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## Introduction

This Advent Devotional collection was written by the Genesis Church family to help individuals and families prepare for the Christmas season. Our hope is that these devotions will lead you to a more meaningful and deeper understanding of the true reason for the season.

Genesis Church exists to help people find a new beginning in Christ and become more like Him. We meet at 10:00 a.m. on Sundays at Blevins Elementary in Eureka, MO. Our website is www.genesiseureka.com.

If you have been attending Genesis long enough to go through a Christmas season, you know that Advent Candle lighting is a part of our Sunday worship for the four weeks prior to Christmas Day and our Christmas Eve Service. This year, one candle will be lit each week representing the following:

Week 1 (Nov. 28) - Prophecy Candle or Candle of Hope

Week 2 (Dec. 5) – Bethlehem Candle or Candle of Love

Week 3 (Dec. 12) - Shepherd's Candle or Candle of Joy

Week 4 (Dec 19) - Angel's Candle or Candle of Peace

**Christmas Eve - Christ candle** 

You can find lots of information online regarding the Advent season, but we recommend:

https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-is-advent

https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/seven-reasons-to-celebrate-advent

https://www.gotquestions.org/what-is-Advent.html

https://www.crosswalk.com/special-coverage/christmas-and-advent/the-beautiful-meaning-and-purpose-of-advent.html

If you would like to make an Advent candle wreath to use at home, you will need the following supplies. It can be as simple or elaborate as you want.

- 3 Purple candles (Hope, Love, Peace)
- 1 Pink candle (Joy)
- 1 White candle (Christ)

A tray or plate to place the candles in a circle, with the white candle in the center Greenery to put around the candles







## Prophecy Candle

The first Advent candle is traditionally called the **Prophecy Candle** or the **Candle of Hope**. This candle is a reminder that God foretold the coming of Jesus long before He was born, and that His divine Word is always needed as we prepare our hearts to receive Him. The words from Isaiah 9:2-7 gave the Old Testament people hope that one day their Savior and King would be born. Isaiah's words also prepare us to receive Christ when He comes again in power. At that time, Jesus will fulfill the promise to be Prince of Peace and Wonderful Counselor for all times and there will truly be no end to His gracious kingdom. This is our hope at Christmas and throughout the year.

## Bethlehem Candle

The second Advent candle is traditionally called the **Bethlehem** Candle, or the Candle of Love. Whén God sent His Son, He chose to have Him enter the world in a simple shepherding village in the Judean countryside. Bethlehem reminds us that God comes to us in humble and simple ways. Bethlehem was in the territory of one of the least influential tribes of Judah, yet out of Bethlehem comes the King of Kings. Bethlehem reminds us that Jesus was born in a small town; that His first crib was an animal feeding trough; that He was born to people of no fame. Jesus' birth in Bethlehem is God's great declaration that no matter who you are, where you are from, or what you have done, you are deeply loved.

## Shepherd Candle

The third advent candle is traditionally called the **Shepherd Candle** or the **Candle** of **Joy**. The shepherds were ordinary people with mundane jobs. As they sat on a quiet hilltop watching their sheep by night, the angels announced the good news of great joy, Jesus' birth. They respond with wonder, curiosity, and faith as they seek the Savior whom the angels proclaimed. And then they left rejoicing, filled with great joy that they had seen the Messiah. May we, too, find the beauty of Jesus and experience the fullness of joy found only in Him this Advent season.

## Angel Candle

The fourth candle is traditionally called the Angel Candle or the Candle of **Peace**. The angels are God's messengers who announce the coming of the Lord. The angel Gabriel spoke to Mary and Joseph to announce the birth of Jesus. An angel appeared in the sky to inform the shepherds of the birth that took place in Bethlehem that evening. And a multitude of angels sang out with joy to give glory to God. Central to their message was the pronouncement that the coming of Jesus brought peace. We live in divided times and peace can be hard to find. Yet, because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we can have peace with God and peace with each other in this Good News. And this news • reminds us that when Christ returns, His peace will reign forever.

## Christ Candle

The final candle lit on Christmas Eve is the **Christ Candle**, a reminder that the wait for the coming of Christ is almost over. At the time Jesus was born, people had been looking forward to the coming of the Messiah for centuries. The hope that God would step into history and intervene on their behalf was fulfilled in the birth of the precious baby in Bethlehem. Shepherds, magi, and angels recognized that this baby was God in the flesh and worthy of worship. On Christmas Eve we, too, remember that Jesus came as the light of the world, the fullness of God, and we recognize that Jesus is worthy of all our worship. Furthermore, we also wait for Jesus; not for His first coming, but for the reality that Jesus will come again to make all things new and bring us back to Himself.







## The First Christmas Promise

by Mike Hubbard

Genesis 3:14-19

It feels as if Advent, the season of waiting and preparation for Christmas now starts at the end of Summer. It's bad enough the Hallmark Channel starts playing their Christmas movies then, furthermore, the marketing starts ramping up, and by the end of October, stores are full of the holiday spirit, some already playing Jingle Bells and Bing Crosby. Way too often by the time the actual season arrives we have Christmas fatigue. The core meaning of Advent and Christmas often gets lost in the shuffle. Yet, at the heart, this season is about a simple reality: God stepped into humanity, coming near to us and defeating our sin, death, and Satan for our redemption.

Believe it or not, the promise of this future Redeemer, that shows up in every book of the Old Testament, goes back to the first chapters of the Bible. In fact, this passage is the first promise pointing hope to the coming Redeemer. Genesis 1-3 tells the grand story of creation. This story engages the most significant questions we as humans ask. When we ask, "Where did we come from?" Genesis answers that everything was created by the One True and Living God who spoke all things into existence and gives meaning and purpose to everything. If we seek to know our own purpose, we discover here that we as humans were created in God's image to know Him, worship, and represent Him. But a third question that hits us every time we hear the news is, what went wrong? Genesis 3 gives us the answer, as Adam and Eve make a conscious decision to rebel against God, seeking to exalt themselves in the place of God. The result is the curse shown in this passage. God tells them two core things about their experience in the world as consequence of sin tainting everything. First, they will be broken, marred by the existence and stain of sin in every area of life. Eventually their sin will lead to death. Second, the world around them will be broken as well, leading to difficult and often hopeless lives. So, is there any way to resolve this, is there any hope?

The order of the pronouncement of the curse in this text is interesting. Notice that God speaks to the serpent before speaking to Adam and Eve. We know the serpent here is a personification of Satan, the tempter representing evil in the Garden. Adam and Eve willingly embraced his message. But before announcing their consequences (and ours), God subtly gives the first promise of a Redeemer. In verse 15, God promises a Seed, a single person who would come from the family of Eve who would take this evil on. The serpent would strike the heel of this Seed, but the Seed will crush his head. There it is, the first promise of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Scholars call this verse the first Gospel. Both the waiting for redemption and the promise of it takes place in the first pages of the Bible, and this promised Seed was born in Bethlehem. God promised the solution to our sin and the curse before He even pronounced the curse. So may we spend the coming days giving thanks and living lives of worship to the God who make the promise of redemption and sent His Son to bring us back to Him.







### **Family Discussion**

Find a rubber snake or a picture of a snake. Show it to your family and ask, "Who here is afraid of snakes? Why are so many people afraid of snakes?"

After everyone answers ask them what the snake represents in Genesis 3.

Explain to your family that Adam and Eve listened to the snake instead of killing it, and that their sin broke everything. But God promised that He would send a single descendent of Eve to take on the snake.

Ask your children to identify the person referred to in verse 15. Then share with them that this is the first promise of our redemption, the first time the Bible promises the birth of a child who would save the world. The first promise of Christmas.



## **Prayer**

\*Pray that God would help your family focus on the promise of Jesus this whole month.

\*Give thanks for the promise of the snake killer Jesus who came for our redemption.









# Waiting Well: Lessons Searned from Exodus

by Jodi Burnley

2 Peter 3:8-9 & Exodus 33:14

How well do you wait? I rank fairly low in that department. We spend a great deal of our lives waiting, so it seems a rather important skill to build. Thankfully, the Lord provides ample opportunity. The word Advent is a version of the Latin word that means "coming". It's a season of waiting. We celebrate the coming of Jesus through the miraculous story of the virgin birth, prophesied 700 years before it's coming to fruition. Those in the Old Testament waited for this fulfillment, just as we wait for the fulfillment of Christ's second coming. It may serve us well to look and learn from how those living in God's covenant promise, pre-Christ's birth, lived out those years of waiting.

Consider the story of Exodus. The Israelites faced real hardships both before and after God delivered them from Egyptian slavery. In their slavery, the hardships were obvious. But in their freedom, they faced continual uncertainties; difficult travels, pursuit by their enemies, hunger, thirst, and endless danger. They left with the clothes on their backs and very little other provisions. They didn't know where they were going, what it would look like, how they would eat, or shelter their children. And traveling with 600,000+ people, I'm sure there were ample other uncertainties and difficulties as well!

They waited for deliverance throughout the years of slavery. Then they waited during the slow process of that deliverance. They waited for the promised land. They waited to know where they were going, how they would get there, and what would happen on the path in between. They saw their enemies pursuing them and they waited to see how God would rescue them. They waited on food, water, healing.... waiting upon waiting. They waited before God made Himself known to them and life was hard. And they waited after God revealed Himself to them, and rescued them....and life was still hard. The difference was God's presence with them and His miraculous provision for them.

Think of all that waiting. Waiting is hard and exhausting, yet God came through time after time; the Red Sea escape, water from the rock, manna from heaven, supernatural duration of their goods, His presence in the form of a pillar of fire by night and cloud by day. Not only did the cloud provide physical comforts, such as light and warmth at night and shade from the desert sun in day, but more importantly, it represented God's physical presence with them and guidance for them. Yet even with that visible presence, they forgot God ... and grumbled. Often.

