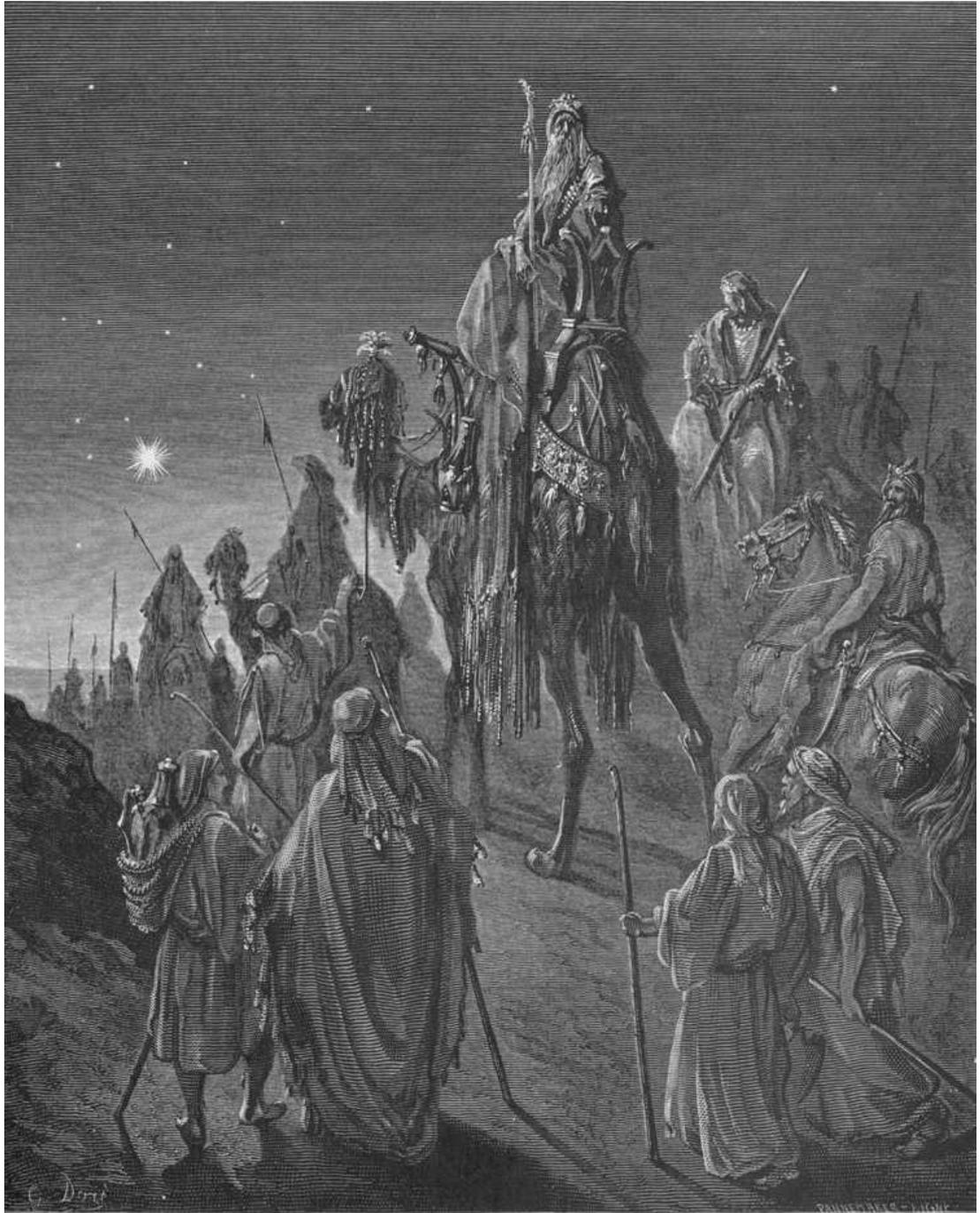


**Readings and Devotions for Advent,
the Twelve Days of Christmas, and Epiphany**



The Wise Men Guided by the Star

When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was.

—Matthew 2:9

Introduction to Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany

OUR CHRISTIAN HERITAGE

Advent and Christmas seasons are with us again. Like the seasons of the year in nature, the season of the ecclesiastical calendar and the national calendar come full circle. This is only appropriate since: “For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. ¹⁷And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. ¹⁸And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence” (Col. 1:16-18).

These are seasons of annual focus and remembrance. But as is true of all liturgy or form, it can point to a true or a false declaration. There is much in the national liturgy that points away from the advent of Christ. Our purpose, in these next few weeks, will be to draw attention to the true message of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. These are central events in the life of Christ and are profoundly significant for all of human history. God became a man. He came to rescue His people. This is worthy of all our celebratory efforts.

ADVENT

Advent is that period of great anticipatory joy—it is a time of preparation for the celebration of Jesus’ arrival in Bethlehem as a helpless infant. In the Western liturgy, Advent begins four Sundays prior to December 25th—the Sunday closest to November 30. The annual commemoration of Jesus’ birth begins the Christmas cycle of the liturgical year—a cycle that runs from Christmas Eve to the Sunday after the feast of the Epiphany.

The four weeks of Advent are often thought of as symbolizing the four different ways that Jesus comes into the world: (1) at his birth as a helpless infant at Bethlehem, (2) at his arrival in the hearts of believers, (3) at his death, and (4) at his arrival on Judgment Day. Because Christmas falls on a different day of the week each year, the fourth week of Advent is never really finished; it is abruptly, joyously, and solemnly abrogated by the annual coming again of Jesus at Christmas.

CHRISTMAS: ALL TWELVE DAYS

As we celebrate Christmas, few of us think of Christmas Day as a beginning. For most families Christmas is the culmination of weeks of planning, shopping, and anticipation. Many are not aware that Christmas is but the first day of the twelve-days of Christmas.

Ever since the Council of Tours met in 567 and proclaimed the twelve days from Christmas to Epiphany as a sacred and festive time, the Church officially has observed both an Advent season in preparation for, and a Christmas season for the celebration of our Lord’s nativity. Recognizing how the Church year dramatizes the biblical story of what Christ has done for the salvation of all people, we have been trying to recover some of the richness of these celebrations. The church year forms an annual curriculum that tells the story of our faith: those who understand it understand the basics of the gospel.

The Christian calendar, therefore, is a great way for families to focus their worship and tradition. Repeated traditions (within biblical boundaries) help all of us know and remember who we are, developing our identity as God’s covenant people. And celebration of the themes and seasons of the life and work of Christ helps families express their faith.

Epiphany

The twelve days of Christmas traditionally end with the celebration of the eve of Epiphany on Twelfth Night, January fifth. Broadly speaking, the word “epiphany” means a sudden manifestation of the essence or meaning of something; a comprehension or perception of reality by means of a sudden intuitive realization. In the context of the Christian Church, Epiphany has a more specific reference: it celebrates the manifestation of the divine nature of Jesus to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi. The feast of Epiphany is observed on January sixth, twelve days after Christmas.

NOTE: Scripture quotations below are from the *New King James Version* of the Bible.

NOVEMBER 27—First Day of Advent

JOHN 1:1-5

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. ⁴In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Our Advent meditations begin with the recognition that in the ancient pagan world, this gospel proclamation begins with a statement that the Greeks might misunderstand and therefore accept in the wrong way. The philosopher Heraclitus had used the term *Logos* in his speculative philosophy, and so when John starts out by saying something apparently inscrutable—the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God—the sentiment might have seemed suitably opaque to them. But John is doing something quite different. He is engaged in overthrowing the ancient wisdom, not compromising with it.

In v. 14, we will discover that the Logos became flesh and dwelt among us. For the apostles, and for all faithful Christians since, the Incarnation means that ultimate Truth has a birthday, and a mom, and ten fingers, and a liver. This kind of thing was absolutely appalling to the ancient philosophical mind—foolishness to the Greeks, as Paul noted.

There are indications that this is where John is deliberately taking us, right from the start. He begins with the same language that starts the book of Genesis (v. 1). We are talking about a new creation here, not another ethereal world elsewhere. The Word was with God in the beginning, and the Word was God. Lest there be a mistake, John repeats it. He was in the beginning with God (v. 2). And then the philosophical Greek encounters his first great difficulty. The earthiness of God's Word is seen in the fact that He made every single thing, and not one created thing was made apart from Him (v. 3). Ultimate reality is not contaminated by matter, but rather rejoices over its origin, calling all of it good. Not only was this Word creative, but He was filled with life. He is no impersonal principle, and His life is the light of men (v. 4). He is the living God.

When this Spoken God, this Word, comes into the world, He shines in the darkness of this world. And as He does so, the darkness cannot comprehend what is going on. But fortunately, the darkness is not there to be persuaded, but rather to be banished by the arrival of the Light.

And so this is what we anticipate every Advent, and this is what we are privileged to see celebrated yet again. The Word was with God; the Word was God. The Word is with man; the Word is man.

—*Pastor Douglas Wilson, Christ Church, Moscow, Idaho*

PRAYER

Our great Father, we rejoice before You as the God who fulfills all Your promises. We glory in the mystery of the Incarnation, knowing that we worship You through the one who is fully God, and fully man. We remember that He is Your apostle, representing God to man. And we call upon You to remember that He is our high priest, representing us to You. We receive Him by faith, as the Creator, as the Spoken God, as the life of men, as the light of the world, and as the conqueror of all the darkness in the world. We pray to You in His strong name, the name of Jesus Christ, and AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Prepare the members of your family to think of Advent and Christmas in very material terms. This is not a season that celebrates vague spiritualities, but rather the season that celebrates God taking on flesh. The instinct to give gifts, to eat chocolate, to cut down a tree in the woods to bring it home, is therefore all very healthy and in line with the holiday. Matter enables us to give, and not just to grab.

NOVEMBER 28—Second Day of Advent

JOHN 1:14

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

After a long, tiring day of shopping, Jim and Sue came upon the gift they had been looking for. There was one particular bicycle that their son, Bobby, had wanted. Now, at last, they found what must have been the only one still available. It was a Ranger Racer, complete with all kinds of shiny gadgets and sparkling features. Quickly, they latched on to the bike and started pushing through the store to the check out area. Unexpectedly, Jim stopped, looked at Sue, and said, “What are we teaching our son about the real meaning of Christmas?”

A couple of weeks later, Bobby woke up extra early on Christmas morning, ran downstairs, and woke the whole household with shouts of joy over his discovery of something special near the Christmas tree. Bobby was grasping not just the handlebars of a new bicycle, but something greater—the meaning of Christmas. The Advent of Jesus Christ is the most materialistic, the most physical, the most worldly message of the Bible. The Word, who we know is Jesus Christ, became flesh. He became human, a person, a baby, flesh and blood; yes, a real, live, crying, eating, sleeping baby boy. For a period of some thirty plus years, God the Son lived here on planet earth. John says that he and his friends beheld Jesus’ glory. Like Bobby squealing with delight over a new bicycle, the disciples experienced the excitement of standing next to Jesus, eating lunch with Jesus, sitting at a lesson listening to Jesus, and watching Jesus teach, preach, and perform miracles.

Jesus is the ultimate Christmas gift. But the gift of Christ is not something that we can put into a holy box labeled “Spiritual.” Rather, a flesh and blood Christ came into this physical world to save us in the here and now, as well as in eternity. His coming here on earth in the flesh gives us the greatest of reasons to truly enjoy all the physical gifts of God, including bicycles.

—Pastor Ben House, Grace Covenant Church, Texarkana, Arkansas

PRAYER

God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, in our earthly condition, we thank You for sending Jesus to us, for making Him a human, just like us, for showing Him to us. We behold His glory and rejoice. We thank You for all the physical gifts of this season, for the feasts and the presents, the decorations and the celebrations. Thank you that in Christ, we can enjoy all things. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss with your family how Christians can truly enjoy material gifts in ways that non-Christians cannot enjoy them. Discuss what the disciples must have felt and thought when they were spending their days with Jesus.

NOVEMBER 29—Third Day of Advent

JOHN 1:18

No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Just as we saw from verse 14, that the Word, who is God, took on human flesh, and lived among men and was seen by men, as the glorious one who is from the Father in heaven, so this verse teaches us that the ministry of Jesus upon the earth was a ministry of revelation. What kind of revelation? A revelation of God himself, particularly the Father. The incarnation of Jesus was not something outside of God's character. It was not something done by Him that was foreign to His nature. Not at all. In fact, Jesus, in His incarnation, was expressing and revealing the very character of God. By taking on our human flesh, and living in it for thirty-three years, Jesus was revealing to us, was telling us, about our Father in heaven. Even though no man has seen the Father, as He is a Spirit and does not have a body like men, nevertheless, through the life of Jesus we do see and come to know the Father. Jesus could do this because He is the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, who has been in communion with the Father for eternity. And so through His life on earth, the love and community that He enjoyed with the Father is displayed for us, even as we are invited into that community ourselves! Through Jesus, we come to know the Father in heaven as our own Father.

—Pastor Burke Shade, Cornerstone Reformed Church, Carbondale, Illinois

PRAYER

O heavenly Father, we thank you that you have not left us alone to wonder in ignorance about your love and character. We thank you that you have revealed yourself to us through the sending of your Son in our flesh, that we may know you, love you, and obey you. Teach us to believe and to remember at all times that no man comes to you but through your Son Jesus. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss with family members how knowing Jesus reveals the character of God the Father in heaven. Point out that in knowing and trusting in Jesus as our King and Savior, God's people are also placed into relationship with God the Father as their own Father. Point out how Muslims don't and can't know the Father and His love because they don't believe that Jesus is the eternal Son of God.

NOVEMBER 30—Fourth Day of Advent

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-8

⁵Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, ⁷but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

This Advent text looks back on the coming of the Son, the second person of the Trinity. The “coming in the likeness of men” refers to the Incarnation; the Son’s taking upon Himself a human body and nature at His Advent. The statements about the Advent are introduced with a command to “let this *mind* [emphasis added] be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.” What we are told about the Advent is to result in an attitude in us that reflects the attitude of the Son. So we are forced to think a bit about what verses 6-8 tell us about Jesus’ attitude. It is important that we get this right. We certainly want to imitate the right attitude, not the wrong one.

Sadly, there has been a general confusion in evangelicalism at just this point. All too often, we are told that the Incarnation was an exception, something out of the ordinary for God’s character. The text is misread to say something like “*in spite* of Him being God, He emptied Himself of His godly nature and instead came to die for us.” This leaves us with a distorted view of God, implying that Jesus acted different from His basic Divine Nature. We end up thinking that God is usually not of a mind to serve others, but did this one time because sin had messed up things so badly. God will, in really tough times, have a mind to serve others, but we are led to believe this is not His normal mindset.

