

LET'S GO
STRAIGHT TO

Bethlehem



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First Steps

Advent is first of all a journey.

We start wherever we are in late November, and by December 25 we end up in Bethlehem.

This is an ancient journey, one first taken by the shepherds who upon hearing the angels announce the Good News that Christ had been born, said to each other, "Let's go straight to Bethlehem" (Luke 2:15 HCSB).

I like the way that sounds.

"Let's go." I'm going and you're going, so let's go together. During the Advent season, Christians of all backgrounds and denominations, Christians from every tribe and tongue, Christians young and old, male and female, rich and poor, we all join together to make this journey once again.

"Straight." No messing around. No detours. No excuses. "We're on our way to see the Savior."

"To Bethlehem." To the "House of Bread" where the Living Bread has come down from heaven. We're coming hungry and thirsty because our journey is long and we are tired. We're coming to worship the Babe in the manger.

This year we will start in Eden and end at Bethlehem, watching as Mary and Joseph put their newborn son to bed in a rough-hewn stone feeding trough.

So if you're ready, let's get started. Wherever you are, you can make this journey with us.

Let's go straight to Bethlehem. Jesus is waiting for us.

December 1

Christmas in Eden

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

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. In the process his “heel” would be bruised on the cross. In short, this verse predicts that Jesus would win the victory over Satan but would himself be wounded at the same time.

As the centuries rolled on, Satan kept winning victories and God kept raising up men and women who would continue the godly line on the earth. *I like to think of this verse as the top of a wide funnel.* When the promise was given, no one could have imagined the coming Jesus Christ. The “seed of the woman” simply meant that he must be a member of the human race. But after the flood the line was narrowed to Noah’s descendants, then later to Shem’s descendants, and later came to rest on one man—Abraham, the father of the nation Israel. Then to his son Isaac, to Isaac’s son Jacob, to Jacob’s son Joseph, and then to Joseph’s son Judah. Centuries later the line was narrowed to the house of David. Finally some nine centuries after that, the line came to rest on the firstborn son of a virgin named Mary. *What started with the whole human race has narrowed to just one man—Jesus Christ.*

He didn’t come in the usual way; he came by means of a virgin birth. *No one before or since ever entered the world as he did.* Thus 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 that one day you would need a Savior.

As we begin our Advent journey, let’s remember that Christ came in fulfillment of a promise made amid the wreckage caused by Adam’s sin. Our sin may be great, but as the promise is greater than the transgression, through Christ’s great sacrifice we have been set free.

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

December 2

The Shoulders of Jesus

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).

I have always been intrigued by a phrase in this famous Christmas verse, "And the government will be on his shoulders." It means something like this: "The weight of the world will be on his shoulders." *This is a profound truth, especially for those of us who feel like we're bearing the full weight of the world on our own shoulders.* Tim Hudson tells a story about George McCauslin, who some years ago served as director of a YMCA in western Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh. It was a difficult situation because the YMCA was losing money, membership and staff. McCauslin worked 85 hours a week trying to solve the problem. He found himself getting little sleep at night. He took little time off. And even when he was away from the job, he was worrying and fretting about the problems of the YMCA. He visited a therapist who warned him he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Somehow he needed to let go and let God take charge of his problems. But how do you do something like that?

The breakthrough came one day when he took a notebook and ventured into a forest not far from where he lived. As he walked through the cool woods, he could feel his muscles starting to relax. Sitting down under a tree, he sighed and felt at ease for the first time in months. He took out his notebook and decided to let go of the burdens of his life. He wrote God a letter that simply said, "Dear God, Today I hereby resign as general manager of the universe. Love, George." Looking back on that moment, he reflected with a twinkle in his eye, "And wonder of wonders, God accepted my resignation."

I think many of us need to do what he did. *We need to resign as general manager of the universe.* Are you worn out from trying to solve every problem, help your children, take care of your parents, get your coworkers shaped up, and in general trying to fix your siblings and parents and roommates and friends and neighbors? Are you exhausted from trying to repair all the broken people and the messed up situations all around you? No wonder you're tired all the time.

Here is where the message of Christmas becomes all-important. *Ponder the Babe in the manger.* He came to set us free from the terrible burden (and inevitable failure) of trying to run the universe.

Let the weary world rejoice. Christ is born! He can carry the full weight of all your problems, for "the government will be on his shoulders."

*Holy Lord, thank you that your shoulders are strong enough to carry all my burdens today.
Amen.*

December 3

Wonderful Counselor

“He will be called Wonderful Counselor” (Isaiah 9:6).

Literally this title means “a wonder of a counselor,” speaking of the wisdom of his plan. The word “wonderful” means “astonishing” or “extraordinary.” *The writers of the Old Testament used it for acts of God which man cannot understand.* The word “counselor” means “advisor” or “ideal ruler.”

This means he is a reliable counselor. Those who come to him will never be led astray. Talk radio is filled with people who make their living giving advice to others. Much of it is good, some not so good. But the Lord goes to no one for advice. And when anyone comes to him, he gives them the counsel they need.