We, likewise, are waiting. As believers, we waited in sin and death with hearts of stone before God opened our eyes and gave us new life ... and life was hard. We are waiting now as redeemed, saved saints of the Almighty, with new hearts of flesh and promised eternal life ... and life can still be hard. The difference? His presence with us. We have the guaranteed seal of His Holy Spirit to protect and guide us through this broken wilderness we are traveling through. He provides for us in this journey in many ways, but some of the best is through His word- where we can read the stories of His faithfulness, His promises, His unchanging character, His love, redemption, and salvation, and a community to share it with (not 600,000+, thankfully). We have His word and His people, our community, to help us remember. Waiting does tend to make us a forgetful bunch.

But this Christmas season, as we wait in anticipation of both the weeks leading up to Christmas Day and the years leading up to Christ's return, let us wait well. Wait with engaged minds, eager hands, expectant hearts, watchful eyes, and obedient lives. The Israelites lived day by day, waiting, not knowing what the next day or even moment would bring, however, they didn't have the luxury of written accounts of God's repeated faithfulness, nor did they have the privilege of the indwelling Holy Spirit. They simply lived each day, doing the next right thing, atoning for their wrongs .... waiting. This Christmas, let's celebrate His first coming while remembering the time of waiting for those we read about in the Old Testament. What a beautiful gift to both give and receive; the gift of waiting well.



### **Family Discussion**

What are you waiting for that has you weary, wondering, or worrying?

What is the hardest thing to wait for during this Christmas advent season?

How does this perspective on waiting well reorient your heart or bring new insight to areas in life that have you weary and waiting?



### **Prayer**

Almighty, Sovereign Father, Your ways are not our ways, yet your timing is perfect and your ways are good and wise. Help us wait in the fashion of which if our life stories were documented years from now, it could be read as an encouragement of a life lived, although imperfect, day by day in faithful steps of obedience and quick repentance waiting on You. Thank you for your word, your people, and your constant presence. As we prepare for this Christmas season, let us not neglect the preparation of our hearts and minds as we await your return and share your love with those around us. Amen.











# Here's Your Sign!

by Kirk Mathews

Isaiah 7: 10-14

In this passage we see for the first time in scripture, the name Immanuel. In fact, the name Immanuel is used only two more times in the entire Bible and one of those is when Matthew quotes this passage! What does this name mean, and why did God use it here in Isaiah?

In this chapter, the prophet Isaiah is sent by God to speak with the wicked king of Judah, Ahaz. The kingdom of Judah and the city of Jerusalem was threatened with total destruction by the combined armies of Syria and the Northern Kingdom of Israel. King Ahaz and the entire kingdom were terrified. But, God's message to Ahaz, delivered through Isaiah, is to fear not, that the armies aligned against them would not prevail.

And although God chose to spare Ahaz at this time, He also knew the heart of Ahaz was not pure. In Verse 10, God told Ahaz to "ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." In other words... you can ask for anything great or small and God will give you that sign. Ahaz did not truly trust the Lord, but tried unsuccessfully to avoid being "forced" to trust in God by refusing to ask for a sign. For if he asked for a sign and God provided it, he would be forced to acknowledge God's power. So instead, in a pretense of righteousness, he replied that he would "...not put the Lord to the test."

Then, through the prophet Isaiah, God turns His voice toward the "house of David", in other words, toward both the King and his kingdom. God, seeing straight through to the heart of Ahaz basically says, you may fool people with such dishonesty, but you cannot fool me! (My paraphrase of verse 13!) And then Isaiah declared that (even though you refused to ask) the Lord will give you a sign! And WHAT A SIGN IT WAS!!!

800 years before Jesus, the Son of God, was born, Isaiah gave Ahaz his sign! That a virgin would conceive, bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel, which means God with us! The great theologian John Calvin said this about the name Immanuel:

"He is, therefore, called God with us, or united to us; which cannot apply to a man who is not God ... it denotes not only the power of God, such as he usually displays by his servant, but a union of person, by which Christ became God-man." (Calvin)

This incredible sign came true 800 years later when the virgin Mary gave birth to God's son Jesus in the town of Bethlehem!



### **Family Discussion**

Why do you think God chose to give THIS sign to Ahaz?

How is God glorified by this prophecy?



How does God give His children signs today?



#### **Prayer**

Dear God our Father, we give you praise and glory as we stand in awe of your story. You are sovereign and omnipotent! Thank you for your Son Jesus, who's birth we celebrate this season. Thank you for His sinless life and that through faith in Him we can be found righteous in your eyes. Lord, please help us recognize the signs you give us through your word, the prompting of your spirit and other believers. Amen.

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# The Light of World

by Tim and Brandi Souhrada

Isaiah 9: 2-7

Once we were on a remote ranch at night and looked up to see the Milky Way Galaxy and thousands of stars in the night sky. It was an impressive sight, the most spectacular night sky that we had ever seen! The stars were still there in the daytime, but they just couldn't be seen. It took deep darkness to reveal a glimpse of the vast universe to us.

In this passage, Isaiah describes both darkness and light to help us understand how we are to think about God. To describe the darkness, Isaiah uses terms that may be difficult for us to understand as Americans today. Isaiah lived in a time of terrible violence. To describe the darkness of our broken world, Isaiah talks about the rod of their oppressor, the warrior's boot and the garment rolled in blood. It may seem like these terrible images are at odds with the character of Jesus, and they are, but the Bible talks about these violent things because they are symbolic of the fallen condition of man. These images of war are used to help the author convey deep human suffering. The rod strikes, the boot tramples and the garment of blood symbolizes the reality of death.

Just like people in Isaiah's time, we too are familiar with violence, heartache, and death. Like those in Isaiah's day, death and suffering can seem so final, yet in this text we see that Isaiah makes the claim that death and sin don't have the last word. Isaiah is pointing us to a new way, a Light, that will have power over death and the deepest darkness.

In John 16, Jesus tells the apostles that a time is coming when they will scatter and falter. He tells them to "take heart" even as the world is crashing all around them because He has overcome the world. How can Jesus have the boldness to tell His followers to have courage and be bolstered even as He is being led off to His death? This is because Jesus knows that His death will lead to His ultimate victory and our unmerited but unequivocal rescue.

Through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection we see that He is the Wonderful Counselor, the Prince of Peace, the Everlasting Father, and the Mighty God that Isaiah foretells in this scripture. Indeed, the light that Isaiah is writing about is the same man that the Gospels proclaim, Jesus Christ. Isaiah tells us that the Light is going to BREAK the Rod of the oppressor and THROW the boots and the blood-soaked garments into the fire. These terrible things will be no more. Christmas is a time to celebrate the Light coming into the world to banish the darkness for good.



### Family Discussion

Do you remember a time when you were in a dark place devoid of light?

How did the darkness make you feel?

Jesus was born during a time of great suffering and oppression. Why do you think God chose this time in history for Jesus to be born?



Ephesians 5: 8 tells us that we are to "walk in the light". How does this apply to you right now?



### **Prayer Ideas**

Pray that more people will see that the gift of Jesus Christ is immeasurably more valuable than any other gift that they could receive this holiday season

Pray that people will be told of the true meaning of Christmas

Pray that God will grant you a gracious and giving heart in the coming weeks







# a Promise of Hope and Peace That Does Not Fail

by Mike Singleton

Isaiah 9:7, Luke 1:29-33

I confess...I love Christmas ... everything about it! The season, winter weather, Christmas decorations (and the Christmas lights) ... the giving and receiving of gifts, holiday meals, time with family and friends, football, and holiday basketball tournaments. And of course, I also love the gathering of the church, as we anticipate and celebrate the birth of our Savior Jesus.

I confess, too, perhaps like many of you, being troubled, and tempted to worry about the brokenness we see around us in the world today ... in our nation, our cities and schools ... and even in our own families. The weight is heavy. The ideas of Hope and Peace are lost in the ever increasing loud voices of divisiveness, hate, conflict, selfishness ... and evil. While this brokenness has been with us long before we arrived on planet earth, it feels different now, doesn't it? And not in a good way. The result is a sense of being pulled away into a darkness ... and away from what is good, what is true, what is promised!

Oh, but we have a Promise of Hope and Peace that is everlasting ... it will not fail! The prophet Isaiah speaks of a King who will reign forever ... "of the increase of His government and of Peace, there will be no end ... the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this"! And further, in Luke's Gospel, we learn who this King will be. King Jesus! He will be called "Son of the Most High ... and of his kingdom there will be no end"!

Brothers and Sisters ... this is a Promise we can hold on to tightly. This is a Hope that will not fail! This Hope has overcome the brokenness of this world. We can live in this promise of Peace now!

As we move through this Advent season, looking toward the birth of our King ... let's claim this victory, this Promise of Hope and Peace, every day!



### **Family Discussion**

What does this brokenness look like in our lives, in our family today?

How can we claim this promise, this victory, in our own lives, right now?



#### Prayer

Father, grant us the strength of your Spirit to hold on to all of your promises in your Word. Help us to live the victorious life given to us at the Cross of Christ. Let your Glory reign in us for others to see. Lord God, let us not miss the beauty of this Christmas season...the birth and everlasting reign of a King who loves us, who never leaves us, who promises Hope and Peace now and forever. Amen.

# The Price of Love and Forgiveness

by Leslie Holdegraver

Isaiah 53:1-6

It is so hard to imagine that the prophets told of the coming birth of Jesus hundreds of years before it happened. Would you believe it if you heard these messages and then had to wait for a really long time for it to come true? Waiting is hard, and I know I am not always a patient person.

