

Introduction

Ad-ven-ture. The Oxford dictionary defines adventure as “an unusual and exciting, typically hazardous, experience or activity.”

My hope for this devotional is to bring some adventure to our Christmas season. You might be thinking that’s the last thing you need. Your December is already going to be bustling. Adding something unusual and exciting to your calendar doesn’t sound like a good idea. “A hazardous holiday season? No thank you!” Before you put this down, let me tell you a story that I hope will help you understand your *need* for adventure.

While I consider myself as being from Florida, much of my childhood was spent in middle Georgia. Only being a few hours away, it became customary for our family to spend Thanksgiving with relatives in Ringgold. Ringgold is a small town in the Peach State just south of the Tennessee state line. Every fourth week of November, we’d drive the few hours north, anticipating a wonderful time of fellowship with family and a turkey dinner with all the trimmings. Our trip would take us through Chattanooga and right by Lookout Mountain. I knew we were getting close to our destination when we started to pass “See Rock City” and “Ruby Falls” advertisements on barns and billboards. As a family, we went up Lookout Mountain a couple times but never got to visit Ruby Falls. Only a few Februarys ago, all these years later, did I realize what I was missing.

Elizabeth and I had the opportunity to spend a few days in Chattanooga. One afternoon we decided to visit Ruby Falls. We had a blast. If you’ve ever been there, you know how it works. After descending into the mountain via elevator, you journey through the cave on a narrow pathway stopping to see different rock formations, and eventually the pathway opens into a larger cavern where you see the waterfall thunder downward into a deep pool. It is simply beautiful.

I can’t even tell you how many times we drove by Lookout Mountain. All those childhood gazes out the car window looking at the mountain and never knowing what breathtakingly beautiful sight lay beneath it. Now, after seeing the formations and the falls, I’ll never view the mountain the same way again. My appreciation for something I saw a thousand times grew exponentially after I journeyed deeper into it. And here’s my entire point, it took some adventure to do so!

In an illustrative way, we drive right by Christmas. It seems as if we are so focused on our destination we don’t make the effort to go deeper. The Bible beckons us to see Christmas for what it really is in the same way the Ruby Falls advertisements sought to draw us in. To get to Ruby Falls we had to do something different. So, this Christmas season let’s go on an adventure. Let’s go deeper. If we do, I think God can so change our perspective by what we see we’ll never celebrate Christmas the same way again!

On Day 1, I’ll explain the particulars of this devotional. On December 1st, read Day 1 and there our adventure begins!

Merry Christmas – Pastor Andrew

Part 1

Jesus' Childhood

To start our journey to Ruby Falls, Elizabeth and I paid, got our tickets, descended into the mountain, and heard an introduction from a guide for how the journey would work.

After saying a prayer (which we did as we descended into the mountain), we will observe some moments in the life of Jesus as a baby then as a boy as a type of orientation for our adventure. These moments can set us on the right path to understand and appreciate the heart of our Savior King in greater ways this Christmas.

Day 1 Planning and Praying

If you are unfamiliar with advent historically, conceptually, or theologically you can check out gotquestions.org and just search “what is advent?” For the purposes of this devotional, we are going to keep it simple. Practically, advent is a day-to-day approach to celebrating Christmas which helps us to slow down and be more spiritually intentional in a busy season. Read one page each day in this devotional starting December 1 and we’ll finish on December 25.

Each devotion will start with a passage of Scripture so keep your Bible handy. As you go through this season, approach the devotions with prayer. Ask God to reveal to you in a unique way the character and glory of our Lord. Our hope is to truly celebrate Jesus as we take this advent journey together.

We are going to use the “unusual” and “different” aspects of adventure and the story I told you in the introduction as our framework to build upon. Like the tour stops on our journey through the caves under Lookout Mountain, we’ll pause at some different, less well-known moments in Jesus’ life, as well as stories you know, that will reveal His character to us in unique ways creating for us a spiritual sense of adventure. Eventually our journey, that will start at the cradle, will lead us to the breathtakingly beautiful sight that is the cross.

Scripture: Hebrews 4:16

We *need* adventure. Our Christmas must be more than material, greater than gifts, and bigger than the boxes and bags under the tree. We have to see more of Jesus. So start this journey by confidently drawing near to the throne of grace. God rules and reigns over all as expressions of His unfathomable love flow from His heart. He is a king that wants to help us in our time of need.

There’s no doubt you’ll hear the song, “All I Want for Christmas is You” at least 50 times this season. Perhaps you’ve already heard it. That song typifies an unfortunate reality for so many during Christmas time. The most common Christmas consideration usually relates to our wants. God is more interested in what we *need*.

So, start this devotional journey by asking Him to help you have the kind of Christmas you need, which may be different than the kind of Christmas you want.

Right now... ask Him.¹

¹ Yes, right this moment.

Day 2 Before the Fullness of Time

Galatians 4:4

We are a people bound by time. I can't tell you how often I've felt silly checking my phone for the time while remembering I was wearing a watch.² Time matters to us. Sermons are measured in minutes, movies in hours, vacations in days, seasons in months, and our lives in years.

With all of that said, it is difficult for us to imagine a context in which time has no significance. I want you to do your best to use your imagination and go back before time began. Think pre-Eden thoughts. What makes this exercise extra difficult is that the only aspect of existence we are considering is God. Yes, before the events in Genesis 1:1 there was only God, existing in glad trinitarian unity into eternity past. I don't know about you but if I dwell on this too long I start to get a headache. So, let's make our point...the redemptive purpose of the incarnation must've always been in the mind of God. The fall in Genesis 3 did not thwart the plan of Genesis 1. God knew people would sin and therefore, there must be an aspect of redemption that brings God the most glory.

Our text in Galatians gives us a sort of peak behind the sovereign curtain. From eternity past to Genesis 1:1, throughout Old Testament history, and into the events of Matthew 1:1 the "fullness" of time was an object on the heavenly horizon moving closer to humanity. When the angel told Mary she'd give birth to the Savior, "fullness" had come forth. Another way of saying Galatians 4:4a would be "when it was the perfect time."

James Boice discusses the cultural moment of Jesus' birth this way, "It was a time when the *Pax Romana* extended over most of the civilized earth and when travel and commerce were therefore possible in a way that had formerly been impossible. Great roads linked the empire of the Caesars, and its diverse regions were linked far more significantly by the all-pervasive language of the Greeks. Add the fact that the world was sunk in a moral abyss so low that even the pagans cried out against it and that the spiritual hunger was everywhere evident, and one has a *perfect time* for the coming of Christ and for the early expansion of the Christian Gospel."

