

A photograph of a desert landscape at night. The foreground is dominated by large, golden sand dunes with fine ripples on their surface. In the background, dark mountains are silhouetted against a deep blue night sky filled with numerous stars. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

Good News of Great Joy!

Devotions for the Advent Season

[Cover Photo](#) by Bob Wick, BLM. Licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#). Cropped from original.

What Is Advent?

Christmas is such a fun time of year: the sights, the sounds, the food, the gifts! More than that, for those of us who follow Jesus, Christmas is a celebration of the Incarnation: the reality that the God who created everything entered into His creation—“became flesh” (John 1:14)—in order to save us. But in the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season, it can be easy for *what* we do at Christmas to obscure the point of *why* we do it.

Advent is something that Christians have been doing for centuries as a way to focus on Jesus in the weeks leading up to Christmas. The Latin word *advent* means “arrival” or “coming.” Advent is the practice of using the four weeks leading up to Christmas Day to *look backward* to the glory of Jesus’ first coming, and *look forward* to the even greater glory of Jesus’ second coming.

The Advent Season is a time to develop rhythms of restful celebration. We are celebrating the fact that God became a man—a baby even—in order to rescue us from our own rebellion against him. That’s pretty incredible! We need to learn to slow down long enough to notice how incredible Christmas already is—to build rhythms of rest, so that we can focus on Jesus and allow His goodness to fuel our celebration.

Different church traditions celebrate Advent in many different ways. Since Advent is never commanded in Scripture, there is no particular way that it has to be done. What you’ll find in the following pages is a guide that will take you through the accounts of Jesus’ birth in Matthew and Luke. They are broken down into four parts – one for each week of Advent, with 3 devotions per week, plus one for Christmas Eve/Day. These devotions can be used on your own, or with your spouse, family, a friend, or a small group.

If you have young children, you may want to use *Good News of Great Joy: Advent Storytelling for Families with Young Children*. It follows the same 4-week structure as this devotional, but in a simpler storytelling format. For a PDF, go to cornerstonesimi.com, and click on “Resources.”

Merry Christmas!

Christian Burkhardt

Equipping Pastor

Cornerstone, Simi Valley

Making an Advent Wreath

If you want to use an advent wreath during your devotions, you can make one very easily.

What you'll need:

- **A wreath**
- **4 colored candles** (any color and size)
- **1 white candle.** This one goes in the middle of the wreath, with the other 4 candles around it. It's called the "Jesus Candle" and is lit on Christmas Eve.

How to use it:

- Starting 4 Sundays before Christmas, light the first candle at the start of your devotions. Recite **John 8:12** as you light the candle:

"Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'"
- Then on each following Sunday, light an additional candle.
- On Christmas Eve, you will light all 4 candles and the "Jesus Candle".
 - The lighting of candles represents the idea of Jesus as the "Light of the World." Each week, as you light an additional candle, the light gets brighter and brighter as we get closer to Christmas Day.

Questions? email grow@cornerstonesimi.com

Week 1: The Angel Visits Mary

Day 1: The Annunciation

Light the first candle, and recite John 8:12 -

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Read Luke 1:26-38.

- In v. 30-31, how does the angel Gabriel describe what is going to happen to Mary? Why her?
- In v. 32-33, how does Gabriel describe who this baby will be and what he will do?
- In v. 32, Gabriel says that this child will be called the "Son of the Most High," but that "God will give him the throne of his father David." How is it possible for him to be both the Son of God and the Son of David?
- In v. 34, Mary asks the angel a very honest question about how she can have a baby while still a virgin. In v. 35-37, how does Gabriel answer her question? (If you want more information on Elizabeth, read Luke 1:1-25.)
- In v. 38, how does Mary respond to Gabriel's announcement?

Pray

Week 1, Day 2 (continued)

Look again at Isaiah 9:7 -

Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.

The zeal of the LORD of Hosts will accomplish this.