This mistaken view of the text has a direct result on our sanctification. We are told in Psalm 135:16-18 that men take on the characteristics of the gods they worship and trust. If we think that God only occasionally and exceptionally acts in sacrificial service to others, then we will be like that sort of God. We will think of serving others as an exception to our normal lives. Isn’t that, after all, the Divine Nature?

No. The facts of the Advent are prefaced with a simple declarative statement that Jesus is God’s Image-bearer. He possesses the Divine Nature, and this explains what follows. The first thing the text tells us about the Incarnation and Advent of Jesus is that it is a *result* of Him being God. *Because* He existed as God, *because* He has the mind of the triune God, He is by this Divine Nature moved to not to seek His own glory, but rather, to seek the well-being of others. *Because* He is God, the text tells us, He became human, and then humbled Himself to die for sinful men.

The Incarnate Son’s mind of self-sacrificial service was not an exception to the Divine Nature. John 1 tells us that Jesus came to “declare” the Father. The Greek word translated “declare” is the origin for our word “exegete.” The Son has come to exegete the Father, to show us the sort of God it is that we worship and whom we are to imitate. John’s Gospel climaxes with the death of Jesus, the great revelation that we serve a God whose mind and nature is to self-sacrificially serve others. This is the mind of Christ Jesus that we are to have as well. We are to see all of our lives as ones of service to others. This is the great message of Advent, according to Philippians 2:5-9. God has come, He is indeed love, and we are to be like Him.

—Pastor Dennis Tuuri, Reformation Covenant Church, Oregon City, Oregon

PRAYER

Gracious Father, please forgive us for believing Satan’s lie that you are selfish, and not loving towards us in all things. Thank you for the wonderful message of Advent. May our Advent celebrations inform our minds, attitudes and actions not just in this joyous season, but in the balance of our lives. May we be self-sacrificial image-bearers of our blessed Savior, in whose Name we pray, AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Help the individual members of the family think of practical acts of service to others this Season, and to commit themselves to these actions in prayer. Additionally, select one project this week for the entire family to perform in self-sacrificial service to others.

DECEMBER 1—The Fifth Day of Advent

COLOSSIANS 1:15-20

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. ¹⁷And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. ¹⁸And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. ¹⁹For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, ²⁰and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Have you ever wondered what God is like? Do you think of Him as a kindly grandfather or as a stern King with a fearsome countenance? The Bible answers this question by pointing us to Jesus. Paul makes plain that Jesus is the exact image of the invisible God. When we see Jesus, we are seeing what God is like. He is not indifferent or unfeeling. Rather, He is grieved over our suffering and sin. He is not filled with frustration or bitterness toward us. Rather, He is one who sympathizes with our weakness and our sorrows and calls us to repentance and obedience. In Jesus we actually see the invisible God in all the glory of His sacrificial love, humility, and mercy – as well as in His saving power. In Him the fullness of God dwells. God not only reveals His nature in His Son but through Him accomplishes His loving purposes for the world. The world was created through Him and for Him and He constantly upholds it by His power. By His death, He reconciled the world to God making “peace” through the blood of the cross. By His resurrection, He has been made the “head” of the Church and given the preeminence over all things. Above everything else, Paul wants us to see the supremacy and centrality of Jesus Christ in all things. The more we see Him and know Him, the more we understand who God is and what He has done – and, the more clearly we see this, the more clearly we understand who we are and what it means for us to live for the glory of God. Jesus shows us what it means to be truly and fully *human*. We, therefore, are to imitate Him. As He was the full image of His Father, so we must be conformed to His image. We must live in the way He lived among men. As He laid down His life for the world, so we must live lives of sacrificial love for the world. As He has been exalted over all things, so we must seek to glorify Him in everything we say and do.

—Pastor Steve Wilkins, Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church, Monroe, Louisiana

PRAYER

Our gracious heavenly Father, in Your infinite love and mercy, You sent Your Son into the world so that we might know You and be restored to our true callings as Your children through His life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Enable us to know Him and to increase in our love for Him, so that we might be conformed to Him and live for His glory throughout all our days. All for the glory and honor of Your Son who is the King of kings and Lord of lords and who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end, AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss with your family what Jesus was like during His life and how that reveals God’s nature. How can we grow in likeness to Him? Where do we fall short? How may we love one another as He has loved us? How can we love our neighbors and show the love of God to them?

DECEMBER 2—Sixth Day of Advent

HEBREWS 1:1-2

¹God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, ²has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

God is not silent. He speaks to His people. In the Garden He walked with Adam and Eve. After the Fall, God spoke through signs, wonders, stories, and prophets. From a burning bush to a man robed in camel's hair, God continued to speak. From a donkey to educated men to a shepherd and a fruit-picker, we learn that God does not leave His people alone.

These signs, wonders, and prophets speak the word of God, the gospel of the coming Christ. Each repeats the Proto-Evangelion, the message heard from the beginning that a victor would arise to crush the serpent. With Moses this repetition took the form of, "The LORD God of your fathers . . . will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt . . . unto a land flowing with milk and honey . . . and, you shall not go empty." Isaiah declared that "unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end."

Standing on the shoulders of these men, John the Baptist linked their words to Jesus. He prepared the way of the Lord by calling Israel to "Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is near." Jesus, he declared, was the mighty victor—one so mighty that John felt unworthy to even untie His shoes.

Now the writer of Hebrews tells us that God still speaks. To that of the prophets God adds the voice of his Son. Jesus repeats and then fulfills their words—a messenger better by far. Let us rejoice in the Advent prophecies for they stand fulfilled. And as Jesus goes forth victoriously, let us heed the Father's command, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear Him."

—*Pastor Todd Davis, Christ Church, Searcy, Arkansas*

PRAYER

Almighty God, you are not silent; therefore, give us ears to hear that which the Spirit says unto the Church that all your words might be fulfilled as we worship You, who together with Jesus and the Holy Spirit rules in a kingdom without end, AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss with your family how the Living Word is made known through the written and spoken word. Discuss how sermons, studies, and readings strengthen our faith. Discuss Jesus' authority as the Living Word of God and the surety of His word's fulfillment.

DECEMBER 3—Seventh Day of Advent

ISAIAH 9:6

For unto us a Child is born,
Unto us a Son is given;
And the government will be upon His shoulder.
And His name will be called
Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

In the verse we have just read we heard one of the greatest prophecies concerning the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Throughout this prophecy we have a wonderful display of the Person of our Lord Jesus, whose birth we celebrate at this time of the year. First, Isaiah declares that He will be a *child born*. Jesus entered into human flesh just as you and I do, through birth. As we heard in our first reading this week *the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us*. Jesus is fully man.

But then Isaiah declares that He is also a *son...given*. Jesus Christ is more than a mere man like you and me; rather, He is the eternal Son of God who has been *given*. Jesus is more than just a child, He is *God of God, very God of very God*, as our Nicene Creed declares and which we confess in our worship each Sunday. Jesus is fully God, for only God could *accomplish* what Jesus accomplished.

And what did Jesus come to accomplish? Look closely at the important phrase added to each of the two statements: He was *born* and given *to us*. Jesus Christ was born and given *to us*; He came to save His people (see verses 3 & 4), *us*, those whom the Father gave to His Son from all eternity; those whom the Father gave the Son as His inheritance so that they might be brought into the eternal covenant of salvation through the saving work Jesus accomplished on their behalf. Again, we confess this very truth every Sunday in our worship service using the Nicene Creed, when we say, *who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven*. Jesus is our Savior.

In this season, set aside by the Church, we celebrate the birth of Jesus and the reality that God gave Jesus to us and for our salvation. As St. Matthew will write, and which we will read in a couple days, Jesus came to save His people from their sins. He was given to us to do what we could not and cannot do for ourselves—save ourselves from our sin and God's judgment against our sins. Let us also celebrate the reality that God has given us, you and me, each of us, to His Son for our salvation, and that He is mighty to save.

—Pastor Galen Sorey, Christ Presbyterian Church, Baton Rouge, Louisiana

PRAYER

Our eternal and most blessed God and Father, we thank You for the gift of Jesus, given by You, and for our salvation. We thank You that in Your eternal and unchanging love You have given us to Your Son, to save and to keep through all our lives. Thank You for the gift of Your Son and thank You for the gift of our salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord, AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss with your family how each of us can know with assurance that Jesus Christ came for us and to save us. Discuss the magnitude of our own sinfulness and our total inability to save ourselves. Discuss the unchanging love of God displayed to us in the person of Jesus Christ and His being given to us and for us and for our salvation.

DECEMBER 4—The Eighth Day of Advent

MATTHEW 1

¹The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham: ²Abraham begot Isaac, Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot Judah and his brothers. ³Judah begot Perez and Zerah by Tamar, Perez begot Hezron, and Hezron begot Ram. ⁴Ram begot Amminadab, Amminadab begot Nahshon, and Nahshon begot Salmon. ⁵Salmon begot Boaz by Rahab, Boaz begot Obed by Ruth, Obed begot Jesse, ⁶and Jesse begot David the king.

David the king begot Solomon by her who had been the wife of Uriah. ⁷Solomon begot Rehoboam, Rehoboam begot Abijah, and Abijah begot Asa. ⁸Asa begot Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat begot Joram, and Joram begot Uzziah. ⁹Uzziah begot Jotham, Jotham begot Ahaz, and Ahaz begot Hezekiah. ¹⁰Hezekiah begot Manasseh, Manasseh begot Amon, and Amon begot Josiah. ¹¹Josiah begot Jeconiah and his brothers about the time they were carried away to Babylon.

¹²And after they were brought to Babylon, Jeconiah begot Shealtiel, and Shealtiel begot Zerubbabel. ¹³Zerubbabel begot Abiud, Abiud begot Eliakim, and Eliakim begot Azor. ¹⁴Azor begot Zadok, Zadok begot Achim, and Achim begot Eliud. ¹⁵Eliud begot Eleazar, Eleazar begot Matthan, and Matthan begot Jacob. ¹⁶And Jacob begot Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus who is called Christ. ¹⁷So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations, from David until the captivity in Babylon are fourteen generations, and from the captivity in Babylon until the Christ are fourteen generations.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

We have just read Jesus' family tree from the Bible. Our family tree tells us something about us; it tells us where we came from and who our people are. In the same way, Jesus' family tree tells us something about where Jesus came from and who His people are. It shows God's love for His people throughout the centuries. It shows that God is continually at work in our world. And, it shows that His faithfulness continues to reach to all generations as His covenant love goes from parents to children. The genealogy of Jesus teaches us that the only way we can get from Abraham to David to Jesus is because of God's providence. Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham, is evidence of God's planning. That the promises made centuries earlier to Abraham and David are fulfilled in Jesus is proof that it is God who is at work here. The genealogy of Jesus reflects the working out of God's plan of salvation in history.

—*Pastor Randy Booth, Grace Covenant Church, Nacogdoches, Texas*

PRAYER

Our gracious heavenly Father, Your kind providence has directed all the details of history, including the birth of Christ, our Savior, as well as our own birth and life. We are thankful that You use even sinful men to accomplish all Your holy purposes. Teach us to remember Your faithfulness in the past so that we might rest in You for our future. In Jesus' name, AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss with your family how God has used your family tree (the good and the bad) to providentially bring the gospel to your household. Discuss how our adoption by God, through Christ, makes all the genealogy of Jesus our own.

DECEMBER 5—Ninth Day of Advent

MATTHEW 1:18-21

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. ²⁰But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. ²¹And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.”

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

In this story about the birth of the Messiah, we see Joseph’s godliness under difficult circumstances, his inability to perceive good, and God’s mysterious use of “unlikely” things. Joseph made a worthy attempt to start a family by finding an exemplary young woman, Mary, and becoming engaged to her. Although he behaved honorably, she was suddenly found to be pregnant! How could Mary have “done” this to him? Imagine Joseph’s disappointment and humiliation! How could he marry this woman and bring the apparent shame of infidelity to himself and to his family?

Most people in Joseph’s situation would feel a need to get even and to assert his own innocence by punishing Mary. But we see that the heavenly Father, in His wisdom selected a godly man to act as an earthly father for the Son. Even under the duress of a broken engagement and a sullied reputation, we see Joseph exercising self-control and concern for Mary.

But even with his good disposition, Joseph could not see what was happening or how he should respond. It was only by God’s grace in sending an angel that Joseph could begin to understand that the very one who he thought was unclean and dishonorable was actually the incarnation of righteousness and honor. The one, who appeared to be illegitimate, was the only true Son. The one, who looked like Joseph’s potential ruin, would become not only his Savior, but the world’s Savior.

—Pastor David Givler, Christ Covenant Church, San Antonio, Texas

PRAYER

Our gracious heavenly Father, we thank You that Your good will toward Your children is so pervasive that even bad things turn out to be for our blessing. Send the Holy Spirit to us as you sent the angel to Joseph so that, like him, we can comprehend Your goodness. Help us to have faith like his so that we would be stable and selfless under trying circumstances. And though we are small, weak, and sinful; we pray that You would be pleased to use us as unlikely vessels to glorify yourself. In Jesus’ name we pray, AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss with your family how God likes to accomplish His will through weak and despised things like a stuttering Moses who would lead Israel out of slavery, a blind man who would be healed, and a little child of inexplicable origin who would save mankind from its sin. If God works through these types of things, should we expect Him to work through our weaknesses? If He does work through our weaknesses, then how should we behave when confronted with difficulties and suffering? What do we need to help us to see God’s goodness and to behave properly at difficult times?

DECEMBER 6—Tenth Day of Advent

MATTHEW 1:22-25

²²So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: ²³“Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which is translated, “God with us.” ²⁴Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, ²⁵and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

The prophet Isaiah said that Jesus would be called Immanuel, which means literally God with us! (Isaiah 7:14). The prophet goes on in the next chapter to explain how the people of Israel were not to fear their earthly enemies. Rather he tells them, “Jehovah of hosts, Him you shall hallow; let Him be your fear, and let Him be your dread. He will be as a sanctuary, but a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense to both the houses of Israel, as a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem” (Isaiah 8:13-14).

We see that the God, who is now with us, is to be our dread and our sanctuary. This baby would not grow up to be the wimpy Jesus that is often pictured. Rather He would grow in stature with God and men to become the Savior of the world who we are to properly fear and dread. The one to whom we must flee for sanctuary from the wrath of God (a wrath that is due to us because of our sins), calling only on the name of Jesus to be saved.

The prophet also warns us that we must not allow Jesus to be a stumbling block through unbelief. We must come to Him believing that He is Immanuel, God with us, or else we too will fall and stumble as did many of the inhabitants of Jerusalem in that day.

We see this proper fear and obedience in Joseph who when he awoke “did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.” No doubting or demanding, just simple obedience! Doing what would ruin his “reputation” and be hard to explain to all of his friends, but doing what needed to be done so God’s great plan of salvation would move forward.

