If you're looking for a bad guy in the Christmas story, here he is. There's nothing good to say about Herod.

He lied to the Magi.  
He killed the baby boys of Bethlehem.  
He tried to kill Jesus.

By the time this story takes place, Herod is a sick old man, clinging desperately to his power. History tells us he was a great builder. He reconstructed the temple in Jerusalem, transforming it into a grand edifice. He built up the port city of Caesarea, and he constructed a vast palace for himself.

Along the way he gained a reputation as a man you didn't cross because Herod the Great was a killer. That was his nature. He killed out of spite, and he killed to stay in power. Human life meant nothing to him. The great historian Josephus called him “barbaric,” another writer dubbed him “the malevolent maniac,” yet another named him “the great pervert.”

Perhaps his basic character can best be seen by one incident in the year 7 B.C. Herod is an old man now. He has been in power 41 years. He knows he doesn't have much longer to live. Word comes that his sons are plotting to overthrow him. They are sons by his late wife Mariamne. He orders them put to death by strangling.

No wonder Caesar Augustus said, “It is safer to be Herod's sow than his son.”

This is the man who told the Magi, **“Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him”** (Matthew 2:8). Why didn't Herod go himself? Because he didn't want to come face to face with the King sent from heaven. That would be too much. *He would be forced to decide.* At all costs, he wanted to avoid that. So he didn't go, and he didn't send his soldiers. He sent the Wise Men instead.

You know the rest of the story. The star miraculously reappeared and led them to the exact house. When they found baby Jesus, they bowed down and worshiped him, offering him gold, frankincense and myrrh.

As I read Matthew 2, one fact strikes me above all others. *Everybody involved had the same basic information.* They all knew a baby had been born in Bethlehem, and they all knew who the baby was. Herod knew and tried to kill him; the scribes knew and ignored him; the Wise Men knew and worshiped him.

If information alone could save you, then even Herod would have been saved. But information alone is not enough. It is not what you know, but what you do with what you know that saves you.

If you believe Jesus is the Savior of the world, then do what the Wise Men did. Come with an open heart, bow down before the Lord Jesus and worship him. As the hymn says, "Come and worship. Come and worship. Worship Christ the newborn King."

*Father, give us eyes to see Jesus as he is—a king sleeping in a stable. Give us ears to hear the angels singing. Give us feet like the shepherds to go swiftly to Bethlehem. Give us hands like the Wise Men to offer our best to him. Amen.*

Musical bonus: Here's a vibrant performance of [Angels from the Realms of Glory](#).

December 19

## Scribes: They Should Have Known Better

**“When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. ‘In Bethlehem in Judea,’ they replied” (Matthew 2:4-5).**

Sometimes you can know so much that it would be better not to know anything at all.

If this had been an ancient version of the American Bible Challenge, the scribes would have won first place. They instantly knew the answer to Herod's question.

Who were these chief priests and teachers of the law Herod consulted? *They were the best and brightest minds of the day.* As professional students of the Torah of God, they studied the Old Testament day and night. They knew the Word of God, loved it, revered it, learned it, debated it, studied it, and memorized it. Some of them had memorized the first five books of the Bible in Hebrew. Others had memorized the Psalms in Hebrew.

When Herod asked where the Christ was to be born, immediately the religious leaders knew the answer, in Bethlehem of Judea because that's what the prophet Micah had foretold some 700 years earlier.

They knew it by heart.  
They didn't have to look it up.

To use a modern phrase, they didn't have to use a lifeline. I'm sure one of them must have smiled and said, “I hope the king asks us a hard question next time.”

Education can be a curse if it doesn't lead to action. You can know so much that you end up doing nothing with the knowledge you have. The Messiah was being born six miles away in Bethlehem, and the scribes didn't care enough to go and check it out for themselves.

Charles Spurgeon remarks upon the Jewish leaders this way:

Those who should have been leaders were no leaders; they would not even be followers of that which is good, for they had no heart towards Christ.



I underlined the last phrase because the heart is always the issue. If the heart is not right, no amount of religion can save it. If the heart is not right, no amount of Bible knowledge can make up the difference.

*Religion, even good religion, even Bible-based religion, can deaden the heart and mind.* It's easy to fall into the trap of saying, "I'm Baptist" or "I'm Catholic" or "I'm Lutheran" or "I'm Presbyterian" or "I'm Brethren" or "I'm Church of Christ" or "I'm Episcopalian," as if going to heaven is determined by church affiliation. It's easy for all of us to "play by the rules" of whatever church we attend and keep Christ at arm's length. As long as Christ remains outside of us, all that he did on the cross is of no value to us. When Jesus is just a theory, he can never be our Savior.

The lesson is clear. Don't miss Christ this year! Don't go through this festive season and somehow miss the Son of God.