Meditate on this verse for a few minutes:

- **A king who establishes his rule with justice and righteousness** - not with conspiracy and intrigue, or with glad-handing and double-speak. A leader who cannot be bribed, tricked, or manipulated. He rules justly and righteously forever.
- **Endlessly increasing government and peace.** Typically, as government increases, whether through tyranny or bureaucracy, peace and harmony *decrease*. That will not be the case in the government that the Jesus, the Prince of Peace, will one day establish. His perfect, peace-giving rule will continue forever.
- There will be no perfect government system, nor true lasting peace, until then. **This is why we set our hope in Jesus**, and this is what enables us to live faithfully and courageously in the present, no matter the outcome of the next election cycle or international conflict.

Pray

Listen: The 12th movement of Handel's *Messiah* is titled, "For Unto Us A Child Is Born." The lyrics are taken directly from Isaiah 9:6. Listen to this song as a way to finish your devotional time. Recordings can be easily found on YouTube. Simply search "Handel's Messiah For Unto Us A Child Is Born."

Week 1: The Angel Visits Mary

Day 3: The Magnificat

Light the first candle, and recite John 8:12 -

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Read Luke 1:39-56

Very soon after the angel departed, Mary left her home in Nazareth to visit her cousin Elizabeth in the southern hill country of Judea. She ended up staying with Elizabeth during her first trimester (perhaps because she didn't feel well enough to make the journey home?). When Mary first arrived, Elizabeth greeted her. Elizabeth had obviously become aware of the special connection their miraculous pregnancies shared, because she referred to Mary's developing baby as her "Lord" (v. 43). In response to Elizabeth's greeting, Mary breaks out into a beautiful and seemingly spontaneous song of praise, traditionally known as the *Magnificat*. Look closely at this song. What reasons does Mary give for her outbreak of praise?

Most of the statements in Mary's song can be broken into two categories:

- **What God does**
- **Who He does it to or for**

In the space below, see how many statements you can identify (There are at least 10).

What God Does

Who He Does It To or For

continued →

Week 1, Day 3 (continued)

Look back over the list you just created.

- Can you think of any stories from the Bible that relate to these statements (Old or New Testament)?

- Can you think of any events in your own life that relate to these statements?

Pray: Close your time in prayer by reading and praying this song back to God, and/or by praising him for how He has worked similarly in your own life.

Week 2: The Angel Visits Joseph

Day 1: The Dream

Light the first two candles, and recite John 8:12 -

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Luke 1 gave us the story of the angel's announcement to Mary. In Matthew 1, we get the story from Joseph's perspective:

Read Matthew 1:18-25

Both Matthew and Luke say that Mary and Joseph were betrothed, but that they had not yet come together (in marriage). So why would Joseph need to divorce her?

In Mary and Joseph's culture, a betrothal was a legally-binding agreement between the groom and the bride's father. It formally established the intent to marry and the bride-price the groom would pay to the bride's father. A betrothed couple was legally bound together (in v. 19, Joseph is called "her husband"), but they were not yet married and would not have lived together until after their wedding ceremony. Yet betrothal was a serious enough agreement that it could only be dissolved through divorce.

Matthew says that Joseph was a "just man." If Mary had become pregnant because she had been involved with another man while betrothed to Joseph, then Joseph would have had every right (and would have been expected) to publicly shame her in order to preserve his own honor (to make it clear that he was not the cause of her pregnancy). He could have even had her stoned to death, because she had "played the harlot in her father's house" (Deut. 22:20-21). Graciously, Joseph resolves to divorce Mary quietly, rather than shame her (or worse). But this is where the angel intervenes.

Look at what the angel said to Joseph in the dream (v. 20-21).

- What does the angel call Joseph?

- What does the angel tell Joseph to do with Mary?

continued →

Week 2, Day 1 (continued)

- What does the angel say about Mary's pregnancy?

- What does the angel tell Joseph to do with Mary's baby?

What's In Name?

Do you know what Jesus' name means? It's the Hebrew name *Yeshua*, which is a combination of two incredible Hebrew words:

- The first is God's name: *YHWH*, or *Yahweh* - the name God first made known to Moses at the burning bush, in Exodus 2:14. (When you read your Bible, and you see the phrase "**the LORD**," in capital letters, this is the name being used.)
- The second is a verb: *y'sha*, which means "to save."