This Advent season may we truly see Jesus as Immanuel who has come to save His people from their sins, and may we respond with the faithful and simple obedience of that simple carpenter Joseph. We must remember the promise of Romans 10:13: “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

—*Pastor John Stoos, Church of the King, Sacramento, California*

PRAYER

Father, we thank you for the gift of your Son Jesus! We thank You that when the time had come you brought Him forth from a virgin to be the Savior of the world. We thank You for His great name Immanuel, reminding us that God has truly visited His people. By your grace, may we live our lives in such a way that we show forth His love to a needy world. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss with your family the significance of names. Discuss some of your family names and perhaps share the stories of how some of these names were chosen. You could even look up the meaning of your names. But, most importantly, discuss how *we get a new name* when we are baptized into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The world now calls us Christians. We are saved because we have called upon the name of Jesus! What does this mean for how we should live our lives?

DECEMBER 7—Eleventh Day of Advent

LUKE 1:26-31

²⁶Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" ²⁹But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. ³⁰Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Do you like surprises? God sure does. He likes ad libs and pretzelly plot lines. Take this passage for instance. How many surprises can *you* count?

Well, maybe you found more than I, but here goes. First, imagine an *angel* appearing to you. Angels are scary people. That certainly must have made Mary drop something valuable. Gabriel gave no advanced warning. He didn't make an appointment. One minute, Mary is day dreaming about her wedding to Joseph, and then—pop!—Gabriel is there in the living room, "Rejoice highly favored one!" Another surprise is *where* this girl lived. She lived in Galilee of the Gentiles. The Jews from Judah had a habit of harrumphing around Galilean Jews. But this is a surprise *within* a surprise, because God chose not just a distasteful region, but perhaps the worst town He could find within it. *Nazareth*. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Why, actually. . . *yes*. *Jesus* did. Is anything *better*? Surprise!

And then, Gabriel came to see a surprising person. Mary was a poor girl, living in a gross city. You never would have thought to look at her, but within this humble girl ran the blood of Ancient Kings. And Mary was surprised not only by the sudden arrival of the angel, but by what he said. He called her, *highly favored one*. Certainly she did not think of *herself* this way. Had Gabriel got the wrong house? The next big surprise came when she learned she was to have the baby, Jesus. How could she be pregnant when she was not married? And God wasn't even through with the surprises, though I am through with my verses, and my allotted space.

Why does God give so many surprises? Why does he do things so differently than *we* would? Well first, just because He likes to. But also, He chooses foolish things to shame the wise, and weak things he chooses to shame the mighty. A baby and a pregnant virgin and a backward town of second-rate Jews—these are weak things. And through them, God upended the world.

—Pastor Joost Nixon, Christ Church, Spokane, Washington

PRAYER

Almighty Father, you show your power in hidden ways. You use weak things to overcome the mighty, and foolish things to overcome the wise. We praise you for sending Jesus in the way you did, and for hiding things from the proud, and revealing them to babes. Grant us the humility, Father, to see the wisdom of your foolishness, and the power of your impotency. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

God saved us from His wrath through unexpected ways. And He grants smaller salvations, daily, after the same style. Give an example of how God has surprised you with one of His deliverances.

DECEMBER 8—Twelfth Day of Advent

LUKE 1:32-33

³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. ³³And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.”

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

In these verses the angel Gabriel has already told Mary that she would have a son and that His name would be Jesus. He has told her not to be afraid and one of the reasons she should not be afraid is that her new son would be great. Her baby was no ordinary human who would be born and then grow up and eventually die. He would be great. Of course, we know how great He would be because we can look back at what He did and who He is. But Mary couldn't do that. She could only listen to Gabriel and accept what He said. And He said the most amazing things! Jesus would be called the Son of the Highest. There is only one way to understand those words: Mary's little baby boy would be called the Son of God. Can you imagine how she felt looking down into the manger nine months later and thinking that this little child was the very Son of God? But Gabriel had more amazing things to say about the baby that was growing inside Mary. He would be given the throne of David and therefore rule over the people of God forever. God promised that David would never be without a descendant on His throne and now Mary's little baby was going to sit on that throne forever, ruling God's people in love and justice.

—Pastor Gene Franklin, Jr., St. David's Church, Hockley, Texas

PRAYER

O Lord, you have been so gracious to keep your promises to your people. Long ago you promised that David would always have a descendant on the throne of Israel, then you sent your Son to make sure that will always be true. Please give us that same spirit of faithfulness. In Jesus' name we ask it, AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Talk with your family about the importance of keeping your promises and show them that God was always faithful to keep His.

DECEMBER 9—Thirteenth Day of Advent

LUKE 1:34-35

³⁴Then Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” ³⁵And the angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.”

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

In response to the angel’s statement that Mary will conceive in her womb and bring forth a son, Mary asks, “How can this be? How can this be, since I do not know a man?” Upon a cursory reading of the text, we might assume that Mary’s response is one of faithless disbelief. Yet this seems unlikely.... How could it be that the one chosen to bear the only-begotten Son of God be lacking in faith? How could it be that Zechariah who had not believed was condemned to silence, but Mary, if she had not believed, would be exalted by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit? No... Mary’s “How can this be?” was same “How can this be” that a child utters the first time he peer through a microscope and sees a world that he never knew existed in a tiny drop of water. It is the “How can this be” of wonder and awe. It is a “How can this be” that bows down, submitting to a divine mystery that not even she will ever fully comprehend. It is a question that springs from the heart of one who ends the thought with “Yet... not my will, but Your will be done.”

It is then that the Holy Spirit comes down and works things which are beyond description and understanding in the life of the believer. Ah, the mystery of the incarnation.

—*Pastor Gene Liechty, Christ Church, Cary, North Carolina*

PRAYER

Creator God,

We praise You for all the mysteries which You have placed round about us. They are too wonderful for us and we ask with the writer in Proverbs 30: “Who can understand the way of an eagle in the air, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship in the midst of the sea, or the way of a man with a virgin?” Yet, Father, when we come to the incarnation, we arrive at Your greatest work of all... a virgin conceives, eternity takes on flesh, and the world is forever changed. We praise you for this mystery and we thank You for giving us the faith to believe the unimaginable. In Jesus name we pray, AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Talk with your family about some of the outlandish promises that God makes in regard to you and your children and your future. Discuss the origin and importance of faith in our lives as we walk this God.

DECEMBER 10—Fourteenth Day of Advent

Luke 1:39-42

³⁹Now Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah, ⁴⁰and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴²Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!”

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

In this section of his gospel, Luke is interweaving two birth narratives. In the midst of recounting the story of the birth of Jesus Christ, Luke also tells the birth story of Jesus’ cousin and forerunner, John the Baptist. What happened when Mary, with the Son of God in her belly, visited Elizabeth, who was also great with child? The babe in Elizabeth’s womb leapt with joy as the promised Savior drew near! This boggles our minds: *How could baby John have known that baby Jesus was near? How did baby John know to leap for joy even enclosed in his mother’s womb?* This is a great mystery. And yet again and again, we find that God loves the children of his people, even in their infancy, and that even babies can have a relationship with Jesus. David, the great Israelite king and psalmist, wrote, “From my mother’s womb, You have been my God” (Ps. 22:10). When godly parents brought their infants to Jesus, he did not turn them away, but blessed them and declared, “Of such is the kingdom of God!” (Lk. 18:17). We may not be able to explain how babies belonging to Christian families can be believers, and yet it seems to be the consistent teaching of Scripture. Our children belong to Jesus and to his church from their earliest days. All throughout the Bible, God’s promises are to us and to our children (Gen. 17:7). Christian fathers and mothers are blessed, as is the fruit of a Christian womb. This is the Lord’s covenant with us!

God draws people into his kingdom in all kinds of ways, at all ages and stages of life. But for children born into Christian homes, we should hope and expect that their experience will be like that of David and John the Baptist, never remembering a day without the joy of knowing Jesus in their hearts. Certainly, we should all be growing in grace, day by day and year by year. Our faith should mature as our bodies and minds mature. But some how, some way, God can work faith even in the heart of the smallest child. If you are blessed to grow up in a Christian home, you should always remember that even before you could speak or demonstrate your love for God, He had already claimed you and declared His love for you. Give God thanks for His mysterious and amazing grace to families!

—Pastor Rich Lusk, Trinity Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL

PRAYER

Our gracious heavenly Father, we give you thanks and praise, for you have made promises to our family. Those promises include loving and caring for us, and filling us with the presence of your Holy Spirit, even from birth. Help us to receive the kingdom of your Son as a little child, and to rejoice in the Savior’s presence, as John the Baptist did so long ago, even in his mother’s womb. Teach us to know and remember your faithfulness to thousands of generations, and help us to respond to the grace you have given us in your Son with whole-hearted trust and obedience. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss how God has demonstrated his graciousness to your family. Can any family members remember a time when they did not trust and love Jesus as Savior? How has God shown His faithfulness to you (or your children) even from the womb? What are some ways that your family can receive children in your church in the name of Jesus (Mt. 18:5)?

DECEMBER 11—Fifteenth Day of Advent

LUKE 1:57-80—The Benedictus—Zechariah’s Song

⁵⁷Now Elizabeth’s full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son. ⁵⁸When her neighbors and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹So it was, on the eighth day, that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him by the name of his father, Zacharias. ⁶⁰His mother answered and said, “No; he shall be called John.” ⁶¹But they said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name.” ⁶²So they made signs to his father—what he would have him called. ⁶³And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, “His name is John.” So they all marveled. ⁶⁴Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, praising God. ⁶⁵Then fear came on all who dwelt around them; and all these sayings were discussed throughout all the hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶And all those who heard them kept them in their hearts, saying, “What kind of child will this be?” And the hand of the Lord was with him.

⁶⁷ Now his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying:
⁶⁸ “Blessed is the Lord God of Israel,
For He has visited and redeemed His people,
⁶⁹ And has raised up a horn of salvation for us
In the house of His servant David,
⁷⁰ As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets,
Who have been since the world began,
⁷¹ That we should be saved from our enemies
And from the hand of all who hate us,
⁷² To perform the mercy promised to our fathers
And to remember His holy covenant,
⁷³ The oath which He swore to our father Abraham:
⁷⁴ To grant us that we,
Being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
Might serve Him without fear,
⁷⁵ In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.
⁷⁶ “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest;
For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,
⁷⁷ To give knowledge of salvation to His people
By the remission of their sins,
⁷⁸ Through the tender mercy of our God,
With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us;
⁷⁹ To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,
To guide our feet into the way of peace.”

⁸⁰ So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

There are four “New Testament Psalms” in the book of Luke which the Church has sung throughout its history, particularly during Advent. Their names are taken from the first word of each song in the Latin Vulgate translation: “The Magnificat” sung by Mary—“My soul *magnifies* the Lord” —Luke 1:4-6; “The Benedictus” sung by Zechariah—“*Blessed* be the Lord, the God of Israel”—Luke 1:67-69; “The Gloria in Excelsis” sung by the angels—“*Glory to God in the highest*”—Luke 2:13-14; and “The Nunc Dimittis” sung by Simeon—“*Now* let Your servant *depart*, O Lord”—Luke 2:22-32. The song before us today, “The Benedictus” is a revelation from God. Zacharias was “filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied...” (v. 67). He does not speak as a private individual but as a prophet in Israel, *to* Israel. His son, John the Forerunner, will be the last of the Old Covenant prophets. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb. Zechariah’s sings of God’s action on behalf of His people (vv. 68-75). John’s mission would be specifically to “go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways” (Mal. 3:1), and “to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins” (vv. 76-77). [continued]

Something was wrong with the world: people were *suffering*. Wicked foreigners had come from far away, with hatred in their eyes and weapons in their hands. Darkness and death had stalked the land. If you lived in Israel during this period, and you were a godly person, you would especially be concerned about the *spiritual* conditions around you, formalism in worship, and emptiness of profession. But there is still somehow a *larger hope*—a sense that even though much has gone wrong, and much is still going wrong, things can still be put right. Things *will* be put right. There are many in Israel who have *not* lost hope, who are trusting God and seeking to live for him—Elizabeth and Zacharias, Simeon and Anna, Joseph and Mary. Zacharias has pondered the agony and the hope for many years, and he now finds both the agony and the hope bubbling out of him as he looks in awe and delight at his baby son John, named as Zacharias’ tongue is loosed. “Benedictus” is a poem about God acting at last, finally doing what He promised many centuries ago, and doing it at a time when His people had had their fill of hatred and oppression. Zechariah praises God for having provided salvation for His people, in fulfillment of prophecy and of His holy covenant with Abraham. And Zechariah sings of his child’s mission as the one who will prepare the way for the Messiah. “*Blessed* is the Lord God of Israel” (Psa. 72:18; 111:9). Imagine yourself in Zechariah’s position: seeing the fulfillment of the oldest promise in the O.T., the promise of a Redeemer (Gen.3:15). The Redeemer was specifically promised to the seed of Abraham, the Covenant race. The Lord has “visited” His people, “visited” because the God had come to His people Israel when they were in desperate straits, as they were at the time of the Exodus and the time of the captivity. They were so sunk in disaster, so crushed under a heap of woes that no one thought God’s blessing was upon them. God has “raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David.” (Psa. 132:14-18; Ex.27:2, 30:2-3; Ex.29:12; Lev.4:7, 18). With the destruction of the throne of David and the dispersion of the people, the hope of salvation in particular had fallen. Now, the tabernacle of David was going to be raised up again and established. This promise has to do with “the oath which He swore to our father Abraham.” God had called the descendents of Abraham to be the priest to the nations (Gen.17:7; Lev. 26:42; Psa. 105:8; Micah 7:20)

—Pastor Mickey Schneider, Trinity Presbyterian Church, Valparaiso, Florida

PRAYER

O Lord, remind us in this Advent season, that You sent John the Forerunner to prepare the way for the Messiah, and that *all* of our children are given to us as a gift from Your hand. When we read that “the hand of the Lord was with him,” we ask that Your hand will be upon our family and our children and that You will use us in the plan You have for the ages in Christ. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss with your family what you ought to seek for your children and your children’s children in the light of the coming of the Messiah and the work of the forerunner. What is the portion we ought to seek for our children—that they be successful? Rich? Influential? It is good to have the hand of parents over them, the hand of teachers, pastors, elders, wise bosses; but it is still better to have “the hand of the Lord” upon them.

DECEMBER 12—Sixteenth Day of Advent

LUKE 2:1-7

¹And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. ³So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. ⁴Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. ⁶So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. ⁷And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

If I were to ask you to tell me the story of the birth of Jesus, where would you fit the name “Quirinius” in? You would probably tell me about the shepherds and how there was no room at the inn. You might work in something about swaddling clothes and a manger, but you would probably be hard-pressed to shoehorn into the story much about the Syrian governor Quirinius. So would I. I can’t ever remember mentioning his name in my own tellings of the story. You probably don’t have a Governor Quirinius action figure to go along with your nativity scene.

