

GOOD NEWS *of* GREAT JOY

*Advent
2021*



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ADVENT DEVOTIONALS // *written by*

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DECEMBER 1, 2021 // Day 1
Wednesday

ISAIAH 9:2-5

LIGHT IS COME

On November 9, 1965, the biggest power blackout in U.S. history happened leaving 30 million people in the dark. The power outage covered all of New York state, with parts of the states around New York and also Canada impacted. The outage happened when a relay switch was improperly set in Ontario, Canada. A tiny surge of power tripped the relay switch, and in less than 5 minutes, power lines were overloaded. Millions of people were plunged into darkness. People were stranded in office buildings, on trains, and in subway tunnels with no way of escape. A day later, power was restored and the lights were back on.

When the power goes off unexpectedly and we are suddenly left in darkness, it is a disruptive, perhaps upsetting, situation. But the Bible talks about people in darkness that has nothing to do with power grids or overloaded relay switches.

It helps to remember that many of the Old Testament prophecies sometimes spoke of both current events and future events. Here's the "origin story" for Isaiah 9. In these opening verses of the chapter, the prophet spoke to the people living in Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel. Judah finds itself trapped between a rock and a hard place. Should they join forces with Israel and Syria, fighting against the powerful enemy nation of Assyria. Or should they reach out to Assyria, begging them for help. Isaiah was speaking these words of hope in chapter 61 to the people of Judah who felt vulnerable and powerless, wondering if God had forgotten them, in the face of the impending Assyrian invasion. That military invasion was a coming darkness that would devastate the land.

But these Isaiah 61 words also have a future meaning. In Matthew's gospel account describing the beginning of Jesus' ministry, Matthew reached back in time for Isaiah's words and used them to describe how Jesus was a fulfillment of that ancient prophecy:

*The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.
-Matthew 4:16*

And in John 9:5, Jesus described Himself, saying, "I am the light of the world." The great news of the gospel is that we don't have to be people stumbling in darkness because He has come to us carrying light.

No matter how reliable our power systems might be, we are all people living in darkness apart from Jesus. The stunning good news of Christmas is "Immanuel"—God with us. Jesus came to bring light into this world's darkness, so that we may know that life and have relationship with Him.



DECEMBER 2, 2021 // Day 2
Thursday

ISAIAH 9:6-7

*I heard the bells on Christmas day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men.*

*And in despair I bowed my head:
“There is no peace on earth,” I said,
“For hate is strong, and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.”*

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
“God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
With peace on earth, good will to men.”*

- Henry W. Longfellow

After you've lived through quite a few presidential elections, you realize they're all the same... a little disappointing. No matter how optimistic we were about the candidate, we come to realize there is no perfect leader. There are always bad decisions and broken promises. And while we're blessed to live in a country founded on faith and freedom, our government is FAR from ideal. The interminable in-fighting in congress, bi-partisan politics, and leaders working harder for their own re-election than the needs of their constituents...it's enough to make you bow your head in despair.

But Christmastime is about good news. The best news ever. Into the middle of our messed up, broken world has come a Savior. And HE is ultimately our leader. Jesus Christ governs His kingdom with justice, righteousness, and peace. He always keeps His promises. And His rule will never end. Our temporary rulers frequently earn disparaging titles for their unscrupulous behavior—crooked, racist, womanizer, unfit. Our Savior ruler has also earned His titles: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Amid the chaos that envelops our world, we want to know, “Who’s charge here? Who is going to guide us? Who holds the answers to the problems we face?” When you turn on the morning news and find the problems in the world are greater than the government leading us, remember Who is king. Let the truth that Jesus is in charge bring you peace today.



DECEMBER 3, 2021 // Day 3
Friday

JEREMIAH 23:1-6

“Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!” declares the Lord. Therefore this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: “Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,” declares the Lord. “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing,” declares the Lord. “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Savior.

DELIGHT IN TODAY

This passage reminds me of God’s perfect timing. It looks back on Israel’s history and the corrupt shepherds who did not care for nor lead the people but instead destroyed and scattered them. The people no doubt suffered under these evil shepherds but God had a plan and a purpose in the suffering. He always does. When the time was right God stepped in and gathered His people and restored them and gave them a Good Shepherd. God sent His son Jesus to be our Good Shepherd. To lead His people and make us fruitful, with the help of the indwelling Holy Spirit, who came at the perfect time.

God keeps His promises and He raised up a Righteous Branch from David’s lineage, our good King Jesus, who reigns wisely and does what is just and right in the land. Matthew 1 shows us how Jesus descended from David according to this promise. He came at the right time in history. God’s perfect time.

My spirit was unsettled recently about something I wanted and felt like God wasn’t moving fast enough. The words to the hymn “I’d Rather have Jesus” came to mind and after the words convicted me they became my prayer! I would rather have Jesus than silver or gold, riches, houses, land, man’s applause, worldwide fame, a vast domain! I would rather be led by His nail-pierced hand. My Good Shepherd knows what I need and He knows when I need it.

The advent season teaches us to trust as we wait. We wait for anticipated gifts, for traditions, for the joy of Christmas Eve and Christmas morning. And in my relationship with God I am strengthened as I wait on my Shepherd to lead me. Patience is developed as I wait and trust His perfect timing.

Teach me, Lord, to be content until you move. Protect me from the sway of sin and from impatience. Help me set my mind on things above, to trust my Shepherd and His timing, to be content where you have me. To trust that when the time is right You will lead me where I am supposed to be. One movement of Your hand can change everything!

God’s timing is never early or late or faulty. We can trust Him!

I will choose to DELIGHT in today!



DECEMBER 4, 2021 // Day 4
Saturday

MICAH 5:2-5

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times. Therefore, Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor gives birth and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace.

The prophet Micah lived in troubled times. God's people had been divided into two kingdoms. War and strife were constant. The Northern Kingdom would fall into the hands of Assyria and the people of Judah would face a similar fate. Micah, and other prophets during this time, tried to warn Israel, but in most cases their words were completely ignored or shortly forgotten. How hard must it have been to be one of these prophets? I think Jeremiah accurately describes why the prophets were able to persist:

...his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary from holding it in; indeed, I cannot.

~Jeremiah 20:9

I think that the fire Jeremiah describes is the power of God's truth.