Put them together, and you get the name *Yeshua* - "The LORD Saves." This is the name the angel instructed both Mary and Joseph to give to the baby. In v. 21, we see the reason why they were to give him this name: "*for he will save his people from their sins.*"

This is an incredible promise! The angel says that this baby, miraculously growing within the womb of Joseph's virgin bride-to-be, is the one who will rescue his people, not just from foreign aggressors or illness or even evil spirits, but from an even greater problem—the problem which we most often overlook and are most powerless to overcome: the sinfulness in our own hearts. This is good news indeed!

Read Psalm 130

This is a beautiful song, calling God's people to set their hope in God and his word, because with him there is forgiveness for sin and the promise of redemption – a promise that finds its fulfillment in the one whose name is "The LORD Saves."

Pray: Thank God for keeping his promise to send Jesus to redeem us from sin. If there is sin in your life that needs to be confessed, put your trust in the Lord and confess it to him, because "*with [Him] there is forgiveness.*" Remember 1 John 1:9 – "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" There is nothing like the joy of knowing that, because of Jesus, your sins have been forgiven!

Week 2: The Angel Visits Joseph

Day 2: The Son of David

Light the first two candles, and recite John 8:12 -

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

In Matthew 1:20, the angel addresses Joseph as "Son of David." David's name has been coming up a lot in this story, hasn't it? Why do you think that is? Sure, David was the most faithful king in Israel's history, but by this time he had been dead for almost one thousand years! Why does his name keep coming up in the story now?

Read 2 Samuel 7:1-17

In this passage God makes some incredible promises to David regarding his sons and the future of his kingdom. In the space below, write down some of the promises you noticed:

After David died, his son Solomon succeeded him as king, just as God promised. Solomon did build a temple for God in Jerusalem, and God did discipline him when he disobeyed (which he did a *lot!*). And for the next 350 years, there was always a son of David ruling in Jerusalem.

There was only one problem: things kept getting worse! For the most part, the Davidic kings wanted little to do with God, his temple, or his law (with a few notable exceptions, like Hezekiah and Josiah). They led God's people to worship other gods from the surrounding nations. Things got so bad that, in 586 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon attacked Jerusalem with his armies, destroyed the city and Solomon's temple, and carried off the survivors to Babylon as captives - including Zedekiah, the last son of David to reign in Jerusalem.

continued →

Week 2: The Angel Visits Joseph

Day 3: God With Us

Light the first two candles, and recite John 8:12 -

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

The Sign of Immanuel

In Matthew 1:22-23, Matthew sees Jesus' birth as the fulfillment of prophecy:

²² *All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:*

²³ *"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,*

and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).

This prophecy comes from Isaiah 7. Let's take a few minutes to look at what was going on when this promise was made.

In Isaiah 7, King Ahaz and the people of Jerusalem are terrified, because they are under attack from two of their neighbors to the north: Rezin, king of Syria, and Pekah, king of the 10 northern tribes of Israel (v. 1-2). God sends Isaiah to King Ahaz to tell him not to be afraid, because Rezin and Pekah will not succeed in their plan to destroy Jerusalem.

King Ahaz, however, doesn't believe God's promise. He was one of the sons of David who rejected the LORD and worshipped other gods. He shut up God's temple, and even sacrificed one of his own sons in worship of false gods (2 Chron. 28). Even though Isaiah brought him good news, Ahaz was wary to receive it, because he didn't trust the source. So God offers to prove himself to Ahaz. God tells Ahaz to ask for a sign, even a miraculous sign, to show that He really is able to do what He says.

Read Isaiah 7:10-17

When Ahaz self-righteously refuses to ask God for a sign, God gives him one anyway. Isaiah speaks of a young woman who was probably present during this conversation. She may have been a bystander, a member of the king's harem, or even possibly Isaiah's wife. (The Hebrew word used for her is *almah* – which speaks more to her being a young woman of marriageable age than to her virginal status). Whoever she is, Isaiah turns to her and says, "Look, this young woman will conceive and give birth to a son, and she will call his name Immanuel...Before this boy reaches an age where he can tell the difference between right and wrong, not only will these two kings not destroy *your* land, but *their* lands will be destroyed instead" (paraphrase). Indeed, that's exactly what happened. As v. 17 indicates, God brought the armies of Assyria, swooping down from the north, and they overthrew both Syria and Israel.