So why does Luke use up this precious real estate on the pages of the Bible telling us who was in charge at the time of Jesus’ birth? Well, one answer is that he is giving us a couple of historical landmarks by telling us who was caesar at the time, and who was governor, so that we remember that Jesus was a real man born into history. But that isn’t all. We read these names, but then these guys don’t matter for the rest of the story. We hear who the world leaders are, but the angels don’t go to them. They aren’t told that the savior is born in the city of David or about the babe lying in the manger. They don’t even get to hear the song that the angels sing. They are left out of the loop, and in the dark. The new king had arrived, the new order was beginning, and the world leaders didn’t even get a memo.

Far outside the soft palaces and the luxurious comfort of these rulers’ beds that night, in a barn, in a backwater town, a baby was born. Jesus’ invasion of the kingdoms of men began. The Kingdom of God couldn’t be conjured out of the powers and authorities that were already in place; they were weak and ineffectual for salvation. Deliverance has to come from the outside. Human systems and organizations need to be saved themselves, so they cannot offer deliverance. They are powerless to meet man’s most fundamental needs, so Jesus must invade them and overturn them.

Therefore we cannot put our hope in princes or presidents, but in the King that was born in a stable. We pray for His advent. We pray that His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. We join with Him in His invasion of the kingdoms and organizations of men to bring them all under His dominion.

—Assistant Pastor Duane Garner, Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church, Monroe, Louisiana

PRAYER

Eternal Father, from whom all truth and justice proceeds: subdue the nations of the world, and grant them your peace. Hasten the time when the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Sing Psalm 135 (**next page**). Discuss all the ways that the Kingdom is still breaking into the world, what other idols must yet fall, and how we should go about the business of overturning them.

PSALM 135:1-12

KIRKPATRICK. 87.87.D.



1. ¹Hal - le - lu - jah! Praise the LORD's name! Praise Him, serv - ants of the LORD,
 2. ⁵Well I know how great the LORD is; Our Lord is a - bove all gods.
 3. ⁸Who slew all of E - gypt's first - born, ⁹On you, E - gypt, won - ders sent.



²You that in the LORD's house serve Him, In God's court - yard stand - ing guard.
⁶For the LORD does what He pleas - es In all heav'n, earth, deeps, and floods.
 Signs to Phar - aoh and his serv - ants, ¹⁰Who killed kings, their king - doms rent -



³Praise the LORD! How good the LORD is! Sing His name—how sweet its tone!
⁷He it is Who lifts the va - pors From the ends of earth and sea,
¹¹Might - y Si - hon, Og of Ba - shan— Then the kings of Ca - naan fell!



⁴For the LORD has cho - sen Ja - cob, Is - ra - el to be His own.
 Who with light - nings brings the rain down, From His store the wind sets free,
¹²God their land gave to His peo - ple, Willed it all to Is - ra - el.



DECEMBER 13—Seventeenth Day of Advent

LUKE 2:8-10

⁸Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. ¹⁰Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

In every Christmas pageant and every nativity scene there are always shepherds with staffs and lambs because of this part of the Bible. Shepherds and sheep show us about God’s leaders and God’s people and even God Himself. If we were to visit that hillside on the first Christmas Eve we would see that shepherds are ordinary folks with dirt under their fingernails and mud on their sandals. That night they were probably sitting around a campfire telling stories watching for dogs or wolves. Maybe they were talking about a very famous shepherd that lived in the same area, King David. Then suddenly they were very surprised and afraid because of the glory and light of the angel’s presence. Wouldn’t you be afraid if a bright cloud appeared from nowhere on a dark night outside? The angel probably looked like a bright-shining man in a cloud of light. Maybe the glory of God made the sound of rushing wind or water as it sometimes does (Acts 2). That would have been scary. But the angel speaks words they can understand and tells them not to be afraid. The angel is not there to hurt them or judge them because of their sin. Angels are messengers. He is there to tell them wonderful news that the one who is King David’s heir, who will save them from their sin, has been born. The angel explains that this is a message of joy for all kinds of people. This angel does not come to King Herod in his palace or to the High Priest in the temple or to Caesar Augustus in Rome. The messages that come to these men will not be joyful. He does not announce this to the powerful people of the world, but to the ordinary and common people in the fields. The good news of Jesus’ birth was announced with great glory, but not to glorious people, just to regular farmers caring for smelly animals like sheep and goats. It is amazing that God chooses these ordinary shepherds to be the first people to tell the good news to others (Luke 2:17).

—Pastor Gregg Strawbridge, *All Saints Presbyterian Church, Lancaster, Pennsylvania*

PRAYER

Our Father in heaven, you are our Shepherd and we are your sheep who always need your care. We thank you that for using ordinary people to tell your good news, even as you used those first shepherds to seek out the baby Jesus and tell of His birth. Help us follow their example of listening to the announcement of Jesus and then to telling others about Him. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss these questions: Why do you think God used ordinary people, like shepherds, instead of Herod or Caesar? Does God still use people like farmers? What kinds of people is God using in your life to help you learn about Jesus?

DECEMBER 14—Eighteenth Day of Advent

LUKE 2:11-14

¹¹ “For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹²And this *will be* the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

The text we have just read is the famous announcement from the angel of Yahweh to the shepherds that the Savior has been born in the city of David. The city of David is Bethlehem, and Bethlehem is near where Jacob’s wife Rachel died while giving birth to Benjamin (Gen. 35:19) as well as where Ruth returns with Naomi after God visits His people with bread (Ruth 1:6, 19). Both stories are about women in desperation, experiencing trials related to childbearing, facing death and famine. The angel announces that something wonderful has happened in the city of David, and it has to do with the birth of a child who is the Messiah. The angel also gives the shepherds a sign. Signs first appear in the Bible when God calls the sun, moon, and stars “signs,” but later the rainbow, circumcision, plagues, the Sabbath, miracles, the law, and prophecies are called “signs.” In the Bible, signs are not merely locators to show you where you are, signs are places where God speaks with authority and marks His intentions. Signs should be seen by people, and they should provoke faith and repentance and love for God. Perhaps part of what the angel means has to do with who the shepherds are themselves. Twice in our text the angel says “to you” or “for you.” That the Savior of the world should be found in a cattle stall, in a barn, would be particularly meaningful to shepherds. It was a sign *for them* because they would find their Savior in the very sort of place they would be likely to go. The Savior had come *for them*, and the proof was that He was lying in a feeding trough, as though He were food. The text says that immediately the heavenly host appeared, praising God. The heavenly host is the army of God; we call upon this army to praise God whenever we sing the Doxology. At Christmas, we sing *Angels We Have Heard on High*, joining our voices to that heavenly army praising God, announcing peace to shepherds in a field in the middle of the night. This text reminds us that God’s power is made perfect in weakness; the army of God sings praises and announces the birth of the Lord of heaven who has been born in a barn. God has visited His people in Bethlehem again, and He has come to be the bread of life *for them*.

—Pastor Toby Sumpter, Trinity Church, Moscon, Idaho

PRAYER

Gracious Father, we thank you that you sent your Son to break the curse of sin. We thank you that in His birth, He was the greater Obed who brings life to a dead and dying world. We ask that you would remind us again and again that the birth of Jesus is *for us* and for our salvation so that we might continually join our voices to Your heavenly army. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss with your family how the stories of Rachel, Naomi/Ruth, and Mary are similar. How is Jesus like Benjamin and Obed? Discuss how God has specifically met the needs of your family in various circumstances.

DECEMBER 15—Nineteenth Day of Advent

LUKE 2:15-16

¹⁵So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

The angels had gone, the heavenly singing was over, and now the shepherds had to decide what to do. It didn't take them long. They had no doubts, for they were going to see “this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord made known to us,” but they desired to see for themselves nonetheless. It isn't enough to hear about Jesus. Our religion teaches us that we must each come to Him ourselves. This we do as we join with one another each Lord's Day and partake of His Word and sacrament with the same faith as the shepherds. There, we are also lifted up with the singing of the saints joined with the angels themselves in worship before Jesus Who, no longer a Babe, sits as our Resurrected Savior at the right hand of God the Father.

Making haste, they came to Mary and Joseph. There, they certainly shared stories of their visions and encounters, strengthening one another's faith over this wonderful event. And this is what we do as well when we gather together as a family or when we gather together as a church, encouraging one another with our stories of how God has met us, changed us, and fitted us for service in His kingdom.

—Pastor Dave Hatcher, Trinity Church, Woodinville, Washington

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we thank You for all the ways in which You encourage us and build us up in our faith, including this time of singing, reading Your Word and discussing Your work in our lives together. And we thank You for summoning us together each Lord's Day to do the same but with all the saints gathered together. Strengthen us again and let us strengthen one another for greater service to You for the sake of Jesus, in Whose name we pray, AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

How might we do a better job of encouraging one another to “make haste” and come to Jesus each day? How might we do a better job of preparing ourselves and one another to “make haste” in our gathering on the Lord's Day? Discuss the fact that kings were not first brought to Jesus, but rather ordinary people, even simple shepherds.

DECEMBER 16—Twentieth Day of Advent

LUKE 2:17–20

¹⁷Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child.

¹⁸And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. ¹⁹But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Shepherds. Day and night, watching sheep, feeding sheep, protecting sheep, guiding sheep, and otherwise doing whatever else the care of sheep calls for. Not exactly what one would call a “glorious” job. This was just the case with the shepherds in the field at Bethlehem, as they “watched their flocks by night.” They did not hold high positions in the local city government. They were not religious leaders to whom people looked for theological answers or spiritual direction. They were not the intellectuals of the day, seeking to spearhead cultural change. They were just plain, ordinary sheep-herders, doing their jobs on a typical “winter’s” night.

Yet, despite all their relative unimportance to the rest of the world, it was these humble shepherds whom God chose for the incredible honor of being the first men not only to see the miracle of God come in the flesh but to announce it to the world as well. In the same way, God chose the humble maiden Mary to carry His Son in her womb. Just a simple “peasant” girl, yet the Bible says she is to be honored above all women.

As He often does, God exalted the simple and humble to be the first among men to know and proclaim the great coming of Christ our Savior. This is a wonderful thing. And if God used at the outset simple shepherds and maidens to bring the gospel into the world, He surely can use you and me as well in building the kingdom of God today.

—Pastor Bill Izard, Grace Covenant Church, Texarkana, Arkansas

PRAYER

Great God in heaven above, we give You thanks for Your own Son who took on the flesh of a newborn baby in order to save the world of men. We give You thanks for Your choosing the weak and the lowly to be a vibrant witness to the waiting world. Thank You for the shepherds who first “preached” the gospel that has now come to us. Thank You for humble Mary who carried God-Become-Man in her womb. Now hear our prayer: Make us faithful bearers of the Gospel ourselves, weak and helpless as we are. Fill our hearts with the joy of the shepherds, our minds with the ponderings of Mary, and loose our tongues to sing Your praises for the wonderful thing You have done in sending Your Son to be our Savior, in whose name we pray, AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Even the smallest child or the quietest family can help spread the good news of Christ’s coming to save the world by celebrating His birth loudly, proudly, and publicly. Plan with your family to carol in the neighborhood or at a local nursing home, throw a party, give gifts to others, etc.; and brainstorm other ways both to celebrate and spread the gospel this Christmas season.

DECEMBER 17—Twenty-First Day of Advent

LUKE 2:25-32

²⁵And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law, ²⁸he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said:

²⁹"Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace,
According to Your word;

³⁰For my eyes have seen Your salvation

³¹Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples,

³² A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles,
And the glory of Your people Israel."

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

During Jesus' ministry, He was known to have picked up little children and hold them in His arms. He would hold them and bless them (Mark 9:36; 10:16). Jesus welcomed the little children (Mark 10:14) then and now, and this is wonderful. However, there was a time when Jesus Himself was a little child and someone scooped Him up in his arms and uttered a blessing (Luke 2:28). This man's name was Simeon, and he is the man we just read about.

Simeon had been waiting to see Jesus, and some think that he was a very old man by this time. We really do not know how old he was, but from his words, we know he is ready to die, and die in peace: "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word" (2:29). Here was Simeon, holding the baby Jesus in his arms and calling upon the Lord. Simeon's eyes looked upon the salvation that had been promised, and was now (somehow!) in his arms. The Holy Spirit had assured Simeon that he would not die before seeing the promised Messiah, "the Consolation of Israel."

"And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ."

Simeon had longed to see this day, he lived for it, and he would now peacefully die because of it. It was on that very same day that Joseph and Mary and Jesus were in the temple to offer a sacrifice when the Spirit sent Simeon into the temple too. This is when he met Jesus.

For Simeon, this was a day of life and death, and life. Simeon looked in the face of Jesus; and as he did so he was full of life *and* ready to die. Simeon was holding Life in his arms, while at the same time he was approaching death. The Lord's promises have been realized (again!); and while the dying face of Simeon is looking into the face of Jesus, he proclaims that this life is not some simple and private matter only for one elderly man. No, this is for the entire world: "a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel."

—Pastor Jeff Niell, Emmanuel Covenant Church, Glendale, Arizona

PRAYER

Grant, O Lord, that we adhere to Jesus, the Savior of the nations, with a tenacity throughout our years, so that we may present to You a heart of wisdom. Train us in our youth and sustain us in our old age so that we may love You and display our confidence in Your promises. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Noting the example of Simeon, discuss the importance of living lives of devotion based upon the sure word of the Lord, asking how this promotes confidence in life and death. Sing: *The Song of Simeon* (also known as *Nunc Dimittis*, which are the first two words of Simeon's blessing in Latin, meaning "now dismiss"), and/or *Comfort, Comfort Ye My People*. (See next pages.)

Simeon's Song (*Nunc Dimittis*)

To the Tune of "He Leadeth Me"

C F C

1. Glor - y to God, Who is Most High, and sent His Son to
 2. May we de - part in peace O Lord Ac - cor - ding to Your

C/G G C F

draw us nigh. For peace on earth, good will toward men! He
 ho - ly Word; For we have seen Your sa - ving grace, Which

C Am C/G G C G7 C F C

came to save us from our sin. The an - gels sang His glo - ry loud,
 You've pre - pared be - fore our face. A light to bring re - veal - ing grace,

F C Am C/G G C G7

the shep - herds came to Him and bowed. There in the man - ger
 to all the world to ev' - ry race. His sto - ry I will

C F C F C Am C/G G7 C 7

weak and low, God came to men that they might know.
 al - ways tell, the glo - ry of His Is - ra - el.

Randy Booth

HE LEADETH ME L.M.D.
 William B. Bradbury, 1864

Comfort, Comfort Ye My People

FREU DICH SEHR [AINSI QU'ON OIT LE CERF BRUIRE] (8 7. 8 7. 7 7. 8 8)
Genevan Psalter, 1551
harm. Johann Crüger, 1658

Johannes Olearius, 1671
tr. Catherine Winkworth, 1863; alt.