He is therefore the perfect teacher and the ultimate counselor. This gives us insight into his working. His plans are not our plans, his ways not our ways. He will accomplish things beyond human comprehension, and he will do it in ways we cannot fathom. He will do the greatest work ever accomplished, and he will do it successfully. A violent death would not be man’s way to victory, but it was God’s plan and our Lord carried it out perfectly.

As the Wonderful Counselor, he gives wholesome direction to His people. Those who follow him will not walk in darkness but in the blazing light of day.

Lord Jesus, all the treasures of divine wisdom are found in you. You know what we need for today and tomorrow. Grant us a holy desire to do your will. Amen.

December 4

Mighty God

“He will be called Mighty God” (Isaiah 9:6).

This speaks of the “Power of Accomplishment.” It is first of all a statement of deity. The baby born in the manger is not just the Son of God, he is also God the Son. *All the fullness of God dwells in the Lord Jesus Christ.* As the ancient creeds declare, he is “very God of very God.” That can never be said of any mere human baby.

There is something else important in this title. *The word translated “mighty” means “strong one” or “powerful, valiant warrior.”* Thus the term “mighty God” is actually a military title. He is the God who fights for his people!

At the Incarnation, God took the form of human flesh. That’s why one of his names is Immanuel—God with us.

Now take the first two titles together and what do you have?

As the Wonderful Counselor — He makes the plans.

As the Mighty God —He makes the plans work.

All of his wonderful plans will be carried out with all of God’s infinite might. *There is in this little baby all the strength of Deity.* The power of God is in those tiny fists. He has strength which is divine. His commands rest upon the omnipotence of God. Whatever he desires, he is able to achieve.

When we meet Jesus, we meet God. If he is not the “mighty God,” then we are deceived and it is blasphemy to worship him. There is no middle ground.

If he is not God, we are fools to worship him.

If he is God, we are fools not to.

But if he is the Mighty God, then when we rely on him, we are relying on God himself! We need divine aid to help us in our battle. Satan and sin would every day defeat us, but he is the Mighty God, and he has defeated them.

My Lord, you have fought and won every battle. You are the undisputed Victor. When I am tempted to doubt, remind me of your unlimited power. Amen.

December 5

Everlasting Father

"He will be called . . . Everlasting Father " (Isaiah 9:6).

In the Hebrew the phrase is literally "the Father of Eternity." This speaks of the purpose of his coming.

He is before, above, and beyond time. *He is the possessor of eternity.* He is eternally like a father to his people. This is not a statement about the Trinity but about the character of our Lord. All that a good father is, Jesus is to his people.

Because he is like a father, he cares for his people. Because he owns eternity, he can give us eternal life. That's important for those who live on this sin-cursed planet. No one lives forever. *Sooner or later we will all find our own place in the graveyard.* We are not immortal but transitory. We're here today, gone tomorrow. A dead Christ will do us no good. Dying men need an undying Christ.

Here's a key phrase: *He is a father forever!* That's important to me because I had a father, but not a father forever. I had a father, but he is gone now. I received a message from someone who said her aunt knew my father, Dr. Tyrus Pritchard. That warmed my heart because it's been 38 years since my father died. He was a very good man, but he was not a father forever. I am a father to Joshua, Mark and Nick, but I am not a father forever. I will someday pass away. All human fathers must go. But Jesus is a father forever! He's just what we need.

We are glad, O Lord, for your love that never ends. We rejoice in the thought that you are greater than any problem we may face today. Amen.

December 6

Prince of Peace

“He will be called . . . Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

The phrase literally means “the prince whose coming brings peace.” *It is the climax of all that has gone before.* The word “prince” means something like “General of the Army.” It speaks of his high position. The word “peace” speaks of his basic nature.

All over globe there are ethnic conflicts and tribal wars. As I write these words there is turmoil in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Israel, Turkey and Iran. There are even whispers of trouble in China. We’re almost immune to violence because we live in a violent world.

Isaiah 9:6 tells us that God’s plan for world peace focuses on a baby asleep in a manger in Bethlehem. He is the ultimate Prince of Peace.

*In the past, his coming made peace with God

*In the present, those who trust in him find peace in their hearts when Christ comes in.

*In the future, his second coming will usher in a kingdom of peace.

We live in a world marked by strife and bloodshed.

He is not a failure. We are.

God’s ultimate plan for peace rests not in treaties or education or material prosperity. God’s plan for peace is the Maker of Peace, Jesus Christ.

To know him is to know blessing and happiness. To live without him means a life that is restless and miserable.

He came to bring peace.

He did. He does. He will.

Lord Jesus, you came to bring peace to a world torn by sin and suffering. Make me an instrument of your peace today. Amen.

December 7

Behold the Son!

“The rising sun will come to us from heaven” (Luke 1:78).

