

From Bethlehem to Golgotha

Devotions on the Infant Savior

December 1

Imagine for a moment that you are a Jew living in the first century, and you have just made your way out to the Judean wilderness to listen to the message of a rather strange man—according to the rumors—a prophet. You have gone to listen to the message of John the Baptizer; you have gone to listen to the wonderful message of Isaiah 40:1-5.

What exactly would this message have meant to you, a first century Jew? It would have meant something like this: the time for God's people to be freed from their enemies and pardoned for all their sins was about to dawn. It was a message of love from the Covenant-Keeping God to His grieving people in captivity. It was the message about the coming of the Bridegroom to rescue and claim His bride for Himself and turn all of her mourning into dancing. It was the message that the exile of the people of God was over and the time of the exodus was at hand. This is why the amazing figurative language is used concerning the creation itself—that the valley should be lifted up and the mountains made low and the uneven ground made level. Why? Because the Lord Himself was going to come to His earth and save His people. And when He would come His amazing glory would be revealed, and all flesh would see it. But realize this: when God would come His glory wouldn't be revealed in a blaze of grandeur, but it would be revealed in the most unexpected of ways. It will be revealed in the crushing of His only faithful Servant, His Chosen One, the One in whom is all of His delight.

This faithful one is Jesus. God's glory is revealed most clearly and perfectly in the death of Jesus, His Faithful Servant. This wasn't what a first century Jew expected. It isn't what a twenty-first century American expects either. It sounds foolish to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the very power and wisdom and glory of God.

Prayer: O Lord, give us eyes to behold Your glory in Jesus, Your Son. Amen.

Isaiah 40:1-5:
“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

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December 2

Many of us often thank God for the gifts He has given us—and how gladly we receive them! It's easy to forget that the gifts of God to us are not given simply to be thankfully received. This passage talks of being “enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge” (v. 5). Does God give us these gifts so that we might become great orators or profound professors? Is His final goal that we triumph over this world on the wings of our great wisdom and rhetoric?

The Holy Spirit tells us otherwise in this passage from 1 Corinthians. Through the words of the apostle Paul we understand that God's spiritual gifts have a necessary connection to our waiting for “the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 7). In other words, the grace of God is not given in order that we might hoard our gifts for own enjoyment, but so that we might be adequately equipped to live as those who anticipate the great coming of our Savior. The very promises that he will “sustain” us (v. 8), that indeed “God... is faithful” (v. 9), are intended to make our hope certain and our confidence sure. And the gifts that God has given us are to be used to declare the praises of the God who called us and to proclaim to all the world the coming of that One whom we anticipate. And so we meditate during Advent upon the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. His first coming, in a state of lowliness and humiliation, guarantees His second coming, in a state of glory and exaltation. And on this day we fix our hope, even as we stand “enriched” in Christ to do His will until He comes.

Prayer: Great Father in heaven, You have indeed enriched us in every possible way. Help us by your Holy Spirit to walk as faithful servants who anticipate their Master's imminent arrival. Thank You that Christ's promise to sustain us cannot fail, and that just as You called us into fellowship with Him, so also You will guard us until the great day of Christ. Amen.

1 Corinthians

1:3-9: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in Him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

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December 3

The glory of the Lord will arrive without fail. It will travel without difficulty and will not be delayed by men. The glory of the Lord will be revealed. It will be revealed, Isaiah says, so that everyone will see it together. There will not be a man here and a woman there saying, "I have seen the Lord," because it will be evident to everyone.

While it is not evident to everyone that the glory of the Lord has begun to shine, it has dawned. God's glory has begun to shimmer in the Incarnation. The Incarnation is the breaking of the dawn. No man or woman shines in the face of such glory. Oh, they think they do. But the truth is that people are transient and ephemeral. They are like withered grass and their glory is like dead flowers compared to the word which proceeds from God. And God has said His glory will be revealed. And it is revealed in this way: the Lord, the One who absolutely, eternally and invincibly is, has come to us! No more waiting while Moses is on the mountain to tell us what He said. Here is your God! His Word stands forever. His arm no one can stay. He has come to redeem his people. He has come to reign! Tell it in Jerusalem. Say it in the towns of Judah. Lift up your voice to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Do not be afraid of the truthfulness of your message. The glory of the Lord has been revealed. Tell them: the Lord has arrived, He has received the fruits of His victory; His wages are the flock of His people, which His victory over death has won, and when He comes again the stars will be darkened and the moon shall not give its light because His glory will be so resplendent. The sun of God's glory shall run its course until it reaches its noon when the Son of Man shall come, and there it shall remain forever.

Prayer: O that I might believe Your Word that the glory of the Lord will be revealed. Make this my joy, my life and my end, that the Son might receive the reward of His Incarnation. Amen.

Isaiah 40:6-11:

*"A voice says, 'Cry!'
And I said, 'What
shall I cry?' All flesh
is grass, and all its
beauty is like the
flower of the field.*

*The grass withers,
the flower fades when
the breath of the Lord
blows on it; surely
the people are grass.*

*The grass withers,
the flower fades, but
the word of our God
will stand forever.*

*Get you up to a high
mountain, O Zion,
herald of good news:*

*lift up your voice
with strength, O
Jerusalem, herald
of good news; lift it
up, fear not; say to
the cities of Judah,
'Behold your God!'*

*Behold, the Lord God
comes with might,
and His arm rules
for Him; behold, His
reward is with Him,
and His recompense
before Him. He will
tend his flock like a
shepherd; He will
gather the lambs in
His arms; He will
carry them in His
bosom, and gently
lead those that are with
young."*

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December 4

Words have always had a strange power. When spoken they are, as it were, a living extension of the breath, the voice and the very will of their speaker. At the same time words have a life of their own. The joining of three simple words to form the sentence, "I love you," has had a profound effect upon all humans throughout the history of the English language. The first century Jewish conception of God's Word was no different. On the one hand, the creative Word of God was seen as the living extension of the Creator Himself. In His Word He was present ordering the chaotic world of Genesis 1. In other places God's Word seems to have a life of its own. This is especially so in the personification of the Word as the life-giving Torah of Psalm 1 or the creative Wisdom of Proverbs 3.