In the verses we read today, Micah lays out a wonderful truth that God has planned. Yes, Israel had appeared to have been abandoned because of their sin, but there is hope. A ruler would come from one of the smallest clans in Judah, whose origins are from ancient times (from the days of eternity). A ruler who was with God since the beginning (John 1:2).

Jesus Christ is the ruler who would come to be a shepherd for his people. He would come to this world to conquer sin and death. Like a good shepherd, Jesus was prepared to give his life to protect his flock. We can now live securely, knowing that Jesus is our bridge to spending eternity together with the Lord.

How comforting is that last verse? Jesus did not come to bring peace, but to be our peace! We can be at peace because Jesus has broken the power of sin over us. We can be at peace because Jesus can provide rest for our souls. We can be at peace because we know that Jesus loves the imperfect beings that we are.

As we approach the celebration of Christ's birth, let us give thanks that we have a good shepherd who loves us and who is our peace!

Joy to the world, the Lord has come!

PRAYER

Jesus, we thank you that you are our peace. Help us to live in that truth today. Amen.



DECEMBER 5, 2021 // Day 5
Sunday

GENESIS 12:1-3

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

GOD IS FAITHFUL

Fast forward several thousand years. We now see this promise unfolding before our eyes. We know the nation of Israel descended from Abraham and from this nation came the lineage of Jesus. Because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, those of us who have trusted in him have already experienced this blessing and will continue to experience it for all eternity.

What about Abraham? He couldn't see how the promise would be fulfilled. He was told to leave his home and family to travel to a land he did not know. God told him that his family would be a blessing to the entire world, but he did not yet have any children. How could any of this be? How did Abraham respond? In faith and obedience. He did not know how God would fulfill His promise, but he knew that God was faithful.

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.
-Hebrews 11:1*

*By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.
-Hebrews 11:8*

Maybe you are currently in a season of waiting, longing for a promise that has not yet been fulfilled. Maybe God has called you to step out in faith and trust Him, but you still need to take that first step. Maybe you are walking in obedience but aren't sure what the next step is. We can see throughout the story of the Bible how God fulfilled his promise to Abraham through Jesus. Remembering stories of God's faithfulness in the scriptures helps us to trust Him, especially when like Abraham, we can't see the full picture.

This advent season, we can look to the birth of Jesus as a reminder that God fulfills his promises. He always has, and He always will.



DECEMBER 6, 2021 // *Day 6*
Monday

GENESIS 49:9-10

NOT SAFE. BUT GOOD.

There is this wonderful thing that happens in *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis that blows my mind each time I read it. When the Pevensie children find their way into the magical land of Narnia through the wardrobe, they enter a world where the rightful king is a Lion named Aslan. When the children hear of Aslan for the first time, they think of him as a man like them, and boy are they surprised when Mr. Beaver (an actual beaver) calls him a great lion. Susan responds as one would expect, saying, "I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." Then she asks Mr. Beaver if Aslan is "safe" leaving him to reply, "Safe? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King."

Not safe... but Good.

I can't help but be reminded of this story when I read Genesis 49:9-10. Jacob is giving his final words to his children, and he turns to Judah. "Judah is a lion's cub; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down; he crouched as a lion and as a lioness; who dares rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples."

The eyes of Jacob, as weak as they had become in his old age, are seeing very far ahead as he pronounces this truth. This line of Judah would bring forth the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. Charles Spurgeon would write: "Let that man beware who would attack this Lion of the tribe of Judah: 'Who dares to rouse him?' If one persecutes his followers, he will rouse him. If one denies his truth, tramples on the doctrine of atonement, and rejects his love, he will rouse him. Terrible is the King of Judah when he is once aroused."

He is terrible to behold. He is dangerous and not a tame Lion... and that is good news for those who trust in Him. He is a protector and guardian of every believing heart that puts its hope in Him. He's not safe, but he is always good. He is the King. Jacob reminds us in verse 10 that His rule will never end. He cannot be defeated. He may have taken our place on the cross as a lamb led to slaughter, but on the third day, He roared in triumph over death when he left that tomb. The Lion of the tribe of Judah did come, and he promises to come again to defeat sin, death, and hell once for all. Don't you long for that day?

As we turn our eyes towards the coming of Christ during this advent season, I pray that our hearts would burn inside our chests. He is glorious and terrifying to behold, yet he beckons us to draw near and embrace him.

We do good to remember that Jesus has no rival. He is mighty beyond our wildest dreams. Will you trust in the wondrous power of our King today? Would you remember, regardless of whether you see it now or not, that He is good?

After all, I think Mr. Beaver was onto something.

Not safe... but always good.



DECEMBER 7, 2021 // Day 7
Tuesday

ISAIAH 40:3-5

*A voice of one crying out: Prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness,
make a straight highway for our God in the desert.
Every valley will be lifted up, and every mountain and hill will be leveled;
the uneven ground will become smooth and the rough places, a plain.
And the glory of the Lord will appear, and all humanity together will see it,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.*

ADVENT: COMING

In ancient days, a crier or herald was sent ahead of a journeying king, especially in wilderness or desert areas and untraveled countries with no public highways, to prepare for their passage. Pioneers would answer the call of duty and literally leveled hills, constructed bridges over valleys or filled them up, scouted out fording places over streams, provided supplies, removed any hindrances.

Isaiah was speaking about the already and the not yet in chapter 40 of his book. He was referring to the deliverance of God's people from Egyptian bondage as well as their return from Babylon—both of which involved an immense tract of wilderness or desert with difficult passage. God made the way straight and cleared the path for the exodus of His people and for their return from captivity. God would also call for the Jewish Church through John the Baptist, who was sent to announce and prepare people for the coming of Jesus, the Messiah. The Church was in a barren and desert condition, and John called for repentance of sin throughout all Judah and Jerusalem (John 3:1-3).

The glory of the Lord—the majesty, power, and honor of Yahweh—appeared and would appear. He displayed his power, showing himself to be a covenant-keeping God, by delivering his people from their bondage and into their own land. And the glory of Yahweh would be manifest to all human beings together, not just Jews. The glory of the Lord would also be shown in the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

LEVELED BY DIVINE GRACE

May this voice crying out, and the power of the Holy Spirit along with it, give us the heart of a pioneer in the wilderness, setting to work in leveling our roads and preparing the way for Christ's salvation for us.