Don't be like the scribes.  
Be like the shepherds.

Make haste and go to Bethlehem to greet the newborn King!

*Forgive us, Lord, for substituting knowledge for true heart devotion to you. May we grow in our love for you today. Amen.*

Musical Bonus: In 1866 Benjamin Russell Canby composed a song tracing the life of Christ from his birth to his death and resurrection and even to his second coming. Listen as the Collingsworth Family sings [Who is He?](#)

December 20

## Shepherds: Watching in the Fields

**“And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night” (Luke 2:8).**

You never know when God will show up

It happened one night in the fields outside the little village of Bethlehem. Shepherds were near the bottom of the social order of ancient Israel. They were often poor and uneducated, and some were quite young. Not very many people would put “shepherd” on their Career Preference Form. There were easier ways to make a living in ancient Israel. When the angel says, “A Savior has been born to you” (Luke 2:11), he means, “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.

God ordained that shepherds would be 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, and 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.

*The first Noel the angels did say  
Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay;  
In fields where they lay, keeping their sheep,  
On a cold winter's night that was so deep.*

Certainly those shepherds were poor in terms of worldly goods. If they had been rich, they would have hired someone else to watch the sheep. God is not embarrassed to announce the birth of his Son to those the world takes for granted. While the rich slept in Jerusalem, the shepherds saw the angel and heard the good news a Savior had been born. Upon hearing the news, they set out immediately for Bethlehem. And after they saw the baby, they couldn’t stop talking about him. God chose lowly shepherds as the first evangelists.

We need a good dose of that “shepherd spirit” today. We need their openness and their eagerness and their gladness to share the good news Christ has come to the world. Soon enough they would go back to their flocks. Probably they were back in the same field the next night. I wonder if they didn’t sneak a peek at the sky and wonder if the angels would show up again.

Christmas is full of surprises. For the shepherds, the great surprise came while they were tending their sheep. That's what I meant when I said you never know when God will show up.

That's still true today.

*Lord, keep us watching and waiting for you. Give us that "shepherd spirit" to go quickly to Bethlehem and then to tell the world Christ has come. Amen.*

Musical bonus: Today's song challenges us to do what the shepherds did when Christ was born. Here's a lovely performance of [\*Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow by the King's Singers\*](#).

December 21

## Magi: Strangers from a Distant Land

**“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?’” (Matthew 2:1-2).**

A great mystery surrounds the Magi.  
Who are they?  
Where do they come from?

The term “Magi” refers to a special class of priests in the Persian Empire. They had their own religion, their own priesthood, and their own writings. It appears from the book of Daniel that they existed in his day, and it seems Daniel was appointed head over the Magi in the time of King Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 5:11).

They were the professors and philosophers of their day. They were brilliant and highly educated scholars who studied medicine, history, religion and astronomy. They were also trained in what we would call astrology.

These influential leaders served as advisors to the king. It would not be wrong to call them king-makers because they functioned as political advisors to the Persian rulers.

We know the Jews and Persians had intermingled for at least 500 years. The Magi may have been descendants of the “wise men” of Babylon. I believe God used Daniel (while he was in captivity in Babylon), to teach these men about future events, including the birth of the Savior of the world.

It is often said that “wise men still seek him.” That is true, and we should give these Magi all the credit they deserve because they risked a great deal to journey all the way to Jerusalem in search of the “king of the Jews.”

*Jesus stands at the end of life’s road for all of us.* There can be no middle ground. To ignore him is the same as to hate him because you end up without him either way. Perhaps hatred is nobler than casual disinterest because when you hate, you at least must pay attention to the object of your hatred. That very attention may someday lead to a change of heart. To ignore Jesus means to live as if he doesn’t matter at all. But no one can ignore him forever. We all have an appointment with Christ sooner or later.

Christ never turns away from any heart that is open to him. Those who seek him will find him every time.

*Lord Jesus, grant us the zeal of the Wise Men first to find you and then to tell others where they can find you too. Amen.*

Musical bonus: In 1857 John Henry Hopkins wrote a carol based on this story. I hope you enjoy this live performance of [We Three Kings](#) from Royal Albert Hall in London.

December 22

## Simeon: Waiting for Jesus

**“Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ” (Luke 2:25-26).**

If Jesus were born today, would it be any different than it was 2,000 years ago?

We like to think the answer is yes, that we would be ready, that we wouldn’t make the mistake of turning the Son of God away. There would be room in *our* inn, we confidently say. We’d find room, or make room, or maybe we’d throw somebody out of their room, but in any case, we’d be ready if Jesus were born in Chicago or Manila or London or Bangkok.

But is that true? Are we any more prepared for the coming of Christ than they were in Bethlehem? That’s the crucial question.

