

HOME
FOR
CHRISTMAS

Daily Devotions for Advent



Home for Christmas

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A Word of Introduction

Who would have thought when this year began that instead of crossing off completed tasks and trips from our calendars, we would be erasing our plans and replacing them with lots of time at home?

Rather than picking our reclining theatre seats and settling in to watch the latest box office thriller, we've become experts at stretching out on the sofa to "Netflix and chill." Rather than driving across the country on family vacations, we've become "weekend warriors," tackling endless home repairs and improvements. Rather than sharing favorite meals with our extended family and friends for birthday celebrations, we've partied virtually via FaceTime or Zoom from the comfort of our home offices.

The challenges and difficulties of this year have left many of us spending far more time at home with our immediate families than to which we are accustomed. For not a few of us, all this togetherness has highlighted and heightened the struggles and sorrows that have long simmered in our lives.

If that's you, you are not alone. You are not alone because you are not the only person whose extended time at home has underscored preexisting strife. But more than that, you are not alone because rather than allowing you and your family to worry and wither in your sorrows, the God who created heaven and earth wants to inhabit your space this Christmas.

The story of the birth of Jesus Christ is filled with people just like you and me, people whose homes were filled with struggles and sorrows, Yet they were changed through the joyful entrance of the Son of God into their lives.

As we reflect upon their stories this Advent, we will be reminded that God wants to come home to our homes this Christmas and we will be compelled to make room in our lives to receive him.

December 1

Luke 1:5-7

Faithfulness to God's commands does not necessarily lead to fulfillment of our desires.

"What do you want?" It's the question all parents ask when all of a sudden their children are taking on chores, obeying rules, and contributing to the household without being asked. The question usually reveals some desire or dream that has caught a child's attention and spurred their willingness to do whatever their parents expect in order to get what they want.

How often are we like little children with our heavenly Father? We live our lives somewhat indifferently to His plans and purposes until suddenly we want something that is outside of our power to reach. We begin going to church, saying our prayers, giving to those in need, reading the Bible—all the spiritual things we believe will curry favor with God and compel Him to give us what we want only to find out that God doesn't work that way.

Some of us have tried this method of relating to God only to come up short and so we have walked away empty-handed and broken-hearted, thinking either that God does not care or that God is not there. However, the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth teaches us a far different reality: Faithfulness to God's commands does not guarantee fulfillment of our desires.

Zechariah and Elizabeth faithfully served God. They walked in holiness. They were *blameless in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord*. Yet one of the defining qualities of their lives was barrenness.

In the world of the Bible, the birth of children was a sign of divine favor and the absence of children spelled condemnation or rejection by God. Those around Zechariah and Elizabeth may have wondered what the

couple had done to warrant God's opposition of them. People may have thought their character was not stellar, their conduct not holy. Zechariah and Elizabeth may have even wondered why God had not graced them with the blessing of children.

Whatever their wondering, however ashamed they may have felt, they did not allow the unfulfilled longings of their hearts to move them away from faithfulness to God. As we consider the example of Zechariah and Elizabeth, we should be encouraged to keep serving God faithfully, recognizing that God is *with* us and *for* us even when He does not give us all that we desire.

God, change my heart. Make my motives pure. Grow in me a desire to faithfully live for You in order to glorify You, rather than to gratify me. Fill me with grace to accept the good gifts You have for me, even when those gifts are not what I desired.

December 2

Luke 1:8-12

***If our commitment to worship is conditional,
there is something wrong with the condition of our hearts.***

One of the harder things I have had to do in my short life was preach on the Sunday following my father's death. My heart was heavy, my mind distracted, yet I was convinced I needed to be found faithful in worship, leading my congregation in the praise of God. I was up early that morning preparing for worship and I sent my mom a text: "Daddy was a Christian. Let's honor him today and worship in the middle of our weeping."

While I was busy leading my church family, my mom and siblings filled their place in my parents' church and worshiped. I'll never forget a dear friend from home sending a text the next day that read, "It was good to see your mother praising Jesus on Sunday."

There are times in life when it is difficult to worship. We walk through the valley of the shadow of death. We go through a separation that leads to divorce. Our children embrace alternative lifestyles. We experience financial ruin.

There are endless scenarios in which we are tempted to abandon our commitment to worship because of how we feel about God, ourselves, or others.

If we give into those temptations, we say to God that our worship of His name is contingent upon our circumstances. If our worship can be hindered by our circumstances, we reveal that we have not rightly understood worship at all.

In the birth narrative of John the Baptist, the cousin and forerunner to the Lord Jesus, we read that Zechariah, John's father, went to the temple at his appointed time to serve his turn in the leading of worship, the lot falling to him to burn the incense.

Life had not been without its difficulties for Zechariah. He and his wife Elizabeth had lived into their old age without the blessing of children.

They had endured the shame and reproach of their neighbors.

They had wondered why God had not favored them with a child while those around them abounded with children.

Yet, Zechariah and Elizabeth were committed to worship. Their worship—both privately and corporately—was not contingent upon their experiences of grace, but upon their obedience to God's commands.

No matter what hardships, disappointments, and troubles you may face, if you believe in God, you are commanded to worship Him.

If your worship of God has been interrupted by the difficulties of life, it is time to correct course. Let the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth call you to faithfully, regularly engage God in worship, regardless of how you feel or what you've endured. Your commitment to worship in the tough times will magnify His name all the more.

God, there are days when I do not feel like worshiping. The burdens are great, my sins are many, I cannot sense Your presence. On those days help me to be obedient to Your commands, to recognize Your worth, and to offer up a sacrifice of praise to You, even if that sacrifice is my own comfort. Condition me to worship so that my worship is not conditional.

December 3

Luke 1:13-17

Prayers unanswered are not necessarily prayers unheard.

I spend a lot of time on the road, typically driving around 40,000 miles per year. Over the years I've learned to pass the time by making phone calls to family and friends.

As my travels regularly take me through regions with poor cell phone reception, my conversations are often suddenly met with silence on the other end. Wondering if I've dropped the call momentarily or entirely, I immediately begin asking, "Can you hear me now?"

In our conversations with God—and that's what our prayers should be—we sometimes are suddenly aware of silence. We pour our hearts out to God day after day, longing that He would hear and answer. And after talking to God so long, yet hearing no response, we begin to wonder if we have entered a no-signal zone, asking, "God, can You hear me now?"

One wonders how often Zechariah and Elizabeth wondered if God could hear them. They were *old* and *advanced in years* by the time we encounter them. They had faced the reproach of barrenness all their lives.

They had prayed for God to take away their shame and favor them with a child. Yet they remained childless.

It must have seemed that their prayers had gone unheard.

They resigned themselves to live with the burden of infertility in the absence of the blessing of children.

But then the angel of the Lord showed up while Zechariah was on duty in the temple to inform him that his prayer had been heard and that his wife would bear a son, whom they would name John.

Though Zechariah could not believe at first (Luke 1:20), it became increasingly clear that God had heard them all along.

God's intervention at such a distant, defeated point in the lives of Zechariah and Elizabeth is proof that prayers unanswered are not necessarily prayers unheard. If you find yourself this Christmas frustrated by the lack of response, wondering if God even hears you, do not quit praying. You may soon hear His voice invading your life to let you know He's heard you all along.