The apostle John incorporates this dual understanding of God's Word into his portrayal of Jesus. On the one hand, Jesus is the living extension of God Himself, "The Word was God." On the other, Jesus is distinct from God, having a life of His own, "The Word was with God." Echoing Genesis 1, John tells us twice that the Word was "in the beginning" as the present and active agent of God in the creation of the world. He goes on to explain that the Word was both the life and light of the original creation.

But now something new is happening. The same light that pierced the darkness of the old creation is bringing to light a new creation. Just as the darkness did not prevail in the beginning, likewise, it will not prevail now. God's creative Word is active again to bring light and life, but not in the way most people would have expected. It is neither the Jewish Torah as understood by the Pharisees, nor the hidden principle of rationality as understood by the pagan philosophers. It is the living embodiment of God's authoritative Word, his life-giving Torah, His creative Wisdom in the person of Jesus. And He will make all things new.

Prayer: Lord of glory, shine the light of your countenance upon the world to make all things new in and through Jesus, your incarnate Word. Amen.

John 1:1-5:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made. In Him was life, and the Life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

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December 5

From Genesis, as the curtain rises in the opening scenes of the drama of redemption, chaotic darkness fills the stage.

Yet God's Word is pregnant with illumination. In creation, God speaks His Word as the light into the night. Similarly, in redemption God speaks His Word as the Light into a spiritually dark world. From their first steps of exile from Eden, Adam and Eve saw the light of God in the "flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life" (Gen. 3:24).

The Psalmist declares: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119:105). God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. In His mercy God gives His Word to fallen man as a sword of protection and a bright guide of direction in an otherwise dark and confusing world.

Tragically, even with the light of God's Word, we love the darkness. In the night we foolishly attempt to veil the shame of our wickedness. In the night we naively attempt to flee from the presence of God. In the night we confuse the day for night and night for day. In the night, we lose our way.

In Scripture God calls the prophet to shed the light of His Word into our darkness: to remind us that we've fallen from the narrow way into the dark wilderness of our flesh, the world, and the devil. The last and greatest Old Testament prophet, John the Baptist, was called to cry out from the dark wilderness to "bear witness about the light" (John 1:8).

The "radiance of the glory of God" (Heb. 1:3), the Light was leaving the brilliance of His heavenly abode to dwell in a dark world. The brightest of Lights was coming to bear the darkest night of the soul. The Light of lights was coming into this lost world so that those of us hiding in darkness might find ourselves hidden in Him.

Prayer: Oh God, we are those who have walked in darkness but have now seen a great light. We are those who have dwelt in a land of deep darkness on whom Your light, Jesus, has shined. Thank You. Amen.

John 1:6-9:

"There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."

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December 6

The pernicious nature of sin interferes with our pursuits of justice, and ultimately we are left with an unfulfilled longing for making things truly right. This longing for righteousness is the mark of our creaturely dependence on God, for the true and ultimate righteousness comes from Him alone. It also explains why the promise of future righteousness brings comfort to our hearts. We need to observe, however, that the nature of this righteousness is much broader than mere human justice. Because of sin, man stands condemned before God, alienated from His blessings. This alienation from God is the primary effect of sin. The injustice on the human level is one of the secondary effects of sin. What the Lord is promising then, is that, because of the righteous Branch, His people no longer will stand condemned before Him and will live securely. Horizontal righteousness will be there because vertical righteousness preceded it.

Who is this righteous Branch? The answer is revealed by God. Man's predicament caused by sin was so severe that the Son of God, the righteous Branch, had to become man in order to fulfill the righteous demands of the law on behalf of His people. It was through Jesus Christ that God manifested Himself to "be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26). For while God's love calls for forgiveness of sins, God's holiness demands justice. There can be no forgiveness of sins without satisfying God's righteousness. Even for God. That is why righteousness required the payment of the price. That is why Jesus, the Eternal Son of God became man.

He is our righteous Branch. He is "the Lord is our righteousness." What a magnificent way of expressing the alien character of the believer's righteousness. It does come from the Lord. And yet, it is also ours.

Prayer: Righteous Father, who did not forsake me in the misery of my sin, but instead sent your Beloved Son, accept my thanks for exchanging His righteousness for my own unrighteousness. May Christ's righteousness be evident in me everyday, even more so, as I live to glorify Your name. Amen.

Jeremiah 33:14-16:

"Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and He shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'"

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December 7

In horror movies, darkness is the cloak under which evil and seething things hide. Light is the broom that whisks those things away. Biblically, it is no different. Evil and seething things love darkness, and what's more, **are** darkness, and light is the uniform of righteousness. If you get right down to it, since these verses look forward to days of fleeting darkness before the fierce and radiant presence of God, and our days feel nothing but dark, then we are writing and playing out our own horror movie here. We just don't notice so much because we've gotten used to the horror.

In Munich, Germany, a neighborhood and a Home Depot have been built right around the corner from Dachau. We hide our death camps behind subdivisions and shopping centers. We stack lumber where once we piled corpses. We build lives where once we ripped them apart. It's all a part of the concerted effort to convince ourselves that "it's not so dark here." But upon realizing that this is the game we play, we finally find the real horror of it all.