In this passage, Isaiah reminds us of some characteristics of Jesus who hadn't even been born yet. In verse 2 it says that He grew up and didn't have anything special about His outward appearance that would attract people to Him. He just looked like an average guy. Imagine Him growing up, playing ball and laughing with His friends, learning how to become a carpenter from His father Joseph, and eating dinner at the table with His family. That seems like a pretty ordinary life.

The next four verses, though, tell us of everything that He went through on our behalf. The words used in these verses seem so harsh: despised, rejected, acquainted with grief, afflicted, pierced, crushed. We often don't consider how it felt to be Jesus when He was treated like this. Rejection alone is a heartbreaking, devastating experience: when someone you love turns against you. Then add in all the physical trauma, and ultimately His death, to the mix. He went through all of that for you and for me.

Why would He be willing to go through these horrible things? His love for us is greater than we can imagine. In verses 5-6, Isaiah points out that we are sinners; we want our own way. Like sheep, we wandered off from our shepherd. Jesus loves us too much to leave us alone in our sin, though. He came to bring us peace and heal us from the things we have done wrong. He took all those wrong things we did (or do) upon Himself when He died on the cross. For that, we can thank Him for eternity!



Has anyone ever done or said something that hurt your feelings? How did that make you feel about them?

If everyone you loved turned against you, would you forgive them or would you want to get back at them? How did Jesus react to those who hurt him?



#### **Prayer**

Dear Jesus, these verses we read today showed me just how much I have hurt you with my sin. Thank you for loving me so much that you forgave me, even though I didn't deserve it. Because you have forgiven me, help me to forgive others when they have hurt me too. I love you and praise you for all that you are. In Jesus' name, Amen.







## a Blue Christmas

by Amanda Lopez

Based on Psalms 34:17-18

Are you ever tempted to focus more on yourself and how well you may or may not be performing, planning, preparing, giving, loving, volunteering, sharing, praying, decorating, etc., during the advent season?

One particular Christmas, no matter how hard I tried to "keep it together", the tears kept up a steady pace. I had been going through some really tough trials in my life and they had me feeling completely broken-hearted and crushed in spirit.

Christmas was less than a week away and I hadn't even managed to buy a single gift or put up the Christmas tree. Hopelessness and despair had consumed me.

I questioned and cried out to Jesus daily. I didn't understand how a true child of God could be in this condition. Why was I not full of joy and hope, especially now, during this advent season? Why was I stuck crying in bed, day in and day out, instead of spreading the Good News and singing "Joy to the World" and "Peace on Earth" like I felt a good Christian should? Honest truth, there's probably a thousand reasons, but only a few truths I hope to never forget that I learned after healing, that I want to share.

If you find that your heart feels less than ready, or willing, or able, or prepared to celebrate this advent season the way you think you ought to be able to, know this: God loves you because of who He is, not because of who you are or what you've done, or maybe failed to do. There are times in every Christian's heart when all of the promises of God and truths of the Bible are of no help, unless a gracious hand comes along and applies them to us personally. If you are sick, depressed, full of anxiety, too weak to even will yourself out of bed today, please know that God will carry you and apply the perfect remedies for your hurting soul in His perfect timing. He will reveal His love to you once more, wipe away your tears, and strengthen you once again. Just keep your eyes focused on Him always, keep the faith, and wait patiently. He is enough. He will be glorified in your waiting.



### **Family Discussion**



God is blessing us all the time. Does it feel good to give to others?

How does it feel to receive? Do you find it hard to accept things from others?

How will you be intentional this Advent season to keep your eyes fixed on the Lord and not yourself?



### Prayer

If you are hurting today, feeling like you have somehow failed God because you're unable to put your best foot forward, I pray the He would draw near to you now, comfort you, heal you, renew your heart with His love, joy, peace, and hope and give you rest. In Jesus's name, Amen.

# Little Town, Eternal Hope

by John Parke

Micah 5:2

Micah's name means "Who is like Yahweh"? The book that he authored was written to pronounce judgment on Israel for their disobedience to God during a time of prosperity. Within this book is the marvelous foretelling of the ultimate reign of the Messiah. It is here that Micah gives us the detail of the birthplace of Jesus, 700 years before it takes place.

Consistent with our Lord's time on earth as the suffering servant, even His birthplace is of humble origins. Micah tells us that Bethlehem is too little to be among the clans of Judah. There is nothing spectacular about the town. It is a remote, out of the way place.

What is not insignificant is the one who is to be born there. When Micah states "whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days", it's a reference to eternity. The eternal King will be born in Bethlehem, which means "House of Bread" in Hebrew. In John, 6:35, Jesus makes one of His I am proclamations. "I am the bread of life". His statement is further validation that He is the one Micah wrote about long ago. Born in bread town is the one who will satisfy the world's spiritual hunger.



**Family Discussion** 

Why do you think God chose a small town for the Savior's birth?

What phrase in this text points to the eternal nature of Jesus?

What lyrics from the song "O little town of Bethlehem" relate back to Micah 5:2?



### **Prayer**

Heavenly Father, as we prepare our hearts to celebrate Christmas, we rejoice that we have a God who keeps His promises. You gave us specific detail on the birthplace of our Savior. In your sovereignty, you arranged for Mary and Joseph to travel back to Bethlehem so that several prophecies would be fulfilled, including this one that Micah gave us. Our hearts rejoice that You loved us enough to enter the world in a humble way, in a humble place, to restore our relationship with you, the everlasting God.



# While waiting... Sing with Goy by Travis Dierker

Zephaniah 3: 14-20

In this portion of the third chapter, Zephaniah is telling the people to rejoice now that they were released from exile as the Lord has taken away and dealt with the judgement. Furthermore, God is abundant in His gift of grace to all us sinners who deserve judgement. He does this as outlined in the verses by taking away our judgement, dealing with our enemies, being in our midst to take away fear, loving and delighting in his people, and finally gathering all who are weary and worn out.

As individuals gathered in His care, we can look at the Lord's joy, security, and vision. It is a joy for only God's people, and it is worth shouting about. It is a security that He is present, and He has defeated our enemies and overcome the world. It is a vision of what the future gathering and restoration will be like.

Take this advent season as a test concerning whether we are followers of the righteousness of God or followers of the fear among us. If Zephaniah were to come back and look at America in this season of Advent, would he be saddened to see us closing our minds and hearts to the genuine pain of the world? I believe that he would restate his call for all of us to join God in the work of gathering and caring for all those in the world. Advent is a season of reminder to each of us that the promise that God can be trusted to meet our needs, it may not always be in our timing, but rather learn to be joyful in waiting.



#### Family Discussion

Often it is easier to see the tough situations rather than rejoicing in the joyful ones that we should be thankful for. What is one way you can be more joyous? As a family we could shout, sing and rejoice to the Lord. (i.e. sing Joy to the World or O Come, O Come, Emmanuel) Where can we find joy in waiting? Today, we speak of joy, the joy of a people redeemed and restored, but also the joy of a God who is deeply invested in the life of the world. God sings. God shouts. God rejoices. And we, we who are wondrously and inexplicably God's beloved, join in the celebration. What are you seeking during this season of advent?



### **Prayer**

Dear Lord, each of us cannot wait until the day you return. At times it can be difficult for us to wait, especially through pain, suffering and chaos. May we seek you during this time and look to the promises that you have provided each of us. While we wait, may we continually sing with joy. Each of us should learn to be ever more thankful and grow closer in our relationship with you. Our hope is fulfilled with knowing you will come to restore us. Your kingdom has and will overcome and in that day, you will rejoice over us and we will get to experience that. May each of us seek to be more Christlike and find the joy in our lives and in your sovereignty and grace while we await you. Heavenly father, in this time of Advent may we pause, sing and shout to you all the glory and honor by rejoicing in your name and knowing you are faithful and true. Amen.



by Becca Ballada

Based on Matthew 1:18-25



I distinctly remember going to the movies in December 2006 with friends to see "The Nativity Story". After watching, we shared our thoughts about the movie, including which elements followed scripture, and where Hollywood took some liberties. We all had one common observation- we had never really thought much about Joseph until that evening. Joseph the carpenter, husband of Mary, was part of every nativity set in our homes, but we really hadn't considered Joseph's significance in the Christmas

After reading Matthew 1:18-25 and other passages that mention Joseph (especially Matthew 2), one thing is very clear: Joseph believed God's promises and wholeheartedly followed instructions. When it became known that Mary was expecting a baby, instead of acting rashly Joseph considered everything, including his plan to quietly divorce her. Then in a dream, an angel revealed to him the truth about Mary's pregnancy and how Joseph needed to respond. This child was conceived by the Holy Spirit and would save His people from their sins! Once he had this communication from the Lord, Joseph did not delay. Verse 24 tells us that Joseph did three things based on what the angel revealed: he took Mary as his wife, knew her not until she had given birth, and later named the baby Jesus. In Chapter 2 he relocated their family two times as soon as he received divine revelation, keeping them safe. These actions were integral details in God's plan to bring salvation through His Son, Jesus Christ. They were important, and not easy.

As we consider Joseph's responses and his obedient faith, let's also consider how we respond to God's promises and commands. This Christmas season as we prepare our hearts to celebrate the birth of our Savior, what is God leading us to do in our daily lives? Perhaps a parent is feeling the call to study scripture with their children on a more regular basis. Or a child might feel prompted to honor God more in a specific friendship. Maybe an area of ongoing sin requires accountability, and it's time to set aside pride and ask a fellow believer for help. Could December's budget more closely reflect adoration of Jesus by replacing a few material gifts with contributions to those in need, or those spreading the gospel in hard places?

We can never obey the Lord perfectly and save ourselves. We are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. James 2:18 says, "But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works." Like Joseph, let's live out our God-given faith by honestly seeking to follow Him wholeheartedly.