When De Witt Talmage preached on this passage, he told the following story:

I have read that near the North Pole, the night lasting for months and months, when the people expect the day is about to dawn, some messengers go up on the highest point to watch; and when they see the first streak of day they put on their brightest possible apparel, and embrace each other and cry, “Behold the sun!” and the cry goes through all the land, “Behold the sun!”

On the first Christmas morning the sun began to shine in Bethlehem. And from that sunrise, the light still shines 2000 years later. The light from the manger has encircled the world, setting free those who sat in darkness and giving hope to those who could not find their way home.

“Behold the sun!”

“Behold the Son!”

Has the light of Christ ever shined into your heart or are you still in the darkness? No question is more important. What is your answer?

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 the transcendent truth that 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?*

The familiar words of Phillips Brooks are a delight at this point:

*How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given.
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.*

So he does! May that be your experience this Christmas season.

Lord Jesus, I gladly welcome you today. Make my heart your home. Amen.

December 8

An Unlikely Christmas Verse

This morning in my quiet time I came across a verse I had never noticed before. The more I thought about it, the more apt it seems for this time of year. **“We have never heard anyone talk like this”** (John 7:46 New Living Translation). Scene: Jesus has come to Jerusalem to take part in the annual Feast of Booths. *As he speaks in the temple courts, thousands of pilgrims listen to his words.* They are excited and perplexed by his teaching. Some of them have heard about this upstart rabbi from Galilee. Word spreads quickly that the Pharisees want to kill him. But then why were the rulers letting him teach openly? Why not just put him to death? Could it be that the leaders secretly think that he is Messiah? Or maybe they’re not sure themselves.

John tells us that many who heard him believed in him. When word got back to the Pharisees they sent the temple guards to arrest him. At that precise moment Jesus made his famous declaration, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink” and “streams of living water will flow from within him.” There were three reactions to these statements: Some thought he was the prophet Elijah. Others correctly surmised that he was the Messiah. But a third group had questions about his ancestry. *How could he be the Christ since the Messiah must come from Bethlehem and not from Galilee?* Then John adds one simple sentence: “Thus the people were divided because of Jesus” (John 7:43).

The temple guards returned empty-handed. When asked why, they answered “We have never heard anyone talk like this.” Here is unimpeachable testimony from those who were sent to arrest him. *Yet his words arrested them!* They weren’t believers, but they weren’t sure either. Who is this man? Why does he speak this way?

In this episode we see the true power of the Son of God. His enemies have no answer for him. *He baffles his critics, even while they plot to take his life.*

Two thousand years have passed and Jesus still divides people today. Some believe, others don’t. At Christmastime we are invited to come and worship the newborn King. Will you bow before the Babe of Bethlehem this year?

Lord Jesus, never has any man spoken as you did. You stand alone among all those who have walked on the earth. Praise to you, O Lord, for you have confounded the wisdom of man and brought it to nothing. Amen.

December 9

Merry Christmas, Caesar Augustus

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.

Actually, Caesar Augustus was the greatest of the Roman emperors, greater even than his granduncle, Julius Caesar. *It was said that when he came to Rome it was a city of brick, and 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 single 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 lead to 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 that it is not likely that 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 that 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, thank you for showing us that you hold the mightiest rulers in your hand. Open our eyes that we may see your Invisible Hand moving through our world today. Amen.

December 10

Get Off Your High Horse

“He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble” (Luke 1:52).

It must be obvious to everyone that the world is not as it should be. This is not the world that God made because that world was “very good” (Genesis 1:31). What can we say about our world except that it is “very messed up”? There is no darkness like the darkness of not knowing how to get out of the trouble you are in. I met a man who has learned this from hard experience. For years he struggled with a serious alcohol problem. It impacted every part of his life and damaged every relationship. The turning point came, as it so often does, when those nearest to him would not, could not, live with him anymore. A terrible crisis came, he hit rock bottom, and by the grace of God, he looked up and realized that Christ was his only hope. That led to some very difficult choices, and a course of treatment and counseling that continues to this day. He has not, he told me, finished all of the 12 Steps and perhaps would not for a long time. But if you ask him, he would give thanks to people who loved him enough not to let him go on, and he would say, “It was the Lord who changed me. Without him, I would still be drinking and destroying my family.”

If you ever visit the Holy Land, one of the sites you will visit is the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The church is built over the reputed spot where Mary gave birth to Jesus. To get to the church, you first walk across a broad plaza and then come to a very small entrance. *In fact, it’s so small that 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. Since you don’t deserve heaven, the only proper response to God’s offer of salvation is to say, “Thank you, Lord God, for what Jesus did for me.” Gratitude, not arrogance, is the language of heaven.

Deliver me, Lord, from thinking too much of myself. When I am tempted to pride, help me to remember that without you, I can do nothing. Amen.

December 11

Faith and Doubt at Christmastime

“Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be”
(Luke 1:29).