After this prophecy, we don't hear anything else about this child or who he became. All we know is that Syria and Israel were going to be overthrown while he was still in his early childhood years. And we know his name: *Immanuel*. This is another one of those amazing Hebrew names that's basically a sentence condensed into a single word:

Im, "with" + *anu*, "us" + *El*, "God" = *Immanuel*, "God with us."

continued →

Week 2, Day 3 (continued)

In the immediate context of Isaiah 7, this name represented the fact that, whether or not King Ahaz wanted to acknowledge it, Yahweh was still his God (v. 11), Judah was still God's people, and God was still with them.

Immanuel Realized

Here's where it gets interesting: during the first and second centuries, BC, a group of Jewish scholars got together to translate the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, because that had become the international trade language. This Greek translation is known as the *Septuagint*. When they got around to translating the phrase in Isaiah 7, "*the young woman will conceive and bear a son,*" they used the Greek work *parthenos*, a term which specifically refers to a woman who is a virgin. By the time you get to the New Testament writers (mid-to-late first century AD), the *Septuagint* was the most accessible and familiar version of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Now imagine: Here's Matthew writing his account of the life of Jesus, and beginning with the angel's message to Joseph. He records how Mary, though a virgin, had conceived a child through the power of the Holy Spirit – and then it hits him! "Wait, I think I've read something like that before!" Sure enough, he finds the place in Isaiah where it says, "*Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son!*" Even though the woman to whom Isaiah 7 originally referred was not technically a virgin, Mary definitely was!

What's more, look at the name given to the child: *Immanuel*, "God with Us"! In Isaiah 7, it was a reminder that, regardless of what Ahaz and the people believed, God was still with them. But Matthew recognized that an even greater fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy was at hand. In the birth of Jesus, *Immanuel* has been realized! It's no longer just a name, no longer just a sign. In the person of Jesus, God "*became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth...And from His fullness we have all received grace upon grace*" (John 1:14, 16). This is good news indeed.

Sing: *O Come, O Come, Immanuel*

*O come, O come, Immanuel and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lowly exile here until the Son of God appear
Rejoice, Rejoice, Immanuel has come to thee, O Israel*

Pray

No Room In the “Inn”

Many of us are familiar with versions of this story in which Mary and Joseph race between contractions to cover the last few miles to Bethlehem, or Joseph searching door-to-door for lodging, only to be turned away by cold-hearted, indifferent innkeepers. While those make for good, suspenseful stories, they’re really just conjecture. What we do know is that Bethlehem wasn’t a very large town, and, with the influx of travelers for the census, there wouldn’t have been enough rooms to go around. The word “inn” could have referred to anything from public lodgings to guest rooms in people’s homes. Whatever the circumstances, Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem when it was already filled to capacity, perhaps because they had to travel slowly for Mary’s sake.

It is likely that a midwife, or at least another woman, would have been on hand to assist Mary with her delivery. Luke mentions the manger or feeding trough in which Jesus was laid, but whether that trough was located in a stable, a cave, or on the side of the road, we don’t know. It is fair to assume that Joseph would have tried to secure some semblance of privacy for Mary, so that she wouldn’t have to deliver right out in the open. I once heard someone say that a good modern equivalent would be a covered bus stop or a corner of a parking garage—the kind of place where you would expect a homeless person to take shelter, not the birthing mother of the Son of God!

That’s the point: There was no fanfare, no press waiting outside the delivery room for news of the newborn king. Jesus’ birth went largely unnoticed, and anyone who did notice it—who perhaps heard Mary crying out in the throes of labor—probably hurried past because of the general discomfort of the whole scene. But there was one group upon whom the magnitude of this event was not lost, and they were going to make sure that at least *someone* knew that the most important event in the history of the world (to that point) was happening right under their noses. That’s the part of the story we’ll look at tomorrow.