If we are hindered from comfort in Christ by the valleys of life, we must be exalted. If we are hindered by pride and conceit in our own merit and worth, those mountains and hills must be made low. If we are hindered by sin, we must repent and make those ways straight.

And in God's will and by His grace, our hearts will be opened and the glory of the Lord will be revealed.

(source commentaries: Benson, Barnes, Matthew Henry)



DECEMBER 8, 2021 // Day 8
Wednesday

ISAIAH 42:1-4

Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law.

I love learning the parallels between the Old Testament and the New Testament. It really puts things in perspective for me for how God has designed this grand plan from the beginning of creation. How He knew that we would need a Savior and how we've been reconciled and redeemed. This happens over and over throughout the Bible.

Isaiah 42 tells us to take note of His Servant through the word "behold". This Servant is the prophecy of Jesus to come in the New Testament, the only one who can bring justice to all nations, who can endure the life of man while serving the Father to completion. Jesus gave His life as ransom for all. This shows just how far a Servant goes to obey and please his Master. But, being a servant is a choice and serving humbly and gently is also a choice. Serving equally is a choice. Jesus served and is still serving with undeniable power to bring justice to all and irrefutable gentleness to those who are far from him.

What speaks to me most is how He will not break the already bruised and broken. No matter how infant-like someone's faith is or how someone is struggling with their long-time faith due to life circumstances, Jesus deals with us all with the utmost gentleness and love. And He does this because He loves us so deeply. A love that is truly incomprehensible without knowledge of who the Father is. Jesus has provided for us the example and instruction of how to live and how to love. The Bible invites us to "behold" the love of God that He has provided through the gift of His son Jesus Christ. Let us take note to seek out the lost and to serve and love others with the gentleness of Jesus.



DECEMBER 9, 2021 // Day 9
Thursday

ISAIAH 53:2-6

For He grew up before Him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him. He was despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as One from whom men hide their faces, He was despised, and we esteemed Him not. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. (ESV)

This portion of Scripture is beloved by all who have been “healed” by the “wounds” of the Savior (v. 5; 1 Peter 2:24). It is a glorious song that sings the sweet melody of redemption to our ears. However, the Word of God is a double-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12 NIV) and this passage rightfully pierces our hearts with sorrow. For it was our sins that nailed Christ to the cross in which He so willingly embraced in our place (v. 4-5).

It brings to reality the gravity of our sins, but also reveals the depth of God’s love for us (see Romans 5:8). The Lord God would send His suffering Servant to rescue us, to suffer the punishment we deserved, and to free us from the power of sin. It pleased God to crush Jesus on the cross (Isaiah 53:10 NASB), His only Son with whom He was well pleased (Matthew 3:17), because “For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Oh, what endless love our God has for us!

We are reminded that our wayward hearts tend to stray from the presence of the Lord. “Like sheep we have all gone astray” (v. 6a); however, Jesus leaves the ninety-nine to find the one sheep gone astray (see Matthew 18:12; Luke 15:4). He says “I am the good Shepherd. The good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep” (John 10:11) and the Lord has laid on our good Shepherd the “iniquity of us all” (v. 6b). Isaiah 53:2-6 is a picture of what Jesus would willingly endure to bring His sheep into the pasture of God’s mercy, grace, and rest.

As we celebrate the birth of our Messiah, let us rejoice in the victory He has won through His death, burial, and resurrection. Let us marvel at the incomprehensible grace of God and His infinite love for us all. Moreover, let us imitate the “Founder and Perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2 paraphrased). He has “borne our griefs and our sorrows” (v.4) and interchanged them with joy and peace that cannot be measured. And though this is a beautiful song of the Savior’s sacrifice for us, let us not forget He is triumphant. Through His victory He has given us a “new song” to sing: “Worthy are You,” Lord Jesus, “for You were slain, and by Your blood You ransomed people for God” (Revelation 5:9 paraphrased; emphasis added)!



DECEMBER 10, 2021 // Day 10
Friday

ISAIAH 61:1-3

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.

FIXING ALL THE BROKEN THINGS

In Zagreb, Croatia, there is a place called the Museum of Broken Relationships. People from all over the world donate their objects and stories – mementos of their failed relationships – for display in the museum. Started by a Croatian couple in 2010, after they ended their relationship with each other, the Museum of Broken Relationships has grown in both size and popularity, so much that it now has temporary exhibits in cities around the globe, including London, New York, Tokyo, and Shanghai. But you probably didn't need to know there is a Museum of Broken Relationships to understand that we live in a brokenhearted, aching world.

Isaiah the prophet seemed to understand brokenhearted people, as he penned these words in chapter 61. He spoke so poetically about bringing good news and binding up brokenhearted people and setting prisoners free. Isaiah wrote these words around 680 years before Jesus was born. He preached a bold message of repentance, calling the rebellious nation of Judah back to God. Isaiah's words in chapter 61 hold out the hope of future blessings that would be heralded into the world through the yet-to-come, promised Messiah.

The truly amazing thing about these words in Isaiah 61 is that they are also found in the New Testament in Luke 4. When Jesus walked out of obscurity and into the temple in Nazareth, announcing that His public ministry had begun, He unrolled the scroll and began to read aloud to the people gathered there on the Sabbath day. And He read these words from Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

When Jesus finished reading, He rolled up the scroll and announced, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Wow! Talk about a sermon, waking up the regular Sabbath crowd. Wonder if the people who showed up at the temple that day had any idea they were hearing from God Himself, speaking those words about good news for the poor and freedom for prisoners and sight for blind people.

I love the Christmas story, with its shepherds and angels and the baby. And as lovely as that story is, I need to keep reminding myself that Jesus came to earth because ultimately we are all broken people who need a Savior. No wonder the angels sang "glory!"



DECEMBER 11, 2021 // Day 11
Saturday

LUKE 1:5-25

And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news."

-Luke 1:18-19

In today's passage we are introduced to Zechariah and Elizabeth. This is a faithful couple who have served the Lord for decades. Luke tells us that they were "righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord" (v. 6). Sometimes I wonder what words would be used to describe my walk with the Lord if I was written about in Scripture. How special to have this written about them!