God, on the days when prayer is not a delight, help me to make it a discipline. Show me that the purposes of prayer are many, that my prayer life is not just about begging Your provision, but is also bending my will. Give me confidence in Your concern for me and cause me to persist in prayer even when I do not hear or see Your response.

December 4

Luke 1:18-25

***If the muscle of gratitude has atrophied in your life,
it is time to exercise it by giving thanks.***

You don't have to work with the public for long before you realize that there are some people who are marvelous at being miserable. They look for items to stoke the fires of their grumbling. They highlight the negative in every situation. Their very presence casts a pall not because of who they are, but because of how they act.

These are people who complain about what they don't have or can't do, while turning down any offer of help or provision for their needs. They are discontented. They would not have life any other way.

If we aren't careful, we join the company of the miserable. We focus on what we don't have. We talk about where we can't go. We dwell on what we can't do. Before long, the grace of God fades so far into the background of our lives that our scope is bounded by grief and groaning.

One of the dangers of excelling in misery is that one loses the ability to be grateful. As we fill our days grumbling at God about how we find his planning imperfect, his provision insufficient, and his protection incomplete, the muscle memory that prompts us to express gratitude at every extension of grace diminishes.

The truly sad thing is that we often fail to recognize how far we have walked down this path until some kind providence of God meets a need or solves a problem in our lives and we find ourselves struggling to even tell God thank you.

The nature of living in a world marred by sin and in the process of being redeemed means that we have difficulties, we experience hardships, we face fears, we grieve losses. We often talk about these troubles both to

our fellow man and to God, so we must be careful not to cross the line into grumbling, lest we talk so much about our misery we forget to even look for God's mercy.

This Christmas, let us remember the example of Elizabeth, who lived her whole life with a source of shame and a hurt in her heart, yet continued to walk faithfully before the Lord so that when God brought forth a child in her at an old age, she expressed her gratitude in praise of God who had looked on her with favor. Be like Elizabeth: Stop grumbling. Give thanks.

God, I am grateful for Your love for me, for Your interest in my life, for the conviction You give me over my sin, for Your grace that forgives and frees me when I falter. I am grateful for the desires of my heart You have met and for the desires of my heart You have replaced. I am grateful for every loss and every need that have increased my dependence upon You. God, there are needs in my life right now that I want You to meet. Help me to be ready to accept Your provision whenever and however it comes into my life by cultivating a heart of gratitude in me.

December 5

Luke 1:26-30

***My faith may not always be strong,
but God's grace is always sufficient.***

Sometimes we think that obedience to God leads to a life of comfort and safety. We go along with the idea that if we just do the right things, our lives will go smoothly and we'll be free from worry.

However, growing up spiritually requires the realization that comfort and safety are not among the promises of God for His people. In fact, walking in obedience to God often brings us out of our comfort zones into dangerous and precarious places. Yet we set fear aside and walk along these paths because we know that God is leading us.

While her situation as the one favored by God to bring the Messiah into the world is unique, there are abiding principles to be learned from the life experiences of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

One of the lessons we learn from God's invasion of Mary's life is that though the work He wants to do in and through us may be scary, we have no cause for fear.

The angel told Mary not to be afraid. This was not a command without foundation. Rather, the direction to release fear and embrace faith was built upon the truth that God's favor had come to rest on Mary.

The path she was called to walk was not easy. Though we are not told about all the challenges Mary faced, it is not hard for us to imagine the rejection and condemnation she endured. Yet, we see her growing in faith, embracing God's plan, treasuring in her heart the beauty of Christ. Why? Because God's grace was upon her.

Like Mary, when God invades your life, He does so to call you to walk with Him. He knows the path will be difficult. He

is aware of the struggles you will face. Before you know it, He knows that you will falter at times.

Yet God bids you to walk on in faith. Why? Not because your faith is so strong, but because His grace is so sufficient.

As you hear the callings of God on your life, do not be afraid to follow Him in faith. Like Mary, God's favor will cause you to endure and overcome for His glory and your good.

God, show me again that Your will lies in the way of the cross. In order to obey You, I must be willing to die to myself. When that seems overwhelming, complicated, difficult, impossible, remind me that endurance does not depend on the strength of my faith, but on the sufficiency of Your grace. Help me to overcome my fears moment by moment as I depend upon You.

December 6

Luke 1:31-37

***The callings of God may be beyond our reach,
but they are never beyond His.***

God specializes in the miraculous. Mary would have known this from hearing the history of Israel recounted.

The wondrous work of God began in creation when He called the world into being out of nothing. His wonders were displayed at the Red Sea when He caused a part in the waters so that the children of Israel might walk across on dry land. We cannot forget that mighty show of His power when he brought down the city of Jericho at the blast of the rams' horns and the shout of His people.

God replenished the supply of flour and oil for the widow of Zarephath.

God raised the Shunamite's son from death.

God cured Naaman of leprosy.

God shielded the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace.

God closed the mouths of the lions in Daniel's den.

All those things would have been familiar to Mary, yet when God entered her world and told her of His plan for her life—that she would bear the Son of the Most High—her first instinct was to doubt. She queried God: *How will this be since I am a virgin?*

Though not an unreasonable question, given the requirements of having a child naturally, it did seem to miss the miraculous.

Mary needed the reminder as God announced His intention to do the extraordinary in her life that He is not bound by the limits of human resources. He specializes in

the miraculous, the extraordinary, the wonderful. God can do anything, even the things we are convinced are out of reach and beyond hope.

Though Mary's call to be the mother of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, is unique in history, the lesson God taught to her and through her abides: Nothing is impossible with God.

In the course of ordinary living, seeking obedience to the God we believe in, we will be called to reach goals, embrace changes, and upend situations that are beyond the bounds of our abilities. In these moments, we must come back to the story of Mary and remember that nothing is ever beyond the reach of God.

God, I only see the part and not the whole. I do not always understand how Your plans can be accomplished or Your purposes fulfilled. I want to understand. I want to see the big picture. I want to have it all figured out. And sometimes my desire to know what You are up to stalls out my faith. Help me to believe. Write upon my heart the truth that with You nothing is impossible. Remind me that this truth is the page upon which the story of my salvation is written. Do these things in me so that when Your plan is beyond my comprehension and out of my reach, I will walk in faith, knowing that You will make a way.

December 7

Luke 1:38

***God does not enter our lives so that we can be more fulfilled.
God enters our lives so that we can bear fruit for His kingdom.***

Maybe you were the parent asking your child to get up from watching TV or to put down the phone in order to finish chores.

Maybe you were the child who wanted to finish the show first, hoping that your parents would not realize when it was over so that you could start another show and make the same argument the next time they checked in about starting the chores.

Maybe you have been the child and are now the parent, so you know this struggle inside out.

Patience might prevail for a bit, but then the line is crossed. Both parent and child become instantly aware of who has the authority in the situation and who needs to accede to that authority.

As the children of God the Father by faith in God the Son, we often engage in these tests of authority, insisting on the activities that bring us pleasure when we should be yielding to what accomplishes His purposes. In those moments, we are compelled to learn the lesson that while God cares deeply about us, the most important thing in the world is not our gratification, but His glory.

God's insistence upon His glory in all things requires a response of yielded obedience on our part.