What God knew to be the ideal time for the incarnation since before time began had finally arrived.

This reminds us that God is perfectly sovereign. So, whatever circumstances this holiday season finds you in, even if they're particularly difficult, God has you there for a reason. Never forget that God works in the fullness of time. He did at the first Christmas, and still is today as we approach this one.

² In case you were wondering about a last-minute Christmas gift for me, I love watches.

Day 3

The Cradle

Luke 2:7

“Mary, Did You Know?” is one of my favorite Christmas songs.³ The lyrics convey incredibly powerful truths in a creative, engaging way. Some think the concept of the song is cheesy, I couldn’t disagree more.

Think about the scene that Luke 2:7 describes. Young Mary gently laying her newborn son into a feeding trough. What an unassuming, humble picture. Mary knew some truths about Jesus thanks to a visit from an angel but surely she couldn’t hope to comprehend the breadth of His blessed work. That is the point of the song after all. Did she know?

Let me share with you the verse of this Christmas carol that gets me every time:

Did you know that your baby boy, Has walked where angels trod?
When you kiss your little baby, You kiss the face of God.⁴

Even if Mary couldn’t have realized all of the eternal, theological, and complex realities that went into the moment she kissed her baby on the cheek, she still got that privilege. She most likely wasn’t pondering the mysteries of the incarnation as she awkwardly wrapped up a squirming baby in a way that only new parents can. Those moments around the manger were about Jesus, not information about Him.

We are tempted every year to celebrate truths about Jesus at the sacrifice of celebrating the Savior Himself. How can we make our Christmas more about Jesus and not just theological truths about Him? Think more in terms of the present tense not the past. As you reflect on the nativity, remember what that represents for you. That moment made your forgiveness and salvation possible.

When you sing about the blind seeing, the deaf hearing, and the dead living again, realize in a spiritual sense you are singing about yourself! If you’re in Christ, that baby that is represented in every nativity is *your* Savior and friend.

Don’t get me wrong, growing in your biblical knowledge is important, crucial even, but let’s not minimize our faith to being theologically precise. Let Luke 2:7 remind you Christmas about a person and His name is Jesus!

³ I was in youth group in the early 2000s so don’t judge me, but one of my favorite versions of Mary, Did You Know? is from Kutless. If you don’t know who that band is, look up their cover of this Christmas carol. No judgement or low volume listening allowed!

⁴ You sang the last two lines didn’t you?

Day 4 The Temple, Part 1

Luke 2:21-24

Jesus (def.) – “Jehovah is salvation.”

Joseph and Mary were devout Israelites. These verses tell us that they took Leviticus 12:2-3 seriously and sought to honor God, not just in how they named Jesus, but also how they raised him. The circumcision and purification ceremonies were reminders that all were born in sin and needed to be cleansed.

If anyone could have been excused from the circumcision and purification ceremonies, it was Jesus. Jesus was not a sinner by nature. He was not conceived naturally, but supernaturally. Joseph may have been Jesus’ adopted father, but Jesus was not his son by blood. Doctrinally, the virgin birth matters because if Jesus was conceived naturally he would have been passed a sin nature by Joseph and could not have been the sinner’s substitute. This is why Jesus is called the second Adam.⁵ He was born to undo the fall of the first Adam. Where Adam failed, Jesus succeeded.

1 Corinthians 15:22, “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.” Jesus not only didn’t have a sin nature, but He also was victorious over temptations to sin (Matthew 4:1-11). The darkness in Adam gave way to the light in Jesus.

So, why these rituals? If you read the passage I referenced in Leviticus 12, you’ll notice that these ceremonies were as much for the mother as they were for the son. These moments in the temple were *specifically* important for Mary, they were *symbolically* important for Jesus. At eight days old, Jesus was already being identified with sinners. The earliest moments of Jesus’ life foreshadowed what His time on earth would be all about. Read the words of one commentator about this passage...

“For he who knew no sin, and who never was to know sin, was already in His circumcision made sin for us. He was not so much as eight days in the world till he began to be numbered with the transgressors. Mary’s firstborn son was a lamb without blemish and without spot, but before He was a week old, he began to bear the sins of many...And as He began in the temple that day, so He continued every day to lead a life of pain, and shame, and blood-shedding, for us, for our children, till He finished on the cross the sin-atoning work His Father had given Him to do. And ever after that first day of His wounding of our transgression, that Holy Thing bore in His body the marks of our redemption” (Whyte).

Incredible right? Thank you Jesus for the blood applied...

⁵ I jokingly refer to a friend named Adam as “first Adam.” He is a sinner after all.

Day 5

Simeon

Luke 2:25-35

It has taken me to Day 5 to quote my favorite preacher. I know you have been on the edge of your seat waiting with great anticipation for an eloquent exclamation from the prince of preachers. Well, here you go. Spurgeon said this of Simeon...

“Simeon took Christ up in his arms. Somebody might have said, ‘Old man, thou mayest be just and devout; but darest thou handle the Incarnate God? Darest thou fondle him upon whose shoulders God hath laid the keys of His kingdom, whose name is called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace? Darest thou touch him?’ Yes, he dares to do it; he takes him up in his arms, he clasps him to his heart, he rejoices over him, he is ready to die with delight now that he has found Christ. Come, poor troubled ones, come tonight and take Christ into your arms! And you, dear saints of God, who have done this long ago, do it over again! Take him right up into your arms, as though he were still a babe. Take him still to your heart, and say, ‘He is everything to me – my love, my hope, my brother, this blessed Incarnate God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.’”

It was worth the wait wasn't it? Spurgeon helps us to come to grips with what has been a theme of our devotional so far, celebrating Jesus (not just truth about him). Remember that Jesus is close to you, He is near. You must embrace the fullness of His ministry to grow closer to Him as a friend. You can't compartmentalize Christ.

Let's make two observations about Simeon:

1. Though we can't be sure of his age, it's assumed by the context clues in the passage that he is an older man.⁶
2. Simeon's interaction with Mary starts with delight and ends with difficulty.

God had promised that Simeon would meet the Messiah before he died. Why would God have ordained this interaction to take place in Simeon's old age? We can't be sure, but it does remind us that God works according to His own timetable. And even if it isn't until the twilight of our lives, the Lord keeps His promises.

Mary must have taken particular joy at Simeon's prophecy, right up until verse 35. The sword that would pierce her soul would be seeing her Son crucified in agony and blood. But without the cross there would be no salvation, even for Mary. There are going to be difficult seasons as we follow Jesus but they're always for a purpose.

Be patient and purposeful as you journey with Jesus and if you do it will be easier to fully embrace Him, just like Simeon did.

⁶ I'll leave it to you to define "older."