This couple loved the Lord and followed him. But for all the blessing they felt from the Lord, they did not have children. It wasn't because they chose not to, the Bible is clear, Elizabeth was barren (v. 7). It appears that they wanted to have a child but had given up on that dream and instead of shaking their fists at the Lord, they praised him with their life, no matter their lot.

Zechariah was a priest, and he was given a big honor. He was to go into the temple and burn incense as an offering to the Lord. While he was there something amazing happened. An angel of the Lord appeared and told him that his prayer had been answered. His wife, Elizabeth, would conceive and have a child. This child would be named John and he would herald the coming of the Messiah. They had been praying for this for years, and this prayer was answered in a magnificent way, the news delivered by Gabriel himself!

What was Zechariah's response? Pretty much it was, "yeah right!" He didn't believe it was possible. His wife was old, he was old, no way.

Isn't it funny how we go to the Lord with bold prayers and we doubt that the Lord can do it? I mean, this guy was righteous, a priest who was chosen to go and offer incense. Gabriel, who is in the very presence of the Father on the daily, was there delivering this news. If anyone would have faith, it should be Zechariah. But he just couldn't believe it.

I think we are like this as well. We pray but don't follow through in faith.

Do you believe in miracles? What are the bold prayers you are praying? Who are the people you are praying for? I encourage you not to give up. Not one of our prayers is wasted (Revelation 5:8). It might seem impossible, but with God all things are possible (Matthew 19:26). Don't give up your hope, keep the faith, you never know how the Lord might choose to act. And when he does, praise him for the good thing he has done in your life.



DECEMBER 12, 2021 // Day 12
Sunday

MATTHEW 1:1-17

RIGHTFUL HEIR

The authenticity and reliability of Jesus' human identity matters—genealogy was taken very seriously in ancient Israel. Ancestral records were used to prove land ownership as well as an authentic place among people. For instance, in order to serve, priests had to prove an unbroken line of male descent from Aaron, Moses' brother.

God led Matthew to carefully validate Jesus' human credentials in the opening of his book, written to a primarily Jewish audience, with the indisputable claims that 1) Jesus Christ of Nazareth was the legitimate heir, traced back from Abraham to King David's throne, and 2) Jesus was the fulfillment of divine prophecies (to send a deliverer through God's people) given from the beginning of humanity. On the day of Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, the people shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" Had He been an impostor, Jesus' enemies would have disputed His genealogy—the validity of that claim contributed to their desire to crucify Him.

NERDING OUT

Genesis 5 genealogy repeats the refrain "and he died", highlighting the sting of death that entered mankind through Adam's sin. Matthew 1 genealogy emphasizes life, and that Jesus came to save His people from their sins. Only Jesus Christ, the second Adam, could reverse the curse brought by the first Adam. There is also a lot of intentional organization in Matthew's genealogy in the deliberate structure—3 cycles of 14 generations representing specific periods in Israel's history, and in the numbers correlating to the Hebrew alphabet giving significance to the repeated number 14, drawing attention to the letters DVD (David). All these things qualify Jesus as Messiah.

GOD'S GRACE

Matthew's message, beyond the list of names or deliberate structure from Abraham to Jesus, is a beautiful case for grace. Everyone listed in the human lineage of Jesus needed a Savior. God chooses to use people with human limitations and failures to show us that Jesus is the Savior all sinners need.

Old Testament ancestry almost never mentioned women. Before Christ, the hardness of men's hearts meant women were given less legal status than men. The background stories of the five women Matthew included in his genealogy were not who people may expect to be in the line of Christ. They had mostly Gentile backgrounds, several were caught up in or subjected to sexual sin, several were widowed, and the final one was young and unmarried. Matthew intentionally departed from Jewish tradition to highlight these unlikely ancestors of the Lord Jesus Christ, the holy Son of God, pointing to God's grace toward people of all nations and backgrounds. Matthew's genealogy upholds God's faithfulness and the undeserved grace He pours out on sinful people.

God does not offer a bright future only to those without a sinful past—everyone has a sinful past, and everyone needs a Savior. Are you living as a new creation because of what Jesus has won for you?

(source commentary: Bible Study Fellowship)



DECEMBER 13, 2021 // Day 13
Monday

MATTHEW 1:18-25

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

We meet Joseph at a crossroads. The woman he is betrothed to marry is pregnant. Knowing he wasn't the father, he made the expected assumption: the father of the baby is another man. Something had to be done and Joseph, a righteous man, had a plan. But God always has the best plan and He had specifically chosen Joseph to be a part of it.

God knew Mary's pregnancy would create conflict for Joseph. In His loving kindness, God revealed His plan to Joseph in a way that would help Joseph obey and submit to God's unexpected truth: this child was the promised Messiah, fully human and fully God. Let's examine the importance of this truth.

Jesus is fully God. God revealed to Joseph that "What is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit is responsible for taking Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, and giving Him human form. The very Jesus that was present at the formation of the world came to earth and gave sight to the blind, calmed the stormy sea and brought the dead to life.

Jesus is fully human. God tells Jacob that Mary "will give birth to a son." From birth to death, Jesus identifies with each of us. He felt hunger and pain. He experienced joy and sadness. Jesus was tempted to sin but was sinless, making Him the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Jesus is the promised Messiah. God declares the child's purpose: "he will save his people from their sins." By calling Joseph "son of David," God confirms that Joseph is an heir to David's throne. Joseph obeys God by bringing the child into his home and naming Him Jesus. The result of these obedient acts is that Joseph legally adopted Jesus. This adoption confirms Jesus is the rightful heir to David's throne and the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham and David.

It is Jesus, the Messiah who is fully God and fully human, who makes it possible for each of us to be adopted into God's family. All that is required is that you place your faith in Jesus.

Do you find yourself at a crossroads trying to reconcile who you perceive Jesus to be with the truth of who Jesus is? How does God's revelation to you in this passage that Jesus is the Messiah who is fully God and fully human encourage you to believe that Jesus is your Messiah?