An e-mail arrived from someone who wanted to know how to deal with doubt. I wrote back and said not to worry, we all doubt from time to time and doubt can actually be good for the soul. A second message arrived a day later: "I wanted to tell you that I very much appreciated your e-mail. It's good to know that someone with your experience and expertise questions their faith from time to time. Sometimes I feel like I'm the only one. There are people who are filled with conviction and don't understand why I have questions, and others on the opposite side of spectrum--those who don't embrace God at all (they have more difficult questions that I can't answer)--and I find myself going through highs and lows with my faith. Sometimes it feels like a big question mark; I wonder why there are so many unanswered questions, and other times I just accept it."

Faith and doubt always go together. There is no such thing as 100% faith. After all, if you had certainty, you wouldn't need faith at all. In heaven we will not need faith because we will experience ultimate reality. But between now and then, our doubts spur us on to greater spiritual growth. Doubt can be a good thing if it moves you to study, to think, to investigate, and to ask hard questions.

Christmas seems like a good season to ponder the relationship between faith and doubt. Did Mary have any doubts? Did Joseph? What about the shepherds and the Magi who traveled from a distant land to worship the baby Jesus? Luke 1:29 tells us that Mary was "greatly troubled" when the angel Gabriel came to her. When she heard that she was going to give birth to Jesus, she asked, "How can I have a baby? I am a virgin." Gabriel brushed aside her doubts with one sweeping assertion: "Nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37).

A virgin, a stable, a star, some shepherds, strange visitors from the East, gold, frankincense and myrrh. *It doesn't seem likely but that was God's plan for bringing his Son to the world.*

"When we are in doubt, God will never fail to give light when we have no other plan than to please him and to act in love for him." So said Brother Lawrence. The issue is never our doubts. It is always the condition of our heart. At Christmastime we are asked to believe that God entered the human race as a tiny baby. *He asked for no special favors and got none.* As Martin Luther said, "He whom the worlds could not enwrap, yonder lies in Mary's lap." Can you believe that? If you can, everything else is just details.

Lord Jesus, we do believe! Give light from heaven that we might believe deeper, longer, stronger. Amen.

December 12

Mystery and Wonder

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

Christmas has been slow in coming this year. *Maybe that's a statement about me personally, but I think it's more than that.* It's almost as if the whole nation has been busy and distracted and we almost forgot that a special occasion is just around the corner. But now, at last, Christmas is upon us, just thirteen days away. Earlier this week I looked at our tree and realized we had some work to do. And that's why I've been shopping not once but twice and even three times this week. And I even enjoyed it, although nowadays I prefer to do as much shopping as possible via the Internet.

But gift-giving does not exhaust the meaning of this holiday. *Behind the celebration is a solemn and wonderful truth: the birth of Jesus Christ signals that God has entered our world.* You will recall that the name Immanuel means “God with us.” The angel told Joseph to call the baby Immanuel because that's precisely what Jesus is—God with us. He stripped off his royal robes and exchanged them for strips of peasant cloth. He traded a palace for a stable so that he might truly be “God with us.”

Here's how one Statement of Faith puts it: “We believe in the deity of Jesus Christ, that He was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, lived a sinless life, and is fully God and fully Man.” That sentence contains a phrase that will make the smartest man stop and scratch his head: “fully God and fully man.” *How that could be is a mystery to us.* By that phrase we simply mean that the baby in the manger was God in human flesh. John 1:14 explains the matter this way: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” See his little hands and feet; they are the hands and feet of God. Listen to him laugh; it is the laughter of God. Wipe the tears from his infant cheeks; you are wiping the tears of God.

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 the mystery leads to wonderment. 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, you entered our world and brought light into our darkness. We gladly say, “Welcome to our world.” We hope you feel at home because we need you so much. Amen.

December 13

By Faith Rahab

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

Many first-time Bible readers are surprised to learn that the New Testament begins with a genealogy (Matthew 1:1-16), Jesus’ family tree. Those same readers are even more surprised when Rahab shows up on the list.

Most of us know about her. *She is almost always mentioned by 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.

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 there because people would be accustomed to seeing strangers come and go at all hours of the night. We also can’t deny the fact that Rahab told a bald-faced 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!

Many people are intimidated by Jesus Christ. *They hook him up 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. To many in the world today, Jesus seems too good to be true.

This genealogy is in the Bible to let us know that 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)

The same grace that 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.

December 14

Believing the Impossible

“I am the Lord’s servant,’ Mary answered. ‘May your word to me be fulfilled.’ Then the angel left her” (Luke 1:38).

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 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. In the future her life would many times be happy, but it would never again be quiet.

Since we know the end of the story, we may tend to overlook the possibility of divorce. But Mary had no way of knowing how Joseph would respond to her pregnancy. Would he blow his top and walk out on her? Would he humiliate her publicly? Would he divorce her?

As it turned out, Mary had every reason to worry about Joseph. He didn't blow his top or try to humiliate her, but he did intend to divorce her. Only an angel's intervention kept that from happening.

That, too, was on Mary's mind. By saying "Yes", she risked losing the man she loved. Her whole future was on the line.