"But wait a minute! Christmas is only a few days away! We don't talk of such things now! Death camps and other unspeakable things have nothing to do with Advent!" Or so we say. But, no. They have everything to do with Advent and Christmas. The King of Glory wrote Himself into our horror script, wore the fear and the brutality of it Himself, all in order to write us out of it. The King is born in a zoo and killed on a slaughterhouse cross so that we could inherit paradise, and all on His back. It's why Israel looked forward to His first coming, and we should look forward to his second. Days of darkness in God's distance give way to days of light in His presence.

And the surprise ending to beat them all is this—there is no surprise ending. Usually in horror films, just when we think the evil has been thwarted, it makes one last frightening stab at carnage. But not here. It is just us, joined inseparably to the Father by the work of the Son, through the Spirit—forever. And horror becomes comedy.

Prayer: Father of Glory, Jesus, King of mercy, Spirit of new life... hasten it! Amen.

Isaiah 60:19-22:

***"Your sun shall
no more go down,
nor your moon
withdraw itself;
for the Lord will be
your everlasting
light, and your
days of mourning
shall be ended.
Your people shall
all be righteous;
they shall possess
the land forever,
the branch of My
planting, the work
of My hands,
that I might be
glorified. The least
one shall become
a clan, and the
smallest one a
mighty nation; I am
the Lord; in its time
I will hasten it."***

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December 8

All who believe in the name of Jesus are shaded under the branches of the tree of life which sprang from the root of Jesse. King Jesus, promised of old, worshiped now in the splendor of His glorious mercy and great love, has reconciled the nations unto himself.

Christ became a servant to the circumcised in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. Jesus' birth accomplishes two very significant things: 1) His Word is upheld as true, and 2) His mercy is displayed for all the world to glorify. God's faithfulness to the Jews in His covenant promises is realized and His uncovenanted mercy is poured out on people from every tribe and tongue.

In this passage Paul quotes four times from Scripture, once from the Law, once from the Prophets, and twice from the Writings. Each time, the theme is the Gentiles glorifying God. God gave us mercy that we might give Him glory. God did this through Christ's obedience, that the law might be fulfilled. Christ undid the curse and satisfied God's wrath. He fulfilled the law that we transgressed in order to make us fit to receive the promises of the covenant.

In the broader context of Romans 14 and 15, Paul is concerned that we learn to endure with our weaker brothers. He calls on God's people to live in peace and humility. Our joy and peace at Christmastime is founded on the marvelous truth that we have been graciously included in the faithful covenant of God. Our only response is to glorify, exult and imitate this Christ who became a servant.

Prayer: O God of All the Nations, thank You that in Your Word You show Yourself to be true, faithful, and most gracious. We do not deserve to be heirs of the covenant promises You made to Abraham, but we rejoice that by the life and death of Christ You have provided for us to stand in Your grace and favor. We give you all our praise for this good work of Yours, and ask that You would fill us with the assurance, joy and hope it brings, that we might be more fit to love our neighbors. Amen.

Romans 15:8-13:

"For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy. As it is written, 'Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles and sing to your name.' And again it is said, 'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people.' And again, 'Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol Him.' And again Isaiah says, 'The root of Jesse will come, even He who arises to rule the Gentiles; in Him will the Gentiles hope.' May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."

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December 9

It's almost Christmas. And you're thinking of home—even if "home" is no longer what it once was, even if mom and dad are gone, even if siblings are grown, married and have moved far away, even if the old home place itself has been bulldozed to make way for a Wal-Mart parking lot—you're thinking of home, and sadness fills your soul, because that home, those times, those dear people, that life are gone, or at least will never again be known and felt and enjoyed like they once were.

The writer of Psalm 43 knew the same heart-longings for home. He was an exile, a homesick worshiper of God who longed to be home with his heavenly Father and fellow believers (43:3b). He suffered the slow agony of spiritual drought. Like a dazed and dying deer that pants for streams of water, he yearned for the heart-healing mercies of his Lord (42:1,2). That's the way it is when we are away from home: we feel vulnerable, alone, forgotten, afraid (42:3-10). Our souls are indeed "cast down." Will we never again know and feel the joy of our salvation like we did before?

Good news: God brings His children home! His light and truth guide us to His "holy mountain" where He, our joy and delight, dwells in loving and glorious majesty (43:3,4). He does this by means of the Incarnation of His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus is God with us, the light upon the path that leads home, the truth of a salvation that comes by grace received by faith. Yes, even when our hearts are nearly broken with loneliness and disappointment, we know that, in Christ, we are always at home in the Father's heart, and that one day we actually will dwell at home with Him in glory. When you think longingly of life as it once was and probably will never be again, lay hold by faith on the light and truth of the Incarnate Son of God and, like the psalmist, talk tough to your cringing soul.

Prayer: Lord, grant me the grace and the trust in You to talk tough to my cringing soul, saying, "Why are you downcast? Why so disturbed?" I will put my hope in You and yet praise You, my Savior and my God. Amen.

Psalm 43:3-5:
"Send out Your light and Your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to Your holy hill and to Your dwelling! Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise You with the lyre, O God, my God. Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him, my salvation and my God."

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December 10

As we grow in the knowledge of who God is, we grow in our confidence in Him. King David in the Old Testament, like Paul in the New, expresses unswerving confidence in the Lord. In the first four verses of Psalm 27, David tells us the reason for his confidence.

David says, "The Lord is my light." Why is David confident of this? Light brings understanding and enables us to see. Psalm 18:28 says, "For it is You who light my lamp; the Lord God lightens my darkness." David knows that God will bring him understanding to move through whatever darkness he will face. God's light reveals who He is so we can see Him and have fellowship with Him (1 John 5:5-7).