Do you have a favorite Christmas movie that makes you think more deeply about the Christmas story?

Have you ever really thought about Jesus' earthly father, Joseph? What did you learn from Matthew 1:18-25?

What is one specific area where you sense God calling you to live out your faith in obedience?

### **Prayer Focus:**

\*Thanking God for the gift of Jesus, and salvation through Him \*Seeking God's help in our daily lives, to trust and obey







# An Example of Steadfast Faithfulness

by Melissa Johnston

Text: Luke 1: 5-80

Who was Zechariah & Elizabeth? Zechariah was a priest from the tribe of the Levites, a descendant from Aaron and Elizabeth was his wife. They were both devoted to God, following in all of God's commandments and statues. But they were childless and prayed earnestly to God for a child. Even though they were older in years, they knew God could perform a miracle and answer their prayers.

One day while serving as a priest before God, there appeared unto him an angel from the Lord. Zechariah was troubled upon seeing the angel, but the angel said unto him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you shall call his name John. There will be great rejoicing and gladness at his birth, for he will do great work for the Lord. And he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. John will be the forerunner of Jesus Christ, turning many hearts unto the Lord their God and making ready for the birth of Jesus Christ. He was preparing the way for the gospel.'

Now this was astonishing to Zechariah, and he asked, "How shall I know this? For both I and my wife are older in our years." The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel who was sent by God to speak this good news to you. Now behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the birth of your son, John, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in God's time."

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth unto her son and family and friends rejoiced greatly with her, as the Lord had shown great mercy to them. On the eighth day they would bring the baby to the temple to be circumcised and be named after his father, Zechariah (which was the custom back then) but his mother answered, "No, his name will be John." This confused some of their relatives and they looked to Zechariah for answers but he asked/signed for writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And immediately his mouth was opened and he began blessing and praising God.



### Family Discussion

How can we have strong faith like Zechariah and Elizabeth? They prayed for a long time for a child and could have given up, but they were steadfast in their prayer.

How should have Zechariah reacted when the angel, Gabriel, told him of the child God would be sending? The Bible tells us that Zechariah knew of God's promises, and he had strong faith, so why did he doubt this great news?

How can we, as followers of Christ, stay strong in our faith and not turn to fear?

#### Prayer

Lord, I ask that you help me remember that you are in control of everything. I ask that you help me stay strong in my faith, stay in your word and not to live in fear. Lord, we thank you for all of your blessings, your mighty fortress, your protecting hand and your never-ending love for us. In Jesus name, amen.

# Who is Jesus?

by Doug Brickey

John 1:1-18



I love this passage because it summarizes so much about God's character and Jesus' nature, but it is written in a way that really makes me have to think!

John doesn't talk about Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus at all, he goes back a lot further. "In the beginning" is a callback to Genesis 1:1. John establishes that "the Word" has been around since then, both with God and is God. How can someone be with God but also be God? There's a reason that we often refer to the trinity as a mystery; it's something that we can't quite wrap our human minds around.

There are two main characteristics that John gives us about the Word. First, John says that through the Word, all things were created. In Genesis, when God said, "Let there be light", there was light. God's Word brings things into existence. God's Word brought everything into existence.

The second characteristic of the Word is that in the Word, God's character is revealed. Throughout the Old Testament, God's character was revealed through His actions and the words spoken to the prophets. But He was also hidden, never able to be looked upon directly.

But then the Word became flesh (v14)!

God was able to give us a full picture of His character by taking on flesh and becoming a man in Jesus Christ. We see through the life of Jesus the complete picture of God's character: speaking justice, healing the sick, caring for the poor and lost, and literally giving Himself up for others. And it all started "in the beginning."



Family Discussion

Why is it important to know that Jesus existed "in the beginning"?

Why did the Word need to come down and live as a man?

God's Word is a demonstration of His character. How do your words demonstrate your character?



#### **Prayer**

God, help me to see that everything that you have created is a gift for us, but help us to see that the greatest gift that you gave to us is the gift of yourself in the flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. Help us to grow to know you by knowing Him more and more each day. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.







# The Free Gift

By Cheryl Branson

John 3:16

John 3:16 is the most familiar verse in the Bible. It was one of the first verses I memorized as a child, and I've always looked at this verse as one of simplicity, but I was wrong. This verse summarizes the whole message of the Bible, which is, God's love for us and the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ.

I can't help but think about all the specific details God orchestrated to send His Son to rescue us from our sin. From His lowly birth all the way through to His death, the details are numerous and unfortunately I only have room for the following three.

### First, why did God send His Son?

We see God's deep and compassionate love for us in sending His son. The world was in great need of a Savior to rescue us from our nasty sin. "For God so loved the world, He gave His only Son..."

This was a great sacrifice because His Son would be the perfect lamb sacrificed on our behalf. His son Jesus, would have to die in order for us to live.

### Second, how does God send His Son?

God chooses Mary, a young woman with a servant's heart. She accepted this incredible role of being Jesus' mother even knowing, as a virgin, it could cause ridicule and rejection from family and friends.

What a wonderful privilege to be a huge part of the Messiah's coming.

### Third, who was God's Son?

We see an obedient heart in Jesus, and His life reflected His Heavenly Father. If it wasn't for His obedience in fulfilling His Father's perfect plan, we would have had no hope but be condemned to hell and perish.







### **Family Discussion**

Take a moment to reflect on what it took to bring this wonderful free gift of salvation to you, and share other details that come to mind.

"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." – Romans 6:23 Have you received this free gift of eternal life?

Can you think of a friend that needs to hear about Jesus? Pray for God to give you strength and courage to share with them.



## Prayer

Lord, we praise you and thank you for sending your Son and the work that was done on the cross for our sin. Thank you Father that by believing and receiving this beautiful free gift of eternal life, we can experience your true joy and lean on your precious promise of spending eternity with you.

**Amen** 









# Wonderful, Wonderful, Wonderful!

by Vonita Hill

Luke 2:8-20

When my granddaughters are riding with me in my car, we listen to a kids music CD about Jesus. One of the songs goes like this, "Isn't He wonderful, wonderful, wonderful - isn't Jesus my Lord wonderful?! Eyes have seen, ears have heard - it's recorded in God's Word - isn't Jesus my Lord wonderful?!"

Even though it is not known as a Christmas carol, these lyrics could be a theme song of sorts for the portion of scripture we are looking at today. The line "...it's recorded in God's Word..." is especially fitting when we think about the Gospel of Luke. Why? Because Luke was not only an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ; he was also a great historian. In fact, many scholars consider Luke to be one of the most important historians of the ancient world! A dictionary I have at my house defines historical like this, "known to be real or true; in history, not a legend". So, when we read the facts about Jesus' birth recorded in Luke's Gospel, it is important to remember that he is recording a historical event. The details that Luke gives us about the shepherds and the angels is not a fairytale or a legend. It is as real to us as George Washington, World War II, the events of 9/11 or the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic. It really happened!

Now, with history in mind - let's look at verse 8 and think deeper about the shepherds.

Luke writes, "And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night."

The region the shepherds were in was close to both Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Bethlehem is where Jesus was born and Jerusalem was the city where the Temple was located. The flocks of sheep that the shepherds were guarding would be used in the Temple as sacrifices to forgive the Jewish people of their sins. All of the details about the shepherds and the Temple and the priests and the sacrificial system are recorded for us in the Old Testament of the Bible. Everything that God had established throughout the history of the Old Testament was pointing to this very night when Jesus was born. God became a baby; "...the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). It is truly wonderful, wonderful, wonderful to think about how God's orchestration around the birth of His Son connects so many important details in one small verse of the Christmas story. The baby born would ultimately grow up and be offered as the final sacrifice of the old Levitical covenant and through His shed blood a new covenant would be established and available for anyone who would believe. Not just the Jews, but Gentiles too! The shepherds would have been keenly familiar with the importance of the lambs they were tending and perhaps they were the ones expectantly awaiting the true Lamb of God.

Still, the job of guarding the flock is not the most amazing thing about the shepherds. The most amazing thing is that God chose to send the angels to the shepherds. They, above anyone else, would be the first to hear about the birth of the Messiah, Jesus. God did not send the angels to the King in his palace or to the Jewish priests in the Temple or to anyone else that would have been considered "important" at that time. In fact, it is fair to assume that God chose the shepherds because they had become despised and rejected by the Rabbinic leaders. Even though God Himself had esteemed shepherds over and over again in the Old Testament, the shepherds in Jesus' day were seen as dirty, untrustworthy, smelly and unclean. They were often forbidden from being able to worship in the Temple. One Jewish sage named Philo, who was alive at the same time as Christ, wrote that shepherds were "held to be mean and inglorious", which is quite ironic when we read what the angels proclaimed to these shepherds in Luke 2:13-14. "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!'" These shepherds were among those with whom God was pleased and "the glory of the Lord shone around about them..." (verse 9).







Finally, there is more in Luke's account that should make us want to behave today like the shepherds did that glorious night. Luke tells us in verses 16-17, "And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child." These shepherds believed what the angels had proclaimed, they went quickly to find the Christ child and then testified to what had been said. Also in verse 20, Luke states, "And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them." The shepherds did not abandon the job that God had ordained for them but rather they returned glorifying God and giving him praise!

This Advent season let's remember the shepherds and respond like they did to the wonderful, wonderful, wonderful things we've been told about Jesus Christ our Lord!



**Family Discussion** 

Did you learn anything new about Luke 2:8-20? If so, what were those things?

Can you think of an actual Christmas carol that tells about the shepherds and the angels? Find the words and sing a verse or two.

When you picture the "glory of the Lord" what comes to mind? Try and draw a picture of the shepherds that night and share it with your family.