Mary's response to the message of the angel serves as a model of such obedience. God upended Mary's life and called her to cast fear aside as she faced all the challenges of mothering Jesus. She did not seek her own will or plead an easier path. She yielded to the Father's plan.

As we hear the clarion voice of God calling us to find joy not in our plans, but in His, may we follow in the steps of Mary, yielding to God with a declaration of obedience: *I am your servant, Lord. Let it be as you desire.*

God, I want my life to be used by You, to make much of You, to bear fruit for You. And I want to enjoy the blessing of serving You. So, grow me in grace so that the posture of my faith is increasingly one of yielded obedience rather than endless questioning or defiant rebellion. Help me to exercise trust in You by following Your leading in my life even when I am unsure of Your plan. Show me that the destination is always conformity with Your will and so compel me to follow in faith even when the directions are unclear.

December 8

Luke 1:39-56

In worship we remind ourselves of God's character and, therefore, learn to rest in His control.

Sometimes we face terribly difficult circumstances. Perhaps they are the result of our choices or the consequences of the actions of others. They may simply stem from our living in a fallen world. But they are the kind of real-life challenges that threaten to consume us as we look for solutions, contemplate conclusions, and worry over responses. Sometimes in these circumstances the only option that makes sense is to run away and hide.

Did you notice that Mary did exactly that? She ran away. Luke tells us that after she was encountered by the angel of the Lord, *she went with haste* from Nazareth to the hill country of Judah. Mary put the pedal to the metal getting out of Dodge.

We cannot know all the things Mary was feeling in her heart. However, with concerns about how this child was to be conceived, how Joseph, her beloved, would respond to what in any other situation would be proof of infidelity and a loss of virginity, and, no doubt, how the community would respond once the news was known, it is safe to say Mary had a little on her mind.

The wonderings of her mind were enough to send her wandering for cover. But think of the transformation that was made in that wandering.

Mary fled for the hill country to hide in the home of her cousin Elizabeth, presumably because she had heard of Elizabeth's miraculous conception and thought she would be open to the possibility that God had worked in Mary's life, too, albeit in a different way. She went there immediately, when she would have been showing no physical signs of a baby, yet returned to her home three

months later when her body would have begun revealing she was with child.

What happened in that season of escape that compelled her to go home and face her fears? I am convinced it was her worship.

Mary received the blessing of Elizabeth — one recipient of divine favor saying grace over another. And then Mary began to sing forth the praises of the Lord who had done great things for her.

She came worrying.

She left worshipping.

That moved her from fear to faith.

If you find yourself in difficult circumstances, filled with worry, longing to head for the hills and hide, the pathway to conquering your fears and strengthening your faith is found in the worship of God. Call out your praises to Him. Sing in celebration of God's person and work. Revel in the promises of God that you will one day experience. As your worry gives way to worship, you'll begin moving from fear to faith.

God, I am dealing with some overwhelming challenges in my life right now. I've done all I know to do and still can't get a handle on them. I feel defeated and the battle isn't over. All I want to do is run away. Instead, I am running to You. I know my resources are finite, but Yours are infinite. I know I am often faithless, but You remain faithful. I know my love grows cold, but Your steadfast love never ceases. Your new mercies greet me each morning and Your sustaining grace sees me through each day. Though it is sometimes hard to see, there are evidences of Your favor all over my life. So I worship You. You have done great things for me. You will do great things for me. Cause me to keep worshipping in the midst of my worry and woe. And as I do, help my unbelief.

December 9

Matthew 1:18-20

***If you see in your situation a green light to worry,
stop long enough to listen for a word from the Lord.***

One wonders what Joseph thought in the three months that Mary was gone to the hill country of Judah, hiding out in the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth. If absence makes the heart grow fonder, he must have been so excited to see her, to reconnect with his beloved.

But then there was this mic drop moment. Matthew wrote about it this way: *Before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.*

We wonder how that information came to Joseph first. Did Mary share it with him herself? Did her parents relay it? Did he notice the physical changes in her and wonder what was up? All we know is that he knew she was with child and the claim, which by the angel's testimony he was clearly struggling to believe, was that this child was from God. For Joseph, this was a green light to worry.

That *he considered these things* means Joseph had all the feelings, experienced the full gamut of emotions. He thought through and mulled over and hashed out all the details and his duty in responding to them. And in what may have been a series of restless nights, as Joseph tossed and turned over his love for Mary, his commitment to the Law, his experience of grace, and his desire to divorce her secretly, Joseph was encountered by an angel with a message from God.

Right now, you may be just like Joseph. You're wrestling through restless nights, knowing your marriage is on the rocks, there's little that can be done to salvage it, trust has been violated. The only option you see is divorce.

You may be absolutely justified in seeking that divorce. Your circumstances may warrant your permanent separation

from, even your protection from your spouse. But before you take that step, take another look at the story of Joseph, a man who was staring divorce in the face until God intervened.

Pause for a moment. Consider your circumstances. Contemplate the riches of God's grace. Then leave room for God to speak to you. Because even if divorce is certain for you this Christmas, the God of heaven and earth longs to speak a word of comfort and concern to you, to point you to the hope His Son Jesus brings, and to bind up the pieces of your broken heart.

God, I've been hearing a lot of voices lately. I've heard the hurtful, even hateful words of my spouse. I've heard the advice of friends and family telling me to leave. I've heard myself lashing out in frustration, bewildered by the fact that I can fix neither my broken heart nor my broken home. And now when I lay awake at night, I hear the thoughts of worry over what will happen next. God, I trust in You. My hope is in You. I believe You care for me. So cause these other voices to grow quiet in my mind and help me to tune in to Your voice. Speak clearly, compassionately, correctively, and completely. Help me to hear and heed Your word to me.

December 10

Matthew 1:20-25

***In circumstances where other friends are suddenly absent,
God remains steadfastly present with us.***

Sometimes our circumstances create deep feelings of loneliness despite the presence of people all around us. We interact with our families, we conduct business with customers, we labor alongside our coworkers, yet we are burdened with the sense that no one understands our situations. We may even think no one cares.

There are any number of occurrences that may cause us to experience such loneliness: emotional trauma, physical turmoil, mental terror, financial trial, even spiritual testing. At times, these things come into our lives with such immensity or intensity that we cannot help but feel overwhelmed and isolated from others. In our isolation, we begin to feel forsaken or forgotten not only by our fellow man, but also by God. We find ourselves asking, "Where are you, God?"

If that's you this Christmas, know that you are not alone. Many faithful believers have found themselves asking that question at one time or another. I think even Joseph must have been asking that question as he pondered and reflected upon his situation.

Joseph was a righteous man. He honored God in his living. He knew the Law and desired to obey God. Yet, he was moved with compassion for Mary. Though society demanded public shaming, though religious zealots demanded stoning, Joseph was determined to find a way to keep this situation quiet and to divorce her secretly.

As all these thoughts and events and feelings swirled around in his mind, it is not hard to put yourself in his shoes and imagine him wondering why his life had turned out like this, why God had allowed this to happen. Maybe as Joseph *considered these things* he was asking, "Where are you, God?"

Whether he ever asked that question or just felt that loneliness, it was not to last for Joseph. In the midst of it all, God broke into Joseph's life, dispatching an angel to bring Joseph a message.