Secondly, David knows God is his salvation. David has seen God deliver him from his enemies and he is confident that God will continue to do so. Salvation is God's work and we can rest in it.

Thirdly, David is confident because God is his stronghold. A stronghold is a place of security. God is David's security.

Because God is all of these things to David, he confidently asserts, "Of whom shall I fear?" When evildoers, adversaries, foes and even a whole army come against him, he says, "My heart shall not fear, though war arises against me, yet will I be confident."

Where does David derive this confidence? David's central focus in life was to seek after the Lord, to be where He is, and to enjoy His beauty. David finds confidence in the worship of his living, protecting God, who reveals Himself by His light.

At Christmas, as we adorn our home with lights, let us remember that it is God who brings His light to adorn our hearts so we can know Him. His light will draw us into His fellowship and drive out all darkness and fear.

Prayer: Lord, be the light of my life. Drive away the fear that keeps me from trusting You with all the struggles and foes in my life. Thank You for Your presence, Your protection, and Your beauty, for they give me confidence. Amen.

Psalm 27:1-4:

"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers assail me to eat up my flesh, my adversaries and foes, it is they who stumble and fall.

Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident.

One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in His temple."

From Bethlehem to Golgotha

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December 11

One of the most profound moments in world history came when Thomas Edison's incandescent light bulbs first illumined a street in Manhattan's financial district. A new way of seeing had broken in upon the world that promised to forever transform human life and culture. For the author of Psalm 119 that light is the Word of God. Like a lamp God's Word illumines the path of the psalmist and provides a sure way for his feet to travel.

But what is God's Word, and how does it function as a light for his path? For Israelites God's Word is the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament that served as Israel's covenant charter with her God. Torah illumined the way to be truly human over and against all the darkened counterfeits of humanity in service to idols. It is this Torah-shaped obedience to the Lord that distinguishes Israel's way of being human from the nations. As such, it is the Torah, throughout Psalm 119, that brings to the psalmist light and life. Earlier, he declares, "I will never forget Your precepts, for by them You have given me life" (119:93). Later he prays, "Great is your mercy O Lord; give me life according to Your rules" (119:156). It is in keeping with Torah's life-giving quality that later Jewish writers came to speak of it as a manifestation, as it were, of God's presence within Israel. To study Torah after the fashion of the psalmist was to be in the presence of the life-giving Lord Himself.

This seems to be the motivation behind one 1st century group in particular—the Pharisees. Under Roman rule the oppressive conditions of Israel's exile persisted. For devout Jews Torah-keeping was the way to the promised life of God's future. In the midst of this darkness, however, a new way of seeing was about to break in upon the world. The Torah of Psalm 119 was about to become embodied in one man. "The Word became flesh... in Him was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4,14). With this surprising innovation into Israel's story everything would change.

Prayer: I long for Your salvation, O Lord... Let my soul live and praise You, and let Your incarnate Word help me. Amen. (Psalm 119:174-175)

Psalm 119:105-106:

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. I have sworn an oath and confirmed it, to keep Your righteous rules."

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December 12

One of the central motifs in J.R.R. Tolkien's epic trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, is travel. The members of the Fellowship travel over vast amounts of territory in their anti-quest toward the land of the Dark Lord to destroy his ring of power. When they tarry for rest or food they are careful to get underway quickly so that night does not overtake them. After the sun sets the servants of the Enemy abound and danger is close at hand.

Throughout John's Gospel Jesus has been traveling on a journey marked along the way by signs that are meant to indicate the purpose of his quest. In chapter 2 water was changed to wine, in chapter 4 an official's son was restored to health, in chapter 5 an invalid was enabled to walk, in chapter 6 loaves were multiplied to feed thousands, in chapter 9 a man born blind was given sight and in chapter 11 a dead man named Lazarus was raised to life. Echoing the six working days of the first creation, these six works of Jesus serve as signs pointing toward the journey's end when the new creation will break forth like the dawn upon a world long darkened by evil and death.

But here in chapter 12, twilight has come upon Jesus. Soon, night must fall and the servants of the Enemy will do their worst to him. Perhaps with an eye toward the setting sun, Jesus urges his followers to remain loyal in the midst of the coming darkness. "As long as the light remains," he says, "believe in the light. Once darkness overtakes you, you'll be lost." Where Jesus goes they cannot follow. He must walk through the valley of death's shadow alone. By the end of this second creative week the darkness will have overcome the light.

But for those sons of light who dare to believe through the hours of the night, a new day will dawn—the first day of a new week—as the light of God's glorious future breaks in upon the world to make it new.

Prayer: Father of Light, give us courage to serve the One who was overcome by the night for us, that we might become sons and daughters of the dawn to illumine a darkened world. Amen.

John 12:35-36a:

"So Jesus said to them, 'The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in darkness does not know where he is going. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.'"

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December 13

The immense truth that Christ is the light of the world must be foundational to our thinking as we study this text, the opening words of which amazingly apply the metaphor to us: “For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord” (Verse 8a). We are light!

As Christians, we are “light in the Lord.” Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14a). The more luminous our integrity—our goodness, righteousness, and truth—the brighter the light. How can we shine more brightly?

A man returning from a journey brought his wife a matchbox that would glow in the dark. After giving it to her, she turned out the light, but the matchbox could not be seen. Both thought they had been cheated. Then the wife noticed some French words on the box and asked a friend to translate them. The inscription said: “If you want me to shine in the night, keep me in the light.”