Sing: *O Little Town of Bethlehem*

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

*For Christ is born of Mary, and gathered all above
While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love
The morning stars together proclaim the holy birth
And praises sing to God the King, and peace to men on earth*

*How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given.
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming, yet in this world of sin
Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in*

*Oh holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today
We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel*

Pray

Week 3: The Angel Visits the Shepherds

Day 2: Good News of Great Joy!

Light three candles, and recite John 8:12 -

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

As Mary and Joseph huddled together around the newborn Jesus in the manger, largely unnoticed by those around them, something was taking place in the hills outside Bethlehem that would have been impossible for those nearby to miss.

Read Luke 2:8-12

- When the angel appears, how do the shepherds react? What is the first thing the angel says to them? Did you notice that this is also the first thing the angels said to Mary and Joseph? Why do you think that is?

- What kind of news does the angel bring them? Who is it for?

- In v. 11, how does the angel describe who this child is?

- In v. 12, what does the angel tell them to look for? Does this seem to fit with what he just said in v. 11? Why or why not?

continued →

Week 3, Day 2 (continued)

Savior, Christ, Lord

In v. 11, the angel uses three specific terms to refer to Jesus: *Savior*, *Christ*, and *Lord*. Let's look briefly at each of these:

- **Savior:** The angel calls Jesus a “savior,” but from *what*? The passage doesn't specify, but think back to what the angel(s) said to Mary and Joseph. Did either of those messages talk about what Jesus would save us from? (hint: look at Matthew 1:20-21).
- **Christ:** Contrary to what some think, this isn't Jesus' last name. The Greek word *Christ* is a translation of the Hebrew word *Messiah*, which means, “anointed one.” This term was used frequently in the Old Testament to refer to those who had been anointed with oil to be king over God's people, especially David (Did you notice that his name came up again in this passage?).

Read Psalm 2

In this Psalm, the word *Messiah* (“anointed”) is used to refer to God's chosen king, whom God calls “my son” (v. 7). God sets him on the throne in Jerusalem to rule not just over Israel, but over all nations! The nations will rage against Messiah's rule, but they will not prevail. The Psalm ends with a call to the “rulers of the earth” to be wise and to swear their allegiance to God's Messiah:

Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him. (Psalm 2:12)

This Psalm (along with passages we've already read in 2 Samuel 7 and Isaiah 9 & 11) sums up the Jewish hope for the Messiah, or *Christ*: A promised descendant of David, who would enjoy a special father/son relationship with God, and would reign from Jerusalem as king of all nations. That's why it is such a big deal that the angel called Jesus the *Christ*. He wanted those shepherds to know that the baby born just over the hill (and lying in a feeding trough!) was the one all Israel had been longing for!

- **Lord:** This word refers to one who is master, controller or owner. During this time, it was used most significantly for the Roman emperor. The phrase “Caesar is Lord” became like the pledge of allegiance for those living in the Roman Empire. It acknowledged the complete authority, ownership, even *deity* of the Emperor. It is fascinating that Luke's account of Jesus' birth began with a decree from Caesar Augustus, the Roman “Lord,” which sent Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. Yet, while they were there, Mary gave birth to the one proclaimed as “Lord” by the angels of heaven!

Starting right from his birth, Luke wants us to see that Jesus' identity and mission are going to pose a threat to those in positions of power. Just as Psalm 2 says, the nations will rage against God's *Messiah*, but they will not prevail. Jesus will rule in judgment over all the nations of the earth. Those who oppose him will be destroyed, but those who take refuge in him—who swear their allegiance to Jesus as *Savior*, *Christ*, and *Lord*—will find life, peace, and blessing under His rule.

Pray

Week 3: The Angel Visits the Shepherds

Day 3: Majesty and Meekness

Light three candles, and recite John 8:12 -

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Yesterday, we read about the angel's announcement to the shepherd that "a savior, who is Christ the Lord" had been born. As amazing as it must have been to hear this news, what happened next probably knocked the shepherd's socks off!