Day 6

Anna, The Prophetess

Luke 2:36-38

Of all the sermons that I've sat through (and preached myself), I've never heard one on this devout lady we find in Luke's Gospel. We don't know a lot about Anna but here's what we discover from our passage:

1. She was a prophetess (v.36a).
2. She was an Israelite from the tribe of Asher (v.36b).
3. She was advanced in age (v.37a).
4. She was a woman of faithfulness and prayer (v.37b).

We can often get wrapped up in the mysterious aspects of Anna's life and miss what I think is the most important truth this text tells us. Don't overlook this part of v. 38, "She began to give thanks to God and to speak *of Him* to all who were waiting..."

Notice the connectivity between thankfulness and her desire to tell others about Jesus. Every fisherman knows what you do after catching a trophy fish.⁷ You take as many pictures as you can, and you show as many people as you can.⁸ No one has to convince you to show off pictures of your biggest fish.⁹ You yearn to show and tell others about that moment you landed a monster.¹⁰

We are going to tell stories of what we are the most passionate about. What does that tell us if we aren't regularly sharing about Jesus? We aren't as excited about Him as we should be. Here's where the thankfulness aspect of Anna's story comes in.

We can develop a "ho-hum" attitude about Jesus when we stop being thankful for the Gospel of grace. We stop being thankful for grace when we forget just how wicked we are. Let me put it plainly...you are a sinner who deserves judgement in this life and in the next. When we forget that or pretend it isn't true, we cheapen grace. When we regularly remember just how dark our sin is, it reveals over and over just how gracious and good God is and how radical our redemption is through Jesus' vicarious death.

When we are continually reminded of God's grace, we will grow in our gratitude. Thankful people tell others what they're thankful for.

⁷ Only the ones you can't eat. The ones you can, you deep fry as quickly as possible. Can I get an amen?

⁸ Every fisherman also knows the trick to making fish look bigger in pictures, hold the fish away from yourself and toward the camera. Works every time.

⁹ Mine is a bull shark. I'll show you a picture anytime.

¹⁰ And the bigger one that got away.

Day 7

The Temple, Part 2

Luke 2:39-52

Notice what Luke does while writing under the inspiration on the Holy Spirit. In just a few short words, he covers a twelve-year span of time. Up until now we've been discussing the earliest days of Christ's incarnation, His infancy. Now, we turn to the last moment of Jesus' childhood. Essentially, Luke's account of Jesus as a boy is bookended by time in the temple.

Parents know that there is no kind of panic like the one you feel when you are looking for a child and can't find them. Imagine the turmoil that Mary and Joseph were in as they journeyed back to Jerusalem and searched for their son over multiple days to no avail. Finally, after a frantic search, they found Jesus in the temple talking and teaching.

Even before Jesus grew up and started His ministry He knew that He was the Son of God (v.49). In the Judaism of that day, a boy about the age of twelve started learning the family business. Jesus was already prioritizing the Father's redemptive purposes over other worldly endeavors. Verse 51 seems to communicate that Jesus was not intentionally disobeying His earthly parents by staying in Jerusalem. He was willingly "submissive" and obedient. We can deduce that Jesus so prioritized God's Word that He missed the caravan back to Nazareth.

We often find ourselves in opposite circumstances. We seem to travel in every cultural caravan that we neglect God's Word and God's will. With that said, it's good for us to be engaged, informed, and involved in our society. We don't want to put our head in the sand and pretend that the world isn't the way it is. At the same time, we should be most engaged and involved in the Father's business, the business of redemption.

Christmastime is one of the most oxymoronic seasons on our calendar. What was meant to be all about Jesus has devolved into a celebration of everything but the Savior.¹¹ Jesus has been jettisoned from the very holiday that bears His name. How can we get off the cultural caravan particularly at Christmas? Well, for starters you're in the middle of step one right now. Slowing down and engaging in God's Word is the best place to begin.

Now, I encourage you to go back to the Bible and read Luke 4:16-20. Here we find Jesus grown up and reading a passage from Isaiah that is ultimately about Himself. Jesus emphasized ministry to the sick, poor, and struggling. A good way to prioritize Christ at Christmastime is to help someone less fortunate than yourself. If you do and someone asks you about it, tell them that you're about your Father's business.

¹¹ Does the term "Happy Holidays" annoy you as much as it does me? It's "Merry Christmas," doggonit!

Part 2

Jesus' Ministry

To get to Ruby Falls you have to journey through a dimly lit cave. Along the way you stop and observe different rock formations. As we continued hiking through the cave, our sense of anticipation to see the falls grew even as we were left in awe by the beauty of the creativity of God throughout the cavern.

Between the cradle and cross are moments of Jesus' ministry of healing, compassion, and power. As we consider and rejoice in these moments may we grow in our anticipation as we approach the cross.

Day 8
Age 12-30

John 21:25

Perhaps this text gives us some insight into the time of Jesus' life that we know nothing about. One of my favorite hymns is "The Love of God." I love the third verse:

Could we with ink the oceans fill, and were the skies of parchment made;
Were every stalk on earth a quill, and ev'ryone a scribe by trade;
To write the love of God above, would drain the ocean dry;
Nor could the scroll contain the whole, though stretched from sky to sky.

The concept that humanity cannot hope to comprehend is love of God, let alone express it in an infinitely large scroll is so beautiful. John essentially wrote the same thing about all the things that Jesus did during His time on earth. John was saying that we could sing similarly about Jesus' works that we do about God's love. Even if everyone was a scribe by trade, the works of Jesus were too numerous to write about all of them. The casual, first-person statement that ends the last Gospel is incredible, "I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."

Remember, Jesus was found in the temple at age twelve doing God's work and leaving listeners astonished at His wisdom. With that said, I don't believe that Jesus' works that John reflects on are isolated to what He did after he turned 30.

In fact, let me just deposit something here for you to think about. Comparing Matthew 27:56, Mark 15:40, and John 19:25, we can isolate Salome to possibly be James and John's mother, the wife of Zebedee, and Mary's sister, making John the Apostle and author of the fourth Gospel, Jesus' cousin.¹² If this is the case, which I believe it is, John might have known Jesus as he grew up and knew the details about those mysterious years in Jesus' life we are left to wonder about.

There are some aspects of Jesus' ways and His work today that we aren't fully informed on. I think about the people in our church that are sick and struggling. Why them? Why now? What is God up to? These mysteries, along with others, we'll probably wonder about until Glory. One day, we'll understand what isn't made plain to us in the present tense. Until then, and even though it isn't a Christmas Carol, let the first verse of the "Love of God" ring in your heart:

The love of God is greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell;
It goes beyond the highest star and reaches to the lowest hell.
The wand'ring child is reconciled by God's beloved Son.
The aching soul again made whole, and priceless pardon won.