To a man who must have felt all alone in his situation, God brought the promise of His presence through the birth of this child conceived in Mary by the Holy Spirit.

This child was and is the fulfillment of the sign God gave through Isaiah to King Ahaz: the child who is Immanuel, *God with us*.

If you feel all alone this Christmas, burdened by your circumstances, wondering where God is, take another look at the story of Joseph and hear God in Christ saying to you, "I am here."

God, there is an ache in my soul that no one around me can see. In the midst of crowds of people, I feel all alone. I feel trapped in my situation. All the options available to me will leave me feeling a failure. I do not understand what You are trying to do in me through this difficult season. At times I even wonder if You are there. In spite of my feelings, I choose to believe the truth: You never leave me. You never forsake me. You are ever-present in my life. The proof of that is that You sent Your Son, Jesus Christ, into this world in human form. He is Immanuel, God with us. As I struggle through loneliness this Christmas, comfort me with the peace of Your presence and cause me to abound in hope because You, God, are with me.

December 11

Luke 2:1-7

God uses the institutions of government as instruments for His glory.

As I write this, our nation is engaged in yet another political battle, waiting to see not only who will prevail in the presidential election, but also which party will round out the houses of Congress.

Regardless of your political stripe, there can be little doubt that this has been a contentious election cycle and that the nation is bitterly divided over which platforms and persons are best to lead us.

In the midst of those stark realities, I am reminded that God orders all human events to accomplish His purposes, including the actions and activities of our governments. While we may think this is just another election with consequences for our nation for the next term of office, the reality is that God is ordering these events to keep moving history and His redemptive plan to their rightful end.

This providential care over the political workings of nations is nothing new, as we are reminded by the physician-historian Luke. God stepped into the home of the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus, and led him to enact a registration, a census to be taken of the Roman world generally and Judea specifically.

While the emperor may have seen this as a means to increasing tax revenue, God had a more important plan in mind. God used this registration to move Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem at just the right time so that Jesus might be born in the ancestral home of David where the prophet Micah had foretold the birth of a ruler for Israel would occur.

As you promote your brand of politics and plead with your elected officials to favor your positions, do not despair,

thinking the world is out of control because of the wearying machinations of the American political system.

Instead, trust in God, who orders the rise and fall of all rulers, even elected ones, in order to accomplish His purposes. And remember: one of God's purposes is to build His church.

It may very well be that God allows this political cycle to play out opposite to what you would have chosen because He knows that it will compel His people to take more seriously their commitment to the Gospel and to advancing His kingdom in the world.

God, I love my country. Help me to love Your church more. I am committed to our system of government. Help me to be more committed to Your kingdom. I recognize the stark divisions our nation is facing. Help me to rest in the reality that the only real hope for reconciliation is a gospel-centered movement that begins in me. I want my candidate, my party, my values to prevail. Help me to accept that Your will may be that they should fail in order to magnify Your name and multiply Your church.

December 12

Luke 2:8

The prioritization of shepherds in the announcement of Jesus' birth is proof that God is no respecter of persons.

My work brings me into contact with people from all lines of work. In God's church, I've served alongside elected officials, bank managers, farmers, factory workers, small business owners, teachers, nurses, graphic designers, and computer programmers just to name a few. While some occupations carry more prominence and publicity than others, one of the things I have noticed is that most people think their work is insignificant or overlooked.

People go to work to provide food and shelter for themselves and their families. They put in long hours and toil in difficult environments to improve the lives of their children or other family members. But it seems that beyond making a living, most people do not think their work makes a major difference in the world. Sometimes that thought leads people to believe their value or worth is diminished in the eyes of God.

Yet in the pages of Scripture over and over again we find the actions of God affirming the blessings and benefits of working for a living. That is certainly true as we read the announcement of Jesus' birth. The gospel of Jesus Christ was heralded by angels first to the shepherds.

Shepherds in the first century were working class individuals. We would say they were blue-collar. Their jobs required much time outdoors, remaining with their flocks in order to move them to various grazing lands at different times of the year, and in order to protect them from predators. The proximity of the shepherds to their flocks meant they were dirty and smelly, not qualities that brought a sense of welcome in a society bound up in regulations of ritualistic purity.

They were lowly. Their work was not glamorous. They would not have been well known. Yet their labor was not insignificant and their worth was not diminished.

It was not while they were back home between seasons or while they were in town gathering supplies, but while they watched their flocks by night that the angels appeared to them to herald the news of Jesus' birth. These men were at work when the Lord sent them glad tidings of great joy.

As you labor to provide a living for yourself and your family, do not despair thinking that because your work is ordinary it is without significance or diminishes you in God's eyes. Read the story of Christmas and remember that the Gospel was first and foremost for working people just like you.

God, I don't work to change the world, I work to pay the bills. My career is ordinary. I work hard for long hours. No matter what I do, there are still times when I can barely make ends meet. I sometimes wonder if it's worth it at all. Remind me that work—hard work—is holy when it is done for Your glory. Teach me that though my labor may not bring fame or fortune, it is an honorable pursuit to provide for myself and my family from the labor of my hands. Give me the reassurance of Your presence each day when I am on the job just as You gave to the shepherds, who heard the announcement of Jesus' birth while they were at work.

December 13

Luke 2:10-14

***The gospel is good news because
it is always unto you that a Savior is born.***

During my senior year in high school, I served as student body president. The election was held during the spring of my junior year. I worked hard on my campaign and strove to influence my peers.

I will never forget the morning after the election when the announcements were broadcast over our school news program. The anchor began to read the returns of the election. All of a sudden he called out the numbers for each candidate in my race. I'd won.

Two seconds before, it was just news. Now that it was personal and practical, it was good news!

The gospel, or good news, of Jesus Christ is like that. The story of His incarnate entrance in to the world, the message of repentance of sin and realignment with His kingdom, the reality of His substitutionary death on the cross and triumph over death through His resurrection—all these things are news worthy.

But they are good news because of their impact on the lives of people.

We see that clearly in the announcement of the angels to the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth.

The angels declared to the shepherds, *For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.* The message—the news of Jesus' birth—was *good news of great joy* because it was personal and practical. While it was for other people, too, it was for the shepherds specifically that night. And it was for their good, their salvation.

As you reflect on the Christmas story this year and recall the first recipients of the news that joy had dawned upon the earth, recognize that the message of Christmas is always the same: it is always good news because it is always personal, which means it's for you, and it is always practical, which means it contains the means of your salvation.

The Savior, Jesus Christ, is born for you and your salvation.

Once you realize that, it will be the best news you have ever heard.

God, help me to hear with a fresh ear the message of the angels this Christmas. Teach me that the coming of Jesus Christ, the Savior, is personal. Jesus came for me. Teach me that His incarnation is practical. He came to save. Help me to understand that while the gospel is for the whole world, it is also for me and for my salvation. I know I need a savior because I am a sinner and my sin separates me from You. I have tried and failed to save myself. The only hope I have in life and death is that there has been a Savior born unto me and He is Jesus. Help me to walk by faith in Him.

December 14

Luke 2:15-20

People who are convinced that Jesus is the Savior proclaim the message of salvation and praise God for it.

Good news is life changing. It upends. It overturns. It gladdens. Good news relieves, revives, renews, restores. When you have good news, you have cause for celebration. You want to share it. Some of the best good news revolves around the birth of a baby.