Can you imagine the scene? Early every morning Simeon goes to the Temple, watching and waiting for the Messiah to come. How would he know him? What should he look for?

Here comes Mary holding the baby in her arms with Joseph by her side. Jesus is only forty days old. *Never was there a more unlikely couple.* He is a poor carpenter from Nazareth, she is a peasant girl carrying a baby boy. They are obviously from the country. They obviously don’t have much money. If you were people-watching, you wouldn’t give them a second glance.

Not educated. Not stylish. Not from the upper-crust. Here they are in cosmopolitan Jerusalem, timidly walking in the Temple courts. When Simeon sees them, he asks his question for the 10,000th time, “Is this the one?” And the Holy Spirit whispers, “Yes.”

Suddenly Simeon’s heart leaps within him. The long days of waiting are finally over. The Lord’s Christ is before him. Here is the One for whom the nation has been waiting. He walks over, introduces himself, and says, “Do you mind if I hold your child?” As Mary gives the infant Jesus to Simeon, the thought hits him, “I am holding the salvation of the world in my arms.”

*He’s the Savior of the whole world.* That includes rich and poor, young and old, black and white, Hispanic and Asian, Jew and Gentile. All people are included in his coming. He didn’t come for a small group; he came for the whole world.

If you feel forgotten, depressed, discouraged, and down on your luck, be of good cheer. Christmas is for you! Whatever sins hold you back this year, Christmas means you can be forgiven, because Jesus came for you.

He's the Messiah of Israel. Do you know him?  
He's the Savior of the World. Do you know him?

It's Christmastime. He came for you. Do you know him?

*Father, we thank you that you didn't leave us alone in our sins. You could have written us off as hopeless. But you sent Jesus to rescue us. Because of him, we are safe now and saved forever. We thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.*

Musical bonus: At the request of a friend who wanted a song for a birthday party, Jester Hairston wrote *Mary's Boy Child*. He composed it in a Calypso rhythm because most of the people at the party were from the West Indies. Here's a [spirited version by Pepper and Salt](#).

December 23

## Joseph: A Very Good Man

**“Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife” (Matthew 1:20).**

Joseph has been rightly called the forgotten man of Christmas. It is natural that most of our attention should focus on Mary since she gave birth to Jesus. *Nowhere in the birth accounts do we have any recorded words of Joseph.* He appears on the stage of history for a few moments and then disappears.

Let me briefly list for you the things we know about Joseph:

–His father was Jacob.

–His family came from Bethlehem in Judea, but he lived in Nazareth in Galilee. That meant Joseph and Mary had to travel about 95 miles to register for the census.

–He is from the royal line of David. The genealogy in Matthew 1 makes that clear.

–He was a carpenter by trade.

–He was a poor man. When he and Mary presented Jesus in the Temple, they brought a turtledove to sacrifice. Jews did that when they could not afford a lamb.

–He was a devout man.

How old was Joseph? We don't know the answer for sure, but many writers agree he was probably a young man and possibly a teenager.

Now Mary turns up pregnant. Joseph only knows one thing for sure. He's not the father. What did he say to her? What did she say to him? Did she tell him about the angel Gabriel? If she did, can you blame him for not believing her?

I think Joseph cried harder that day than he had ever cried in his life.

Matthew 1:24-25 reveal Joseph's finest qualities:



**When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she had given birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.**

Every step he takes testifies to his greatness:

1. By marrying her quickly, he broke Jewish custom, but he protected Mary's reputation. She was pregnant and he wasn't the father, but he married her anyway.
2. By keeping her a virgin until Jesus was born, he protected the miracle of Jesus' conception by the Holy Spirit against slander by unbelievers.
3. By naming the baby he exercised a father's prerogative and thus officially took him into his family as his son.

In these days of confusion, Joseph shows us what a godly man looks like:

He was strong when he could have been weak.  
He was tender when he could have been harsh.  
He was thoughtful when he could have been hasty.  
He was trusting when he could have doubted.

There is one other line of proof about the kind of man Joseph was. When Jesus grew up and began his ministry, he chose one word above all others to describe what God is like. He called him Father.

*Heavenly Father, thank you for choosing Joseph. Grant me the same courage to do right even when I don't fully understand your plan. Amen.*

Musical bonus: Written from Joseph's standpoint, this song reminds us that God's plans continually surprise us. Let's listen together to [Strange Way to Save the World by Rascal Flatts](#).

December 24

## Mary: Believing the Impossible

**“How will this be” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:34).**

This is a perfectly natural question.

Mary is betrothed but not formally married. She has never had sexual relations with any man. How then can she become pregnant and bear a son?

Mary does not doubt the angel’s word, even though it must have sounded incredible. She believed what the angel said. Her only question had to do with how it would happen.