All these things were just the beginning. Mary could not know what the future would hold. Before it was all over, she would experience heartache, opposition, slander, confusion, anguish, despair and loneliness. In the end she would face the greatest pain a mother can endure when she watched her son die on the cross (John 19:25).

Mary couldn't know all those things. Perhaps if she had known, she might not have said "Yes." *But it's just as well that she didn't.* Sometimes we say, "I wish I knew what the future holds for me." But you really don't want to know. It's far better that we don't know what life will bring us in 10 or 15 years.

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.

God said, "Are you willing to believe the impossible?"

Mary answered, "Yes I am!"

Without that "Yes", there would be no Christmas.

Loving Lord, thank you for Mary's godly example. May I be ready to say Yes when you call me to trust you. Amen.

December 15

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.

How old was Joseph? We don't know the answer for sure, but many writers agree that 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 are insufficiently celebrated as great Christmas verses. They 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 own son.

The story in Matthew 1 is told exactly as a man would tell it. I like Joseph. I wish I could meet him. He strikes me as a very good man.

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. I pray for the same courage to trust you even when circumstances may tempt me to doubt what you are doing. Amen.

December 16

Power of the Most High

“The angel answered, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.’” (Luke 1:35)

Across the centuries, the virgin birth of Jesus Christ has been considered a foundational doctrine by Christians of virtually every denomination. *Both Matthew and Luke plainly ascribe the conception of Jesus Christ to the action of the Holy Spirit.* Matthew uses phrases such as “through the Holy Spirit” and “from the Holy Spirit” to describe what happened. Luke adds an intriguing phrase when he reports the angel Gabriel’s words to Mary: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (Luke 1:35). The verb for “overshadow” speaks of the direct, personal presence of God. The same verb is used in all three accounts of the Transfiguration to describe the cloud that enveloped Jesus, Moses and Elijah (and Peter, James and John) on the mountain. From that cloud came a voice saying, “This is my Son,” even as Gabriel told Mary, “The holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.”

What is the significance of Jesus being begotten of the Holy Spirit? Since Jesus was born of Mary, we know that He was truly human. Since He was conceived through the Holy Spirit, we know that He was more than a man.

The virgin birth was God’s way of announcing to the world that Jesus was indeed his Son. We’ll never know if God could have done it some other way, but because he did it *this way*, the unique entrance of the Son of God into the world proves that Jesus was indeed “the Word made flesh” (John 1:14). Through the virgin birth, the Son of God entered the human race, taking upon himself all aspects of true humanity, yet remaining sinless, and without surrendering any aspect of his deity.

Thus the Babe in the manger was truly Almighty God from heaven. He was fully God and yet fully man at one and the same time. *Deity and humanity joined together.* Theologians call him the God-Man.

What role did the Holy Spirit play? Through some means unknown to us, during the “overshadowing” he created within the womb of Mary the unborn (yet fully human and fully alive) Person of Jesus Christ.

It is a pure miracle of the highest order. *No one can explain it.* No scientist can duplicate it. It happened once and only once—never to be repeated. The virgin birth of Jesus Christ stands absolutely alone. Nothing can be compared to it because no other birth has been or ever could be like it.

But there it is. A truth to be believed. *A fundamental fact to be accepted.* A miracle at which to marvel. An amazing beginning for the God-Man. A birth like no other because Jesus was indeed God's one-and-only Son.

Father, we believe in the virgin birth because we believe your Word. As we contemplate this miracle, increase our faith to believe that nothing is impossible with God. Amen.

December 17

What Does God Look Like?

“No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known” (John 1:18).

What does God look like? The Bible doesn't leave us to wonder about the answer to that question. *Nearly 2000 years ago a little baby was born in Bethlehem who forever answered that question.* If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. Hebrews 1:3 calls him the **“shining forth of the glory of God.”**

If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. Does God have a name? Yes. His name is Jesus. *In him the abstract becomes concrete.* When I look at Jesus all those theoretical ideas about God suddenly become reality.

- God now has hands.
- And feet.
- And eyes to see.
- Ears to hear.
- Lips to speak.
- God has a voice!
- He speaks a language I understand.

I see him touch a leper, and I know no one is too dirty for him.
I see him pause to speak to a beggar, and I know he's never too busy for me.
I see him feed the multitudes with loaves and fishes, and I know he can supply my needs.
I see him with the towel and the basin, and I know no job is too menial for him.

Finally I see him hanging on the cross, suspended between heaven and earth, beaten, bruised, bloodied, mocked, scourged, spat upon, jeered, booed, hated, attacked, scorned, despised, rejected, crucified. When I hear him cry out, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do,” I suddenly understand that Jesus has no enemies. *In Jesus I discover a God who takes people seriously.* He never treats people casually. He never brushes them off. He never says, “You're a loser.” He's a God who cares enough to get involved in this ugly, twisted, unredeemed world.

What does God look like? Take a look at Jesus and you have your answer.