As I write this, my family is waiting with eager anticipation for the arrival of my sister-in-law's third child. He is due any day now. This birth would be exciting anyway, but it is even more so because he is the first boy to be born in that line of the family in six decades. Soon the news will come that he has arrived and relatives far and near will gather to get a glimpse at this new life God has given. That will be good news!

If we respond to the birth of ordinary babies with such anticipation and celebration, is it any wonder that the shepherds responded to the birth of the baby who is Christ the Lord in such a hurried, holy, happy way?

They had received a message dispatched from the gates of Glory specifically for them, angels assuring them that not only had the Savior been born, but that He had been born unto them. That news drove them to make haste, running to Bethlehem to investigate this declaration. They found everything—baby and all—just as they were told it would be.

The experience of seeing this baby could not be contained. They were moved to two spiritual disciplines: *proclamation* and *praise*. They were telling everyone what they had heard and people were moved by the news. And as they went back to their posts in the fields, they were glorifying and praising God. It was anything but a silent night!

Presumably, like the shepherds, you have investigated the good news of this Savior's birth. (If you haven't, I encourage you to do so. It will change your life!) If, like the shepherds, you have found Jesus to be the Savior, the Christ, then you have work to do this Christmas.

Show people that the good news of Jesus' birth has changed you, that it has given you a song of praise to sing and a story of life to tell. May the surrounding community be filled with wonder as you worship and witness to the good news of Jesus Christ.

God, for too long I have kept the good news of Jesus Christ to myself. I've been to church. I've read my Bible. I've gone on mission trips. I've given to Kingdom causes. I've rehearsed the story of Jesus over and over again. But I haven't shared it with those I encounter. Keep bringing me back to the story of the shepherds until I learn that I cannot truly praise You until I have proclaimed the gospel of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Give me joy in Jesus that overflows my heart so that I will be about the business sharing His story with the people I meet each day.

December 15

Luke 2:18

***The more we lose our sense of wonder at Jesus,
the more likely we are to wander in sin.***

Have you ever noticed that the new doesn't wear off of something suddenly, but slowly? Think about it. We buy a new car. At first we are super careful. We park at the far end of parking lots. We deny our passengers the privilege of eating in the vehicle. We detail it every weekend. We soak up that new car smell. And then one day every drink holder is filled with the remnants of morning coffees or afternoon Cokes, the only wash the car gets is from the rain, and there's a smell coming from the car that is anything but pleasant. How did we get there? The new wore off. We lost our sense of wonder.

Too often our walk of faith is that way. When we first hear and respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ, we are so excited. We blaze a trail as we tell everyone our conversion story, urging the unbelievers in our lives to repent of their sins. We read voraciously, taking the Scriptures in like drinking water from a fire hydrant.

Then one day we hear a sermon appealing to us to share our faith and we realize we haven't shared our faith in years. A friend asks us about our quiet time and we realize the only time we spend with God is in the occasional worship service we attend. Where we once had served the church in numerous ways, we find that now we are filled with excuses, defending our lack of involvement by talking about all the ways we used to be involved. And if we are truly honest, we have to admit that we have filled the void of faithful service to God with the things of this world that please us and, all too often, dishonor Him.

What made the change? We lost our sense of wonder.

Thankfully, Christmas is an invitation to behold the wonder of Jesus in a fresh way.

As we read the birth narrative of Jesus, we find that the good news of the incarnation was heralded not just to a few individuals, but was widely broadcast. Everyone was invited to behold this Savior born in Bethlehem. For the residents of the House of Bread taking in all that the shepherds had proclaimed and all that the angels had announced, there was a real cause for wonder.

There had been other announcements in their lives before that had brought them happiness. There had been other news accounts that had given them hope. But when they heard the message of the birth of Jesus Christ, they were astonished, amazed, and awestruck. *This* was wonderful news!

Has the news of Jesus' birth become jaded to you? Have you heard the story so many times that it has lost its luster? Have you listened to all the ways preachers have presented this story and come away thinking it's not so special? It is possible that the love you had for Jesus at first has grown cold over time as you have drifted back to an old, sinful way of living. If that is you, I implore you to read this story again.

Join the crowds in that sleepy hamlet on the back side of Jerusalem. Awaken to a new source of town gossip. Listen to these glad tidings of great joy that the shepherds and angels are proclaiming. And know that a Savior has been born for you. He is Christ the Lord. *That* is wonderful!

God, I admit that in my life the new of the gospel has worn off over time. I've settled into the story of Jesus like an old car. I'm not as careful as I once was. I don't appreciate Jesus like I used to. I've wandered back toward my sin. Open my eyes. Unlock my ears. Take away the callous of my heart. Show me Christ in a new and fresh way. Cause me to be dissatisfied with the world. Fill me with wonder at Your Son, Jesus, and give me grace to respond to Him in worship and witness.

December 16

Luke 2:19

***When we treasure in our hearts the riches of Jesus,
we guard our minds against the temptation to worry.***

How have you been sleeping lately? One of the things I have noticed people speaking about more this year than normal is how their ability rest well at night has been affected. It seems as though concerns about the pandemic, the election cycle, the needless slaughtering of black men and women, the adjoining protests, and the major economic downturn, among other things, are troubling our minds and hearts.

We lay awake at night fretting, concerned, troubled, wondering how these things will be resolved in a redemptive, productive way. This does not take into account all the ways in which the normal difficulties of life have raised our anxiety levels this year. Add to it the fact that many of us feel the need to help and fix, and—well—is there any wonder so many of us are not sleeping well?

If you find yourself in this category this Christmas, I want you to learn from Mary. Think about her circumstances.

Mary was a maiden betrothed to be married. All alone, she has this angelic encounter. She is told that though she has never been with a man, she is going to have a child. This child will not be conceived naturally after she and Joseph have been married and had a chance to settle down. No, this child will be conceived supernaturally through the power of the Holy Spirit and he is coming soon.

She flees to the hills where her cousin Elizabeth lives to hide out. Then she returns home where the word of her pregnancy is conveyed to Joseph, who is determined to divorce her until the angel confirms the nature of the conception.

Any hope of maintaining her sanity amid the storm of emotions and reactions is complicated by the need to travel over several days to Joseph's hometown to be registered for the imperial census. Where every other expectant mother would be resting and nesting, Mary was road-tripping on a holiday weekend to a sleepy town that was overrun with tourists.

Every inch of floor space was already taken by Joseph's distant relatives, so they were compelled to settle down in the stable place so that she could give birth. Just when Mary probably wanted a moment's peace with her little bundle of joy, the shepherds intruded on her privacy.

Talk about things that would keep you up at night.

Instead of being terrified or traumatized by all she had experienced, Mary told her friends (and maybe the historian Luke) that she spent that first Christmas night treasuring the coming of her son, our Savior, in her heart.

This Christmas, God wants to free your mind and heart from woe and worry, and to fill you with wonder and worship. He invites you to ponder the riches of His grace in Christ toward you and, like Mary, to treasure them in your heart.