¹² Most of us have a strange cousin we tell stories about. If you don't, it might be you

Day 9

Baptism

Matthew 3:13-17

The Trinity is something that is difficult for us to grasp. Even still, the Bible clearly teaches that there are three Persons of the Trinity and one God.

If we were to try to visualize the Trinity mathematically it would be $1+1+1=1$.¹³ Just because we can't understand it, doesn't mean it isn't true. We should be glad there are parts of God we just simply cannot grasp. The very nature of God demands He exists beyond the reaches of our intellect, and He does.

We do well to note that all three Persons of the Trinity are present at Jesus' baptism. The voice of the Father and the descending of the Spirit along with Jesus Himself adds to the significance of this moment.

Jesus' baptism was essentially the beginning of His ministry. Although Jesus needed no cleansing from sin Himself, through baptism Jesus again identifies with sinners affirming the reality that He came to save through his vicarious life and death.

Theologian F.F. Bruce adds a unique perspective to the significance of these events in the Jordan River, he states, "In accordance with the symbolic significance of the rite as denoting death to an old life and rising to a new, Jesus came to be baptized in the sense of dying to the old natural relations to parents, neighbors, and earthly calling, and devoting Himself henceforth to His public Messianic vocation."

Jesus had always been committed to His Messianic mission, but His baptism seems to signify the full and final acceptance of the path that would lead to the cross and to the grave. Our baptism represented something similar. Our old life was spiritually put to death with Jesus, and we share in Jesus' glorious resurrection in the new life He gives us at salvation, represented by our rising from the water (Romans 6:1-4).

Here's a question we should consider...are you living up to your new life? I'm not trying to heap coals of guilt upon your head, I'm just trying to remind you that you are a new creation. We should recognize the radical way we've been changed. Way back in Genesis 1 the Spirit of God "hovered" over the waters just before creation happened. The Hebrew word here is the same word used to describe a bird fluttering. As the Spirit descended over the water in Matthew 3 we are drawn toward the reality of spiritual new creation, just like Genesis 1:2 draws us toward the moment creation itself.

You are a re-created child of God. Let that reality frame how you celebrate Christmas!

¹³ Even using the "new math" they're teaching this doesn't add up. I agree with Mr. Incredible, "Why would they change math. Math is Math."

Day 10

Temptation

Matthew 4:1-11

Like a stark scene change on a movie screen we are transported from the blessedness and beauty of Jesus' baptism to His temptation in the wilderness. We go from the lush banks of the Jordan River to an area by the Dead Sea called the Devastation.

One writer describes this area of the world like this, "It is an area of yellow sand, of crumbling limestone, and of scattered shingle. It is an area of contorted strata where the ridges run in all directions as if they were warped and twisted. The hills are like dust heaps. The limestone is blistered and peeling. Rocks are bare and jagged. Often the ground sounds hollow. In that wilderness Jesus would be alone, more alone than anywhere else in Palestine."

This setting seems to match the situation. Jesus was out in this wilderness fasting for forty days. Our Lord has already committed to His Messianic mission and was ready to begin His ministry in earnest. The enemy meets Jesus at this moment and seeks to divert His Divine purpose. I'm certainly not trying to over-spiritualize things here, but I think we would do well to note some of the subtle ways Satan seeks to subvert God's purposes in our lives, particularly at Christmas.

The first aspect of spiritual warfare that we must deal with is apathy. I'm sure that some of you think that any discussion of Satan and spiritual attacks are silly and aren't practically relevant for your lives. David Platt says this, "My involvement in spiritual warfare is personal, and the same holds true for every follower of Christ. The battles may look different...but don't be fooled: the war is real, and the evil one is persistently plotting to subtly entice you with sin and ultimately to bring destruction upon your soul. So don't be caught unaware."

I think Satan's greatest successes at Christmastime have to do with the sins of materialism and covetousness. Let me say this first, I'm all for presents.¹⁴ I love the excitement and anticipation that grows in my kids as more and more gifts gather under the tree. I cherish the chaos of flying wrapping paper and the excited squeals on Christmas morning. But if that's all that Christmas is to us then we've missed it entirely.

Push back the darkness by shining a light. Manage materialism with generosity. Cut out the covetousness with compassion. If there are young people in your life, be intentional about making Christmas more meaningful than material. Share the Gospel, visit a nursing home, help the homeless. Most of the time kids forget what they got for Christmas by the end of January. But if you help an elderly neighbor rake their leaves, the kids will remember that and so will your neighbor.

¹⁴ Both giving and receiving them.

Day 11

Withdrawal

Matthew 4:12

A cursory reading of our passage may lead to a critical misunderstanding of what Jesus did at the arrest of His forerunner. Herod Antipas, the guy who arrested John the Baptist, was Tetrarch of Galilee. This historical fact changes the way that we read the twelfth verse of Matthew 4. Jesus did not retreat from inhabiting enemy territory, He went into it.

One commentator writes, “Into that region, our Lord went to continue the ministry of the man thus silenced... Thus it has ever been, and still is. Evil may silence a voice, but it cannot prevent the proclamation of the Word. If John is imprisoned then Jesus takes up the message.”

Jesus picked up where John left off, preaching a message of repentance (4:17). While Jesus’ courageous move into Galilee and the message He preached there are more than worthy of our study, we aren’t going to focus on those specifics. I want to lean into the prophecy fulfilled as Jesus inhabited the land lorded over by Herod Antipas, Galilee.

Herod, that evil and ruthless political leader installed by Rome, certainly must have thought he had things under control. The agitator, John the Baptist, was in prison, and all was well. As John was taken out of the region Jesus moved in. When He did, a prophecy that was penned by Isaiah more than 700 years before Jesus was born was fulfilled, read Matthew 4:14-16.

The fulfillment of prophecy at this moment in history shows us that there will be times that it may seem like evil, immoral political leaders are ruling but in reality, God is on the throne. When you grow anxious at the state of our nation, pray for our leaders, and remember what you know about the rule and reign of Christ, it is sure.

Lee Strobel writes this in his famous book *The Case for Christ*, “The probability of just eight prophecies being fulfilled is one chance in one hundred million billion.” Jesus did not fulfill the Old Testament prophecies like being born in Bethlehem or inhabiting Galilee by chance. He fulfilled over 300 because He indeed is the prophesied Messiah, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords.