Read Luke 2:13-20

As soon as the angel finished his announcement, "a multitude of the heavenly host" appeared with the angel. Perhaps you've pictured this as an angel choir, floating in the sky, singing four-part harmonies. While I'm sure it sounded incredible, the text never actually says that the angels were *singing*. It says they were *saying*. And they weren't an angel choir; they were an angel *army*—that's what the word "host" means. So what the shepherds saw and heard was probably less like a choir concert and more like the victory cry of an army—an army made up of supernatural warriors of light! I have no idea what that would have looked like, but I bet the sound was deafening! And *what* they said was even better:

"Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!"

The angels knew what was really going on in the events of that night. In the birth of this child, a chain of events had begun that would result in God receiving the highest glory and in peace to those with whom God is pleased.

See and Say

- After the angels left, what did the shepherds do?
- In v. 16, what did they see?
- In v. 17, what did they say to others? How did people respond?
- In v. 20, what did they say to God?

continued →

Week 3, Day 3 (continued)

In many ways, the responses of the shepherds and angels show us the effect we should expect this good news to have on us: to compel us to praise God and to share this good news with others—not out of guilt or compulsion, but out of “great joy” at what God has made known to us.

A Stark Contrast

Think for a moment about the two scenes the shepherds saw that night: Out in the fields, the shepherds were astounded by the majesty and wonder of the angel armies. But in the streets of Bethlehem, the child who was the reason for this glorious outburst lay obscurely, even embarrassingly, in a manger. Really? This is how “Christ the Lord” comes into the world? If his birth is marked by such a strange combination of glory and obscurity, of majesty and meekness, what will the rest of His life be like?

No Christmas song captures the tension of these two scenes better than *What Child Is This*. The lyrics are almost incredulous: “*This is Christ the King? This is the one the angels were singing about? What is he doing in a manger? Are you sure you’ve got the right baby?*” In response to these questions, each verse ends with the simple call to come and worship, because, even though He came in an unexpected way, “the babe, the son of Mary” is the one all the world has been waiting for.

Sing: *What Child Is This?*

*What child is this who laid to rest on Mary’s lap is sleeping
Whom angels greet with anthem sweet while shepherds watch are keeping?
This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing.
Haste, haste to bring him laud, the babe, the son of Mary*

*Why lies he in such mean estate, where ox and lamb are feeding?
Good Christian fear for sinners here. The silent word is pleading.
Nails, spear shall pierce him through. The cross be borne for me, for you.
Hail, hail the Word made flesh. The babe, the son of Mary*

*So bring him incense, gold and myrrh. Come peasant, king to own him
The King of Kings salvation brings. Let loving hearts enthrone him.
Raise, raise the song on high. The virgin sings her lullaby
Joy, joy for Christ is born. The babe, the son of Mary*

Pray

Week 4: The Magi Journey to Bethlehem

Day 1: Magi from the East

Light four candles, and recite John 8:12 -

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Read Matthew 2:1-12

The Magi

Though they appear in most nativity scenes, the "wise men" were not there on the night of Jesus' birth. Also, contrary to the song, there were probably more than three of them, and they weren't kings either. They were *Magi*, a priestly group from Persia or Babylon. Magi often served as advisors to kings and other important people. They used elements of religion, magical incantations, and astrology—the tracking of stars, planets, and other celestial bodies as they move across the night sky as a means of discerning future events on earth (fortune-telling). At the time of Jesus' birth, there was a large Jewish population living in Babylon (as many as one million), and it is likely that Babylonian Magi would have had some familiarity with Jewish culture and scripture. Since the Magi in Matthew 1 travel to Jerusalem in search of the "*king of the Jews*," it is likely that they came from Babylon.¹

The Journey

The journey from Babylon to Jerusalem covered about 900 miles, and would have taken the Magi at least a couple of months. Depending upon when the star first appeared, and how soon after this that they left, the Magi could have arrived in Judea a year or more after Jesus' birth. In v. 11, they found Jesus as a child in a home not as a baby in a manger, indicating that at least some time had passed since Jesus' birth. Also, when King Herod later tried to destroy Jesus, v. 16 says "*he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time he had ascertained from the wise men.*" Thus Jesus was probably 1-2 years old at the time of their visit.