If there is snow outside, have everyone go out and make a "host" of snow angels. While you're doing this, yell out facts to each other from the scripture recorded in Luke.



#### **Prayer**

Oh God in heaven, we want to praise and glorify you like the shepherds did. Help us to believe what you have said about the Christ Child; your only begotten Son. Grant us faith to trust in Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away our sin. We also ask that you give us the desire and humility to read and accept your Word, along with the boldness we need to submit to your commands. Help us to proclaim your salvation to the world both in word and deed! Humble our hearts and give us your peace during this Advent season and in all the days that follow. May our love for you be bigger than any other love we pursue. For your Namesake we pray for these things. Amen.



## a Mother's Heart

by Missy Raley

Luke 2: 22-35

As a mother to four rowdy...eh em...I mean, precious children, when I read this passage I am always caught off guard when Simeon directs his words to Mary alone. He turns to her, looks her in the eyes and says, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." Now, Mary knows that Jesus is the Son of God, but I would imagine that one in her position would need to be reminded of that from time to time. Here, Simeon is not only confirming what she already knew, he is also informing her that she will receive a sword through her own soul? She must have thought, "Wait a minute, I don't remember the angel mentioning THAT part. The baby is only couple months old! I'm not prepared for all this!"

When you think about it, mothers can all relate to the piercing heart aches that come with child rearing. Though, in Mary's case she could not have fathomed the pain she would endure standing at the foot of the cross watching her 33 year old son suffer as He took on the insurmountable pain of enduring the cost of her own sin along with the sins of the rest of the world.

After that moment, when Simeon, who himself had been preparing for decades to lay eyes on the Christ, said her son would be a light to the Gentiles; would have opposition; would reveal people's hypocrisy; and that her own soul would be torn apart, what would the rest of her life look like as she waited for all this to come to fruition? If she's anything like me she probably had a few nightmares and lot of nights checking Jesus' bed mat to make sure He was still breathing.

We don't know the daily thoughts of Mary but we do know she was faithful to her Son and to God. She and Joseph dedicated Jesus to the Lord the day of Simeon's prophesy. Mary was with Jesus during His ministry, watching as He gathered His fishers of men. And she was with Him as the sword pierced His side and was driven through her heart. For the rest of Jesus' life, she was watching and preparing her heart for the day she knew would come but wasn't sure when or how.



Have you ever received information that was unclear? Where did you go to help you understand?

Tell me about a time when you waited a very long time for something. How did you feel when you were waiting How did you feel when you received it?

Simeon and Mary were faithful to God as they waited for His promises to come true. How can we be faithful while we wait for Jesus to come back?

#### Prayer

Dear Lord, we thank you for your Son Jesus and that you are always keeping your promises. We know your heart is for us. Help us prepare our hearts for You. Amen



Luke 1:26: Matthew 1:19-20

December 14

When we first got married, we got into an argument on our first Christmas together about the Christmas tree: what it would look like, how it would be decorated, and the biggest thing: what would be on top. Terry's family had always had a star. My family always had an angel. So, I let her have the rest of the tree and the top would be mine. For 10 years, we had an angel. When the bulbs burnt out, I replaced them with bigger bulbs. When I took the tree down, I noticed that the plastic under the angel skirt was melted. Without saying anything, I ran out to get another angel. There was not a selection after Christmas, so I got the only one left. Next year, it took its place of honor on the top of the tree, with extremely bright lights and wings that moved. It was so big that it bent down the top of the tree, but since I couldn't give up the angel, I put a mop stick up the middle of the tree with zip ties for support. That angel lasted three more years, until only one wing worked and it jerked as it flapped. The next angel had fiber optics that reminded me of a Las Vegas casino.

So, I say all this to ask the question: What is on the top of your tree? Let's look at this in a different way.

An angel appeared to Mary in Luke 1:26 and told her she was going to have a baby and to call His name Jesus. Angel score one.

In Matthew 1:19-20, an angel appeared to Joseph and told him to take Mary, his pregnant girlfriend, take care of her and name the baby Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins. Angel score two.

When the shepherds were in the field taking care of their flocks, a multitude of angels appeared to them. Angel score three – or maybe more.

As for the star, in the 2nd chapter of Matthew, a star appeared over Jesus, so that the Wisemen would follow the star and find Jesus. Star score one. So, that's why I say Angel.

But both the angel's words and the star were to announce the birth of Jesus. And the world would never be the same.

Family Discussion

When you look at your Christmas tree and see what is on top: does it say to you: Jesus is born and is alive. If it doesn't say that to you, it's time to change it. Take time with your kids to talk about how you celebrate Christmas. When you have to explain how and why you do things, it may make it more special to you.

### Prayer

Jesus, help us remember how you came into the world. You come into our lives as much as we let you in. That night there was no room in the inn, so you were born in a stable. Help us remember and tell our family Your story through traditions like angels and stars. We pray that those traditions will make the Christmas season special for them. Help us remember that Christmas is all about Jesus.

Amen







# Seeking The Star Under The Mistletoe

By Alex Anders

Matthew 2:1-11



O Come let us adore him



"Where is the newborn King of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship Him..." Matthew 2:1-8.

These wise men, otherwise known as Magi, traveled a far distance, (some Scholars say from Babylon, present-day Iraq) to see the king of the Jews. We also find prophesied in the Old Testament in Psalm 72:10, "The western kings of Tarshish and other distant lands, will bring him tribute. The eastern kings of Sheba and Seba, will bring him gifts. All kings will bow before him, and all nations will serve him." Reading this text does not give us much information of who these visitors really were or how many, but one thing is for sure, they recognized a supernatural event was taking place, in fulfilling what had been prophesied, and as the scribes in this story focused on, as the Messiah's birthplace found in Micah 5:2 (Bethlehem). What an incredible lesson we can still learn today that if we want to find Jesus we can look to the Word of God. All through the Bible God promises us, "I love those who love me and those who seek me diligently will find me" Proverbs 8:17. "Without faith it is impossible to please him for he who comes to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of those who seek Him." Hebrews 11:6 These Magi did not grow up following the Hebrew God, may have been eastern astrologers, they were Gentiles, they were also considered unclean people, but even then, they recognized when a star arose that could not be explained they turned to the Hebrew scriptures for answers. They made the decision to believe the word of God, set off to find the king Messiah and God guided them by a star straight to Jesus.

Lord, I pray you put a deep desire in all our hearts to come and seek you and your truths, to find you and to worship you every moment, "making music" to the Lord in our hearts. So often does the demands of this world get in the way of fellowship with you and getting our "daily bread" with you can take a back seat. We know we cannot live on bread alone but by every word of God. Please give us grace over our time and help us to give our "first fruits" in fellowship with you each day in your Word, staying persistent in our walk with you and loving others. Please keep us from this world and make our heart's desires to know you more by your Word, and your Spirit, rooting us deeper in you. Thank you, Jesus, that you gave up your life to make us holy and clean, washing us by your blood and by the cleansing of God's word. Take our hearts and minds, making them more like you.



### If the stars were made to worship so, will I



"After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was." Matthew 2:9

How did the star get the Magi to start to seek the Messiah and how did that star stop dead in its tracks over where Jesus was? The only explanation is intentionality in the stars by God Himself. This was God's design, "his aim is that all nations worship his son." Matthew 24:14. "But the time is coming-indeed it's here now- when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. The Father is looking for those who will worship him that way." John 4:23. God's will is for everyone to know Christ and be saved. Throughout Biblical history we see God making Himself known through light, and in this case the star above declared His presence. This was a Supernatural event that cannot be explained by a



natural occurrence. We can try and explain what was going on with the movement of the stars but only God can miraculously open our eyes and hearts to make His son known and use His creation and the cosmos to obey His commands to reveal His glory. It was a sign from God who has the power even to stop stars in their tracks, and this star was being guided by something it could not do on its own and was guiding the Magi to the Son to be worshipped.

December 1

Lord thank you that even in our limited human eyes, you continue to reveal just enough to us to know you are always with us. Lord help us to be led by you and to trust you, to believe in your Holiness, saving us from ourselves. Help us to see what the Magi saw, and how you are constantly moving around us in miraculous ways to have deeper relationships with us. The Magi saw something in Christ that was so desirable and wanted to be near to you, help us also draw near to you as you draw near to us, guiding us to see wondrous things through your son.



#### **ALL HAIL KING JESUS**



"When they saw the star they were filled with joy! As they entered the house they saw the child, they bowed down and worshiped him. Then opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts."

Matthew 2:10-11

The Magi followed the star and when it was clear it fell on Christ the Messiah, they worshipped Him joyfully, falling to their knees and submitting all authority and dignity over Christ, bringing sacrificial gifts in His honor. They rejoiced in the certainty of the child's birth and knowing God's favor was over them by His divine direction. Just imagine how they felt or what they must have been thinking that the God of the universe guided them in a noticeably clear way, that gave them undeniable proof of His existence. The experience would be like none other, seeing God Himself face-to-face. In addition, they brought gifts to God Almighty, not that God needed these gifts, but because these gifts showed the Magi's hearts and were extensions of their desire for Christ, not for what He can give but for who He is. And what is more incredible, in His overflowing grace, we too can have these experiences with the Lord every day.

Lord, may we ascribe all authority and dignity to you, and be overwhelmed by who you are and what you have done to save us. We may not have gold to give but help us to give our hearts and all of ourselves in surrender to you, making you our ultimate treasure. Rain down kisses from heaven, like the star in the sky, where there is no denying your presence, receiving you with grateful hearts and great joy. May we fall down and worship you, seeing our complete need Lord, is in you. May we take the richness of being in your presence and take the abundant love you give to us and pour it out onto others in service, to glorify you. May others see your light and experience your kisses as well. Because once you experience just one kiss from heaven may it become an addiction, and may we intensely desire more of you Lord.