DECEMBER 14, 2021 // Day 14
Tuesday

LUKE 1:26-38

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Being chosen by God doesn't mean gaining a trouble-free life. In fact, sometimes it means you will bear more pain, suffer more heartache, and shed more tears than others. You may struggle with more 'whys' about your circumstances. Surely Mary did. From the moment Gabriel told her what God had chosen her to do and Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant" (Luke 1:38, NIV) she signed on for a world of trouble she could not have begun to imagine.

Soon she would hear the whispers and feel the stares of her neighbors who knew she was pregnant out of wedlock. Their assumptions always followed her. Then when Jesus became an adult and started to teach and perform miracles, it was thrilling but also frightening. Who was this child of hers? And what would become of Him?

But nothing could have prepared Mary for the agony she would feel when she watched helplessly as haters stripped her son naked, beat Him, taunted Him, drove spikes through His hands and feet, and hoisted Him on a cross to die. There is no suffering like watching your child suffer. So this is what it means to be chosen.

Mary's story is not the picture-perfect happy life. She saw her firstborn tortured and killed, and even when He rose again, He was soon taken away. Yet the beauty of her life was that God used her pain for a purpose much larger than the hurt. The world now has a Savior, and Mary played a role in that.

When God chooses you, He may call you to a path of hardship. Say yes anyway. He can transform your darkest hours to accomplish His highest purposes.

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

~2 Corinthians 4:16-18



DECEMBER 15, 2021 // Day 15
Wednesday

LUKE 1:46-56

MARY'S SONG

"When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped inside her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit." -Luke 1:41

Luke 1:46-55 is Mary's beautiful song of praise to God. It pours out of her heart after her cousin, Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, proclaims her blessedness as the mother of our Messiah. Mary, in response, after what was certainly a tiring journey, discards all fatigue and echoes the prophecy in her song: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Her praise is a prayer of hope and promise. Her praise reminds us of God's character. Her praise reminds us that we are deeply loved by a holy God. His holiness means He is free from sin and exalted above all creatures. The Lord is perfect and we are lowly sinners in need of a savior. Yet, He calls us into fellowship with Him "just as he promised our ancestors."

This relationship might seem "upside down" from our normal...and it is. We are reminded of this in the latter half of these verses. He "looked with favor on the humble condition of his servant" when choosing a mother for the Messiah, rather than selecting a woman in high society. The Lord "scattered the proud" rather than honoring them. "He has toppled the mighty from their thrones and exalted the lowly. He has satisfied the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." God's kingdom inverts human structures and values, as we see in Mary's own experience.

We can read Mary's song and think these are wonderful thoughts. But do we really take seriously what she said? When we do this, the "Magnificat" unsettles us. Why? Because we tend to be proud. Because, though we are not kings nor billionaires, we live lives with authority and are not necessarily all that humble. And in comparison to most people in the world, we are rich. So, Mary's song can be unnerving to us, as, indeed, it should be. It challenges us to consider our values and goals. "Am I striving for the wrong things in life?" "How much of my life is devoted to seeking security, reputation, and power?" "How often do I hold on to my material blessings rather than sharing them with the poor and hungry?"

I don't believe the Lord, through Luke, put the "Magnificat" in scripture to make us feel guilty for what we have in the way of possessions or influence. Rather, it calls us to devote our lives to being, like Mary, a willing and humble servant of God. It reminds us that, like Israel, we are called to be God's servants in the world, serving others as a reflection of Christ and an extension of God's kingdom. Mary's song stirs a desire to live today for what really matters, so that God might use us for his purposes and glory.

In the days before Christmas, there will be many distractions and worries that will battle for your heart. Mary's song encourages us to step back, to think about our values and our goals. Perhaps, this season of Advent can offer a different way, a way of seeking, a way of serving, a way of sacrifice. The Holy Spirit encourages us in the "upside-down" Truth: the great, great God of the universe loves us in our lowliness. He doesn't love you because you built bridges or dug wells. He isn't attracted to your riches or your accolades. He loves you because he created you to be loved. Then, when our sinfulness kept us away, He sent His Son in the form of that child in Mary's womb as our hope and salvation; to take our sins upon Himself so that we could be restored to the Father forever! Amen.



DECEMBER 16, 2021 // Day 16
Thursday

LUKE 1:57-66

"His name is John"

Do you know what the meaning of your name is? I love hearing the meaning of names and I love that during the time of Zechariah and Elizabeth that names had a deeper meaning and purpose. It was customary at this time to name your child (especially boys) after their Father or another male family member - and if not that then a well known prophet or other meaningful person from the faith. God decides differently in the case of John the Baptist and because of that, teaches Zechariah and us something powerful and receives all of the Glory for it.

Zechariah's name means "the one whom Yahweh Remembers"—a wonderful name and one that really fits with his life well. Zechariah being advanced in years is finally blessed with a son of his own. God had not forgotten him. And even through his disbelief God didn't turn away - he saw him through it and honored his promise with restoring his voice.

John means "God has been gracious"—what a beautiful name! God picked this out just for him. I think I could write ten pages here on how God has been gracious in this whole story and then in my life as well. Think about how God has been gracious in this story and talk about it or spend some time writing it down - and likewise do the same for your own life.

God fulfills his promise to Zechariah—Zechariah's last words (words of doubt and unbelief) were: "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years". After many years of studying and knowing God—he just can't wrap his mind around this. How often are we like Zechariah?

The very next thing out of Zechariah's mouth were words of praise and belief - "His name is John, And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed and he spoke, blessing God."

He did not say his name will be John or I think it should be John—he said, "His Name Is John'.—God had already named him.

It's interesting to me that Zechariah didn't immediately want to tell everyone what it has been like to not be able to speak or communicate the last 9 months - it wasn't about him at all. It was all about God. God used a difficult circumstance for Zechariah's good and His glory! Zechariah's faith was increased by ten fold and the Lord received all of the honor for it. Is it possible that God is working in the same way in your life now?

For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God. Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. ~2 Corinthians 1:20-22

As we look back remembering the birth of Jesus this advent, let us trust and believe the promise of God that Jesus is coming soon.



DECEMBER 17, 2021 // Day 17
Friday

LUKE 1:67-80

PREPARE THE WAY

When was the last time you experienced something that made you so joyful you just couldn't contain it? Long-awaited news, a serious health issue battled and defeated... you can probably remember a lot about that moment without digging very hard into the recesses of your memory. In Luke 1:67-80, we meet Zechariah in the middle of one of these life-defining moments of joy. His excitement, exaltation, and expectation are three things to keep in mind as we enter this time of advent.