We need to spend time alone with Jesus—the Light—in prayer, exposing our lives like photographic plates to His presence so that His image, His character, is burnt into ours. If we do this, we will spiritually be like Moses when he descended Sinai after being alone with God—his face shone with the light of God. We need to open our Bibles and allow God’s truth to illumine our eager faces with goodness and righteousness and truth.

If you want to shine in the night, keep in the light of Christ.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, more than anything in all the world we want You to see the fulfillment of Your work in us and in all creation, for Your glory. So we join in calling out, “Come, Lord Jesus.” Amen.

Ephesians 5:8-14:

“For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, ‘Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’”

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Devotions on the Infant Savior

December 14

Central to the Jewish worldview was the Temple, God's dwelling place on earth. In much the same way the Temple is central to the Christian worldview, but in the Christian worldview the Temple is not a building, instead it's a "spiritual house" made up of "living stones" (i.e. Christians) which have as their foundation the "Living Stone," Jesus Christ. In other words, the true Temple of God is the church and this true Temple, where God now makes His dwelling, is built upon Jesus, the Rock (Matt. 7:24-25). He is the One who was rejected and killed by those who couldn't grasp the reality that He was the One through whom and upon whom God's true Temple was going to be built. But in God's sovereign plan, this "stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" of the "spiritual house" where acceptable sacrifices are made to the one true God.

Not only was the Temple central to the Jewish worldview, so also was their ethnic identity as the nation of Israel. But notice that Peter says that the "living stones," (the church, which is built upon Jesus), are not only the true Temple but are also the true Israel, the true people of God. He says, "You are the chosen race, you are a royal priesthood, you are a holy nation, you are a people for God's own possession."

Through Jesus and in Jesus a whole new community is being built, and it isn't being built based on race or status or privilege. Instead, it is being built on the basis of one's trust in Jesus and His life, death, and resurrection. This is what our world needs to hear this Advent season. It needs to hear that all the other "communities," whatever they may be, are mere parodies of this one true community that is founded on Jesus Christ, and it is the community where the living God makes His home.

How will they hear this message if we, the community of Jesus, the Temple of the Living God, are not proclaiming His excellencies in word and deed to the world?

Prayer: Our God help us to realize who we are in Jesus and to live accordingly in our darkened world. Amen.

I Peter 2:4-9:

"As you come to Him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture: 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame.' So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,' and 'A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense...' But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."

From Bethlehem to Golgotha

Devotions on the Infant Savior

December 15

The great missionary purpose of Old Testament Israel was not “Go and tell” but “Come and see.” When Yahweh, the God of Israel, called out for Himself a people for His own possession, He had more in mind than Israel’s salvation. His purpose was to make His righteousness shine so brightly within a particular people that the nations would be drawn to the one true God. As Isaiah elsewhere prophesied, “The mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains...and all the nations shall flow to it” (Is. 2:2-3). God meant for Israel’s light to be the nations’ light, and her salvation their salvation.

Readers of the Old Testament know all too well that Israel did not fulfill its mandate. But God had purposed to make His light to shine most brilliantly in the depths of His own humiliation. And so the glorious picture of Isaiah 60:1-3 comes to pass not in a righteous nation but in a tiny infant in whom all the hopes of Israel found their fulfillment.

God first called a few wandering shepherds to “arise” when His glory shone about them and His messenger told them good tidings of great joy. God also assured that “kings [would come] to the brightness of your rising,” sending Magi from the east to “arise” and follow a singular star to the humility of Bethlehem.

And finally, God fulfilled His promise that “nations shall come to your light,” drawing people from many tribes and tongues to a Jewish Savior, killed in humiliation but raised in glory. This is the wonder we celebrate during Advent; the light of God in Jesus Christ has shone upon us, and that light will return one day with even greater brilliance. On that day the glory of the Lord will be fully displayed, and we will never again walk in darkness.

Prayer: Father of lights, You have glorified Yourself by sending your Son to illumine a world held captive by darkness. Grant us the grace to joyfully anticipate Your coming, and to let Your light shine in our hearts, so that the nations might flow to Your light as it shines in our lives. Amen.

Isaiah 60:1-3:
*“Arise, shine, for
your light has
come, and the
glory of the Lord
has risen upon
you. For behold,
darkness shall
cover the earth,
and thick darkness
the peoples; but
the Lord will arise
upon you, and
His glory will be
seen upon you.
And nations shall
come to Your light,
and kings to the
brightness of Your
rising.”*

From Bethlehem to Golgotha

Devotions on the Infant Savior

December 16

The gospel has been hidden. That is, its true and excellent character has not been seen. People have not observed that which is completely and comprehensively plain. They have missed the image of God in the face of Christ. The word image has at its root the idea of representation. Christ, being God, represents God, so much so that he who has seen Jesus has seen God the Father (John 14:9).

The gospel displays the light of the new creation by showing how Jesus Christ manifests the glory of God's image. The holy and merciful character of God is fully represented in Jesus Christ. The umbilical corded, blood covered and placenta smeared baby Jesus is the precise expression of the unseen God. Jesus is the visible, material manifestation of the immortal, invisible God. He is the embodiment of God's own substance. As the creed says of Jesus, He is God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God.

Adam was created in God's image. That is, he was created to be God's representative on earth but fell from it and was barred from God's presence. Jesus Christ is the full and final revelation of God's presence to all of us who belong to Adam (Heb 1:2). Therefore, the fullness of deity dwelt in a feeding trough that those who had refused to recognize Him in His superintendence over all might come to recognize Him. The sum of all divine excellence is seen in the face of Christ. To see His glory is to be saved, for we are transformed by seeing God in Christ (2 Cor 3:18).

Prayer: Father, knock the scales from my eyes and allow me to behold all of Your glory in the face of the Son, Jesus Christ, by the power of Your Spirit. Amen.