May this Christmas be a time to follow whatever star the Lord is revealing to us, and may the Lord open our eyes to see our neediness and undeserving position, and may God show his mighty power and astonishing grace in our lives as we trust in the good that awaits in His leading, walking joyfully, with Jesus as our treasure, knowing "LORD you are enough!" "COME JESUS COME"

## **Family Activity**

The Magi journeyed long and far to find the Christ child. They studied the scriptures and skies to learn of the coming Messiah. They risked a lot, trusted a lot, and sacrificed a lot to get a glimpse of Jesus. Take out a map or a phone GPS and see the distance they traveled from Babylon (about 60 miles south of Baghdad, Iraq) to Bethlehem (which is located 5 miles south of Jerusalem). Then map from your location, using the same distance the Magi walked, to find the nearest landmark as if you were traveling following the star to see the Messiah. Discuss the story of the wise men and how Jesus reveals Himself to everyone and encourages us never to stop seeking the Lord and what matters. Thank Father God together for His revealed word that we can read every day and that He delights in us when we delight in Him and want a relationship with Him.





# Manger Moment

by Gretchen Nieman

Matthew 2:12

I have often wondered what it would have been like seeing Jesus after His birth... a night sky filled with starlight, song, and angels, and being in the actual presence of our Savior. If I had been a shepherd, would I have left my flock, running to see the Christ Child? Once there, would it have changed me and my life path forever? Would I decide to follow His family to Egypt so that I could continue to worship and devote my life to His purpose? Would I bring my family and friends to see Him, insisting that this newborn baby was everything we had ever hoped for? I would like to believe that this event would have a profound effect upon me and that I would be forever changed, knowing who my Savior was and that I would have given my life serving Him.

Scripture tells us that the magi came to worship baby Jesus, looking for a king that they had learned about from the appearance of a star. King Herod was very concerned by this, desperate to find out where this child was that would be a threat to his rule. Because he was informed that the prophecy was that the king of the Jews would be born in Bethlehem, Herod sent the magi there, instructing them to find the child and report back with His location, so that he could worship Him as well; all the while, actually intending to have Him killed, unbeknownst to the magi. The magi went on their way, saw the Child and were filled with "great joy" and fell down and "worshipped Him." Clearly, the magi were overwhelmed and believed they were in the presence of the king they were searching for. But then, something amazing happens that changes what Herod had planned. After meeting Jesus, the magi went back another way! They did not obey what they had been ordered to do by a powerful and dangerous king. Instead, after a dream warned them to not go back to Herod, they abandoned his orders, and went to their homeland by a different way. Imagine having the courage to defy an evil king, and instead follow a warning from a dream! When the magi met Jesus, their hearts were filled with such joy, that they determined the dream meant more than Herod's commands. They arrived at the home of Jesus, with the intention of returning to Herod, yet they left this new King, with the courage to go home without following the orders of the king that sent them.

I didn't know Jesus as a child, but He made sure I had my manger moment. I was past my teen years and figured that God must be so disappointed in me, my past beliefs and life. I didn't understand His love, grace or redemption. But I was met with the question: What more did Jesus need to do to show you His forgiveness and love for you? That was my moment in the manger. It changed me forever, and I went another way. I walked away from shame, disbelief, and fear and turned in the direction of forgiveness, love, obedience and redemption. Have you met Him in the manger, and gone a different way?







### **Family Discussion**

What would you have done if you were one of the magi? Would you have returned to Herod?

Have you had your manger moment? What was it like? How did it change you?



### **Prayer**

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for this Advent season and for your scriptures that tell us of your love and the gift of redemption through Your Son, Jesus. You have blessed us so richly by giving us the miraculous account of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection. We thank you for reminding us that you change hearts and lives. We ask you to keep the wonder and joy in our hearts all year, not just at Christmas, especially as we reach out to those that still need to know you. We lift up those that still need to meet you and discover who you are. We ask that during this Christmas season, you bring new wonder and joy to the lost. Lord, we love you. Amen.











# Peace with God

by Rebecca Larson

Romans 5:1

Peace. A concept as elusive as it is sought. Peace. A promise found in scripture and an experience that often seems just out of reach. At Christmas we sing about it, send Christmas cards proclaiming it and seek to create picture perfect little moments where we might cultivate and treasure a moment or two of it. Peace. It is why some men go to war and others refuse. It is the cry of every weary soul, every strained marriage, every striving young person, every war-torn people and every divided country. The means of obtaining peace are as varied as our aims in pursuing it. A walk in the woods, a quiet cup of coffee, a decisive victory, a long-awaited court ruling, a gentle breeze by a quiet stream, sweet fellowship. Peace. The longing of every heart taking a thousand pursuits and often collapsing into a thousand pieces of shattered disappointment and frustration. Yet, throughout the Christmas season we sing the endless refrain of, "Peace on earth, good will to men."

Perhaps you groan like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow did, who in the midst of the Civil war penned the words of I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day. One stanza laments:

And in despair, I bowed my head;

"There is no peace on earth," I said

"For hate is strong and mocks the song

Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

The circumstances of our homes, communities, nation and world confirm a deep absence of peace. So, what do we make of our deep longing and the deep strife that continues to riddle our lives? Scripture would define peace with a depth and decisiveness that our Christmas cards and coffee cups lack. Romans 5:1 proclaims that Jesus granted us peace with God. We are born into sin and live as enemies of our Maker until He awakens new life in us, ending our war with God at the cost of His own Son, Jesus Christ. Ponder this. Baby hands sent to be pierced on our behalf. Tender brow destined for a crown of thorns. Chubby feet which were fashioned for the road to Calvary. Sweet darling of heaven sent to be bloodied for His people. Jesus purchased our peace through a covenant of redemption, a covenant of love. During Advent, we remember the decisive work of Jesus' first coming, obtaining our peace and we look to His second coming when He will finally and fully establish His kingdom. Indeed, in this world we do have trouble, but Jesus has overcome sin, death, condemnation and will rule with perfect peace and justice. So, for today, as you may find yourself in a weary, strained, strife-filled, wartorn, divided world, take heart. For, through faith in the decisive work of Christ you can have peace with God. As Longfellow concluded:

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep;

"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;

The Wrong shall fail, the Right prevail,

With peace on earth, good-will to men."





### **Family Discussion**

What is peace?

How do you try to find peace?

What impact does Jesus' life, death, resurrection and promised return have on your perspective this Advent season?



### **Prayer**

LORD,

We praise you that through the life and work of Jesus Christ we can have peace with You. Help the truth of the gospel to settle deep in our hearts triumphing over fear, strife and struggle. Quiet our restless hearts this Advent season as we reflect on the promised Messiah who purchased peace with God. Satisfy our desire for peace as we look forward to the day when He will come again to fulfill all that He began.











# Christmas Light (singular)

by Laurie Brickey

John 8:12

Have you ever wondered where the idea of Christmas lights (plural) originated? In the 17th century, Germans developed a tradition of attaching lit candles to their Christmas tree branches. (Did fire extinguishers exist back then, I wonder?) Lit candles signified the light of Jesus who had been born into the world. They also placed lit candles on window sills to designate their homes as Christian and a place of worship.

In our text John 8:12, Jesus is proclaiming to be "the Light of the world" at the Festival of Tabernacles/Booths. This celebration was to remind the Israelites that God had been a constant source of light during their 40 years wandering the desert. God would go before them in a "pillar of light" (Exodus 13:21 & 14:19-20). During the festival, many big, bright oil lamps were lit and there was a special candelabra that hung in the Court of Women to represent the "pillar of light". It is very likely, Jesus was standing under this candelabra teaching the Jewish people when he made the second of his seven "I am" statements. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." He is trying to make clear to them that they can stop celebrating a lit candelabra and start worshiping Him!

Light signifies life (John 1:4-5, 9-10) and that light overcomes the darkness. Darkness in the Bible refers to being separated from God due to our sin that causes us to be prisoners in chains as well as being spiritually blind. The word "light" is used 139 times in the Old Testament and 93 times in the New Testament. That's a total of 232 times! "Darkness" is used 177 times total. Obviously, the contrast between light and darkness is a big theme in the Bible and especially in the book of John, who was referred to as the "one Jesus loved".

For the Jew, the sun was a symbol of the Jehovah God., the God that made a covenant with His chosen people saying, "And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people." (Leviticus 26:12). Just like our galaxy with one sun at its center that is the source of life, so there is one God at the center of all and the only source of true eternal life. 1 John 1:5 says, "God is light, and in Him there is no darkness."

To "follow" Jesus means to believe in Him and to trust and obey Him. We are called to be the light of Jesus and follow in His footsteps as we shine his light to the world. Recall Exodus 34:29-30: "When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the testimony in his hands, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking to God. Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him." This is one of my favorite passages of scripture because, for us, in the New Testament, Jesus made Himself known and we have "seen" the glory of God in flesh through His incarnation. Just like Moses, Christians are called to reflect the light of Jesus and be "like stars in the universe" (Philippians 2:15). Isn't that beautiful! What a call to action for believers!









### **Family Discussion:**

1. Listen to Chris Tomlin's song "Here I am to Worship". If you have younger kids, teach them the song "This Little Light of Mine" along with the hand motions.

2. Meditate on scripture. Here are some suggestions:

Matthew 5:14-16: "let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deed and praise your Father in Heaven."

Isaiah 42:6-7: "I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light of nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."