EXCITEMENT

Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth had earnestly been praying for a son, and when Gabriel, an angel of the Lord, appeared to him with news of a child to come, he could not believe what he was hearing and was struck mute for the duration of Elizabeth's pregnancy for his unbelief. He was then so overwhelmed about the birth of his son and what it meant for the people of Israel that he could not contain his joy. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah broke into a beautiful song of praise to God—who had heard his prayer and answered with the very thing he desired most and more. What is one way God has worked in your life today? With excitement, give thanks to Him for it.

EXALTATION

Zechariah's spirit propelled him into a time of exalting the God of Israel who fulfills his promises. Zechariah made it clear that God was the one working from one generation of his people to the next to bring about the one who would make all things right: Jesus! He praised God for being faithful to His prophecy of bringing into the world a prophet to prepare the way for Jesus. He praised the Lord for remembering and carrying out His covenant with Abraham promised over 2,000 years before. Zechariah knew he and his people were so far in debt to God because of their sin, yet because of His rich mercy, God chose to deliver them even still. He will always make good on His promises. What an amazing God we serve!

EXPECTATION

Zechariah was looking on in expectation at the beautifully orchestrated plan that was coming together before his very eyes. John, his own son, would prepare the way for the coming Messiah, in order that Jesus would deliver his people from their enemies, cancel out the debt they owed, and offer peace and salvation to all those who would believe and call on his name. John never strayed from the will of God for his life. He continued to prepare the hearts of those around him for the coming of the Messiah. His gaze fixed on Jesus, spreading that good news was his sole focus. Our calling is much like John's: we are called to be set apart and point the hearts of our neighbors, classmates, co-workers, friends, and everyone else we come across to the glory and splendor of Jesus, the son of the living God. The one who "shines on those living in darkness," and offers peace, rest, and salvation to those who call upon His name. While it may bring fear of disapproval or rejection, it is what we were made to do! During advent, I encourage you to pick one person to share the gospel with, praying the Spirit would guide you into gospel conversations. Our world is in need of light, and our call is to prepare the way for His Spirit to move in the hearts of those who call on His name.



DECEMBER 18, 2021 // Day 18
Saturday

LUKE 2:1-7

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole empire should be registered. This first registration took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So everyone went to be registered, each to his own town. Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family line of David, to be registered with Mary, who was engaged to him and was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. Then she gave birth to her first-born son, and she wrapped him tightly in cloth and laid him in a manger, because here was no guest room available for them.

When I think about how Jesus was brought into this human world, I think, wow, God could have put on the most glorious, powerful display of His strength right here in this moment. He could have blown up the world in amazement by this magnificent presence of Jesus, but he chose not to. He chose to bring us our Savior in the most humble and lowly way possible. Born of man, in a stable, and placed in a manger, was our King of Kings, our Prince of Peace.

I believe God made no mistake in Jesus's entrance to the world. The prophet Micah announced 700 years prior that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. God's plans were carefully laid out and fulfilled. God's timing was perfect, and the humbleness of Christ's arrival was absolute perfection. Jesus was fully God and he humbled himself and took on the likeness of man in the form of a bondservant. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 8:9 "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich".

As we celebrate this Christmas season. Let us not get caught up in the worldly pompousness of expensive and elaborate gifts and parties but let us recognize who we celebrate and why instead. Let us share the hope we have in Jesus with all those we meet. Let us love and serve the least of these reflecting the best gift of all, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior!



DECEMBER 19, 2021 // Day 19
Sunday

LUKE 2:8-14

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

Like most of you, we have plenty of Christmas traditions at the Carmona house. One of our favorites is watching A Charlie Brown Christmas. We love the story of these kids looking for the meaning of Christmas in so many different places until they finally find it in Christ. The show reaches its climax as Charlie Brown is letting his frustrations out to his friend Linus about everything he ever does turning into a disaster. Throwing up his hands he screams out, "Isn't there anyone who can tell me what Christmas is all about?" Linus calmly tells him that yes, he can, and he goes to the stage and quotes from today's passage. This is what Christmas is all about.

What makes this scene so cool is that Linus is known for holding his security blanket wherever he goes. You never see him without it in any movie or comic strip. It is what he clings to for protection. However, as he quotes this passage something pretty cool happens. When he gets to the angels telling the shepherds to fear not, Linus drops his blanket.

What a beautiful picture of Christmas found in a silly cartoon. All of us are like the kids in this show. We are all looking for the meaning to it all. We look for it in so many different places and those things turn into our "security blankets". We are clinging to things that we think can give us peace, comfort, and even hope.

It isn't a problem that we are looking for peace, security, comfort, and hope. Afterall, we all have fears, worries, all of us have insecurities. We all fall short; we all are lacking. The problem occurs when we seek our peace, comfort, security, and hope in things that can't provide it. The only place where true peace, comfort, hope, and security—eternal even—is found in Christ and Christ alone. This is why he came, to offer that to us. This is why we celebrate, because we have everything we are longing for in the boy born in a manger.

Amid our fear, worry, and anxiety about life, Jesus has come. He has come and, in our fear, worry, and anxiety we can toss aside our security blankets and cling to Jesus.

This is good news of great joy. This is for all people. This is for God's glory. This is so those with whom he is pleased may have peace.

Father, help us this Christmas, and every other day, cling to the peace that only Christ can give and not on to the earthly things that we far too often reach for.



DECEMBER 20, 2021 // Day 20
Monday

JOHN 1:1-4

The prologue of the Book of John, the Fourth Gospel, greets us with these words:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men.

Many aspects of this passage make it a favorite of Christian readers: its lyrical quality, its direct connection to Genesis 1:1, its shadowy introduction of the protagonist as 'the Word', and certainly its unabashed declaration of the Word's involvement in bringing about the Creation.