I don’t know about you, I see a lot of Herods on TV.¹⁵ Godless politicians who think they’re rule is secure. There’s going to be a lot of political posturing during the holiday season. When you watch and read about it, don’t give into anger or anxiety. Let the prophetic witness of Scripture remind you who is really on the throne.

¹⁵ And Herodias (or whatever the female rendering would be).

Day 12

Levi

Mark 2:13-14

Jesus had already called the first four disciples, fishermen named Peter, Andrew, James, and John.¹⁶ We find the calling of the fifth in our passage, Levi also known as Matthew. If you're familiar with Levi (we'll use that name) at all you know that he was a tax collector.¹⁷ There's a key detail we might be tempted to overlook about this tax collector turned disciple, his tax booth was by the sea (v.13). It may seem like an insignificant detail but recalling who the first four disciples were the implications for these newfound followers of Jesus were enormous.

Tax collectors were Jewish men who were installed by and collaborated with Rome. They were seen as traitors in cahoots with the occupying political force. Not only that, but tax collectors were also notorious for skimming money off of the taxes they gathered, greedily taking the extra for themselves. Levi would have interacted the tetrarch of Galilee, yes, the same guy who had John the Baptist killed, Herod Antipas. Not only that but Levi's tax booth was strategically placed by the Sea of Galilee. We can only assume it was mostly used for taxing fishermen.

Let me summarize...Levi was a thief, extortioner, and a traitor. He worked with the man who murdered the herald of King Jesus and most likely skimmed taxes from Peter, Andrew, James, and John.

And yet, this guy heard those two powerful, transformative, incredible words from Jesus, "follow me." Every sinner should be thankful that Jesus calls all types of sinners. Even ones so vile as Levi. We leaned into this kind of radical grace on Day 6; I want us to consider how the four fishermen must have felt at the calling of this mortal enemy.

Here's what I want to point out, we don't know. There's no record of their objections, anger, or disillusionment at Levi joining their ranks. In fact, read verse 15. They were most likely with Jesus, reclining at Levi's table. A picture of friendship and fellowship.

Just about all of us have people in our lives we have problems with, even other believers. One of the messages we often hear at Christmas is of peace. We should seek to show grace and forgiveness to others for the sake of peace. Let's find inspiration from four fishermen and prioritize peace, particularly here during the holiday season. After all, we all have a little Levi in us. We all need grace.

¹⁶ My name is Andrew, and I too was called to leave a fishing boat and follow Jesus in full time ministry. I hope those close biblical correlations end with me. My brother's name is Stephen.

¹⁷ Taxes were even more trouble back then!

Day 13

Sent

Mark 6:7-13

Think about the power of Jesus. How would you describe it, limited or limitless? Could He have cast out demons, healed, and preached all by himself? Yes. Even when Jesus took on human form, His power was not limited by the natural laws of the universe. In the same way Jesus could have called down legions of angels to protect Him and chose not to, Jesus could have done all the work of His ministry alone but chose not to.

Why? The answer to this question is the same one we provide for some other questions we ask, because He is good. When met with a hungry few thousand people Jesus multiplied a child's lunch to feed them. Did He need those five loaves and two fish? No, but He used them anyway. Because He is good, Jesus invited a young boy into a miraculous moment of ministry. The boy just had to willingly offer what he had to Christ and the Lord used what was offered in a wonderful way.

We see a similar dynamic in our text. Because of the goodness of Jesus, He invited the Apostles into miraculous moments of ministry by sending them out to do His work.

Willingness to give what we have to Jesus begins by seeing opportunities to serve for what they really are. God could get the Gospel to people in literally any way. The good news could materialize in the clouds, an angel could appear to people in a dream, the list is literally limitless. With innumerable options at His disposal, God chose us. Why? Because He is good. Opportunities to serve, share the Gospel, and help the hurting are invitations from God to be involved in His work in the world.

Unfortunately, because we are fallen people, we can forget this. The longer we serve the Lord the easier it can become to view these opportunities as religious rituals and get burned out. This could be one of the reasons Jesus sent His Apostles out in the way He did, two by two. We were never meant to journey with Jesus alone.

We need others to pray for us, bear our burdens, be a good example, and inspire us to stay the course when the road gets rough. Check out Hebrews 3:12-14. One of the ways God helps us to "hold our original confidence firm to the end" is the exhortation of other disciples. We need each other.

Are there people in your life that encourage you to faithfully follow Jesus? If so, cherish opportunities to grow those relationships. If not, seek to be that kind of friend to other people and pray for the Lord to send you someone. One of the greatest gifts you can give to someone is encouragement to be faithful to the moments of ministry God gives.¹⁸

¹⁸ I can think of some awesome gifts but still, encouragement really is the greatest one.

Day 14

Weeping

John 11:28-37

John 11:35 is probably the easiest verse in the Bible to commit to memory, “Jesus wept.” While it’s only two words long, this verse packs an applicatory punch. I have always heard that Jesus’ tears fell for the sake of Mary and Martha’s unbelief. While I do think Jesus was pained by His friends’ lack of faith, I believe there is another more significant reason for His sorrow.

I agree with this commentator, “The next few verses show Jesus’ response to Mary’s and Martha’s sorrow. Jesus knows what He’s going to do, but before He does it, He responds with deep compassion. Followers of Jesus are commanded in Romans 12:15 to ‘weep with those who weep.’ We do what Jesus did. We love others enough to enter their suffering. Oh, to be more like Jesus. Oh, to willingly enter others’ suffering. The most remarkable part is that Jesus is going to do something that takes their suffering away, but before he fixes their problem, he joins their pain. He enters their grief before he exiles it. We can’t be afraid to enter other people’s pain.”

The last couple of days we’ve been discussing how we can encourage other believers and help bear their burdens. This passage seems to draw us into a deeper alignment with those who are suffering during this season. There’s no better time to be like Christ than at Christmas, and Jesus wept with those who were weeping.

Christmas is particularly difficult for some folks. There’s more significant stress to manage, tighter deadlines to meet, and there is pressure to make the holiday perfectly special for family members. While these stressors are real, I’m thinking about those who are dealing with more difficulty. We can help those that are stressed in practical ways, and I would encourage you to do so. But there are some circumstances that the only way we can help is by reminding someone who is suffering that they’re not alone by sharing in their tears.

There are people in our church that the pain of losing a loved one will be sharper this season. We know people who are truly considering whether this will be their last Christmas with their families. For these, we need to be like Jesus.

Who has come to your mind as you’ve been reading? Don’t push that prompting aside. Perhaps that is the Holy Spirit leading you to call that person and affirm the reality that they aren’t alone. Letting them know that you care will also remind them that they are cared for by God. Mary and Martha, friends of Jesus, doubted His compassion. He changed their mind fully and finally when he raised Lazarus from the dead. He started to show His love first by weeping with them.