In essence, she says to Gabriel, “All right. I’m willing to do my part, but you need to explain how we’ll handle this one little problem.” That’s real faith. That’s believing the impossible. That’s trusting God when the “facts” argue against it.

*Let's not underestimate what it cost Mary to say Yes to God.* From that moment on, she faced the incredulity of her friends ("Oh Mary, how could you expect us to believe such a bizarre story?"), the scurrilous gossip of the neighborhood, and the whispers of promiscuity that have lasted 2,000 years.

*Mary knew—or would soon realize—that saying Yes to God meant misunderstanding and public shame.* Gone was her pure reputation and with it her dreams of a quiet, happy life in Nazareth.

Mary didn't know the full cost of saying “Yes.” *But having made her decision, she never looked back.* Those two aspects of her life may be the greatest things we can say about her:

1. She believed God when it seemed to be impossible.
2. She never looked back.

The painting "Nativity" by Gari Melchers invites us to look at this familiar scene in a new way. Jesus is born in what appears to be an alley, and Mary looks exhausted while Joseph seems to have the weight of the world on his shoulders. The glow surrounding the baby's face reminds us Jesus came to bring light into the darkness of this world.

Some things we understand and therefore believe. *Christmas is a miracle of another order.* We can think of a thousand other ways God could have done it. But God chose the unusual (a virgin birth) and the unlikely (a baby born in a stable) as his means of visiting our planet. As we

ponder the meaning of it all, our theology leads us to mystery and mystery leads to wonder. At Christmastime, like the Wise Men of old, we are invited to bring our gifts to Bethlehem and welcome God to our world.

*Gracious Lord, we thank you for hard challenges and scary moments because without them, we would never learn to trust you. Amen.*

Musical bonus: Here's a performance of [Mary, Did You Know?](#) with scenes from the TV miniseries *The Bible*.

December 25

# Immanuel: God With Us

**“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)” (Matthew 1:22-23).**

Immanuel.  
God with us.

Jesus has come to earth, the Almighty has entered our world, the infinite has become finite, the eternal has invaded time. Theologians call it the Incarnation—God in human flesh. The Bible calls him Immanuel—God with us.

His birth differs from every other birth in that he voluntarily came in obedience to the Father’s will. That could not be said of you or me. *We were born, but we had no choice in the matter.* I am here by the choices made by my parents. But Jesus “came” according to the plan of God. **“When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son”**(Galatians 4:4). Every detail was minutely planned in the courts of heaven. Nothing happened by chance.

He came from the light into the darkness.  
He came from splendor into squalor.  
He came from purity into a world of sin.  
But still he came!

A generation ago C. S. Lewis put this doctrine in its proper perspective:

The central miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation. They say that God became Man. Every other miracle prepares the way for this, or results from this.

Sometimes we focus on peripheral questions that distract us from the core issues. *We believe God became a man.* This is the central truth of our faith. Christians cannot speak about God without speaking about Jesus because God became a man 2000 years ago. As Lewis says, every other miracle leads to the Incarnation or results from it.

We started this Advent journey amid the wreckage of Eden, as Eve received the first promise of the coming Messiah. Abraham "saw" this day, Moses pointed to it, Balaam predicted it, Rahab showed the forgiveness it brings, Malachi helped us discover the gospel power of Jesus' coming, John the Baptist leaped for joy in Elizabeth’s womb, Herod tried to kill Christmas, the Magi

proved they were truly wise men, and Mary and Joseph believed in God when it surely seemed impossible.

None of this happened by accident. It was all part of God's plan from the beginning.

One truth stands at the center of our faith: *God has come down to us in the person of Jesus.* Now we know what God is like for the Son of Man has made him plain to us.

How far is God willing to go to save you?

He's willing to leave the glories of heaven.  
He's willing to be carried in a virgin's womb.  
He's willing to be born in a stable and wrapped in rags.  
He's willing to be ignored by the world.  
He's willing to become just like you.  
He's willing to shed his blood for you.

How far is God willing to go? You can't even imagine the answer to that question. There is no pit so deep that the love of God is not deeper still. At Christmastime, we do not celebrate the birth of some aloof God who stands afar off. No, we celebrate the birth of Immanuel—God with us.

How far is God willing to go? Whatever pit you're in, God is willing to enter that pit and meet you there. That's what he did 2000 years ago.

God sent a gift wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. *Jesus is God's Christmas gift to you.*

Merry Christmas!  
The happy day is here at last.  
Joy to the world, the Lord is come!

*Heavenly Father, make my heart a manger where the Christ child can be born. Amen.*

Musical bonus: Let's bring our Advent journey to a triumphant conclusion with this performance of [Joy to the World by Celtic Woman](#).

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

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