Isaiah 49:6 which is quoted by Paul in Acts 13:47 says, "This is what the Lord has commanded us: 'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'

- 3. For more in-depth personal study, I encourage you to do a word study on light and darkness in the Bible. The Concordance and cross references listed in your study Bible are helpful. These concepts go from the beginning of Genesis through the end of Revelation.
- 4. Have you ever been to Meramec Caverns and gone on a tour of the cave? At one point the guide turns off the lights leaving everyone standing in complete darkness. It's a very scary feeling of being completely helpless and alone. Remind yourself of times in the past when you felt alone in a dark time of life and how God made himself known to you. You may want to journal those thoughts. Spend some time in solitude and silence before your God who never leaves you or forsakes you for he is faithful.

Note: If you have young children, make an obstacle course (the more complicated the better) in your home one dark night. Have your children try to make it through the obstacle course without lights on and give them time to struggle. Then, either give them a flashlight or turn on your Christmas tree lights and have them try again. Use this as an object lesson to teach your kids about the "Light of the World".

5. Put a battery powered candle in a prominent window for the Advent and Christmas season. Every night turn off all the lights except that one and maybe your Christmas tree lights. Reflect on a reading from an Advent calendar or devotional.

### **Prayer**

Pray as an individual and as a family. This prayer example came from "The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotions" page 16.

O God, take me in spirit to the watchful shepherds,

And enlarge my mind;

Let me hear good tidings of great joy,

And hearing, believe, rejoice, praise, adore,

My conscience bathed in an ocean of repose,

My eyes uplifted to the Father;

Place me with the ox, ass, camel, goat,

To look upon my redeemer's face,

And in him account myself delivered from sin;

Let me with Simeon clasp the new-born child to my heart,

Embracing him with undying faith,

Exulting that he is mine and I am his.

In him thou hast given me so much that heaven can give no more.

Amen.





# Hope in the Waiting

by Jacob & Randi Singleton

John 16:16-33

In this passage, which takes place shortly before Jesus' arrest, Jesus prepares His disciples for a season of time apart from Him. He speaks to them of the trials soon to come in their own lives as they are to be "scattered, each to [their] own home" following Jesus' departure from them. But, most importantly, He also makes them -- and in extension, us -- two clear promises. First, there will be sorrow and tribulations in this life. Second, this sorrow will come to an end, and be replaced with joy.

In this time of Advent, as we celebrate the past birth and long for the future coming of Christ, this passage is central to our lives as Christ-followers. We are all now in this season of waiting and expectation. While in this time, we are certain to face hardship. We may even ask when it will end, as the disciples did as they pondered what Jesus meant when he said "a little while". But, Jesus did not respond with a set time or date; He simply reiterated the promise of eventual joy. The importance in this is that the duration of our trials is not significant, but the promise of inevitable joy is.

So, while in the midst of our earthly tribulations, we may find ourselves focusing on the length of our trials. But, if we instead focus on God's promises of eventual joy and the fact that Jesus has overcome this world, our hearts can be refocused on the promise of inevitable joy that Jesus can bring in the midst of tribulations, and ultimately in His return. Our tribulations are a given, but we can take heart, because so is the promise of eventual joy in a Savior who has overcome this world.

# Family Discussion

Though there is much joy in life, is there also sometimes sadness?

What are some examples?

Can you think of a hard time in your life when you asked "how much longer"? With this passage in mind, what could you have done, or what could you even do now, to refocus on Christ's promise?

In this time awaiting Christ's return, are we truly "alone"? (Hint: John 16: 7-15)

### Prayer

Pray for the promises Christ makes us in Scripture. Thank Jesus for these promises and ask Him to help you to navigate the fear and worry about earthly trials; ask Him to refocus your heart and mind on Him and His promise of hope and joy. Thank Him for coming into this world and overcoming this world.

# Perfect Timing

by Carla Moore

Galatians 4:4-5



There is a big difference between perfect timing and less-than-perfect timing: a perfectly ripe, juicy peach vs. one that is still hard and green; a home run or a strikeout; a Christmas gift that arrives on Christmas Eve or Dec. 28th.

In this passage, perfect timing is described as "the fullness of time" – when God sent Jesus to earth to be born as a baby "under the law" and to become our redeemer. The law clearly shows that we are not able to meet God's standard of perfection. Jesus was the only human who was able to meet every requirement of the law. Since God is holy, He cannot allow unholy things into His presence and so He provided Jesus as our redeemer – His perfection covers our imperfection.

The sacrifice Jesus made by dying on the cross in our place allows us to be adopted into God's family. When a person is adopted, they have all the rights of a son or daughter; in fact, in our system of law, an adopted person can never be disowned by the adopting parent. That makes adoption a final act – one that cannot be undone. What a special place we have when we are adopted into God's family by accepting the gift of Jesus!



### **Family Discussion**

Would you rather eat a peach that was not quite ripe or a banana that was covered in brown spots and mushy?

Is it more exciting to receive a gift on time or a few days late?

Is anyone able to keep the Ten Commandments, the law that was given to Moses?

What do we have to do to accept the gift of redemption that Jesus offers? Read John 3:16.



#### **Prayer**

Lord, thank you for your perfect timing that gave us the gift of redemption through Jesus. Thank you for loving us so much that you provided the only way – by accepting Jesus – for us to be with You for eternity. During this Christmas season, help us to share the good news of this wonderful gift with everyone we meet. Amen.





# Hold It All Together

by Tabetha Sheaver

James 1:2-3

Joy. What even is joy?

And why is it that around the holidays we are expected to be "joyful"? What if you don't want to wear bells on your shoes or smile at grumpy people as you press through the store trying to mark the last things off your to do list. Are you tired and overly busy?

I know that for me, much of my joy was being stolen by trying to get it all done and make it all look good so I appeared to "have it all together".

The truth is, deep in my soul I was grieving. I was sad and broken. I looked at others and wondered why everything was so easy for them (envy, jealousy, and a little bit of self-pity). I got upset that I couldn't do it all on my own, that things never looked the way I wanted them to, and that no matter how hard I tried nothing was good enough (pride).

And so, I made myself overly busy trying to avoid some deep seated devastating grief that had been quietly lingering in my soul.

Until I read Choosing Gratitude.

In the book it asks, 'Can you be grateful to God and give joy and thanksgiving even in the hard things? Can you be joyful when things don't turn out the way you had hoped?

It's a re-framing I had never considered.

James 1:2 says, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds" – "IT ALL" and "TRIALS"- that is what we are supposed to be calling joy? Trials?

But why?

Because as James 1:3 tells us, trials are what produces steadfastness in our faith. Steadfastness is akin to steadiness, persistence, a continuation, a deepening. A deepening of dependence on our Heavenly Father. An increase in the fruit of the spirit- love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

So, I invite you to re-frame by asking a question: "How is it that what is irritating me, making me sad or making me feel inadequate could be an opportunity to increase in fruit of the spirit?"

My prayer for you is that you see Christ shaping you in all trials and count "it all" as joy. My prayer is that you can shift perspective to know that even if your presents aren't perfect God's presence is, and that in doing that you will experience joy.







### **Family Discussion**

Think, journal, or share the things that bring you joy and remember not to just enjoy them but to praise and give thanks to God for them.

Then think of a few hard times that produced steadfastness, helped you grown in your faith and dependence on Him. Write them down so when you are in a trial you can see the evidence and good works of God your Father and remember it is all for your good.

If you are in one of those hard times right now, set your eyes on Him and trust He's got this!

Joy to the World the Lord Has Come! Let us rejoice that we don't have to hold it all together.

Listen to Casting Crowns: Just Be Held



## Prayer

Dear God, thank you for the good times and the bad. Thank you for being a God of experiences. Thank you for being a God that provides stability, even in times of fear and uncertainty. I am so broken and need you Lord. When I face trials help me to turn my eyes to you and the cross. Help me to remember you are painting beauty with the ashes and not a tear is wasted. Lord help me to grow, help me to understand the good works you are doing in me and in my life- even in the hard times. Help me to count it all joy! Help me to see how you are shaping me and help me to find great joy in that and in you! Thank you for being here for me. You are my salvation and my joy. I rejoice because you are what gets me through... you God, you sending your son Jesus, your promises, the fact you've already won the battle. Jesus is my joy, my hope, my faith, and my only answer- help me remember that always! Amen











# Building Blocks: Just Toys or a Way of Life?

by Bill Branson

2 Peter 1:3-11

As a young boy, I really enjoyed constructing things. Christmas and birthday gifts usually included something to build with. At first it was simple wooden blocks, then Tinker Toys, then Legos! I could create structures from simple houses to elaborate fortresses depending on the supply of materials. It seems that no matter what was built, there was always a horde of little "attackers" trying to break in to the structure. These early construction efforts taught me that a solid foundation is essential to a strong house or fortress. I also learned that it was my choice whether to build thick interlocking walls that would hold up for defense or weak walls that could easily be peeled away and broken through. It depended on who I wanted to prevail. As I grew in my walk with Jesus, I realized the same could be said of my spiritual fortress. Some walls were built strong and were harder to penetrate, but other areas of my life were much more susceptible to temptation and easier to breech.

Weak walls always resulted in a successful attack by Satan, our adversary. He has a knack for discovering where our weaknesses are and exploiting them.

In this passage Peter states that God, through His divine power, has granted to us everything that pertains to life and godliness! Through our faith in Jesus, we are called to partake in His own glory and excellence, and escape from the corruption of this world. Think about this; we are called to share in God's divine nature! How awesome is that? Our faith is the foundation of our spiritual fortress. However, Peter tells us to make every effort to continually supplement our faith. He names these "building blocks" in verses 5-7 and tells us if these qualities are ours and are increasing, they will keep us from being ineffective and make us useful to God! If we practice these qualities, we will not fall and will be richly provided an entrance to the eternal kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. God never promises that building our life will be easy, pretty, or fast, but He does promise a fantastic end result for those who receive the free gift of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ.