1. Com-fort, com-fort ye My peo-ple, Speak ye peace, thus saith our God;
2. Yea, her sins our God will par-don, Blot-ting out each dark mis-deed;
3. For the her-ald's voice is cry-ing In the des-ert far and near,
4. Make ye straight what long was crook-ed, Make the rough-er plac-es plain:

Com-fort those who sit in dark-ness, Bowed be-neath their sor-row's load;
All that well de-served His an-ger He will no more see nor heed.
Bid-ding all men to re-pen-tance, Since the king-dom now is here.
Let your hearts be true and hum-ble, As be-fits His ho-ly reign,

Speak ye to Je-ru-sa-lem Of the peace that waits for them;
She has suf-fered man-y a day, Now her griefs have passed a-way;
O that warn-ing cry o-bey! Now pre-pare for God a way!
For the glo-ry of the Lord Now o'er earth is shed a-broad,

Tell her that her sins I cov-er, And her war-fare now is o-ver.
God will change her pin-ing sad-ness In-to ev-er-spring-ing glad-ness.
Let the val-leys rise to meet Him, And the hills bow down to greet Him.
And all flesh shall see the to-ken That His Word is nev-er bro-ken.

DECEMBER 18—Twenty-Second Day of Advent

LUKE 2:33-35

³³And Joseph and His mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him. ³⁴Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, “Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against ³⁵(yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Simeon was a devout man who had waited a long time for the Christ. Even though we expect this to be a moment of great joy and celebration, Simeon delivers a message of danger. He tells Jesus’ mother, Mary, that Jesus will be a tremendous troublemaker. Simeon knows his Old Testament. He knows that the prophets don’t promise a Christ as someone who gets along with everyone and never upsets the powerful. Simeon speaks of the “consolation” or comfort of Israel, and when Isaiah uses that language we see that the Christ is coming to “contend with him who contends with you” (Is. 49:25) and to “feed those who oppress you with their own flesh” (Is. 49:26). In a similar message, the Lord told the prophet Jeremiah that “I have this day set you over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out and to pull down, to destroy and to throw down, to build and to plant” (Jer. 1:9,10). We might think that this would be a shocking and troubling revelation for Jesus’ mother. It means certain doom for her Son. One doesn’t take on King Herod and the Roman Empire without provoking a deathly reaction. Simeon even promises Mary that “a sword will pierce through your own soul.” Disturbing claims, but this isn’t really news to Mary. She, herself, had sung similar words about her Son’s dangerous work. She knew that in Jesus, the Father, “has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty” (Lk. 1:51-52). She knew Simeon’s words were true. Jesus would be a premier troublemaker for the enemies of God. He came to pull them down, to overthrow them by the Spirit, and to lift up the people of God. The birth of Jesus is just the beginning of this path of the “fall and rising of many.” The world would never be the same. The enemies of God had little clue about the dramatic consequences of Christmas.

—*Pastor Douglas Jones, Christ Church, Moscow, ID*

PRAYER

O Father, thank you for the fall and raising of many that Jesus still brings to us. Thank you for the privilege of serving in Christ’s kingdom. We praise You for allowing us to be part of this adventure. Give us eyes to recognize His enemies and friends. Give us the courage to pull down and to build up. Give Your church the strength to withstand those who seek to frighten us. Let us rejoice in the work of Christ. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss with your family what sort of enemies Christ would seek to pull down today. What enemies today resemble King Herod and ancient Rome? What sorts of Christians provoke the sort of anger and deathly retaliation that Jesus provoked? Why does our celebration of Christmas often try to hide the more dangerous side of Jesus’ mission?

DECEMBER 19—Twenty-Third Day of Advent

LUKE 2:36-38

³⁶ Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; ³⁷and this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. ³⁸And coming in that instant she gave thanks to **the** Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

The Bible does not provide a moment by moment picture of the people of God. From the last prophecy of Malachi to the announcement of John's birth to Zacharias, God had not spoken for four hundred years. But just as in the days of Elijah, God has, as He always does, preserved for Himself a remnant, a chosen few who remained faithful, and who longed for the coming of the kingdom.

Anna, like Simeon, was one such faithful servant, as were those to whom Anna spoke, those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem. Her service came in the form of prayer and fasting. We, when faced with trouble, typically seek a strategy to solve the problem, and turn to prayer as a somehow weaker response. We ought instead to begin with prayer, and rejoice that our prayers, like Anna's, not only served the saints, but as our text reminds us, serve God as well. The prayers of this righteous woman availed much, as our Father sent His only Son for the redemption of not just Jerusalem, but Judea, Samaria, and the outermost parts of the world.

—*Pastor R.C. Sproul Jr., Saint Peter Presbyterian Church, Bristol, Virginia*

PRAYER

Our loving and faithful Father, we ask that You would make us a people faithful in prayer, and in hope. In Your grace remind us O Lord, to look, and to pray for the coming again of Your Son, and to speak boldly of the Christ, as Anna did, to all those who hope in Him. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Consider how you might add occasional fasts to your prayer life. Miss a meal, or a day's worth of meals, and when hunger comes, use it as a goad to prayer, for a pressing issue in the life of your family or church, or to pray that Jesus' name would be known throughout the land.

DECEMBER 20—Twenty-Fourth Day of Advent

ISAIAH 53:1-3

- ¹Who has believed our report?
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
- ²For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant,
And as a root out of dry ground.
He has no form or comeliness;
And when we see Him,
There is no beauty that we should desire Him.
- ³He is despised and rejected by men,
A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.
And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him;
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

As we approach Christmas and the time of rejoicing at God's presence with us in Jesus, it is important that we think about the plan of God revealed in Jesus. Our readings up to now have focused on the promise of the Messiah coming to save His people from their enemies. So, the anticipation of what God will do through the birth of Mary's son has been growing. We may naturally think that the world will rejoice in this birth and that all that has been amiss in the world will be put right by this little baby boy.

But we see something very different revealed to us in the pages of Scripture and in the life and death of Jesus the Christ. He is set before us, even in the days prior to His birth, as someone who must suffer, be despised and die. This rubs us the wrong way at Christmas time. We want joy and laughter and feasting. And we must remember that Jesus does lead us to joy and laughter and feasting but the way there is through sorrow and tears and fasting. There is resurrection life in Jesus Christ but only after sacrificial death. We must look at the glorious birth of Jesus with the wretched cross in mind. And then, beyond that, to his even more glorious resurrection, in which all things *will* be put right.

He did, indeed, come to save the world but not on the world's terms. He changed everything and since He did so, we too, must see life, this good and joyous life, in terms of the cross. In the Advent season, we see a dying world in need of a Savior and Jesus is that promised Messiah. Then Jesus is born to suffer and die Himself, revealing also the need for all men to die to sin and to live to righteousness.

When Isaiah asks, "Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?" it is clear that he is thinking that few, if any, believed the report. But by God's grace many did believe and from the despised man of sorrows, the victorious arm of the Lord is revealed.

At Christmas, we celebrate all God's work in Jesus Christ, from His glorious Advent to His victory on the cross, His Resurrection from the dead, His Ascension to the place of power and rule, and His coming to establish His Church in power at Pentecost.

—*Pastor Virgil Hurt, Providence Church, Lynchburg, Virginia*

PRAYER

Our Father in Heaven, we give You praise for sending Jesus to us to redeem the world and save His people from their sins. We could not have foreseen the way that You would do this. Your thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are our ways Your ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are Your ways higher than our ways, and your thoughts than our thoughts. We thank You that Jesus suffered and died on our behalf and that at Christmas time we are reminded that we are to be like Jesus, giving ourselves away to others. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace and good will toward men. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Talk about a time when your good intentions were misunderstood and rejected by the very ones you were trying to help. What was your response to this? What does this have to do with entering into the sufferings of Jesus? How do our sufferings turn into victory?

DECEMBER 21—Twenty-Fifth Day of Advent

HEBREWS 2:14-18

¹⁴Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. ¹⁶For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham. ¹⁷Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Our reading for this Christmas Eve speaks of those who were subject to a lifetime of bondage. Who were these in bondage as slaves? All mankind—ever since the Fall of Adam—from the very beginning. And the Word of God, in every place, shows that this bondage is to sin—sin that leads to eternal death. The very thought of death causes fear, for death has great power over us; death is inevitable, it stalks every son of Adam, and every daughter of Eve. But what if there were a remedy for this deathly bondage? What if there was Someone Who could rescue us, Who could redeem us? The Hebrews writer declares that there is such a One! The Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, is that One. He Whom the prophets foretold took on flesh and blood; He was made like us, conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the virgin Mary. He came to this world of death to defeat death, by suffering death in our place. By His death, He destroyed Satan's hold over us (our former slave-master), and now we are released into a glorious liberty. Christ has set us free, we are free indeed! Is it any wonder that the Advent/Christmas Season is a time of joy, of singing, and feasting? So let us do what this old Christmas carol says:

Rejoice and be merry in songs and in mirth;
Oh praise our Redeemer, all mortals on earth;
For this is the birthday of Jesus our King,
Who brought us salvation His praises we'll sing.

—*Pastor Brian Penney, Christ Covenant Church, Copiague, New York*

PRAYER

Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, in Your great wisdom You sent Your Only-begotten Son to be our Savior. We thank and praise You that He has accomplished for us what we could not do ourselves. We thank You that He made propitiation for our sins, appeasing Your righteous wrath, and delivering us from sin and death. Help us, by the Holy Spirit, to be filled with gratitude and joy for such a great deliverance! Help us to rejoice in the Advent of our Lord Jesus Christ, as we look forward to the Day of His appearing, when we shall be made like Him, and inherit eternal life. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Review and discuss with your family the questions found at Lord's Day Five and Six in the Heidelberg Catechism (**See next page**). Discuss how God is both perfectly just and at the same time perfectly merciful.

DECEMBER 22—Twenty-Sixth Day of Advent

Isaiah 9:1-3

- 1 Nevertheless the gloom will not be upon her who is distressed,
As when at first He lightly esteemed
The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,
And afterward more heavily oppressed her,
By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan,
In Galilee of the Gentiles.
- 2 The people who walked in darkness
Have seen a great light;
Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death,
Upon them a light has shined.
- 3 You have multiplied the nation
And increased its joy;
They rejoice before You
According to the joy of harvest,
As men rejoice when they divide the spoil.

The Government of the Promised Son

Though very difficult days were in the offing, the conclusion of chapter 8 indicates that the gloom might break. In particular, the one through whom this significant change is to come to pass is identified and described as a child. Verse one is a transition verse to what follows in the next six verses. The picture of total gloom which closed the preceding chapter gives way to a picture of brilliant light. The words of the Christmas carol, “O come, O come, Emmanuel,” were taken right from this text in Isaiah:

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.
O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!

The Great Happiness (vv. 2-3).

The opening statement (“the people who walked in darkness”) seems to refer specifically to this geographical area. So Matthew construes it: “Now when Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, He departed to Galilee. ¹³ And leaving Nazareth, He came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: ¹⁵ The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles: ¹⁶ The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death Light has dawned.” (Matt. 4:14-16). The “great light” referred to is Jesus Christ in person, as we can now clearly see in the light of the fulfillment that the New Testament brings.

Jesus was indeed that light, not only to those in Galilee but also on throughout the whole wide world. This role He affirmed in John 8:12 “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” “Then Jesus said to them, ‘A little while longer the light is with you. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you; he who walks in darkness does not know where he is going. ³⁶ While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.’ These things Jesus spoke, and departed, and was hidden from them. ³⁷ But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him, ³⁸ that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke: ‘Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?’ ³⁹ Therefore they could not believe, because Isaiah said again: ⁴⁰ ‘He has blinded their eyes and

hardened their hearts, lest they should see with their eyes, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them.’⁴¹ These things Isaiah said when he saw His glory and spoke of Him. (John 12:35-41).

“Light” in this context includes every possible blessing that the age of the Messiah can bring. This passage deserves to be classed with other great passages of the Bible like Genesis 1 and John 1, which also speak of the coming of light. As impossible as it might have seemed to the one who beheld it in its desolation at Isaiah’s time, this child would increase her joy—two comparisons are used: On the one hand the joy involved will be like that when “men rejoice over a harvest,” a type of joy indicative of unusual satisfaction. On the other hand it will be like when “men exult when they divide spoil.” What makes such joy deep is that it sets in after the pains and griefs of war have been resolved into victory and peace. This is what the gospel does for sinners.

—*Pastor Randy Booth, Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, Nacogdoches, TX*

PRAYER

O Lord, our God, we humbly bow before the Son of Your love. We gladly acknowledge that without Him there is only gloom and despair. We must confess that the words of the prophet Isaiah have been true of us as well:

⁹ Therefore justice is far from us, nor does righteousness overtake us; we look for light, but there is darkness! For brightness, but we walk in blackness!

¹⁰ We grope for the wall like the blind, and we grope as if we had no eyes; we stumble at noonday as at twilight; we are as dead men in desolate places.

¹¹ We all growl like bears, and moan sadly like doves; we look for justice, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far from us.

¹² For our transgressions are multiplied before You, and our sins testify against us; for our transgressions are with us, and as for our iniquities, we know them:

¹³ In transgressing and lying against the Lord, and departing from our God (Isa. 59)

Our hope rests in Your zeal to perform Your purpose of redemption for Your people.

²⁰ “The Redeemer will come to Zion, and to those who turn from transgression in Jacob,” says the Lord.

And may we, O Lord, be found faithful in Your covenant, as again declared by the prophet:

²¹ “As for Me,” says the Lord, “this is My covenant with them: My Spirit who is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your descendants, nor from the mouth of your descendants’ descendants,” says the Lord, “from this time and forevermore.”

AMEN

ADVENT APPLICATION

All of us have known gloom and darkness, because all of us are sinners, living in a sinful world. And as the people of God, we have all seen the Light. Immanuel, which means, “God with us.” Our covenant God keeps His promises. By His grace, we have forsaken ourselves and entrusted ourselves to Him who is our Savior. The child born in Bethlehem is indeed, our Wonderful Counselor, our Mighty God, our Everlasting Father, and our Prince of Peace.

As the Apostle Paul wrote to the saints at Colosse: “For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; ¹⁰ that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹ strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy; ¹² giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³ He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:9-14).

DECEMBER 23—Twenty-Seventh Day of Advent

Isaiah 9:4-7

- 4 For You have broken the yoke of his burden
And the staff of his shoulder,
The rod of his oppressor,
As in the day of Midian.
- 5 For every warrior's sandal from the noisy battle,
And garments rolled in blood,
Will be used for burning and fuel of fire.
- 6 For unto us a Child is born,
Unto us a Son is given;
And the government will be upon His shoulder.
And His name will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
- 7 Of the increase of His government and peace
There will be no end,
Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom,
To order it and establish it with judgment and justice
From that time forward, even forever.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.