Lord Jesus, if you had not come, we would not know the Father. Open our eyes that we might see how much God loves us. Amen.

December 18

God's Word to the World

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

Nothing is more invisible than a thought.

You don't know what I am thinking nor can I tell what you are thinking. *But let a man speak and his words reveal his thoughts.* Take the deepest thought and clothe it in words, and it will be visible to millions. Consider the plays of Shakespeare. They are but the thoughts of Shakespeare made visible through his words.

Jesus reveals God to us.

How fitting that Jesus should be called "the Word" for he communicates the very nature of God to us. John 1:18 reminds us that no one has seen the essence of God the Father, but the Son has "declared him" or "made him known" or "explained him" or "revealed him." The underlying Greek has the idea of unfolding a truth step by step.

Jesus makes known what we would never discover on our own.

Without Jesus we would never know the fullness of God. We would know him as Creator and Designer of all things (Romans 1:19-20), but we would never know the depth of his compassion toward sinners.

Jesus is the key to the universe for "all things have been created through him" (Colossians 1:16).

He left his fingerprints everywhere. The galaxies shout out, "He is there." The wildflowers sing together, "He is there." The rippling brooks join in, "He is there." The birds sing it, the lions roar it, the fish write it in the oceans—"He is there." All creation joins to sing his praise. The heavens declare it, the earth repeats it, and the wind whispers it—"He is there." Deep cries out to deep, the mighty sequoia tells it to the eagle who soars overhead, the lamb and the wolf agree on this one thing—"He is there."

Jesus is "the radiance of God's glory" (Hebrews 1:3).

If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. He is not some grimy, blurry image of the Almighty. He isn't the sun peeking through the clouds. Jesus radiates the glory of God. Theologians have a word for this. They say the Son is "co-essential" with the Father. That means

the Father and the Son share the same essence. The Father is God and the Son is God. *Jesus is the blazing, magnificent revelation of God himself.*

When Jesus speaks, God speaks. May we have ears to hear what he is saying.

Speak, Lord, for we long to hear from you. Help us to hear your voice today. Amen.

December 19

King in the Cradle

“On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him” (Matthew 2:11).

When the Magi finally found the baby Jesus, were they disappointed? *They might have been.* After all they been through, after such a long journey, after the detour in Jerusalem, did what they find seem anticlimactic? It might have seemed that way.

–He did not look like a king.

–His home did not look like a castle.

–He had no scepter in his hand, commanded no armies, gave no speeches, passed no laws. He could not walk or talk. No royal decree came from his lips.

–*There was nothing to make you think he was a king.* To the outward eye, he was nothing but a peasant child born in dire poverty.

But to the Magi, he was a king.

He possessed more royalty in a cradle than Herod possessed in his fine palace. He was greater in his infancy than Louis XIV in his ascendancy. He was more powerful as a child than Napoleon as an emperor.

But it did not seem that way. The eyes of flesh revealed nothing but a normal baby, gurgling and cooing, moving his tiny hands side to side, reaching eagerly for his mother’s breast.

Somehow the Magi saw beyond the present and into the future and in deep faith, they worshipped him. They saw that this child would one day rule the world and they were not ashamed to fall on their faces before him.

Let me paraphrase the words of one Bible commentator: Although we read that the Magi met Herod, we do not read that they worshipped him. But when they found this tiny baby, not yet two weeks old, rocking in his mother’s arms, these great men fell on their faces before him. To this baby they gave the honor due a king. What Herod craved, the baby received.

Lord Jesus, grant me eyes of faith to see you as you are, King in a cradle and Lord of the universe. Amen.

December 20

Gifts Fit for a King

Now we come to the last detail, the one for which the Magi are most remembered: **“Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh”** (Matthew 2:11). *The gifts in themselves are expensive and represent a worthy tribute.* But beyond that, there is a very ancient tradition that sees these gifts as symbolic of who this child would become.

The early church fathers said that gold represented the wealth and power of a king. Frankincense was used in the temple worship of the Lord. It represents his deity—He is truly God born in human flesh. Then there is myrrh—a kind of perfume made from the leaves of the cistus rose. It was used in beauty treatments, but when mixed with vinegar it became an anesthetic. *After a person died, myrrh was used to anoint the body and prepare it for burial.* John 19:39 tells us that Jesus’ body was bound in linen wrappings along with 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes. So the gift of myrrh pictures his suffering and death.

- Gold pointing to his majesty ... for he is king.
- Frankincense pointing to his deity ... for he is God.
- Myrrh pointing to his humanity ... for he is destined to suffer and die.

You ask, did the Magi understand all this? No, not at all. *But God arranged it so that their gifts to the Holy Child would point us to who he is and why he came.*

The hymn writer understood it perfectly. Listen to his words:

Born a king on Bethlehem’s plain,
Gold I bring to crown him again
King forever, ceasing never,
Over us all to reign.

Frankincense to offer have I,
Incense owns a Deity nigh.
Prayer and praising, all men raising
Worship Him, God on high.

Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume
Breathes a life of gathering gloom,
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying
Sealed in the stone-cold tomb.

Then the last verse:

Glorious now behold him arise,
King and God and Sacrifice,
Alleluia, Alleluia
Sound thru the earth and skies.

This year and every year, and all during the year, we are invited to return to Bethlehem. *A baby lies there who is King and God and Sacrifice.* The King in the cradle. Before long, he will arise to do his work and the world will see him as he really is. For the moment, the baby sleeps in Bethlehem surrounded by regal gifts and foreign eyes wide with wonder.

My Lord, am I so busy this year that I have no time for you? Slow me down so that my gift to you may be an undivided heart. Amen.

December 21

Come, Desire of Nations, Come

"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. In that sense God promises that the wealth of the nations will flow into the temple in Jerusalem. The rest of the verse promises that God will fill the rebuilt temple with his glory.

Christians have traditionally seen in this verse a foreshadowing of the coming of Christ because Jesus in John 2:20-21 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 coming 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 that 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.

Jesus is the only one who can fulfill the deepest desires of the human heart. As Pascal said, there is a God-shaped vacuum inside every person. If we do not fill the vacuum with God, we are bound to fill it with the spiritual junk food of this world, but in that case we will never be satisfied.

The people of the world desire Christ even though they do not know it for he alone can meet their deepest needs. The familiar Christmas carol "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" contains a verse that mentions this name of Christ (and several others as well). Though rarely sung, it contains deep biblical truth:

Come, Desire of nations, come,
Fix in us thy humble home;
Rise, the woman's conquering seed,
Bruise in us the serpent's head.

Adam's likeness now efface,
Stamp thy image in its place.
Second Adam from above,
Reinstate us in thy love.

The nations will never live in peace until they know Jesus. Can we be at peace while they live without him?

Lord Jesus, while we wait for your return, help us to make you known in every nation. Amen.

December 22

Things Are Going to Change

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

God’s will is seldom done on the earth. Too many things that go on are obviously not God’s will.

Killing the unborn is not God’s will.

Children on crack is not God’s will.

Single moms raising children is not God’s will.

Pastors committing adultery is not God’s will.

Rampant pornography is not God’s will.

Nuclear warfare is not God’s will.

Men starving, women freezing, children wearing rags—this is not God’s will.

Racial prejudice is not God’s will.

Ethnic violence is not God’s will.

Serial killings are not God’s will.

Greed, graft and corruption are not God’s will.

Sometimes it seems as if God has gone to sleep and Satan has taken over.

Now ponder the next sentence carefully. *God does not accept the status quo.* He does not accept Satan’s usurpation of God’s rightful place in the world. He does not accept that sin should reign forever on the earth. He does not accept that the killing should go on forever. God does not sit idly by while the world goes to hell.

That’s why he sent the prophets who thundered out his message to ancient Israel. That’s why he raised up mighty men like Moses, Joshua and David. That’s why he inspired his prophets to write down his words. That’s why he wrote the Ten Commandments with his own fingers.

God does not accept the status quo!

Do you want more proof? *He sent his own Son into the world to change the status quo.* What the prophets couldn’t accomplish with their words, his Son accomplished by the Incarnation. At Bethlehem, God sent a message to the world—“Things are going to change.”

If things were okay, why did God send his Son? But things weren’t okay. They were wrong, dreadfully wrong and getting worse all the time. So God intervened in human history in the most dramatic fashion possible.

Be encouraged, my friend. *Christmas is almost here.* Things are going to change.

Our Father, thank you that you didn't leave us alone in our sin. You came for us! Glory to your name forever. Amen.

December 23

What Are You So Worried About?

In one of his sermons Walt Gerber mentioned a plaque hanging on his wall:

Walt, Do not feel totally, personally,
irrevocably responsible for everything.
That's my job! Love, God!

That caught my eye because it reminds me of the principle I've called the First Rule of the Spiritual Life: *"He's God and we're not."* If you understand that truth, then you don't have to take on impossible burdens that only God could handle anyway.

In the movie "Rudy" there is a scene where the young man despairs of ever making the Notre Dame football team. *He is too small, too slow, too weak, and in every way fails to meet the challenge.* Totally discouraged he goes to a priest and asks if he will ever make the team. The priest smiles and says that in 35 years he has learned only two things for certain: "First, there is a God, and second, I'm not him."

Today is December 23. *In two days we will celebrate the central miracle of the Christian faith: the birth of Jesus Christ.* Theologians call this the "incarnation"--which means "to take the form of human flesh." Skeptics and unbelievers have attacked our faith at precisely this point—the notion that God could ever become a man. Much less a baby.

But that's precisely what happened at Bethlehem. To quote the words of Charles Wesley (from "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"):

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,
Hail the incarnate Deity.

Either you believe that or you don't. If you don't, then Christmas is just another day to you. But if you do believe that then you shouldn't have trouble believing anything else the Bible says.