### **Family Discussion**

Gather Legos or similar blocks and tape names of the qualities listed in the passage: virtue, knowledge, self-control, godliness, love etc., and build with them to demonstrate how they can work together.

As I read this passage, I picture each quality that Peter lists as a Lego building block, and I ask myself these questions:

How am I building my spiritual fortress?

How do I get more material?

Am I stacking them strong enough?

# ss?

#### Prayer

My Father in Heaven, I bow before your throne in the name of Jesus. You are the master builder, the Creator of all things, the Sustainer of all things. You granted to me very precious promises and called me to partake in your divine nature. You love me just the way I am, but You love me too much to leave me to my own devices. Lord God, I'm weak and easily persuaded, but You are my strong shelter in time of tribulation, a mighty wall when I'm attacked, a shield against Satan's arrows. Strengthen my faith and act as my defender. Help me to be diligent in confirming my calling and practice these qualities to build my spiritual fortress. Prepare me for your kingdom. Amen.

# Raise a Hallelujah!

by Janice Johnson

#### Revelation 11:15: Revelation 19:6: Revelation 19:16

A short pause. The conductor flicks his wrist as the orchestra begins. The audience stands. The joyful chorus sings out "Hallelujah! Hallelujah!"

Every 3 or 4 years during Advent, I have had the honor and joy to sing the magnificent Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's Messiah as a member of the chorus for our local symphony. The first time that I sang it in rehearsal, I had thought it so familiar from hearing it hundreds of times in my lifetime, that I glanced over it, thinking that I knew it already. I didn't. I made lots of mistakes. As the years went by, and my faith in Christ grew, so did my perception of the chorus. The last few times I sang it, I began to question why we sing it around Christmas at all. It is, by tradition, most frequently performed during Advent. But, should it be? My second thought was Easter. But, that still didn't fit. Ah, I said to myself as I looked up the scripture reference ... Revelation. Christ's return. Well, that puts a whole new spin on the chorus!

Sometimes, things seem so familiar that we miss the whole point of what they're trying to communicate. Through tradition and familiarity, I had associated the Hallelujah Chorus with Christmas. I had imagined angels singing "Hallelujah!" to the shepherds when Jesus was born. Wait a second, they sang "Glory to God in the Highest" in Luke 2:14. So, where does "Hallelujah" fit in?

"Hallelujah" doesn't even appear in the New Testament until Revelation 19. For context, the Bible ends three chapters later in Revelation 22. I don't think we're in Advent, anymore, Toto. I started to reflect on these two verses and what it means in the season of Advent because we're almost guaranteed to hear this chorus at least once. My first thought is a reflection and awe of God's majesty. My second thought is a different kind of Advent, one where we anticipate Christ's return and honor Jesus in his rightful place. A foreshadowing of the kingdom of our world that finally becomes the kingdom of Jesus, when He shall reign forever and ever. That's certainly something to sing "Hallelujah!" about!

So, if and when you hear the Hallelujah Chorus this Advent season, whether it be at home, in the car, at work, or even over the store speakers while Christmas shopping, will you stop to consider the magnitude of this text? Not just as a Christmas carol proclaiming Jesus' birth, but as a glorious praise and proclamation of awe and majesty to the One who reigns now, and will reign forever and ever".

Family Discussion

What does the word "Hallelujah" mean to you?

What is something that has become so familiar to you that you have forgotten it's true, original meaning? Discuss how you can remember the true meaning.

Describe a time that you were in awe of God's majesty?

Take a minute to search for and listen to the Hallelujah Chorus. Discuss any thoughts that you may have while listening to it.

#### **Prayer**

Heavenly Father, you are the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Help us to reflect on your majesty today. Sometimes, it's easy to become so familiar with You that we don't look to you in awe and majesty. Help us to honor you as our king this Advent season, as we long for the day when you will return to reign forever and ever. Hallelujah! Amen.









## Christ's Second Advent

by Eric Burnley

Revelation 21:1-4

When we think of Christmas and Advent, our minds often logically run to images of Christ as a newborn child in the manger and all the themes that come with the entrance of God, in love, stepping into humanity as the savior of the world. This text, however, points to Christ's second Advent, when He will return and make all things new. Tears will be gone; death will be no more. The broken relationship between God and man will be restored. The perfect peace that God intended at the dawn of creation known as Shalom will return, and things will finally be the way they ought to be.

This is an astounding promise: that in Christ, God will abolish the things that tear down and defile His creation, even when those things come from within us. The vanishing of the sea signifies the removal of earthly chaos and disorder, making way for a peace we cannot fathom. The baby in the manger is the same Christ we see in the book of Revelation, coming again in power to rule and reign in the eternal Kingdom of Heaven.

Does this bring you hope? Is your heart at peace knowing that the perfect love of God has been shown to you through His Son Jesus Christ who bore the penalty for every sin you will ever perpetrate, enabling you to evade the wrath of the one true holy God by grace through faith in Christ alone? Can you taste the joy to come when the Savior rescues His bride in fulfillment of this promise? It is only through receiving and savoring these themes that we can step into sharing them with others; I cannot give what I do not have. It is impossible to show love to others as God intends without fully receiving the love He has shown me in Christ. I cannot exhibit the light of hope to my family if I do not regularly bask in the hope of Christ's second Advent. I will never be a peacemaker without seeing that God has given me perfect peace through His Son. And I won't be filled with joy if I am not seeing that God has a plan to restore all things to Shalom. Take time this week to remind yourself that the themes of Advent permeate the story of the gospel, and they are meant to impact us as ambassadors for Christ in how we share hope, love, joy and peace with those around us.

Know this today: Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.







## **Family Discussion**

Discuss some ways you see the Advent themes of hope, love, peace, and joy reflected in the context of Revelation 21 or amid the promise of Christ's second Advent.

Talk about how we can practically live out those Advent themes with our neighbors.



### **Prayer**

God, we thank you for sending Your Son Jesus Christ to save the world. Help us to receive your gift of hope, love, peace, and joy in Christ deeply today. Help us to believe fully that Jesus has completely atoned for our sins on our behalf so that we may be received as perfectly righteous, just as you would receive Your own Son. And help us to see that one day, Christ will come again to make all things new, restoring the perfect peace You intended in creation. We need to continually experience the hope, love, joy, and peace of Christ's second Advent so that we can extend these to all around us. May the gospel remind us what you have promised, and may we trust in Your perfect faithfulness to accomplish what You have set out to do. Amen.











# You Shall Call His Name

by Mike Hubbard

Matthew 1:18-25

It's finally here! Christmas morning. Have you opened your presents yet? What did you get? In some ways the "Christmas season" begins before Halloween, as the stores were already putting out Christmas stuff and sometimes playing Christmas music. The Advent season began right after Thanksgiving, giving us four weeks of worshipful meditation preparing for the celebration of the birth of Jesus. For the Israelites, their wait for Jesus' coming was hundreds of years of focusing on the promises of God without seeing the reality. They had a long history of waiting in hope for the first Christmas day. Mary and Joseph had been waiting 9 months for the birth of the beautiful infant. But in Christmas, the time of waiting has turned into the time of fulfillment.

The birth of a baby did bring an important task for the parents, the giving of the baby's name. With each of our children, Heidi and I went through a process determining the name, knowing full well that the name given would be so tied to their identity for all of life. What is often painstaking for some parents was decided for Joseph and Mary. The name of their baby was given by the Angel, who told Joseph that they would call Him Jesus. Moreover, this text gives us three key names or titles (nicknames) for Jesus that help us understand His identity and purpose. For our final devotion in the Genesis Advent book I want you to take a few minutes looking at these names in this text and meditating on the meaning of each of these for you.

Jesus – Our Christmas story from Matthew begins with the phrase, "Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way." The angel told Joseph that the baby's name is Jesus, "For he will save His people from their sins." (v.21) The name Jesus is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Yeshua (or Joshua). It's meaning is that Yahweh saves. This is central theme for the storyline for the whole Bible, that salvation belongs to the Lord (Psalm 3:8, Jonah 2:9). The name given to Jesus by the angel through His parents was an announcement, that our God Saves and that this baby is the glorious way God will save His people from their sins.

Christ – No, Christ is not Jesus' last name. He is not Jesus Christ born to Joseph and Mary Christ. Christ again is a Greek word which translates a Hebrew word, the word Messiah. The Old Testament prophets promised a great King who would be from the family of David who would usher in the Kingdom of God, ruling His people in justice and righteousness. Calling Jesus the Christ is the same as saying Jesus is the Messiah, which means that He is the One promised on page after page of the Old Testament and brings fulfillment to God's promises and plans.

Immanuel – Matthew is quoting Isaiah 7:14, the promise that God's salvation sent in a single person who would be the Messiah would come through a specific sign, a virgin who has a baby. This baby would also be called "Immanuel" which we are told means, "God with us." This title answers our ultimate need. Our sin has separated us from God, and because we are sinful this is a problem we cannot solve. Yet God came Himself. Jesus is so much more than a cute baby, He is God who came to be present with us, involved in our lives and loving us even in our sin.

This is the identity of the baby we have been waiting for since Thanksgiving, and the purpose of the man who grew up and lived the life I should have lived. He then died the death I should have died. Yet the grave could not hold Him, three days later Jesus rose again, defeating death, hell, and the grave forever. He now reigns forever more. He is Jesus the Christ, Immanuel, our Lord!







## **Family Discussion**

Explain to your kids how you chose their name. Ask them how their name shapes their view of self and identity.

Why would the Bible tell us things like there is hope in the name of Jesus, or power in the name of Jesus. What does the name of Jesus tell us about him.



### **Prayer**

Give different members of your family the names, Jesus, Christ, Lord, Immanuel.

Ask each person to give thanks for this name and the meaning of Jesus' identity and mission for us.