Ultimate Victory

What this child inaugurates in a seemingly small beginning will have within it potentialities of unbelievable growth. His rule and the peace He achieves will develop endlessly. By the time Isaiah appeared on the scene the great promise to David about the continuance of his line was very well known and accepted in Israel. Because of the permanent reign of this king, our joy too will be progressive, permanent, and perpetual.

Progressive: His reign would have small beginnings, but it would grow until it had no end. It would spread from Bethlehem, to Galilee, to Antioch, to Asia Minor, to Rome—to the whole world. Why will our gladness (v 3) keep growing? Because the reign of this king will keep growing.

Permanent: This last Davidic King will establish His throne on justice and righteousness, and no power will ever be able to overthrow it, unlike Israel's former kings.

Perpetual: and His reign will extend "From then on and forevermore"; it will carry over into the next age of the New Heavens and New Earth. "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!" (Rev. 11:15).

The description closes with two emphatic declarations: First, His work reaches into the vast vistas of eternity. Second, the Lord with burning zeal for this whole undertaking stands continually behind His chosen one. This is one of the clearest and most meaningful Messianic prophecies in the whole Old Testament. In case any doubt remains, Isaiah ends with a statement that is used only three times in the OT: "The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this." "Lord of hosts" means "Lord of armies."

The Lord has at His disposal three kinds of armies. He has creation itself—the stars, the elements, hail, rain, snow, etc. He has all national armies at His call; no matter whether they are Christian or pagan, all military powers are at his disposal. He has the angelic armies at His beck and call. Isaiah is saying that all of the Lord's passionate zeal, together with all of his resources as Commander-in-Chief, backs the reign of this King. All three of these armies worked together to put into effect God's plan at the birth of Jesus. God used the Roman government's census to ensure that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem, thus fulfilling prophecy. A star in the heavens guided the wise men to the Christ-child. And God had the angels direct the shepherds to the child, and lead the heavenly choirs in songs of praise at the birth of the Messiah.

—Pastor Randy Booth, Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, Nacogdoches, TX

PRAYER

You are King, O Christ. The right to rule over the entire universe, the affairs of men, Your church, and our individual lives, is in Your hands. Cause us to understand that fact and submit to Your authority. Cause Your church to recognize the absolute necessity of bowing before You in everything. Cause the nations of the world to see that the government must and *will* be upon Your shoulder. May this great truth be a reality in our lives today. On the basis of Your life, death, and resurrection, You could say, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Matt.28:20). And it is on the basis of Your sovereign authority and rule that we Your people have been commissioned to disciple the nations. For the Father has highly exalted You and given You the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that You are Lord, to the glory of God the Father. AMEN

ADVENT APPLICATION

"Advent" means "arrival." In this case, it is the expected arrival of the Messiah. And so, with great anticipation, God's people, believing what He had promised, looked with hope, for a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord! We look now with remembrance of what God has done in the sending of His Son. Indeed, He came! He came to be the light of the world. And so He was, and is, and will be forevermore! "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined. On this eve of Christmas we look with great anticipation; the Light will soon shine on the world!

DECEMBER 24—Twenty-Eighth Day of Advent

ISAIAH 59: 16-17

16 He saw that there was no man,
And wondered that there was no intercessor;
Therefore His own arm brought salvation for Him;
And His own righteousness, it sustained Him.
17 For He put on righteousness as a breastplate,
And a helmet of salvation on His head;
He put on the garments of vengeance for clothing,
And was clad with zeal as a cloak.

60:1-3

Arise, shine;
For your light has come!
And the glory of Yahweh is risen upon you.
2 For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth,
And deep darkness the people;
But Yahweh will arise over you,
And His glory will be seen upon you.
3 The Gentiles shall come to your light,
And kings to the brightness of your rising.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

As we saw in Isaiah 9 light overcoming darkness is picture pleasing to God. It is a creative picture (Gen 1:3) and it is in that light that man is allowed to see what God is doing in the world. The Savior who was to be born is a New Creation and those who are bathed in such light are made new in Him. The light, the glory that has risen upon the people of God is the great Intercessor of Isaiah 59:16-17 who will restore justice where the wicked rule.

This wickedness is darkness, a deep darkness Yahweh says, that covers the people. But Yahweh will rise over them. The Intercessor of Isaiah 59 is Yahweh Himself. The light that will shine is the Great I AM, God of Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Joseph and Mary! No reflection of light, but the Glory of Yahweh Himself!

As Yahweh arises on the people His glory is then seen upon them and the whole world will notice. At the coming of Yahweh, the nations will come into the light of the people. The Church has this light and when the Church shines the nations come in and are saved. This is what it means when Isaiah says that kings come to the brightness of our rising!

One gets a taste of the Resurrection in this text. Yahweh rises and His people rise with Him. The light that touched Moses and caused him to shine, would touch the Church and they would be lights to the world. Kings still come to that brightness and we rejoice because of this truth.

—Pastor Alan B. Stout, Providence Church, Pensacola, FL

PRAYER

Father, we are Your people we have Your light and now our brightness is Yahweh risen upon us. May Your Church always be that brightness and may You continue to bring kings and their kingdoms into Your presence. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

As you anticipate Christmas tomorrow prepare to worship Father, Son and Spirit. Remember that in your worship the light of God is magnified in the world, drawing men to the throne of Jesus Christ. Go to sleep in the darkness of night and wake at the rising of the Sun and the Son.

The Heidelberg Catechism

Lord's Day Five

- 12. Since, then, by the righteous judgment of God, we deserve temporal and eternal punishment, how may we escape this punishment and be again received into favor?**
God wills that His justice be satisfied; therefore, we must make full satisfaction to that justice, either by ourselves or by another.
- 13. Can we ourselves make this satisfaction?**
Certainly not; on the contrary, we daily increase our guilt.
- 14. Can any mere creature make satisfaction for us?**
None; for first, God will not punish any other creature for the sin which man committed; and further, no mere creature can sustain the burden of God's eternal wrath against sin and redeem others from it.
- 15. What kind of mediator and redeemer, then, must we seek?**
One who is a true and righteous man, and yet more powerful than all creatures, that is, one who is also true God.

Lord's Day Six

- 16. Why must He be a true and righteous man?**
Because the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should make satisfaction for sin; but one who is himself a sinner cannot satisfy for others.
- 17. Why must He also be true God?**
That by the power of His Godhead He might bear in His manhood the burden of God's wrath, and so obtain for and restore to us righteousness and life.
- 18. But who now is that Mediator, who in one person is true God and also a true and righteous man?**
Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is freely given unto us for complete redemption and righteousness.
- 19. From where do you know this?**
From the Holy Gospel, which God Himself first revealed in Paradise, afterwards proclaimed by the holy Patriarchs and Prophets, and foreshadowed by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law, and finally fulfilled by His well-beloved Son.

DECEMBER 25—First Day of Christmas

1 TIMOTHY 1:15-17

¹⁵This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. ¹⁶However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life. ¹⁷Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Too often the Christmas season is just all a hustle and a bustle. People are rushing around; shopping, cooking, and traveling. So much so, that the real meaning of Christmas is almost forgotten. Imagine what would happen if all the traffic on the way to the local mall was delayed while a man with his pregnant wife riding on a donkey crossed the road! Everyone would be honking their horns and yelling, “Hurry up! We are trying to get ready for Christmas!”

Our text provides us a meditation on what the arrival of Jesus meant to the Apostle Paul. He never forgot the real meaning: Jesus came into the world to save sinners. That meant a lot to Paul because he thought that he was the biggest sinner of all. He had hunted Christians down and put them in prison. He was, in many respects, the original Grinch. He hated the fact that people believed that Jesus had come as the Messiah and so he was doing everything he could to stop the spread of the Christian faith.

But when he was converted on the road to Damascus, he realized the reason that God sent His Son into the world. That is why, right after he writes about the meaning of Christmas (verse 15) he sings! (verse 17).

—*Pastor Laurence Windham, St. Peter Presbyterian Church, Bristol, Virginia*

PRAYER

Our Heavenly Father, thank you for this season of celebration. Help us to never forget that the reason this time of the year is so special is because of what Jesus did for us. He came to die for our sins and bring peace between You and us. AMEN.

CHRISTMAS APPLICATION

Phillips Brooks wrote the Christmas hymn, “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” upon returning from a trip to the Holy Land. While there, from the hills of Palestine, he could see the town of Bethlehem and as he reflected on the significance of that small corner of the world at the advent of Jesus, he included these words: “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight...”

As a family, let’s sing, “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” and then we’ll talk about the lyrics.
(See next page.)

O Little Town of Bethlehem

ST. LOUIS (8 6. 8 6. 7 6. 8 6)
Lewis H. Redner, 1868

Phillips Brooks, 1868

1. O lit - tle town of Beth - le - hem, How still we see thee lie!
2. For Christ is born of Mar - y, And gath - ered all a - bove,
3. How si - lent - ly, how si - lent - ly, The won - drous Gift is giv'n!
4. O ho - ly Child of Beth - le - hem, De - scend to us, we pray;

A - bove thy deep and dream-less sleep The si - lent stars go by.
While mor - tals sleep, the an - gels keep Their watch of won - d'ring love.
So God im - parts to hu - man hearts The bless - ings of His heav'n.
Cast out our sin, and en - ter in, Be born in us to - day.

Yet in thy dark streets shin - eth The ev - er - last - ing Light;
O morn - ing stars, to - geth - er Pro - claim the ho - ly birth,
No ear may hear His com - ing, But in this world of sin,
We hear the Christ - mas an - gels The great glad ti - dings tell;

The hopes and fears of all the years Are met in thee to - night.
And prais - es sing to God the King, And peace to men on earth!
Where meek souls will re - ceive Him, still The dear Christ en - ters in.
O come to us, a - bide with us, Our Lord Em - man - u - el!

DECEMBER 26—Second Day of Christmas

JOHN 1:9-10

⁹That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

In the verses before this, the Gospel-writing John has been describing that other John. The camel-hair wearing, brood-of-vipers preaching, wilderness baptizing John. But that John wasn't the light; he only pointed us to the true light, who has now come into the world that He made. But, wonder of wonders, the world He made didn't recognize Him when He came to them.

When someone turns on the lights in your bedroom in the morning, does it take a while for your eyes to get used to the light, after being closed and in the dark all night long? So it was for Israel, when Jesus came. "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light" (Isaiah 9:2). And sometimes you might roll over and demand the light be put out. Or you might even get out of bed and turn it off yourself, and then go get back in bed! This is what Israel did. They went out of their way to put out the light that came to them, so they could go back to their darkness.

But that is like trying to put out the sun. The sun is our source of heat and light, and the sun was made through the Son of God, Jesus. He is our source of light. December 21 is the shortest day of the year this year, when the sun shines the least. Our church fathers put Christmas at this time of year on purpose, partly to remind us that in our darkest hour, the Light of the world dawned. From Christmas Day on, the sun starts shining longer every day. And the Light that gives light to you shines fuller every day in your heart and life. Is He getting brighter in your life? In the tabernacle, God had a lampstand that was kept constantly burning (Exodus 25:31). In Solomon's temple, this became 10 much bigger lampstands (1 Kings 7:49), as God's light to the world in Israel grew. And the lampstand was fueled with oil from olive trees (Ex 27:20-21). Zechariah has a vision of a lampstand fed by olive tree branches, while God says His Word will rule by His Spirit (4:2-6). The anointed ones (Messiah, in Hebrew) stand by the lampstand, just as Jesus walks among the lampstands of the seven churches in Revelation 1. The Spirit fills Him and He is the light of the world (John 8:12). The Spirit fills us, and Jesus calls us the light of the world (Matt 5:14). Our family is also like an olive tree, Psalm 128 tells us. Mom is a vine laden with fruit. Children are like olive shoots springing up around the table. And the oil of the Spirit from Jesus fills and fuels us to shine the light of the world around us.

In the beginning, God spoke His Word and said, "Let there be light," and there was light. Now again, at the birth of Jesus, God has spoken a new creation into existence. He does this, not so that you can get presents at Christmas time. He does this so that you know His Son, through whom all things are made. He speaks so that we will glorify and enjoy Him forever. Do you know this light? Do you know Jesus?

—Pastor Steve Hemmeke, *Covenant Heritage Reformed Fellowship, Newport News, Virginia*

PRAYER

Our gracious heavenly Father, You have given us the ultimate gift. Forgive us for not honoring You, the Giver, or receiving Your Gift with joy, thanks, and faith. Thank you for giving us light and life. We rejoice before You for every good and perfect gift You give us. We believe that you have given us a Savior. We pray in His name, AMEN.

CHRISTMAS APPLICATION

Discuss with your family what light your neighbors can see of Christ radiating from your family. How can you bring them some light and life in this season?

DECEMBER 27—Third Day of Christmas

JOHN 8:56-58

⁵⁶ “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.” ⁵⁷ Then the Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?” ⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.”

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

In today’s reading, Jesus was responding to the accusations of the Jews that He was possessed by a demon. In this response, He declares to them that He is the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham in the book of Genesis. How did Abraham rejoice to see His day? He rejoiced when he believed God. He laughed with joy when the promises of God were declared to him. He rejoiced when a barren womb delivered the promised heir. He rejoiced when God provided for Himself the sacrificial ram in the place of Isaac. He saw, played out right before his eyes, what was actually far off; Jehovah-Jireh (the God-who-provides) providing the sacrificial Lamb for His people in the Incarnate Christ.

Also, we see Jesus declaring his eternity and divinity in the strongest words possible—“Before Abraham was, I AM.” He was telling them that, within Him dwelt all the fullness of God. The use of these words also tells us, among other things, that God is the creator of time, and His existence, His love for us, and His lordship transcends all barriers of time. He loved us and chose us from before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4).

Isn’t it wonderful that we can look back in history and see what God has done, when so many of those who preceded us could only look forward in faith, seeing the promises from afar? It is a special blessing that we should thank God for.

—Pastor Jay Barfield, Christ Covenant Reformed Church, Billings, Montana

PRAYER

Our Father, we thank you and praise you for the faith that you gave to Abraham to look forward to the coming of Christ and rejoice. We likewise rejoice as we look back to His Incarnation. We rejoice further that He lives and rules today as the great I AM, ruling over the great and the small with justice and mercy. Help us, Lord, to live our lives trusting in the fulfilled promise of our redemption, and the continuing promise of your presence with us. In Christ’s name, AMEN.

CHRISTMAS APPLICATION

Discuss with your family the excitement that comes with anticipation of a future event (birthdays, weddings, etc.). Talk about how the entire Old Testament is filled with anticipation for the coming of the Messiah. Then, discuss how blessed we are to be able to look back in time and know that the reality of His coming was even better than the prophets in the Old Testament could have imagined! Talk about how this knowledge and insight should help us to live lives of joy.