Day 15

Feet

John 13:1-9

This story I'm going to tell you will take some time to set up so stay with me. The first important detail you need to know is that my Dad hates feet.¹⁹ At our home in Florida our couch was set up catty-cornered and completely in front of a recliner. So, if you were laying on the couch watching TV you couldn't see the person sitting in the chair behind you. My Dad and I were leisurely watching the tube one day and he grew tired of what was on. He was on the couch, and I was in the recliner. He asked for the remote and reached his open hand back toward me. I did what any other teenage boy would have done in that moment, instead of closing his hand around the remote, he got my foot. I can still hear his voice, "Andrew!"²⁰

Let's be honest, feet are gross. There's little doubt you've heard just how significant it was for Jesus to wash His disciples' feet. Culturally, foot washing was reserved for the lowliest servant. The sandaled feet of the disciples would be grimy, cracking, and contaminated with fecal matter.²¹

Don't disconnect what you read about Jesus right before he fills the basin and begins to scrub. This singular Savior King who "the Father had given all things into His hands" (v.3) chose to take up into them what even other servants refused to touch.

Alexander Maclaren provides this perspective, "Knowing that He came from God, and went to God, and that even when He was kneeling there before these men, 'the Father had given all things into His hands,' what did He do? Triumph? Show His majesty? Flash His power? Demand service? He girded Himself with a towel and washed His disciples' feet." This act of humility can help frame for us the most significant act of service ever done, the incarnation itself.

Following this astounding display Jesus commended similar service to His followers. Jesus encouraged the men with Him to love each other with such selflessness that they would be willing to take up the role of the lowliest servant for the good of each other.

Just in case you are missing the weight behind Jesus' words. I'll leave with what He said a little while later but still in the same teaching moment, "By this *all people* will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

¹⁹ You will most likely be seeing him this Christmas, don't give him too hard a time for this.

²⁰ Just so you know, I've matured beyond these kinds of juvenile pranks. I would never dream of doing anything like this now. Just ask my Dad.

²¹ Imagine my Dad's response if we lived a couple thousand years ago in the ancient Near East.

Day 16

Helper

John 16:5-15

Wouldn't it be awesome if Jesus were still on earth? We could ask Him to tell us all about the mysterious aspects of the Incarnation. Wouldn't that make for some engaging conversation at a Christmas party? And yet, Jesus Himself said that it is better for us that He didn't stay here.

How could it possibly be to our "advantage" for Jesus to go back to glory? Well, Jesus said it Himself "If I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you." The Second Person of the Trinity had to send the Third Person of the Trinity. Let's just say it...according to Jesus Himself, it is better that the Holy Spirit dwell *within us* than Him remaining and dwelling *among us*.

Jesus *always* does what is best for us. He is a faithful friend, devoted brother, and sovereign Lord. He *never* leaves us hanging, *never* stands us up, he *never* lets us down. So, this Helper's ministry must be essential to our faithfulness as followers of Jesus. This can be a difficult pill for us to swallow. If we're honest, and it was up to us, we'd choose Jesus' physical presence over the Spirit's presence every time. Why? In my estimation it's because we don't give the Holy Spirit opportunities to live up to the name Jesus gave Him, "Helper." We work tirelessly to make sure we stay out of circumstances in which we need someone's aid, let alone the aid of God Himself. A situation in which we need God's help means we are at the end of the human-effort rope. That's a tough place to be. But it's in those difficult circumstances that the Spirit comes through with help which will strengthen our resolve and commitment to the Lord.

Let me point you to a passage that reveals one of the ways the Holy Spirit comes to our aid. He helps us to understand God. 1 Cor. 2:10-13 is incredible. Notice the progression in this passage with the deep things of God. The Spirit *searches them* (v.10b), *reveals them to us* (v.10a), *we understand them* (v.12), *we speak them* (v.13). Has there ever been a time when you were telling someone about Jesus or discussing a theological issue with another believer that you've surprised yourself by your own knowledge? That is the work of the Holy Spirit!

What has God been calling you to do that you've been putting off? You have probably heard someone say something like, "God will never give you more than you can handle."²² If this were true then He would be subverting His own efforts in your life. God will regularly give you something to do that is beyond your abilities. And when you come through, He gets the glory through the help He provided. God is interested in His glory not yours. So, as we celebrate the time Jesus came to earth, honor what He did when He left this place. He sent the Holy Spirit to help you.

²² This kind of statement is like the answer to this joke...What do pigs use in the shower? Hogwash.

Day 17

Arrested

John 18:1-11

This is one of my favorite moments in Jesus' life. His prayer in the garden and subsequent arrest reveals so much about our Lord. We see Jesus' sovereignty, courage, grace, resolve, dependence, power, and authority all in one place.

The imagery of verse 1 is incredible. John wasn't just describing the setting of Christ's imminent arrest when he mentioned the brook Kidron. This small stream was the drainage from the temple. At Passover, the water would run red from the blood of thousands of sacrificial lambs. Spurgeon describes the occasion of Christ's crossing like this, "The very brook would remind him of his approaching sacrifice, for through it flowed the blood and refuse from the temple."²³

There are three other men mentioned by name in this passage besides the Lord Himself: Judas, Peter and Malchus. Judas, the betrayer. He was willing to sell out the Savior for the cost of a common slave. Peter who was willing to defend Jesus with a sword but not with his words. And Malchus, the servant of the high priest thrust into prominence by the violence of one man and the miraculous mercy of another.

There are some that believe that Malchus later became a Christian. The very fact that he was named in this passage lends itself to this being more than just conjecture. People in the Gospels and in Acts are named because they were known among the early Christian community. If Malchus had merely drifted off into anonymity, at the time of John's writing, then his name would most likely have not been used.

Notice Jesus' swift rebuke of Peter's actions. By this point, Peter must have grown accustomed to a stern word from the Savior. He seemed to be always out of line with the Lord's will. And yet, Jesus would later restore, commission, and use him to preach the message that started the church.

And while we know what happened to Judas (Matthew 27:5), he did not do all that he did unloved by the Lord. Jesus did wash even Judas' feet.

So Jesus crossed a bloody brook and interacted with all kinds of sinners: a selfish traitor, a man of emotional violence, and a complicit servant seemingly in the wrong place at the wrong time. Judas, Peter, and Malchus, Jesus loved all three.

When you sing "Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled," remember He came for every kind of sinner.

²³ This is only the second time I've quoted Spurgeon. This is not nearly enough! I'll do better!