We've been here before, probably often, so we don't mind the shadows, the hints, the nuances, of John's teasing us along in his introduction of the main character. We have a reference point, in fact a whole series of points, because we know 'the Word' will also be called the Way, the Truth, the Life, the Cornerstone, the Gate, the Lion, the Lamb, and probably a dozen other attributes if we set ourselves to thinking about them. So, despite John's intrigue, we know who's behind the screen of pronouns, and we love being 'insiders' who know what's coming.

To start into John's gospel is like sitting down with an old friend, anticipating the rekindling of long-held memories, the re-telling of favorite stories. It's as comfortable as our best pair of shoes, as welcome as reclining in our favorite chair, as cherished as an autumn sunset.

Not so for the reader who has never been here before. Instead of relaxing with an old friend, the first sentence launches a clash with rationality that jars the senses and is impossible to ignore. How can the Word be 'with God' and simultaneously 'be God'? I can be with my family, but I cannot be my family. A woman can be with child, but she cannot be the child she is with. It's a contortion of space and time and personages that doesn't abide in our ability to understand, so the 'with-God, was-God' word play becomes a stumbling block, a conundrum that refuses to be untangled.

Neither can we as 'insiders' untangle the riddle: it is beyond our ken, and initially it troubles us, too. But we have other reference points to quiet our concerns. We've read in Isaiah "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts," so we've learned to accept as true some things that we can't explain. And we remember John's testimony, "...but when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth..." so read with patience, and we allow ourselves to be guided, and it's OK.

John may be the only person on this side of eternity who can or could make sense of the riddle, but even if he could make sense of it, we still can't understand it. So he doesn't offer an explanation, unless you take the ensuing twenty-one chapters of his gospel as his explanation.

But consider John's credentials: he was an eye-witness of The Word throughout His earthly ministry; he saw the vision on the mountain of transfiguration, and heard the voice from heaven proclaim, "This is my son..."; he watched The Word as he died on the cross, saw the empty tomb, met the resurrected Word, and witnessed His ascension into heaven.

After sixty years of ministry in the fledgling church he heard a voice from heaven calling, "Come up here..." and was instantly taken into the throne room of heaven. There he saw The Word—the Lion—the Lamb, "...looking as if it had been slain...", when He took the scroll from the One Seated on the Throne; he heard the new song that was sung to the Lamb; and was shown the destruction that will take place when God's wrath is no longer constrained.

He heard the voice from the throne proclaim, "I am making everything new!", and saw a rider on a white horse, whose name is The Word of God, and whose title proclaims Him to be King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Finally, John heard The Word describe Himself as the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. These are the same words used by the One Seated on the Throne when He described Himself to John.

And with that, John knows all that can be known about the riddle. He understands.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

It's so much bigger than Christmas, but John brings us to Christmas a few verses later, when he writes,

The Word became flesh, and made his dwelling among us.

With that simple declaration of truth, the Word is no longer an incomprehensible riddle. The Word—who is The Lamb, The Lion, The Alpha and The Omega!—in the moment when he stepped down from heaven to enter the domain of men and make His dwelling among us, the moment which we call Christmas, He became The Babe in the Manger.



DECEMBER 21, 2021 // *Day 21*
Tuesday

LUKE 2:15-21

When we reflect on this passage, there are a few things I consider to help give me a more accurate depiction of the circumstances of this night. First, everyone involved on this night would have been familiar with the Old Testament and knew that Jesus's birth was prophesied 700 years earlier in Isaiah. I am sure that was very overwhelming alone. Second, the appearance of angels at this point in history was usually followed by something bad. With that in mind, I am certain the shepherds were very scared. Much like Mary was when the angel first came to her. Third, the fact that Mary and Joseph could not find a room must have been terrifying as expectant parents.

I often make the mistake of picturing this scene as what is portrayed in our society: a snow-covered barn with hay, a warm fire, and shepherds in clean robes. In all actuality, it was probably dirty, smelly, and less than desirable. There was not a doctor, nurse, or midwife, but regardless of the circumstances, everyone there was blessed to witness the greatest event in history. And they all knew it!

I have always been captivated by the fact that God chose shepherds to be the messengers to the world of the birth of His one and only Son. There are no coincidences in God's plan, so it is no coincidence that the shepherds, who looked after the sheep for sacrifice, were the first ones to see the perfect Lamb. God could have picked anyone to play this role, but He did not. He picked shepherds tending to their flock. Historically, shepherds were not exactly at the top of the social ladder. Their work often kept them from maintaining the ceremonial washings and observing all the religious festivals. God did not pick a king, queen, or a rabbi. There was no fancy feast or even a bed. Jesus, the King of all creation, lying in a manger with Mary and Joseph beside him, and some "outcasts" to welcome Him into the world. Not only did they welcome him into the world, but they also went to proclaim Him to the world! The odd thing is the Bible tells us that everyone that heard this wondered, but it does not say anyone went to see what the shepherds had told them.

I believe this sends a beautiful message that Jesus did not come to die for just the select few. Yes, He did come to die for their sins also, but He came to die for everyone's sins. Kings to outcasts, and anything in between, this baby was born to die so we all can know the one and only true King.

I could not imagine the emotions in the manger on that night. I know from being a father the excitement, thoughts, fears, and anxiety I felt when my children were handed to me when they were born. I was so happy, but scared I was not good enough to be their father. Then, I thanked God for them and pondered what did I do to deserve such a blessing. Mary and Joseph had to have wondered why them? In Israel, women would pray they would be the mother of the Messiah. All too often I forget that we celebrate the birth of Jesus as our Lord and King, which is what we should do, but I forget that this was also a son to Mary and Joseph. Jesus was born fully human and fully divine. He did not become divine later in life. In this very moment He was the Son of God, but also loved and adored by his earthly parents. This is an important fact to remember because if Jesus was not fully human, He could not have been born or die for the sins of the world. What a responsibility to be blessed with, Emmanuel!

I pray this holiday season, and every day, each of us can go and proclaim the good news of Jesus's birth to someone; anyone, just as the shepherds did on this special night!



DECEMBER 22, 2021 // Day 22
Wednesday

JOHN 1:5-13

During our family vacation this past summer in Pigeon Forge, we took an afternoon excursion to the Tuckaleechee Caverns in Townsend, Tennessee. Two young boys in the 1930's, Bill Vananda and Harry Myers, discovered the caverns while playing near a sink hole. They began to explore the caverns as young boys might do. The only light came from a kerosene lantern which allowed them to see only a few feet in front of them. When they eventually told their parents about their discovery, the parents did not believe them. Boys, after all, sometimes have big imaginations! So, they kept their discovery to themselves for years. After their college days, Bill and Harry raised the money, purchased the rights, and, in 1953, opened the caverns to the public.