DECEMBER 28—Fourth Day of Christmas

1 PETER 1:10-12

¹⁰Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, ¹¹searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. ¹²To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things which angels desire to look into.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Imagine yourself reading through a great story, and you sense that the climax is approaching. But before you have a chance to finish it you lose the book, or your dog uses it as a chew toy. Old Testament prophets didn't know the whole story they were writing either. The Spirit had given them much, but there were still many unanswered questions. They did know that the Christ would come and that He would suffer. And Peter tells us that this is because Christ Himself ("the Spirit of Christ") was in them, predicting His own sufferings through them. But there were many unanswered questions. How would the Christ come and accomplish all these things. How will he defeat sin and death? And what about the glories which would follow? What would that be like? And when will all this happen? When they weren't writing down or delivering God's message, Peter tells us that they were searching and sifting it...looking for clues or unnoticed details that might tell them more about the Christ. But we have the completed story. That which prophets and angels longed for has been delivered to us. And what is better, we are included in it. It is the story of what our Savior did for us in His sufferings and the glories we now share with him. That which prophets and angels long for is ours. It is the good news that we have believed and that the nations now must hear.

—*Pastor Eric Sauder, Christ the Kings Church, Springfield, Missouri*

PRAYER

Gracious and Merciful Father, we give you thanks that the prophetic Word is now fulfilled in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We give you thanks for the good news we have heard and believed. We ask that it would continue to grip us and to change us. Through Jesus Christ we pray, AMEN.

CHRISTMAS APPLICATION

The prophets of old looked intently into the Word of God expecting to find Christ there. How does this challenge us to read and hear the message of the prophets today?

DECEMBER 29—Fifth Day of Christmas

JOHN 3:16-17:

¹⁶For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. ¹⁷For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Without a doubt John 3:16 is the most famous verse of the Bible. Placarded in all sorts of interesting places for the sake of witness and evangelism, this verse is used to declare the message of the Gospel in a single sentence. You can probably recite this verse from memory without hesitation, but what is John 3:16 really about?

While it most certainly testifies to the eternal life that has come in Christ—a new life that comes from being “born from above” (3:3)—the verse is speaking first, and most fundamentally, to the love of God. And what do we learn about His love? That He loved the world in such a way that He *gave*. A supreme act of the giving love of God was demonstrated in the Incarnation and Crucifixion of His Son; even as Paul declares in Romans, “but God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (5:8).

Verse 17 parallels verse 16: as God *gave*, so He *sent* His Son. Was Jesus given, was He sent for Israel alone? No, the Son was given and sent for the sake of the world, for the sake of all humanity. He was sent to be “lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should have eternal life” (3:14-15). Though deserving of judgment, the world was sent a Savior. Isn’t that the surprise of the Gospel? Isn’t that the unexpected twist in the story? Instead of condemnation rendered, love is lavished.

Do you want to see the measure of God’s love? Look first to the manger; see the Child wrapped in swaddling clothes, and there behold the love of God. Then look to the Man stripped of all and lifted up on the cross, and yet again behold the love of God. Behold Him and believe that, for the sake of the world, the cross was the ultimate destination of the manger.

—Pastor Joe Thacker, *St. Mark Reformed Church, Nashville, Tennessee*

PRAYER

Heavenly Father and Mighty God, how great is the love that You have lavished upon us in the Lord Jesus Christ! Teach us to understand more deeply the love displayed in the birth and death of Your only-begotten Son, and may our lips and lives express the thanksgiving that You are worthy to receive for such a great salvation. Fire our hearts with Your love that we may never grow cold to the Gospel. We pray in Jesus’ name, AMEN.

CHRISTMAS APPLICATION

Has John 3:16 become too familiar to you? Too mundane? What are some things that you can do to keep from “getting bored” with such a familiar verse? In what ways is the love of God a model for own lives? Meditate on Genesis 28:12; John 1:51 and John 3:14, and consider how the cross is the ladder between heaven and earth.

DECEMBER 30—Sixth Day of Christmas

2 CORINTHIANS 8:9

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

During Advent we read through Christ's birth narrative in Luke. In the King James translation, it is some of the most beautiful writing in the world. It has a little bit of almost everything: surprise...faithful obedience...pathos... suspense...sheep. And it's got glory. Full throttle, wide-eyed, Oh Wow!-type *GLORY!!!!* Those who would usually be in heaven singing "Holy...Holy...Holy!" were down below singing "Glory be to God in the Highest, and on earth Peace, goodwill toward men." The text tells us that a multitude of the heavenly host joined the first angel, praising God. They were down here celebrating Christ's...*humiliation*.

Even before the incarnation, Christ was rich beyond anything we could possibly imagine. Our minds and language don't have the thoughts or words to express it. He was God the Son even before He became man, equal in power and glory with the Father, Yahweh. But He gave up all of that richness to become poor *for us*. He became humble...He was *humiliated*.

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* question 27 asks it this way: "Wherein did Christ's humiliation consist?" It answers: "Christ's humiliation consisted in His being born, and that in a low condition, made under the law, undergoing the miseries of this life, the wrath of God, and the cursed death of the cross; in being buried, and continuing under the power of death for a time."

The Catechism describes Christ's humiliation as beginning in the manger of the Nativity and ending at the resurrection. It is a whole. The world, if they regard the nativity at all, sees only a cute baby in a manger, and much of the church seems to agree with them. We must understand that manger and cross are inseparable, and that the 'cute baby' is born crucified...*for us*. The little child of Bethlehem is also the Son of God going forth to war with Satan. God's glory is infrequently so manifestly revealed in Scripture. The nation Israel sees Yahweh's glory upon the mountain, and is led by the glory-cloud through the wilderness. Moses sees the glory of God's backside, and his face glows from the experience. The glory-cloud of God appears in the commissioning of the Tabernacle and Temple. But at all those times, the response of joy (or fear) is that of men. Only at the nativity do we see heaven itself celebrate. That should speak volumes to us about how truly glorious is Christ's humiliation.

—Assistant Pastor Tom Brainerd, Grace Covenant Church, Nacogdoches, TX

PRAYER

Father, we join with the angel chorus in praising You for Your covenant faithfulness. By Your Holy Spirit enable us to comprehend that which You have revealed to us in the coming of Christ at Christmas. May we and Christ's whole church look past the cuteness of the child in the manger and see the glory of Christ's humiliation in your plan of redemption. AMEN

ADVENT APPLICATION

Sing (or read) *Infant Holy*, *Infant Lowly* and *The Son of God Goes Forth to War*. (See next pages.)

The riches we possess bear no relationship to those Christ gave up for us. But absolutely everything we have and are has been given to us by God. Spiritually and materially, all of our riches are from Him. Consider with your family tangible ways in which you might give up some of your 'riches', whether money or time or even comfort, and take on some poverty in order to share the riches of Christ. We could all stand a little humiliation. It's truly glorious.

Infant Holy, Infant Lowly

He is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers. Rev. 17:14

1. In - fant ho - ly, in - fant low - ly, for his bed a cat - tle stall;
 2. Flocks were sleep - ing: shep - herds keep - ing vig - il till the morn - ing new

ox - en low - ing, lit - tle know - ing Christ, the babe, is Lord of all.
 saw the glo - ry, heard the sto - ry, tid - ings of a gos - pel true.

Swift are wing - ing an - gels sing - ing, no - els ring - ing, tid - ings bring - ing:
 Thus re - joic - ing, free from sor - row, prais - es voic - ing, greet the mor - row:

Christ the babe is Lord of all. Christ the babe is Lord of all.
 Christ the babe was born for you. Christ the babe was born for you.

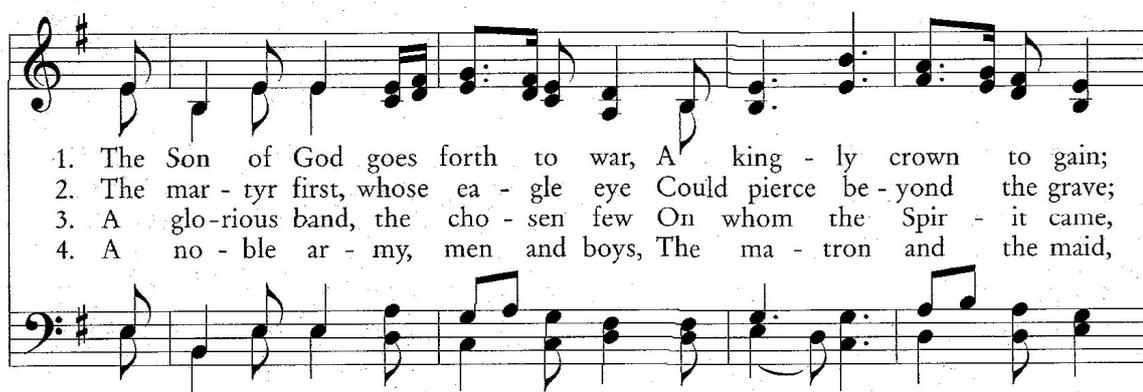
Polish carol
 Paraphrased by Edith M. G. Reed, ca. 1925

W ZLOBIE LEZY 8.7.8.7.8.8.7.
 Traditional Polish melody
 Arr. in *The Kingsway Carol Book*

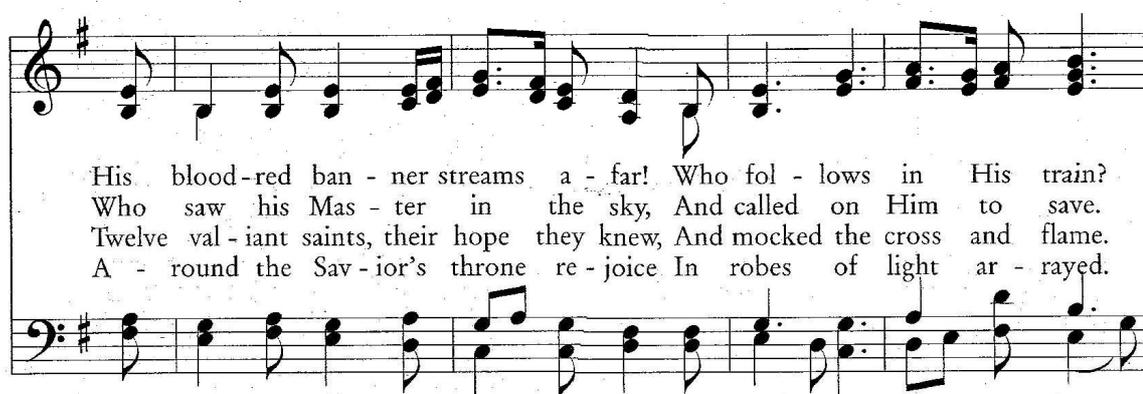
The Son of God Goes Forth to War

GREYOAKS (C.M.D.)
Gregory D. Wilbur, 1994

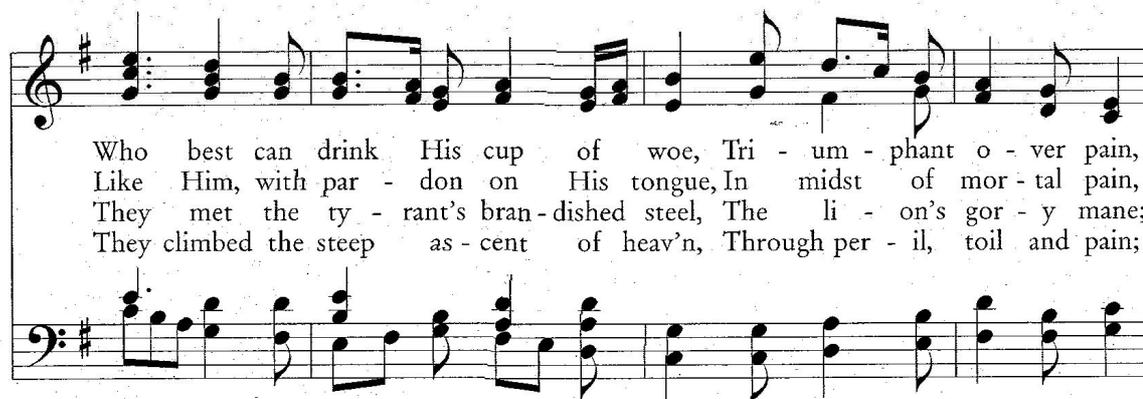
Reginald Heber, 1827



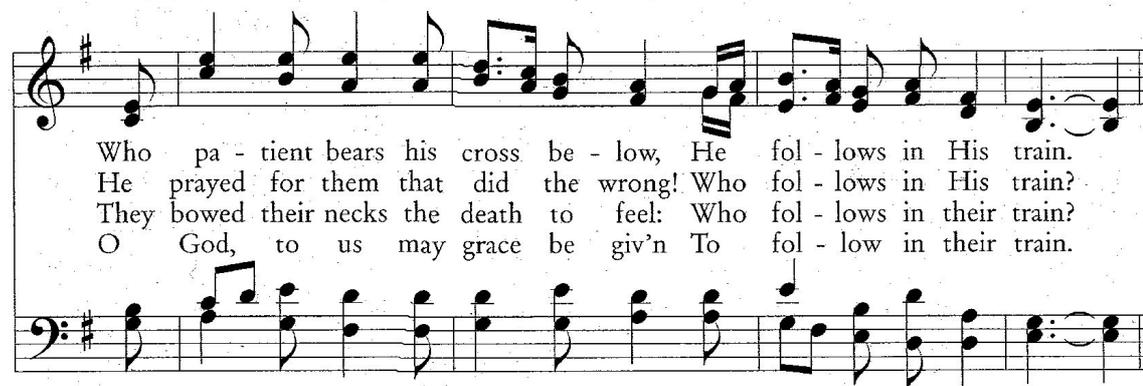
1. The Son of God goes forth to war, A king - ly crown to gain;
2. The mar - tyr first, whose ea - gle eye Could pierce be - yond the grave;
3. A glo - rious band, the cho - sen few On whom the Spir - it came,
4. A no - ble ar - my, men and boys, The ma - tron and the maid,



His blood - red ban - ner streams a - far! Who fol - lows in His train?
Who saw his Mas - ter in the sky, And called on Him to save.
Twelve val - iant saints, their hope they knew, And mocked the cross and flame.
A - round the Sav - ior's throne re - joice In robes of light ar - rayed.



Who best can drink His cup of woe, Tri - um - phant o - ver pain,
Like Him, with par - don on His tongue, In midst of mor - tal pain,
They met the ty - rant's bran - dished steel, The li - on's gor - y mane;
They climbed the steep as - cent of heav'n, Through per - il, toil and pain;



Who pa - tient bears his cross be - low, He fol - lows in His train.
He prayed for them that did the wrong! Who fol - lows in His train?
They bowed their necks the death to feel: Who fol - lows in their train?
O God, to us may grace be giv'n To fol - low in their train.