God, I've been looking for a moment's peace for a while, but I can't seem to find it. Life just won't let up this year. Tragedy and trouble abound. My mind rehearses events and considers outcomes constantly. I need rest. Show me that while the world cannot offer peace, You stand ready to comfort and calm me with the peace of Your presence. As I turn my worries over to You in supplication with thanksgiving, Your peace will flood my heart. As I learn to treasure Christ more than being troubled by the world, I will find rest. Help me to follow in the path of Mary. Let it be said of me that in the midst of sorrow and short-falls, my heart was fixed on my Savior.

December 17

Luke 2:22-24

Jesus Christ is the great equalizer, redeeming by grace and receiving the worship of both the poor and the rich.

Maybe for the first time in a long time you are concerned about being able to make it financially this Christmas.

Your employer had a business interruption causing you to miss numerous shifts.

Your child's recent diagnosis required you to miss work, but you haven't accrued sick leave in your new job yet.

The pressures of the pandemic meant that rather than getting the raise you were promised, you've survived rounds of layoffs only to make the same pay while taking on the work of your former colleagues.

Or maybe the events of this year have only complicated an already difficult financial situation in your life.

Whatever the case, you find yourself needing some financial assistance this Christmas and that's tough for you to accept.

As you work through your particular situation, keep this in mind: the narrative of Scripture consistently points not to what the poor can receive, but to what they can give.

You see, in the very first live-action production of Christmas, the divine Director cast a carpenter named Joseph and a virgin girl named Mary as the parents of the Christ child. Those two earthly parents of the Lord Jesus were dirt poor. We know that because of what Luke notes about the offering of Jesus' parents at the temple: a pair of turtledoves or pigeons. According to Leviticus 12:8, turtledoves or pigeons were the appropriate offering for those who could not afford a lamb.

The reality of Joseph and Mary's sacrifice teaches us that the Christ of Christmas is a great equalizer. He brings to both the poor and the rich the treasures of His grace while at the same time bidding both the rich and the poor to offer sacrifices of praise.

Though your financial situation this year may compel you to receive the assistance of others, it does not lower you in the eyes of God. He bids you to find your place among those worshiping Him this Christmas.

God, in a world that values prosperity and wealth, I have little worth. I have been reminded of that this year as I am struggling more than usual to make ends meet. As I recall the status of Joseph and Mary and the place they found in worshiping You, I am reminded that this world and its values are not what truly matter. I have worth in Your kingdom because I have experienced Your grace and I have responded in faith. While so many around me are commercializing Christmas, free me from the pressure to compete so that I may be found faithfully worshiping Jesus.

December 18

Luke 2:25-26

God compels us to wait in order to increase our dependence upon Him.

One of the more difficult lessons we learn as we grow up in grace is that sometimes it is the will of God for us to wait. Let's be clear about this. It is never the will of God that we should wait to respond to the gospel by repentance of sin and belief in Jesus. Neither is it ever the will of God that we should wait to walk in obedience to His clear commands. Nevertheless, in our walk with Christ, there are seasons when we are longing for increase, expecting deliverance, hoping for healing, pleading for favor, yet rather than immediately bringing those desires to pass in our lives, God brings us to a time of waiting.

Waiting is not easy. Waiting requires that we simultaneously accept that God's answer may be no, while remaining hopeful that His answer will be yes. Waiting requires that we yield to God's timing which is perfect, even when we see so many reasons it would be better if He moved and worked now. Waiting requires that we admit we do not see the big pictures and cannot understand how everything works together for good.

It is precisely for these reasons that God compels us to wait. Waiting increases our dependence upon God.

In the long story of redemption, God's people have been compelled to wait time and again.

God's people waited for deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

God's people waited for movement into Canaan.

God's people waited for return from exile in Babylon.

God's people waited for the birth of a ruler in Bethlehem.

While we often think of the whole nation of Israel waiting in these seasons, it is good for us to remember that there were real people caught up in the waiting. One of those people was Simeon.

Simeon was righteous and devout, which is to say he knew and lived and according to God's standards for His people. Simeon's devotion led him to live with anticipation, with forward looking hope. Like many of his contemporaries, Simeon knew there was a need for movement and improvement in Israel's situation.

Yet where many were looking to make Israel great again politically and militarily, Simeon recognized that what Israel needed was spiritual renewal that could come only in the sending of the Lord's Christ. Israel needed the consolation, the comfort that only the birth of a Savior would bring. Simeon and his fellow citizens needed to wait.

The world may seem rather grim from your perspective. You may be wondering how much longer God will allow the darkness and despair of our world to thrive. You are filled with longing that God should bring about those end-of-time events that will vindicate all of the faithful and vanquish all of God's foes.

If that's you, I urge you to learn from the life of Simeon. As you long for God to come and bring final redemption to His people, keep living a righteous, devoted life to God. Abound in confident, forward-looking hope. And keep waiting because one day God will comfort His people in a permanent way by sending His Son Jesus to conquer.

God, when I am prone to rush ahead or lag behind, compel me to keep in step with You. Show me that when Your will is for me to wait, the time is not wasted. I may not understand all of Your ways, but I can rest in the fact that You long to use seasons of waiting to conform me more to the image of Jesus Christ and to increase my devotion to and dependence upon You.

December 19

Luke 2:27-35

God keeps every promise He makes.

Along this journey into the lives impacted by the birth of Jesus, we have been reminded that while many of the happenings in these stories are unique to their place in salvation history, there are abiding principles to be learned. That is again the case as we reflect upon the fulfillment of the Spirit's revelation to Simeon that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

Though it is not beyond the realm of possibility that God should make a personal promise to us like He did to Simeon, we should not see this as a normative experience. Instead, we should focus on the reality that God made and kept His promise to Simeon.

Look at the response of Simeon. Mary and Joseph have come to the temple to fulfill the requirements of the Law. Simeon, who had come *in the Spirit*, took the infant Jesus in his arms and began to bless God. His blessing acknowledged that God had kept His word. For Simeon, God keeping His word was seeing the Lord's Christ. That was the proof that Israel would be comforted, redeemed, fulfilled. Everything Simeon had been waiting for became a reality in that moment because Jesus Christ is a *light for revelation to the Gentiles* and for *glory to God's people Israel*.

As we contemplate how God in Christ entered Simeon's life, we are reminded that God keeps His word.

When we are feeling lonely and forgotten, we can trust that God will never leave us or forsake us.

When we are burdened and broken by trials in our lives and cannot imagine how God can redeem them, we can trust that God works all things together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purposes.

When we are anxious and worried, we can make our requests known to God in supplication with thanksgiving and trust that the peace of God will keep us.

Simeon's story stands as a reminder that God keeps His promises.

The incarnation of Jesus Christ is the proof!

God, there are times when I question Your work in my life. I know that I only see a part of the picture, but from where I'm looking there's not much cause for hope. In those seasons when I am inclined to doubt Your promises, bring me back to the life of Simeon and teach me again that every promise You make is a promise You keep. Let that assurance be a cause for hope and a source for comfort as I trust in You.

December 20

Luke 2:36-37

Though you may not feel like celebrating Christmas, do not let your grief keep you from worshipping Christ.

The holidays are a hard time of year for a lot of people. There's extra pressure on parents to provide gifts for their children. There are expectations from family members for how meals and other celebrations should go. There are deadlines with clients that must be met without regard for how they impact family time. And then, of course, there are the ways in which all the merry-making done at the holidays drives some among us deeper into the shadows.