At one point during our tour, we were in an area of the cavern called the Big Room. This room is, as the name implies, huge measuring 400 feet long by 300 feet wide and 150 feet tall. For perspective, you could fit a football field in it with sidelines and end zones! While we were in the Big Room, the tour guide asked if we have ever experienced total darkness. She explained, if not, we were about to! And, at that moment, she turned off the lights. And there we were, in total darkness. Thankfully, it was only about a minute when she turned back on the lights!

Even if you've never been in the Big Room with the lights turned off, you've experienced total darkness but, of another kind. I'm talking about spiritual darkness. It is a darkness that has engulfed everyone...you...me...yes, everyone! And the answer for that kind of darkness is not electric lights and a switch. It is the Light which has come into this world. It is the Light that shines in the spiritual darkness. It is the Light that spiritual darkness can never extinguish. It is the Light, John wrote about in John 1:5-13:

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it. God sent a man, John the Baptist, to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. John himself was not the light; he was simply a witness to tell about the light. The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.

Christmas is the time when we celebrate the coming of Light into this world. It is the time when Jesus, who was The Light, was born. By grace through faith, a person can come out of spiritual darkness into the Light. And for those who do, they come into a love relationship with God through His Son, Jesus. As John puts it, they are reborn and “become children of God.”

This Christmas, as you celebrate Jesus' birthday, give glory to God for that true and inextinguishable Light, Jesus. Praise God for the Light that has changed your life and brought you out of total spiritual darkness. Share the story of the Light with those you know who think Christmas is only about Santa Claus, being with family, and giving presents. Be like John the Baptist and tell others about the Light so they, too, might believe and come out of spiritual darkness.



DECEMBER 23, 2021 // Day 23
Thursday

JOHN 1:14-18

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "this was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.") For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

ABSOLUTELY AMAZING!

Sit in the proclamation of those initial nine words. Soak in what John is telling us here and it's difficult to keep reading because one's mind can scarcely wrap around it!

The Word, existing before all else, has now taken on human form, baby to child to teen to adult man. The Word, God Himself, Creator of the universe and everything in it, came to live and walk and teach and love among people. Just sit with that fact for a minute. It's a lot to take in. And there's more.

The Lord provided a great covenant of laws through Moses but by His incredible power and love, he gave us an even better covenant in Jesus Christ, His Son, the Word! Jesus Christ embodied God's grace and truth, allowing people to witness the Lord's glory in the flesh. We deserved nothing yet He gave us everything out of His overflowing grace. To know this to be true is wonderfully mind-blowing, deeply humbling and beautifully exciting!

Do we worship, live and love in a way that reflects we understand how absolutely amazing this is? John's passion for what he knows to be true is palpable in verse 15. He did not just "say" but he "cried out" this is the One! John is uninhibitedly desperate to make known to others whom Jesus Christ is. He is crying out to all who will listen that Jesus is the Word! He is Glory! He is Grace! He is Truth! He is the Son of God!

If your passion to proclaim the Gospel to others has waned, take this Advent season to reignite. Absorb the words God gave us through John. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you connect to John's intense emotion and desire to share what the Lord God did for us through His Son Jesus Christ. May we never see it as anything short of breathtakingly wonderful because knowing something so extraordinary to be true, one could not help but share it.



DECEMBER 24, 2021 // Day 24
Friday

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

As we Americans celebrate the birth of Christ with beautiful classic hymns like O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, O Holy Night, and Joy to the World, let us look back to a passage that many believe to be one of the first “Christmas hymns” ever sung. Philippians 2:1-11 notably contains some of the most theologically dense yet poetically beautiful words in the entire Bible. Here, Paul pleads with God’s people to take up the same selfless mind of Christ, who “emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Phil 2:6). Many scholars believe that the poetic structure of verses 6-11 indicates that the passage was intended to be read as a hymn. Similar to many modern hymns celebrating the birth of Jesus, this opening portion of Philippians 2 points to the incarnation of Christ as an unimaginable act of humility worthy of both celebration and imitation.

CELEBRATION

While the first five verses here urge us to walk in humility and unity, the last six verses provide us with the greatest possible example of humility. In other words, Christ’s incarnation, where He fully suspended His divine rights as King of the universe to take on the form of a man, serves as the basis for our unity and humility today. As one pastor once said, “The moment we are no longer filled with amazement at the incarnation is the same moment we fail to fully appreciate the love of Jesus.” It should never cease to blow our minds that the preexistent, self-sustaining, all-powerful King of the universe took on human flesh. In His frail humanity, He was subject to hunger, thirst, tiredness, temptation, humiliation, and eventually death. However, because He successfully endured these things for the joy set before Him (Heb 12:2), we have been invited into the family of God and now have access to a high priest who can sympathize with us in our weakness (Heb 4:15). Again, how mind-blowing is it that the one whom all things were created by and for (Col 1:16) is able to sympathize with us? Let us celebrate together the unimaginable humility of Christ!

IMITATION

As we continue to reflect on these 11 verses, let us ask ourselves—how seriously do we take Paul’s command to imitate Christ’s humility? If Jesus’ humility is indeed the basis and example for our humility, what should our lives look like? According to Paul, we would be of one mind, completely unified, doing nothing from selfish ambition or vain conceit, but always valuing others as greater than ourselves (Phil 2:2-3). As the great South African writer Andrew Murray explains, “If humility is the first, the all-inclusive grace of the life of Jesus—if humility is the secret of His atonement—then the health and strength of our spiritual life will depend entirely upon our putting this grace first and making humility the chief quality we admire in Him, the chief attribute we ask of Him, the one thing for which we sacrifice all else.” The selfless humility of Christ is at the very center of His being. Murray even goes as far here as saying that Christ’s humility is what we should admire about Him most. Therefore, as we seek to imitate Christ with our lives, let us be a people who in humility set aside our personal privileges for the sake of loving others the way Jesus would.



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