DECEMBER 31—Seventh Day of Christmas

GALATIANS 4:4-5

⁴But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

So often, we look at the law of God as something bad, something to be juxtaposed with grace. The problem is that the law is presented as something good in the Scriptures. We are the problem. Mankind, indeed the whole of creation, was groaning and still groans because of the Fall. The apostle Paul refers to the “futility” that the entire world was subjected to because of the Fall of the human race in Adam. But God’s law is holy and gives a pattern for how a perfect man should live. No one had lived the law perfectly until the promised deliverer, born of a woman, had come in the fullness of time. Jesus lived perfectly to the law’s standards and fulfilled the law in His life and death. And now, in Him, the perfect Son, we also stand like perfect law abiders, because of Him who came in the fullness of time. In Him, we have been adopted as sons of the living God.

—Pastor Garrett Crow, Christ Church, Santa Clarita, California

PRAYER

Lord of the ages, you promised a deliverer, who would come in time, born of a woman. Your Son has come and having been born under the law has fulfilled it so that, in Him, we also receive adoption as sons and daughters of the only true God. We praise You for Your perfect love and timing. AMEN

CHRISTMAS APPLICATION

Discuss with your family the story of the adoption by Julius Caesar of Gaius Octavius who became Augustus Caesar. Adoption meant inheriting a name in the ancient Greco-Roman world and in Augustus’ case it meant taking Julius Caesar’s status as well. Unlike the ruthless world of Roman adoption, we are lovingly adopted as sons of God the Father, by the Son, through the power of the Holy Spirit. We have a royal status in Jesus as though we had never rebelled against God.

JANUARY 1—Eighth Day of Christmas

ROMANS 9:33

As it is written:

“Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offense,
And whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.”

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

According to our calendars, we stand at the beginning of another new year. What should we be thinking? Almost unavoidably we pause to think about what has transpired since last January and begin to craft and hone new resolutions for the months ahead. And yet, if we’re really honest, all of the years past have never really gone according to our plans. We aim to put in at Phoenix for the winter and instead we get shipwrecked on Malta. Today we forever swear off second helpings of fudge and cookies only to be named honorary “Keebler elf” by the twelfth day of Christmas. The fact that resolutions even exist simply points back to a long record of our failures. Happy New Year indeed!

Let’s turn back the clock even further: consider our elder brothers and sisters, Isaiah the prophet and the people of God. All was not well. Each year saw the wicked Assyrians spilling over the banks of the promised land, lapping up in waves even to the gates of Jerusalem. Amidst their troubles, many flatly refused to put their trust in God and inevitably began to be confident in themselves. But as they turned from faith in God and His covenant promises, they actually stumbled and fell into shame.

So, how should we approach this new year? First, we need to be reminded what we should have learned long ago: the hand of the faithless man only delivers into despair and death. Second, our celebrations of the new year occur within Christmas season: we are to receive the new year as a gift through faith, just as we receive Jesus Christ as the gift through faith. Third, the passing of time and all of its worries belong to our heavenly Father: the righteous man knows no shame as he places all of his trust in Christ, especially for the year to come.

—*Pastor Jeff Evans, Christ Church of Livingston County, Howell, Michigan*

PRAYER

Our merciful heavenly Father, as we stand at the beginning of this year, strengthen us to place our whole trust in You through the months ahead. Let us not fall into despair or turn to our own works for hope but rather serve you steadfastly by the grace of Your Son. In Jesus’ name we pray, AMEN.

CHRISTMAS APPLICATION

First of all, get yourself another cookie. It is still Christmas season, after all, and you’re supposed to be feasting. Good job. Now, talk with one another about how God has been faithful to you amidst difficulties throughout the past years. What were some of the hindrances in trusting God through those difficult times? Lastly, try to number all the ways in which God has been faithful to you amidst the easy periods. Has anything prevented you from seeing God’s faithfulness in these times? Does a life of peace cause you to firmly hold on to God as when things are difficult?

JANUARY 2—Ninth Day of Christmas

MATTHEW 2:1-3

¹Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.” ³When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

It might seem a little ironic that at a time like this when most of this season is filled with so much joy, peace and festivities—especially among the believing—that the news of Jesus’ birth brought so much trouble to people’s lives in Jesus’ day. The text says that when Herod the King heard that a baby was born who was being proclaimed as the king of the Jews that not only was his heart troubled, but all of Jerusalem was troubled with him.

It should not surprise us that we are followers of a great King who not only brings peace to the world, but a sword. Friends, families, nations and the world are divided over the person of Jesus. And why is this? Because whenever King Jesus shows up there is always a division that happens—there are those who come from far to worship, and then there are those who are greatly troubled.

You might notice that you can get away with talking about Mohammed, or Buddha, or the Greek gods without much conflict, however, the same is not true of Jesus. Jesus brings division. You are either for Him, or against Him. And because He is the pivotal character of all the world, the world must decide. Even look at how this Christmas season is a point of conflict for the world. They are trying to keep the celebration while eliminating Jesus from it—as if there would then be a reason to celebrate.

Jesus is the King, and this Christmas season we do celebrate that peace on earth has come, but we also know that Jesus came to bring about this peace by warring against the kingdom of darkness. And this war he leads through His church. Yet we are those who do not wage war as the world wages war, the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty in the Lord for tearing down strongholds and everything that exalts itself against the knowledge of Christ.

So let’s have a merry Christmas, and refresh ourselves as we know that the battle belongs to the Lord.

—Pastor Dean Hellekson, Christ Covenant Church, Lynwood, Washington

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we praise you for giving us a King, and for causing us to bow the knee and worship the King. We know that apart from Your kindness we would be like Herod, and would fear and hate You. But because of Your mercy, we have been brought near to the throne of grace. And for that we give thanks. May we always be loyal to our King. May we always honor our King. And may this be a year where His kingdom of light destroys the kingdom of darkness. And may we as His servants take courage, trusting in the power of Your might, and do our part in taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. AMEN.

CHRISTMAS APPLICATION

Discuss as a family the specific areas where you see the conflict between Jesus and the world. How is King Jesus, not even welcomed in some of our churches? Where and how is he hated in the political realm? What would it look like in our culture if we submitted to Jesus in every aspect of our life?

JANUARY 3—Tenth Day of Christmas

MATTHEW 2:4-6

⁴And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵So they said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet:

“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
Are not the least among the rulers of Judah;
For out of you shall come a Ruler
Who will shepherd My people Israel.””

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

One of the most famous passages in Scripture, and the center or hinge of Matthew’s gospel comes when Jesus asks His disciples: “Who do you say that I am?” Peter responded with the good confession given from above: “Thou art the Christ; the Son of the Living God” (Mt 16:13-17). “Christ” means “anointed one.” The Christ was the long-expected ruler/deliverer of Israel. We learn from Colossians 2 that in Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” The Father loves to hide things for His children to find and bring forth with delight, and so the concept of the Christ is deep and wide. Jesus often was met with a partial, incomplete, or distorted view of who and what the Christ would be. Matthew records Peter’s rebuking of Jesus right after the good confession; Peter couldn’t fathom that the long-awaited Christ would suffer and be put to death.

In Matthew 2, the wise men have just come looking for the newborn king; the Christ is king! The scribes and chief priests told Herod that this king would be born in Bethlehem, and that He would be a shepherd king. He would lead His people out of darkness and into His marvelous light. He would not only lead them beside still waters, He would give them living water to thirst no more. He was from Bethlehem “the house of bread,” the true Manna from heaven who gave Himself for the life of the world. This king would be The Good Shepherd, unlike Herod the hireling. This king would not slaughter the children, but would be slaughtered for them; for us. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.

—*Pastor Mike Ferguson, Providence Reformed Evangelical Church, Grand Junction, Colorado*

PRAYER

Our gracious heavenly Father, You have hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge in Christ; and You have hidden the wonders of the world’s salvation in Him as well. Continue to reveal the Christ to us, through the word, and as You remake us in His image. And let us continue to reveal Him in the world. In Christ’s name we pray,
AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

The Christ would be a king, a shepherd, a warrior, a defender and deliverer, a friend, an advocate, a servant, a helper, a healer, bread and wine, life and peace, and much more. But hidden in the treasure was the Father’s call to be a suffering sacrifice.

Can you add anything to the list?

Consider each of these aspects of “The Christ” and then consider how suffering and sacrifice add glory and treasure; i.e. Suffering King, sacrificial shepherd, etc.

JANUARY 4—Eleventh Day of Christmas

MATTHEW 2:7-8

⁷Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. ⁸And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also.”

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Important men from the east have come into Herod’s territory bearing tribute—lavish gifts for a powerful ruler. Thus Herod hears that there is a rightful son of David to rule over Israel’s throne, and so he claims he wishes to do obeisance¹ to the newly born king.

This may remind us of people who claim to be searching for God, and make a wish that He appear to them suddenly with some sign, and they will worship. But of course, the sentiment is as insincere as was Herod’s.

Herod was threatened. Backed into his corner, he did not wish to bow the knee (worship), but to attack the Son. And yet, for all that, Herod unwittingly becomes a support to these visitors from the east. His deceitful words serve to encourage them in their search. For the moment, they were looking in the capital instead of following the star; now they are fortified again to find wisdom in the foolishness of God, and ultimately, in the unlikely town of Bethlehem. And ironically, they are sent there by Herod himself. And God, the God of the stars of the heavens—one of which led these easterners to the house of His Messiah—God sits in those heavens and laughs.

—Elder Tim Gallant, Christ Covenant Church, Grande Prairie, AB, Canada

PRAYER

Our great and Almighty Father, You have set Your King to reign upon Your own holy hill. We thank You that You have brought us to bend the knee before Him. According to Your promise, we pray that Your kingdom would come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, that the nations would likewise bow before Your Son Jesus Christ, to the glory of Your Name forever, AMEN.

CHRISTMAS APPLICATION

Discuss how the coming of Christ’s rule threatens the order of things in this world—and how God overrules the plots of threatened men in order to establish His kingdom.

¹ Obeisance: a movement of the body expressing deep respect or deferential courtesy, as before a superior; a bow, curtsy, or other similar gesture.

JANUARY 5—Twelfth Day of Christmas

MATTHEW 2:9-10

⁹When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Today brings to a close our celebration of the 12 days of Christmas. Tomorrow opens a new season; the season of Epiphany. On this day our reading reminds us of the marvelous way in which the birth of our Savior was announced to the Gentile nations. The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death Light has dawned. (Matthew 4:16).

Many questions have been raised about the star that the Magi saw and the way in which it guided them to the place of our Lord's nativity. Wrangling about whether the star was really a star or maybe a comet or perhaps a miracle of some sort misses the point. Whatever the Magi from the East saw, the important thing to notice is what they did when they saw it. They obeyed the revelation they were given. They followed the star. And when they understood that the star had come to stand over the place where the child Jesus lay they responded with exceeding joy.

Christmas is a time for Christians to revel in the great goodness of God's revelation in Jesus. All of us were in darkness until the light of Christ shone upon us. Blindly we stumbled about until the dawn of the birth of God's dear Son. These past 12 days we have rejoiced in the gift of Christmas. The Father has sent his Son into the world to give us the light of life. He has sent forth the message to us, not in the form of a star this time, but in the Gospel message. Like the wise men from the East each of us must obey the Gospel word we have been given. We must "walk in the light as He is in the light" (1 John 1:7). And we must, like those men from the East, rejoice greatly that we have now seen the Child of Bethlehem. This is the stuff of exceeding great joy, not only for the 12 days of Christmas, but for every day in every season.

—Pastor Jeff Harlow, Trinity Reformation Church, Salem, Oregon

PRAYER

Almighty God our Heavenly Father, we adore You for the gift of your dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We humbly thank you for shedding abroad the light of the Gospel among us. We were darkness. Now you have made us children of light. Give us grace that we might continue in that light all our days and grant us that same exceeding great joy in which the Magi rejoiced. Glory be to you great Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, ages to ages the same, AMEN.

CHRISTMAS APPLICATION

Discuss with your family how each of you can show gladness for the coming of Christ and for the Good News of the Gospel. How can you follow God's light today like the Magi followed the Star? Think about what it must have been like to live before the light of Jesus had dawned upon the Gentiles. Give thanks that the light has come!

JANUARY 6—The Epiphany of Our Lord

MATTHEW 2:11-12

¹¹And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Have you ever received a gift at Christmas that you didn't understand, or that didn't mean very much to you at the time? Maybe you received a Bible before you knew how to read, or a watch that belonged to your grandfather before you knew how to tell time.

Matthew tells us that the wise men gave "gifts" to Jesus when he was very young. But if we think of their gifts as Christmas, birthday, or "just because" gifts, they seem kind of *strange*. Gold was very costly and valuable, and so were the spices of frankincense and myrrh. But they wouldn't have meant much *as gifts* to a little dark-eyed, pudgy-faced, Jewish toddler.

So, if the gifts of the wise men weren't just normal presents, what were they?

Hundreds of years before Jesus was born, King David prophesied a day when God the Father would give the Gentile nations, *all* the Gentile nations, to his Son as his inheritance (Psalm 2:7-8). The gifts that the wise men brought Jesus were *not* like the presents that we give one another. They were *royal* gifts with special meaning. The gold, frankincense and myrrh were products of the country that the wise men came from, and represented their country's *homage* (honor and willing submission) to Jesus, the real "King of the Jews" and the "Son" spoken of in Psalm 2.

We Christians are so used to thinking of ourselves as "God's special people" that we sometimes forget that it wasn't always so. At the time Jesus was born, most of the world in the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia and Australia (including your ancestors, *unless you're Jewish!*) did not know or worship Yahweh God. And so we should remember to read with great joy and thankfulness the story of these wise men, these "firstfruits" from among the Gentile nations. For they were not only the first trickle of the flood of nations that would pour into God's Kingdom after Pentecost. But as such, they are *our* spiritual ancestors. Thanks be to God for His mercy to the Gentiles!

—Pastor Gene Helsel, Trinity Church, Wenatchee, Washington

PRAYER

Gracious Heavenly Father, just like You promised, You have given all the nations to Your Son Jesus as his rightful inheritance. You have placed all things under his feet, given him rule and dominion over everything in heaven and on earth, and caused wise men in every age to seek him. Help us to worship You, in Jesus our lord, by the power of Your Holy Spirit. And use our humble worship and joyful obedience to bring our whole nation into the glad service of King Jesus. AMEN.

CHRISTMAS APPLICATION

Where were your ancestors at the time Jesus was born? What were they doing then? When did the Gospel of Jesus Christ come to your ancestors? Is your country living today in joyful obedience to King Jesus? The wise men offered their *gifts*, *themselves* and their *country* to Christ. When you worship God on Sunday morning, do you remember to represent and pray for your country as you do?