The fact that the Magi used astrology to discern that the king of the Jews had been born is surprising, since God had prohibited the Israelites from practicing fortune-telling, divination, and the like (Deut. 18:9-14). Nevertheless, these pagan astrologers traveled all the way to Jerusalem, because they were so sure that the star had indicated that the promised Messianic king had been born. Moreover, they came bearing gifts—kingly gifts—to "worship," or pay homage, to Jesus (which Isaiah also prophesied! See Isaiah 60:1-6). Here again we see glimpses of how Jesus is going to change the status quo. Those who formerly were far-off from God and His people, geographically and spiritually, are being brought near—even as those who were the closest and should have been the quickest to worship Jesus remain ambivalent, or even lash out violently against him.

Two Parables

Later in the book of Matthew, Jesus told two parables to describe the type of people who would believe his message about the Kingdom of Heaven.

continued →

¹ Wilkins, Michael J. *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), p. 93.

Week 4, Day 1 (continued)

Read Matthew 13:44-46

- How do the two men in these parables differ from each other?
- How do both men respond to what they find?

The two groups who came to worship Jesus at his birth can be likened to the two men described in these parables. The shepherds in Luke 2 are like the man in the first parable: They were in a field, going about their business as usual, when they stumbled upon something they weren't even looking for. In their case, it wasn't a treasure in a field; it was an *angel* in a field, who came bearing news that the long-awaited Savior had been born. Once they heard the news, the shepherds left at once, found Jesus in the manger, spread the news to others, and praised God for what they saw and heard.

The Magi in Matthew 1 can be likened to the man in the second parable. A pearl merchant makes his living searching for fine pearls, so he is able to recognize the one pearl of surpassing value when he sees it. In the same way, the Magi made their living watching the stars. Their powers of observation were honed, though often in service to pagan deities. Yet, because their eyes were fixed on the skies, they were able to recognize the sign of the Star when it appeared, and were willing to go *way* out of their way to worship the one whose birth it signaled.

What about you?

If you are a Christian, think back to when you first believed the gospel: Was it something you were actively looking for, like the pearl merchant, or something you stumbled upon, like the man in the field? Can you remember how you felt when you first realized who Jesus is? Did you have a sense that it might cost you dearly to follow him?

Whether you were looking for Jesus or stumbled upon him, if you responded in faith and obedience, that was *God's* work in you. He gave you the ability to see "*the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*" (2 Cor. 4:6). He drew you to himself just as miraculously as He drew the Magi with the Star.

If you are not a follower of Jesus Christ, I am so excited that you are reading this. I pray that God will give you eyes to see how amazing Jesus is. Like the Magi, may you gladly go out of your way to worship Him—not just at Christmas, but with all of your life!

Sing: *O Come All Ye Faithful*

Verse 1:

*O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem
Come and behold him, born the King of angels*

Chorus:

*O come let us adore him,
O come let us adore him
O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord*

Verse 2:

*Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation
Sing all ye citizens of heaven above
Glory to God, all glory in the highest*

Verse 3:

*Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning
Jesus, to thee be all glory given
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing*

Pray

Week 4: The Magi Journey to Bethlehem

Day 2: We Saw His Star

Light four candles, and recite John 8:12 -

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Read Matthew 2:1-12

The Star

No aspect of Jesus' birth story has generated more speculation than this star. What was it? How did it behave the way it did: rising in the east, but directing the Magi west, then reappearing in the south/southwest to guide the Magi from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, and finally "standing" right above the one particular house where Jesus was? How did the Magi know that the appearance of this star meant that "the king of the Jews" had been born?

There have been many different theories about the nature of this star: a meteor, a supernova (exploding star), a conjunction of planets, even an angel appearing as a star. Earlier this year, Colin Nicholl, an Irish biblical scholar, published a compelling case that the Star of Bethlehem was likely a large, long-period comet, appearing sometime in 6-5 BC.² If it was a retrograde comet (orbiting the Sun in the opposite direction of Earth), it could have appeared in the variety of locations described in Matthew 2 over a matter of months.