2 Corinthians: 4:3-6:

"And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

From Bethlehem to Golgotha

Devotions on the Infant Savior

December 17

You are what you eat.” At least that’s what the promoters of healthy dieting tell us. In the Sermon on the Mount, however, Jesus tells us, “You are what you seek.” This seems to be what John is getting at in this portion of his letter. You take on the character of that which you seek or worship. Standing behind John’s words is the image of God theology of Genesis 1. To be made in the image of God means to be both God’s representation and God’s representative upon the earth. Those who worship the true God both resemble and reflect Him into the world. Humanity has been created as kind of refracting mirror, as it were, to catch the light of God and cast it out again to illumine the creation with His glory.

For John, then, the matter is clear. Those who claim to have fellowship with God—to share in God, to be His worshipers—yet fail to accurately resemble and reflect Him are liars. If you resemble and reflect only darkness, then that’s what you truly worship. You are what you seek. The Christian God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. Only by walking in the light of this God do we demonstrate the sincerity of our worship.

But over those to whom John writes a shadow looms, threatening to eclipse their loyalty to Jesus. Apparently, some were claiming to have no sin. To deny sin is to deny the Savior. To deny the Savior is to embrace darkness. The light of John’s Gospel exposes this as a counterfeit. Those who truly walk in the light are painfully aware of the darkness in their hearts. For these the blood of Jesus avails to cleanse them from sin and unite them together as God’s true people.

You are what you seek. Where is God’s image distorted in your life? It’s there that you’ll find your heart loyal to a counterfeit. For those who repent and return to the light the blood of Jesus still avails.

Prayer: O God of Light, in You there is no darkness. But in me there is shadow and gloom. Draw me back to the light. Forgive me and purify me in Jesus to resemble and reflect only You. Amen.

1 John 1:5-7:
“This is the message we have heard from Him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with Him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”

From Bethlehem to Golgotha

Devotions on the Infant Savior

December 18

For many of us, we're entering that frantic phase of last minute Christmas shopping. Duty and drudgery have crowded out desire. Many of us are desperately looking for gifts not because we really want to but because we're compelled by a conviction that we have to!

Crafted in God's image, our gift-giving rituals are a pale and often distorted reflection of the Gift-Giver Himself. God is the supreme giver of gifts. His Son, Jesus Christ, is the gift. But what compelled God to give us His only Son? Was it His duty and drudgery or desire?

Unlike a battery-operated doll that repeats the same three phrases when squeezed, the gift of God provides commentary on why and for what reason God gave Him as a gift to the world. In the dark of the night, Jesus explains to Nicodemus the reason for the season.

Let us pause and mediate on this gospel truth: It was God's love that from all eternity compelled the Incarnation of His Son into a world that would hate and murder Him.

Sadly, as familiarity breeds contempt, the words of John 3:16 often fall on deaf ears. In our crowded and distracted lives we have grown numb to the wonder of God's gift for us in Christ.

Here it is again: in the gift of Jesus Christ God loves the unlovely. God loves those who hate Him. God loves those in darkness. God sent his Beloved into the world this time not to condemn us in our darkness but to liberate us into the light. In Christ God desires to give us the gift of Himself.

Thus, it stands to reason that the greatest gift of all is Jesus Christ. Through faith in Christ God opens up to us, like a set of Russian nesting dolls, the mysterious and hidden treasures of His eternal life and love.

Though man in his wickedness despises the love of God, having sought even to destroy it, the Gift remains given to all those who would receive it by faith.

Dear God, Warm our hearts anew with the wonder and beauty of Your love for us in Christ. May we receive Him again today like a child, with empty and eager hands. Amen.

*John 3:16-21:
"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God."*

From Bethlehem to Golgotha

Devotions on the Infant Savior

December 19

The imagery here is of a felled tree. The axe of divine judgment fell on the forestlike people of Assyria (Isaiah 10:33-34) which provides the perfect foil for the shoot of the Messiah. The Majestic One has cut the arrogant boughs off the tree of Assyria and brought its lofty arrogance low with His great might.

In sharp contrast, the Davidic dynasty looks like a stump at this point (Isaiah 6:13). For when Christ was born that dynasty had been without power for nearly six hundred years. This expected King is described as the shoot and root of Jesse. This is a shocking reference. For most kings were compared with their father David (2 Kings 18:3) but no king was equivalent to David or to the Son of Jesse. Among, the kings, David is the only king referred to as the son of Jesse (1 Sam 20:27-33). This expected King is called the Root of Jesse, which means that Jesse sprang from Him.

This expected King is endowed with the Spirit of the Lord as were Moses, Joshua, and David before Him. His rule will be magnificently righteous, delighting in the fear of the Lord. The Spirit of the Lord rests upon Him. Consequently, the world which He governs will be graphically peaceful. The world He reigns is absolutely and completely re-ordered and transformed. The entire earth is besotted with the fruit of the Spirit. In fact, the world looks a lot like Eden. The hostilities of predator and prey are abolished. The world is saturated with the peace of God. So secure is the peace on earth that a youngster can rightfully exercise dominion by playing over the hole of the cobra because everyone knows the Lord.

Everywhere God is present in holiness and in every place His magnanimity is enjoyed to its fullest extent.

Prayer: King of Kings subdue us to Yourself. Reign in our hearts this Christmas. May the earth be full of the knowledge of Your rule, and may we be transformed by the peace which comes from Your Spirit. Amen.

Isaiah 11.1-9:

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge... with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;... Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist... The wolf shall dwell with the lamb... and a little child shall lead them... The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples — of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious..."