I realize that many of us approach the end of the year with a heavy load of worries about the future. There are career questions, health issues, family problems, financial difficulties, and a host of unfulfilled dreams. *We wonder if next year will simply mean more of the same.* Sometimes we truly feel that everything depends on us and that we are "totally personally, irrevocably responsible for everything."

Christmas reminds us that God is God and we're not. He can arrange for a virgin to become pregnant. He can cause a Roman ruler to order a census at precisely the right moment in

history. He can ensure that the baby will be born at exactly the place prophesied 700 years earlier. He can bring together angels, shepherds and Wise Men to celebrate that miraculous birth. And he can take a tiny baby born in a stable and make that baby the Savior of the world.

Now if God can do all that, what are you so worried about?

God of the impossible, may I never doubt your power or believe that you are not equal to my circumstances. Amen.

December 24

Is This Really Christmas Eve?

Today is December 24. *This is Christmas Eve, the day before Christmas.* But is this really the day before Jesus was born in Bethlehem? Each year the question comes up and each year the answer is the same: We can't be sure.

The Bible does not clearly answer this question. *Evidently the first Christians didn't make a point of celebrating the birth of Christ.* If they knew the precise date of his birth, they didn't make an issue of it. One writer notes that various leaders in the early church suggested the following dates for Jesus' birth: January 2, January 6, March 21, March 25, April 18, April 19, May 20, May 28, November 17. All we can take from this is that the precise date was hidden and unknown to them even though they were much closer to the historical event than we are.

The traditional date of December 25 goes back as far as A.D. 273. Two pagan festivals honoring the sun were also celebrated on that day and it is possible that December 25 was chosen to counteract the influence of paganism. To this day some people feel uncomfortable with Christmas because they think it is somehow tainted by the pagan festivals held on that day. *But Christians have long believed that the gospel not only transcends culture, it also transforms it.* In A.D. 320 one theologian answered this criticism by noting, "We hold this day holy, not like the pagans because of the birth of the sun, but because of him who made it."

Having said that, you may ask, "Does it really matter?" In one sense, of course, the answer is no. *No doctrine of the Christian faith rests upon knowing the exact day and year of Christ's birth.* And no stress is put upon the date of his birth in the New Testament. No one is ever told to celebrate Christmas. The emphasis always rests on the fact of his birth, not the date. But that doesn't tell the whole story. Christianity is a faith based on certain historical facts. Let us on this Christmas Eve rejoice in this great truth: *Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given.* On that day so long ago, a very real day in a very real year-even if we can't pinpoint it exactly-the eternal Son of God entered humanity, the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us-God himself joined the human race!

It happened, it really happened. On December 25 we celebrate the very real birth of a very real Savior whose name is Jesus Christ. Let the party begin! Break out the cider, open the presents, sing the carols, hug a friend. *We ought to be happiest people in the world.* We were born for Christmas because on Christmas Christ was born for us.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!

Welcome to our world, Lord Jesus! May there always be room in my heart for you. Amen.

December 25

Away in a Manger

“She gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7).

The hours passed in the lonely stable. Finally the pains seemed to be as one. The moment had arrived. Mary cried out, straining with all her might, and fell back onto the blanket. Nothing. Then a tiny sound, a whimper, then a loud cry. It was a boy, a beautiful, healthy, brand-spanking-new baby boy.

Joseph held up the baby for Mary to see. "Let me hold him," she said. And she did. There she lay for a moment. Now the sleep she had fought for hours came to her eyes, the stress of the long trip finally catching up with her. More than anything in all the world, she wanted to go to sleep. But before she did, she picked up a rough piece of cloth, tore it in strips, and wrapped the baby tightly. Then she looked for a place to put him. *The only place she could find was a feeding trough--carved out of stone, rough-hewn, with bits of food stuck to the bottom.* It was perfect. She laid him in the feeding-trough and then lay down to go to sleep. It had been a long, long day. As she drifted off to sleep, she wondered where they would go in the morning.

He didn't sleep just yet. Too much to think about. *What a lucky man he was.* He looked first at his wife—so tired and yet so beautiful—and then at the baby boy—surely the most beautiful baby in the world.

How strange, yet how fitting that it should all end like this. *It had happened just as the angel said it would.* He didn't worry about naming the baby. The angel had taken care of that. "Give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

How strange that it should happen to him—Joseph—just an ordinary carpenter. And to Mary—an innocent teenage girl. Who could figure it all out? Immanuel, the angel said, God with us. Mary, who had never known Joseph, now delivering her first child. "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son" (Isaiah 7:14).

That's the way it was that first Christmas night 2000 years ago. Baby sleeping, mother dreaming, father thinking, and God watching over it all.

And so our journey is finished.

We set out with one thought in mind: "Let's go straight to Bethlehem." *I hope you are smiling right now because you should be.* We made it! We're in Bethlehem with Mary and Joseph and Jesus.

Merry Christmas to you and yours.

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.