Day 18

King

John 18:33-38

The shepherds play a prominent role in the Christmas story. They were the ones that the angel appeared to, proclaiming good news of great joy. They went to see the baby and found him just as the angel had said. Whatever your nativity scene looks like there is no doubt there are a few shepherds standing there before the baby Jesus.

Jesus' words to Pilate in our passage remind us that He is the Good Shepherd. Jesus is questioned by this Roman governor about the nature of His kingdom. Jesus affirms that He is indeed a King and that His "kingdom is not from the world." Our Lord ends his defense to Pilate with this sobering statement, "Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."

In John 10 Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd. He elaborates on this illustration by saying something in John 10 similar to his statement in John 18, "My sheep hear my voice and I know them, and they follow me" (v.27). Christ-followers are likened to sheep that recognize and follow the voice of their shepherd. Jesus' voice is the voice of truth, a voice we can trust, a voice we can and should follow.

Now, Jesus proclaimed to Pilate that His kingdom was not of this world. How many of us neglect the voice of Jesus that beckons us to eternal endeavors to build our own temporarily existential kingdom? Now, we should be good stewards of the gifts that God gives us. We should pursue excellence and excel in the workplace and in society. Those are not bad things to pursue. But, our most passionate pursuits should be a part of Christ's Kingdom, and therefore are not of this world.

We are easily obsessed by the things of this world. Let me drop a statistic on you relevant to both this reality and the season at hand. I read this recently, "Research shows that people actually forget about most of the gifts they get for the holidays. One in six gifts won't even be touched again after January 1." This really does frame for us the failures of a materialistic worldview. Our "stuff" will fail to endure eternity; goodness, it barely makes a month!

I've already said it multiple times. I'm pro gifts, trees, and lights.²⁴ I knew of a family that didn't celebrate Christmas as a protest to this materialism. Their kids really appreciated their parents' convictional fortitude.²⁵ You don't have to do this. Just be sure that your Christmas is more about His Kingdom than yours. How will you answer this question... will your Christmas positively impact eternity?

²⁴ If you saw my lights on my house last Christmas you already know this.

²⁵ This is one of my favorite literary devices, sarcasm.

Part 3

The Cross

When Elizabeth and I finally reached the falls, we did what every other millennial couple would do, we took many, many pictures. We tried different distances, lighting, and camera settings. We took selfies and engaged the help of other adventurers to take our picture. We wanted to see the falls from every angle and appreciate its beauty in full.

We will observe the cross from different “angles.” These varying perspectives will be provided by the seven times Jesus spoke from the cross. The different “words” from Jesus will help us to fully take in the beauty and blessedness that is the cross. The cross should be the backdrop that we orient our lives by.



Day 19
The Cross: 1st Word

Luke 23:34

A Word of Forgiveness

One of the theologians I regularly came across in my doctoral studies was Sydney Greidanus. He says this about the cross, “On a timeline, the cross is but a point in the sweep of redemptive history from creation to the new creation. But exactly in the sweep of redemptive history, the cross has cut a pivotal point that its impact echoes all the way back to the fall of humanity and God’s penalty of death even while it thrusts kingdom history forward to its full perfection – when all the nations will come in, there will be no more death and tears, and God will be all and in all.”

Essentially, this brainy theologian says that the cross changes everything. I couldn’t agree more. As we consider the cross from different angles through the words Jesus speaks, we’ll do so with simplicity. I hope to contextualize each particular statement in a relevant way for our circumstances and season then reflect on a Christmas song that represents each theme musically.²⁶

Jesus’ words about forgiveness reveals the Divine priority of the cross. God, bound by His eternally just and holy character, must punish sin. At the same time, the desire to forgive flowed from the heart of God. Even while wicked men mocked Him and gambled for His clothing, Jesus, as the image of the invisible God, expresses the heartbeat of Heaven, forgiveness.

As you behold the cradle this Christmas, reflect upon the cross and the forgiveness that reverberates from the Righteous One who hung on it.

Reflect on these words from “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing”:

Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace
Hail the Son of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings
Risen with healing in His wings
Mild He lays His glory by
Born that man no more may die
Born to raise the sons of earth
Born to give them second birth
Hark! The herald Angels sing
Glory to the new-born King!

²⁶ Even people like me, who can’t clap and sing at the same time, can appreciate the beauty of a musical message.

Day 20
The Cross: 2nd Word

Luke 23:43

A Word of Salvation

Jesus' response to the second criminal's confession is remarkable. The Son of God, as He suffers for the sins of the world, responds to a dying thief with incredible compassion. We tend to disconnect Jesus' care for individuals due to the momentous nature of His vicarious death. These words of Jesus remind us that we are not conveyed into the Kingdom in some kind of covenantal conglomeration. We are individuals who have been personally redeemed by the Savior's sufficient sacrifice.

One commentator said this about Jesus' words of compassion to this criminal, "This assurance was so important to Jesus that it cost Him something. It hurt Jesus to even say these words. 'Since speech occurs during exhalation, these short, terse utterances must have been particularly difficult and painful'" (Edwards).

Notice that Christ blessed beyond the thief's expectations. It seems like the thief had some distant kingdom in mind at his confession, Jesus told him "today." The dying criminal asked only to be remembered, Jesus said, "You'll be with me." The Savior promised this man paradise when he pleaded only for a Kingdom.²⁷

As you consider the cradle this Christmas, connect it to the cross, where you find an individually oriented, compassionate, gracious Savior.

Take in the third and fourth verse of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," as you consider Jesus' words to the thief on the cross:

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

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

²⁷ Can I get an amen?!

Day 21
The Cross: 3rd Word

John 19:26-27

A Word of Compassion

There are five people standing at the foot of Christ's cross: Mary, the mother of Jesus, Salome, her sister, two other Mary's (Magdalene and the wife of Clopas), and John, the beloved disciple. Imagine the pain these people were experiencing, particularly Mary. This was the fulfillment of Simeon's prophecy we discussed earlier about the sword and Mary's soul. Some of you know the agony of losing a child, others can only try to empathize. Not only was Mary watching her Son die but she was observing the Author of her salvation take upon Himself the penalty for her sin. While Mary was favored by God and pursued righteous living, she was a sinner who needed a Savior just like anyone else.

Jesus expressed deep concern for His mother. Joseph, who isn't mentioned again in Scripture after the little family left the temple nearly twenty years before this, had most likely died. The son of God passed on His responsibility as Mary's caretaker to John. In doing so, Jesus once again affirms the sufficiency of His sacrifice by keeping the fifth commandment.²⁸

Much has been made about Jesus calling His mother "woman." Modern readers think they pick up a disrespectful tone here. Not only was Jesus using a respectful, venerating title used in their society, but I believe He also seeks to spare His mother continued grief. We can imagine Jesus calling to His "mother" would only have driven the sword deeper into her soul.