From Bethlehem to Golgotha

Devotions on the Infant Savior

December 20

It's the difference between holding your breath in anticipation of a great promise and no longer caring enough to bother. What happens when we forget God's great promises? What happens when we quit holding our breath? What happens when we take big, lazy belly full of air and think nothing of it? God takes our breath away. Like he took away old Zechariah's voice. What happens when we quit believing? He knocks the wind out of us by sending a prophet. So old Zech and his wife Liz get pregnant in old age, and as if that weren't enough, the kid grows up to be John the Baptist, a wild-eyed desert dweller who eats locusts and honey and wears a camel hair cloak and a leather belt, and people keep coming to see him out in the wild places even though he screams at them, "Repent! The Kingdom of God is near!" And in between his rantings he pours water over their heads. You'd think they'd have gotten the idea.

Trouble is that sometimes even prophets quit holding their breath. Take John again, rotting away in Herod's dungeon before the gluttonous king lopped off his head for a party favor during his fifty-fifth birthday bash. John, the one who leapt in his mother's womb when the fetal Jesus was near him, now has his doubts. "Are you the one, or is there another?" John asks from his prison cell. What's a doubting prophet to do? Why, listen to the Great Prophet, of course. "The blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, and good news is preached to the poor. Believe," came Jesus' reply. "God has kept His promise."

What do we do in our doubt? In dark moments we ask, "What if Jesus isn't the One?" And God in His mercy sends a whole parade of prophets who scream and flail and sometimes whisper, "Jesus is the one." And in His mercy God the Father sent the Jesus, the Great Prophet, who says to us again and again, "Believe. God has kept His promise." Now, if we only had ears to hear.

Prayer: Give us ears to hear, Lord, in the darkness of doubt, that You are the One. Forgive us when we fail to listen to our true and faithful Prophet, Jesus Christ. Amen.

*Luke 1:67-79:
"And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying... 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us..., as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember His holy covenant..., to grant us that we...might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness...'"*

From Bethlehem to Golgotha

Devotions on the Infant Savior

December 21

Our God is a God of salvation and deliverance, and we participate in a grand history of redemption. The Word of God is a history book of God's redemptive acts in time and space. Imagine that you are a sixth century B.C. Jew in exile. You have never known anything but captivity. From childhood you have been told the Exodus stories, but all of your life your lot has been to wander in the wilderness. Suddenly, a voice is crying in that wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the desert a highway for our God! Could it be? Is that God coming to lead us home? To deliver us from this exile? God is saying, Comfort, comfort. Jerusalem's warfare is ended, and her iniquity is pardoned. Salvation is at hand!

Luke remembers these words from Israel's history to say that this scene is being re-enacted in a new desert. John the Baptizer has become the voice crying in the wilderness. And Yahweh is coming to lead His people still to an even more glorious redemption. He has come, in the flesh, to make the rough places plain.

The history is still being told, for it is to the wilderness of our hearts that Christ comes, and it is there that we must prepare for His coming. He has come to level the mountains of our pride, to fill up the valleys of our fear. He has come to smooth out the rough places of our waywardness, our lack of love, our hurtful words. He has come to make the crooked roads of our perverse ways straight. Comfort, comfort, O people! See the salvation of God! Prepare His way and rejoice in your deliverance.

Prayer: O God of my deliverance, You are strong to save. It is Your right hand that has delivered Your people from sin. I confess that my heart is a wilderness of evil. Come make my rough ways smooth. Help me to prepare for Your coming by granting me a heart of true repentance. Thank You that You have written me into Your history book by including me in the salvation that Christ brings. May these truths be present to my heart and mind this season in particular as I reflect on Your coming. Amen.

*Luke 3:1-6:
"In the fifteenth
year of the reign
of Tiberius Caesar,
Pontius Pilate
being governor of
Judea, and Herod
being tetrarch of
Galilee... the word
of God came to
John the son of
Zechariah in the
wilderness. And he
went into all the
region around the
Jordan, proclaiming
a baptism of
repentance for the
forgiveness of sins.
As it is written
in the book of the
words of Isaiah
the prophet, 'The
voice of one crying
in the wilderness:
Prepare the way
of the Lord, make
his paths straight.
Every valley shall
be filled, and every
mountain and hill
shall be made low,
and the crooked
shall become
straight, and the
rough places shall
become level ways,
and all flesh shall
see the salvation of
God.'"*

From Bethlehem to Golgotha

Devotions on the Infant Savior

December 22

The Jews were chosen of God (Deut. 7:6-11), but God had cast them from Him. They had possessed the light of God's Word (Deut. 4:7-9), but now they groped blindly in deepest darkness. The nation that had danced with God on the mountaintops now languished in a gloomy valley of despair (Isa. 8:5-8, 22). Judah had violated the covenant, now they suffered the consequences of their disobedience (Deut. 11:26-28).

The gloom was real. Zebulun and Naphtali were the first regions of Galilee to fall to Assyria in 733 BC (9:1). But the distress, though real, was not the final nor the fundamental reality. Those first in darkness would be first to see the dawn of the new day of grace (v. 2). The first to weep would be first to rejoice. The first to be cast from God's presence would be the first redeemed, reconciled, restored (v. 3).

The God who delivered His people from Egypt and the Midianites (vv. 4,5), would free the believing remnant from the gloom of His wrath (Ex. 6:6-7): they would be restored to favor with God.

But, how does God accomplish this? Isaiah declares that a King shall come, born of human parentage but given by the Lord (v. 6), a perfect King, eminently qualified to accomplish His task: a "wonder of a counselor" possessing supernatural wisdom, who conquers and governs in the power of God, a faithful Father who brings everlasting care and comfort, a Prince, at one with God and with His people, who makes wounded souls whole in the peace of God (vv. 6-7).