While many know the blessing of gathering with family and friends at Christmas, others are filled with grief over loved ones lost. For far too many people this time of year only underscores what they are missing. The highlight of the holidays for them is grief, whether brand new or decades long.

If you find yourself dealing with the gaping wound of grief this Christmas, I want you to take another look at the story of Anna, a woman whose life was invaded by the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Just as Simeon was offering up a word of blessing and adoration to God at the presentation of Jesus, there was a woman who beheld the sight named Anna. She was a prophetess, which is to say she was one who spoke for God to His people about both future matters and, more often, present circumstances.

Anna married at a young age and lived with her husband for seven years until he died. Though there is some ambiguity in the meaning of the text, even the conservative interpretation means that she had lived as a widow upwards of six decades. And in that long wake of grief, Anna had committed herself to a life of worship marked by fasting and prayer.

That the birth of Jesus Christ should be celebrated by a woman like Anna is proof that there is space in God's family and a role in God's kingdom for all people. The aged and the bereaved need not think they are beyond use by God because God's message of light and life is for everyone.

If you are mourning a loss this Christmas and feel outcast amid all the celebrations going on around you, remember that among the very first people to witness the birth of Jesus Christ was Anna, an old widow woman who had lived her life in the wake of death waiting for *the redemption of Jerusalem*. God not only sees you, but He longs to come to you in your grief this Christmas!

God, the holidays are hard. Everywhere I go people are celebrating with family and friends. I try to smile and carry on as much as normal, but the truth is I want to crawl into the hole of grief and not come out for a while. My heart is broken. My sorrow is great. I cannot bring myself to make merry like those around me. In spite of that, I know that you are worthy of my worship and I know that you care about my loss. So give me the grace to worship in the midst of my weeping so that You will know my commitment to Your glory and so that I will know your comfort in my grief.

December 21

Matthew 2:1-3

This year has been chaotic. So many aspects of our lives have been interrupted in the face of the pandemic. Given the constant changes and adaptations we've had to make this year, it is possible that we have become distracted or taken detours in our spiritual walks. As we end this year, it is a good time for self-reflection, for us to answer the question: *What am I seeking?*

As the narrative of Jesus' birth develops, we return to the gospel of Matthew and learn that the announcement of Jesus' incarnation was not only given to the local and lowly, but was also pronounced on a world stage. Enter the magi.

Despite the popularity of the carol, "We Three Kings," the magi or wise men were not royalty. Rather, these characters from the East (perhaps Persia given the non-canonical use of the word *magoi*, though that cannot be known for certain) were astrologers, star-gazers who studied the heavens and sought to understand celestial signs in relation to historical events.

The magi had seen a sign in the heavens — a star which seemed a portent of the birth of a new king in Israel. The signal was clear and compelling. The magi were moved to leave their homes and journey to Jerusalem. Upon their arrival, they eagerly sought the location of the newborn king.

They did not wait for a royal audience. They did not first seek the wisdom of the priests and scribes. Rather, they entered the Holy City asking everyone in their path about where they could find the one who was *born king of the Jews*.

Matthew reveals much about the impact of this question both in the royal household and among the citizens of Jerusalem. However, we must careful not to rush past the intensity of focus in the lives of the magi. Their purposed search for the newborn king is exemplary to us.

Has this year taken its toll on your faith? Have the stresses of this year distracted you from your spiritual disciplines? Have the interruptions to corporate worship practices given you an excuse to fill the Lord's Day with other activities? What are you seeking?

If your focus on Jesus Christ has grown blurry, it is time to recalibrate. Step back. See the big picture. Then zoom in on Jesus.

As you reflect on the story of Jesus' birth, let the witness of the wisemen serve as a model for your devotion. Determine in your heart that you will be found every day in every way seeking Jesus *who has been born king of the Jews*.

God, I know that I have wandered in my walk with Jesus. I have not been focused. I have made detours for other things. I have learned to live without His power and peace. I have become so busy seeking the things of this world that I have not been seeking Jesus. Would You help me to step back and gain much-needed perspective? Would You should me where I have strayed? Would you give me clarity of vision and help me to focus on Jesus again? Let me be like the wisemen, seeking Jesus no matter the cost.

December 22

Matthew 2:4-6

Information without transformation leads to condemnation.

While the story of Christmas is filled with positive examples of people whose homes were invaded by the incarnate Christ, there are also examples of people who were indifferent to or incensed by the coming of Jesus. At this juncture, Matthew tells us of *the chief priests and scribes of the people* whose knowledge of the Scriptures became important to the search for the infant of Mary.

The magi came into Jerusalem searching for the newborn king, a search that troubled the entire city and their puppet ruler, Herod, a half-breed political appointee to the throne of Israel. The suggestion that there was a competitor to Herod's authority was a source of major anxiety and distress for Herod and those accustomed to his authoritarian rule.

Before summoning the magi to a royal audience, Herod called upon the priests and scribes and *inquired of them where the Christ was to be born*. These religious leaders were quickly able to provide a response, citing the writing of the prophet Micah in telling the king that the Christ was to be born *in Bethlehem of Judea*.

The lack of detail between Matthew's quotation of the prophecy and his comment on Herod's interaction with the magi is telling. Pause for a moment and think about this. The leading religious officials in Israel, those most acquainted with the Scriptures, who clearly understood that a Messiah was coming, were satisfied to report their knowledge of the Scriptures to Herod and then do nothing.

No priestly brigade dispatched to Bethlehem.

No circle of scribes sent investigate.

Not one shepherd of Israel remotely concerned with the possibility that the promised Anointed One had come.

The magi had likely traveled some five hundred miles over the course of weeks, but these teachers of the Law could not be bothered to walk five miles to see if the word of God had been fulfilled. They were so satisfied with the religious status quo that they were indifferent to the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Far too many of us are just like the priests and scribes. We possess volumes of information about Jesus Christ. We can rehearse all the facts about His person and work. We can answer any question about Him with great authority. Yet the information has not led to the transformation of our souls and we remain personally indifferent to Jesus.

The problem, of course, is that none of us is allowed to remain neutral in relation to Jesus. To be indifferent to Him is to be in opposition to Him. To be opposed to Him is to be conquered by Him. The story of the scribes and priests serves as a warning that if we are informed about Jesus without being transformed by faith in His name we will be condemned one day by Him.

God, whether I have known about Jesus for many years or just a few days, the reality is that I need more than to know about Jesus. I need to know Jesus by faith. And I need Jesus to know me. Examine me. Show me if there are places in my life where I am indifferent to Jesus. Cause me to be dissatisfied with merely learning more about Jesus and compel me to be transformed by what I know. Help me to walk by faith in Jesus wherever He leads me.

December 23

Matthew 2:7-12

What Jesus wants from you is what no one else can give Him: He wants you to respond to His gospel in faith.

One of my favorite Christmas carols is based on a poem by the English poet Christina Rossetti simply titled, "A Christmas Carol." Later set to music, the carol is known to us as "In The Bleak Mid-Winter." I love this reflection upon the story of Jesus' birth because of the application the last stanza offers. After recounting the birth of Jesus and the initial reception of the Christ-child, Rossetti compels her audience to consider how they will welcome and worship Jesus, writing:

*What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.
If I were a wise man, I would do my part.
Yet what I can I give Him—give my heart.*

Indeed, Rossetti's question comes to the fore as we reflect upon the adoration of the magi as told to us by the evangelist Matthew.