As you behold the cradle this Christmas, reflect on Jesus' compassion and the sufficiency of His sacrifice that we see in these simple but powerful words to Mary from the cross.

Reflect on these words from "Mary, Did You Know?"

Mary, did you know that your baby boy
Would one day walk on water?
Mary, did you know that your baby boy
Would save our sons and daughters?
Did you know that your baby boy
Has come to make you new?
This child that you delivered, will soon deliver you.

²⁸ Every parent knows how difficult this commandment is to keep.

Day 22
The Cross: 4th Word

Matthew 27:46

A Word of Judgement

The Prince of Preachers provides this perspective, "In order that the sacrifice of Christ might be complete, it pleased the Father to forsake His well-beloved Son. Sin was laid on Christ, so God must turn away His face from the Sin-Bearer. To be deserted of His God was the climax of Christ's grief, the quintessence of His sorrow."²⁹

The Holy Heavenly Father was forced to forsake His Son in order to rescue wayward sinners like us. This is one of the singularly significant circumstances that has ever crossed the horizon of the world. We can only assume that this was the moment the wrath of God in earnest was thrust upon the life of our Lord. Personalize this reality, imagine the punishment you deserve being thrust upon the shoulders of your Savior. There are few other considerations that we can make that are more humbling than this one. Thank you, Jesus!

C.S. Lewis blessed us with his brilliance by capturing deep theological truths in a story that was meant mostly for Children. Consider this moment from the book Prince Caspian:

"Aslan" said Lucy "you're bigger".
"That is because you are older, little one" answered he.
"Not because you are?"
"I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger."

The facts about Jesus' vicarious death on the cross have remained the same throughout all the ages of history. But, as we get older the greater the depth of His sacrifice we can see into. We embrace more and more of the enormity of this moment in time as time marches on. Or at least we should.

Appreciate these words of "The First Noel":

Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel
Born is the King of Israel!
Then let us all with one accord
Sing praises to our heavenly Lord
That hath made Heaven and earth of naught
And with his blood mankind hath bought.

²⁹ I told you I'd do better. Gotta love Spurgeon!

Day 23
The Cross: 5th Word

John 19:28

A Word of Promise

Psalm 69:21 states, “They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.”

Even as Jesus hung dying upon the cross, having finished the work of His substitutionary sacrifice, He was fully aware of the prophecy that must be fulfilled. So, He called for the cup. The incarnate Word fulfilled the written Word. It must have been His weakest moment of being fully man having paid for the sins of the world. He was still fulfilling His Father’s plan.

Spurgeon says this, “Thirst is a common-place misery, such as may happen to peasants or beggars, it is a real pain, and not a thing of a fancy or a nightmare of dreamland. Thirst is no royal grief, but an evil of universal manhood; Jesus is brother to the poorest and most humble of our race.”³⁰

Just as Jesus was identifying with sinners from the earliest moments of His life, He aligns with the broken and lost in His last living moments. We can see shadows of His care for sinners as the beams of his blessed thirst shines forth.

As you consider the cradle this Christmas, appreciate the reality that the manger represents, the moment in which Creator aligned with creation. God became man to rescue mankind.

Will these glad tidings draw you to greater trust in Jesus? They should. Reflect on the carol “God, Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen”:

God rest ye merry gentlemen
Let nothing you dismay
Remember Christ our Savior
Was born on Christmas Day
To save us all from Satan’s pow’r
When we were gone astray
Oh tidings of comfort and joy
Comfort and joy
Oh tidings of comfort and joy.

³⁰ I’m on a roll now!

Day 24
The Cross: 6th Word

John 19:30
A Word of Victory

“It is finished!” 3 Words in the English, 1 Word in the Greek. *“Tetelestai.”*

Spurgeon said this about this word, “An ocean of meaning in a drop of language, a mere drop, for that is all that we can call one word! *‘tetelestai’* Yet it would need all the other words that ever were spoken, or ever can be spoken, to explain this one word. It is altogether immeasurable! ... “Finished” It was the Conqueror’s cry – it was uttered with a loud voice! There is nothing of anguish about it, there is no wailing in it. It is the cry of One who has completed a tremendous labor and is about to die – and before He utters His death-prayer, “Father, into your hands I commend My spirit,” He shouts His life’s last hymn in that one word, “tetelestai.”³¹

Jesus spoke this word in the “perfect” tense. Which means the action considered is viewed as having been completed in the past, once and for all, not needing to be repeated.

This Greek word signifies perfection in completion. A word that is otherwise used by a servant having completed a task given by his master, a priest having examined a sacrifice for blemishes, a composer or painter having finished a piece, a debtor when a person pays their due was used by Christ to describe the nature of His death on the cross. Don’t try to add anything to Christ’s work. No need for grief or guilt, it is finished.

Remember this season in particular that what was started in the cradle was finished on the cross. The sun that dawned at the cradle set at the cross.

Hear the words from the third verse of “Silent Night”:

Silent night! Holy night!
Son of God’ love’s pure light
Radiant beams from Thy holy face
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth!
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth!

³¹ You weren’t expecting someone else were you?

Day 25

The Cross: Final Word

Luke 23:46

A Word of Death

What started with new life in the cradle finishes at the end of a life on the cross. Jesus, who 33 years previous to this moment was born in the back country of Bethlehem, died. The Second Person of the Trinity, who spoke the worlds into existence, expired.

I hope that our Christmas would be filled with the same response from that Roman Soldier who stood there as Jesus died. Luke 23:47 reads, "Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God." Wait, what?! This Roman Soldier complicit in the crucifixion broke out in praise.

There is no other response that appropriates all that we have beheld. We began our journey at the cradle, walked through some moments in Jesus' ministry, and now we see the breathtakingly beautiful sight that is the cross. There's nothing else to do but rejoice in all that Jesus has done for us.

What will God find you doing this Christmas day? Surely, you'll open presents, eat, spend time with loved ones, and eat some more.³² My hope is that we have the merriest of celebrations. Let us intentionally insert this moment into our holiday cheer. A moment of praise.

As you reflect on the cradle this Christmas, connect it to the cross. And take one more blessed step. Connect the cross to the empty tomb. Right now, the savior whose life and ministry we've surveyed these past few weeks is alive today! He is ruling, reigning, and redeeming in the present tense. What started at the cradle is actually still happening! He was born that Christmas day, he died that dark day, He lives today and forevermore.

Notice what kind of light is described in the song "O Little Town of Bethlehem":

O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting light
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight

³² I'm hoping to be found napping at some point.