At His advent, the coming King will zealously fulfill His calling to gather and finally bring to glory all those whom the Father gave to Him in eternity (v. 7b; John 17:1ff). This will happen. Count on it. It is guaranteed, because the Lord who plans our future (v. 1) and shatters our foes (v. 5) also keeps His promises (v. 7).

Prayer: O great God in heaven, may my heart be conquered by Him whose advent has brought light and life to my soul, and may the peace of His presence be my greatest joy and confidence as I eagerly await His second advent. Amen.

*Isaiah 9:1-7:
"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over His kingdom, to establish it and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this."*

From Bethlehem to Golgotha

Devotions on the Infant Savior

December 23

For Christians, Christmas is a time of refreshment and restoration. Zephaniah ends his short prophecy with God's promise of restoration. Like all of the prophets, Zephaniah brings a message of warning about God's judgment. At the same time, he includes the reminder that God does not forget His covenant. Judgment for sin is certain, yet God's grace is even more certain. Zephaniah foretold the day when all our fears would give way to praise. That day came when Jesus entered this world. His life and death set the stage for our ultimate victory and joy.

Christ gives us victory because He takes away the judgments against us. Our sins bring death and the wrath of God, but Christ Jesus removes those judgments, making our case legally clear before God (Rom. 3:21-23). Still, the devil prowls around looking for men to devour. Yet, we can rejoice because Christ's death on the cross disarmed the devil's power and triumphed over him (Col. 2:15). Because Christ dwells in our midst, we need never fear evil again.

Christ's victory brings us joy. We rejoice because our King is in our midst and continues to bring us the fruits of our salvation. He, too, rejoices with us because we are His and He delights in us. His love is so large and so personal that our hearts are overwhelmed with peace. This peace truly leads our hearts to say, "Joy to the World!"

Prayer: Lord, You are our King and You dwell in our midst. We praise You for delivering us from the wrath we deserve. Yet You not only justified us, You came to quiet our very hearts and rejoice over us as Your very own. Lift up our hearts with the joy of Your presence. Amen.

Zephaniah 3:14-17:

"Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; He has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: 'Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak. The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness; He will quiet you by his love; He will exult over you with loud singing.'"

From Bethlehem to Golgotha

Devotions on the Infant Savior

December 24

The young couple leans in to stare at the monitor as the little life they had conceived in secret was about to be made manifest. Through the use of ultrasound doctors are able to see the baby's beating heart, the development of the spinal column and the internal organs. Doctors can predict the child's physical development, but they cannot predict the child's spiritual development. They cannot look at a baby and know how God will use this child for His glory.

But hear the words of God when He says, "It is He who will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). This baby Jesus is a unique child, for He is the Savior of His people.

No doctor is able to foretell the future of a child's spiritual life, yet the Scriptures tell us Jesus' future—He came to save His people. This baby boy has been sent of God the Father, conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary in order to deliver His people from their sin. The Apostle Paul tells us, "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23).

No one can save himself from death, for we are all sinners and will surely die. Our salvation must come from outside of ourselves. God must act on our behalf. And God Himself did act on our behalf when He conceived the baby boy Jesus, that Jesus would come to earth and live a perfectly righteous life and to die a substitutionary death. Mary bore a son and Jesus bore our sin.

Worship the One who took away your sin.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, make room in our hearts today that we may worship You in all Your glory. May we see our hearts today as they truly are and see our sin that we may truly recognize our need. Show us our Savior that we may cry out in sincere thanksgiving for Your life and work on our behalf. We love you Jesus, Savior of Your people. Amen.

*Matthew 1:18-21:
"Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.'"*

From Bethlehem to Golgotha

Devotions on the Infant Savior

December 25

"Christianity is the only major religion to have as its central event the humiliation of its God." —Bruce L. Shelley

What is the Incarnation? Matthew 1:18 literally means: "Mary was found with one in her womb by the Holy Spirit." The Incarnation teaches us that God broke into the world through one illiterate Jewish girl. One world broke into another through her womb. It's a unique claim, one that no other religion makes. For Judaism and Islam, incarnation is impossible. God is too great to have ever broken into this world. It is pathetic, demeaning, and even blasphemous to them to suggest that God would stoop to become a baby, to nurse and wet His diaper. But think about it: If a person is too great to get down on a child's level, we don't say he's great. Christ the Lord stoops to Mary's womb.

God did not become less than God when He came in flesh; but He suffered humiliation. The powerful became powerless; the strong became weak; the invulnerable became vulnerable; the unapproachable, approachable. God became a baby, in fact, a single cell. The Incarnation is not impossible, but it is amazing and necessary.

It is necessary because God says, "I hate suffering, and the only way I can ultimately destroy it is to experience it myself." The Incarnation means God broke in to humanity to suffer. The Incarnation means you don't have to say when you suffer, "Something is wrong with me, I must be bad." The Incarnation shows us that it is not the bad that suffer, it is actually the best who do. The Incarnation also means you don't have to say about suffering, "God is unfeeling, uncaring," but that God suffered far worse than you have. In Christ, God understands and identifies with our hurt. Our God is the only God with wounds.

Prayer: Thank you, Father, for breaking into this world through the womb of Mary and for the wonder of the Incarnation, where Your Son identifies with us and suffers for us. Thank you that in Jesus You, who had all power, became powerless for us. Thank you, that without giving up any of Your greatness, You stooped down low for us. Thank you that, veiled in flesh, Your Godhead we see. Amen.

*Luke 2:4-7, 9-11:
"And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. ... And an angel of the Lord appeared ... and said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a 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.'"*