We do well not to press this act too far. The actions of the magi in falling down before the child Jesus and presenting Him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh should not be taken to assert their conversion. They were most likely not worshiping Jesus as Savior and Lord, but were instead offering obeisance to a new ruler on the world's stage. Nevertheless, to read this story with eyes of faith, there is no way to avoid the question.

What can we—what should we give to Jesus?

As we go through the Christmas season, we will find ourselves thinking about the individuals on our shopping lists. We consider their personalities, their interests, their lifestyles and we shop accordingly. We want to give them

things they want, items they will use or treasure or find valuable. The last thing we want is for our gifts to be returned. That's the proof that we have not considered the recipient well.

Of all the gifts we give this year, the most important is the one we give to Jesus. While it may seem abundantly simple to say, the reality is that there is only one thing Jesus wants from us this Christmas, only one gift that is of real value to Him. What Jesus wants from us this Christmas is our hearts. Jesus wants us to turn away from our sin and toward Him in faith. Jesus wants us to outdo the wise men, not merely welcoming a new ruler, but worshiping Him as the only Savior and Lord.

If you have not done so, why not give your heart, your life to Jesus this Christmas? If you believe that Jesus died on the cross and rose from the grave in order to save you from your sins, call on Him in faith this day and confess Him as your Savior and Lord. You could do so by praying a prayer like this:

God, I have considered the story of Jesus and I know it to be more than a story. I know that it is the message of salvation for me. I believe that Your only Son, Jesus Christ, took on human form, lived a perfect life, died on the cross in my place, was buried in a borrowed tomb, and rose on the third day, conquering death so that by His life I might live. I know that there is nothing I can do to save myself. I know that no other system of the world can offer me escape from eternal condemnation. I deserve hell, death, and the grave because of my sins. But I trust that what Jesus has done is enough to save me. I call upon You to forgive me and save me for the sake of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Empower me with the Holy Spirit so that I may walk in obedience to You. Give me boldness to make disciples of Jesus wherever I go. And bring me into Your kingdom at the last day.

December 24

Matthew 2:13-15

In the face of spiritual danger, the decision to disciple your children in the faith is the greatest gift you can give them.

Some of you were up early this morning, finishing your Christmas shopping before the stores close. Some of you paid extra for expedited shipping for that last must-have gift and you are anxiously waiting for it to arrive. Some of you are just biding your time til the kids go to bed so you can pull the presents out of hiding and arrange them for Christmas morning.

Whatever your situation this Christmas Eve, if you are a mom or dad with little ones at home, your focus is almost certainly on making sure they have something to open tomorrow morning. That's why I want you to reflect on these verses concerning the flight of Jesus' family to Egypt.

You see, you care about your children. You want them to enjoy life. You want them to grow and flourish. You want to see them succeed at the things that matter. You want them to know how much you love them. That's why I know you'll take this word seriously.

On that first Christmas, after the shepherds had returned to their fields, the herald angels to the gates of glory, and the wise men had found another route home, God dispatched an angel to bring a warning to Joseph: *Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.*

This was one time that there was no debate over what was best for his family. Joseph did not hold a family meeting. He did not wait for all interested parties to weigh in. He made a decision for his family, following the directive brought to him by the angel and taking his family to Egypt, where they *remained until the death of Herod.*

Jesus' life was in danger. As His earthly father, Joseph acted decisively to protect Him.

Parents, I know what you are up against. The world is constantly telling you what your children need. You want your children to be well-rounded. You want them to have a full range of life experiences. You want them to play all the sports, travel to all the destinations, read all the books, master all the skills, have all the gadgets. You want these things because you love your kids and you want the very best for them. But some of you are so caught up in fulfilling the expectations of your children and your culture that you fail to see the dangers that exist for your kids. There is a real danger that awaits your sons and daughters. That danger is a life without Jesus.

A life without Jesus is a life without forgiveness.

A life without Jesus is a life without purpose.

A life without Jesus is a life without boundaries.

A life without Jesus is a life without hope.

I urge you to reflect upon the decisive action of Jesus' earthly father, Joseph, who was warned that his Son was in danger and immediately set about the work of ensuring Jesus' safety.

You cannot save your daughters and sons from the wages of sin and death. Only Jesus can do that. But because you know that there is danger for your children if they do not find life in Jesus Christ by faith, you must do everything possible to put them in a path to meet Jesus. That's the greatest gift you could ever give your kids.

God, free me from the expectations of others. Give me boldness to parent my children in the ways that matter. Help me to be devoted to You in my own walk of faith so that I set an example worth following. Show me how to carve out time and space in our family's life to disciple my children. Give my children understanding of the gospel that leads to repentance and belief. God, my children are in danger of eternal condemnation. I beg of You to save them by Your grace.

December 25

Matthew 2:16-18

Jesus Christ enters every home and demands that we either receive Him by faith or reject Him in unbelief.

On this Christmas day, we are compelled to remember that while the entrance of Jesus Christ into our hearts and homes brings peace to those who believe, it challenges systems and creates division in the world that is in rebellion against His will and way. That is seen clearly in the effort of Herod to stamp out the life of Jesus.

Recall that Herod had instructed the magi to return to him with the news of where the newborn king could be found so that he too might *come and worship him*. The wise men were led by the star, which *came to rest over the place where the child was*. After presenting him with gifts, the wise men were *warned in a dream not to return to Herod*.

This act of trickery infuriated the king, who decreed that *all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or younger* should be killed. Ever a tyrant, Herod's pride and paranoia colored his judgment as he enacted the slaughter of the innocents.

Herod was determined to destroy the life of Jesus and in his failed effort he broke the hearts of many families of Bethlehem, families who were his subjects, families he was supposed to shepherd. While no other known contemporary source recorded the loss, God took account of these little boys and their grieving families whose lives were impacted as a result of his Son's entrance into the world.

Matthew tells us this loss was a fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:15. That passage, which subsequently outlines the new covenant between God and His people, highlighted the pain of exile felt by mothers watching their sons carried off into captivity seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus.

Rachel, whose sons Joseph and Benjamin were carried off into Egypt, was used by the prophet as a representative figure of all Israeli mothers.

As the mothers of Israel grieved the exile of their sons in a time when a new covenant of salvation was only hoped for, so Matthew tells us of mothers grieving the loss of their sons in a time when a new covenant of salvation was inaugurated by the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

The grievous cries of *Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they are no more* are both a symbol of the wicked and evil systems of power raging in this world and a signal that the One who will one day destroy these systems of power has come.

As we remember the boys of Bethlehem whose lives were tragically taken at the hand of a wicked ruler, we take comfort in the fact that Jesus' life was not taken then so that He might give His life later at the cross.

God, I know that You are working out redemption's plan, but it is hard to hold on to hope in a world so filled with rage and bent on rebellion against You. Help me to remember that Jesus did not come to bring peace but a sword. His gospel causes division. His redemption is received and rejected. Though one day all the kingdoms of this world will become His kingdom, there are puppet rulers and rebel powers striving to hold onto power through their wicked ways. Remind me that these things actually prove that You have secured the means of our salvation and are bringing that message to bear on the world. Cause me to endure in hope as I trust in You.



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