Nicholl proposes that, at some point after its first appearance, this comet rose in the eastern sky just prior to sunrise. This dramatic, "morning star" rising would have had great astrological significance for the Magi, and may have been what prompted them to travel to Judea. By the time of their arrival in Jerusalem, the comet may have completed its journey around the sun, in which case it could have reappeared in the southern sky in time to "go before" the Magi during their short journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem (about 6 miles.) As they entered Bethlehem, the comet began to set on the horizon, dramatically "standing" with its tail pointing up into the sky, and its head directly above (and seeming to point to) the exact house where Jesus and his mother were staying.

The King

Even if the star was a comet, how did it indicate that the Jewish Messiah had been born? We don't know for certain, but there are two points of biblical evidence that may give us hints:

- **Daniel** – The book of Daniel records the story of a young man who was taken captive from his home in Judah and brought to Babylon. Once there, he was trained in the literature and wisdom of the Babylonians. Daniel then entered the king's service and was numbered among the "magicians and astrologers." Over the course of his life, God gave Daniel the ability to interpret dreams, as well as several visions of his own. These visions often include imagery of a future eternal kingdom (2:44) and a king – a "Son of Man," who receives authority from God to rule over all nations forever (7:13-14).

continued →

² Nicholl, Colin R. *The Great Christ Comet: Revealing the True Star of Bethlehem*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway: 2015) This is a fascinating read, though a bit technical in its discussion of the biblical text and cometary astronomy.

Week 4, Day 2 (continued)

While Daniel lived more than 500 years before the birth of Jesus, his association with Babylonian astrologers, and the fact that there was still a large contingent of Jews in Babylon at the time of Jesus' birth, could explain why Babylonian Magi were watching for the birth of a Jewish King. But how did they know to look for a *star* to signal his birth? For that, we need to look about 1,000 years earlier in Israel's history.

- **Balaam** – In Numbers 22-24, we find the Israelites encamped on the plains of Moab. God has brought them out from slavery in Egypt, and has led them through 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Finally, they are about to enter the Promised Land. When Balak, the king of Moab, sees this group of more than one million people camped in his territory, he is understandably terrified. So he summons Balaam, a renowned diviner from Mesopotamia, and promises him great riches and honor to come and curse Israel.

Surprisingly, Balaam first inquires of Yahweh, the God of Israel, to determine if he should take the job. Yahweh tells Balaam, *"You shall not go with them. You shall not curse this people, for they are blessed"* (22:12). Nevertheless, Balak offers Balaam more and more money, until finally it is too great of a deal for Balaam to refuse. So he agrees to take the job, on one condition: He will only speak the words that Yahweh gives him.

Balak takes Balaam to three different locations, from which he can look out over the whole camp of Israel. Balak offers sacrifices of bulls in an attempt to arouse God's favor. Yet each time Balaam speaks, he pronounces blessings on Israel, not curses. He even pronounces a curse on Balak for trying to curse Israel (24:9)! Balak is so furious that he commands Balaam to leave and refuses to pay him anything. But before Balaam leaves, there is one final message that God wants Balak to hear: (Numbers 24:17, 19)

I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near:

A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel...

And one from Jacob shall exercise dominion and destroy the survivors of cities!"

This is the only Old Testament prophecy that directly connects a star with the promised Jewish Messiah. The mention of a "scepter" could refer to the straight staff that kings would often carry,³ but it could also be a further description of the star itself. Biblical prophecy often uses parallelism: two phrases that repeat the same idea, with the second elaborating on the first. In this case, the "star" in the first statement is further described as a "scepter" in the second. According to Nicholl, the best candidate to play the role of this "star-scepter" is a large comet with a long, straight tail, stretching across the sky from east to west, so that, from the perspective of Magi in Babylon, it would seem to be "rising" out of Israel.⁴

A Light to the Nations

The point of all this is to remind us that the birth of Jesus is part of a much larger story. It stretches backward, far into the annals of Israel's history; and it extends outward, far beyond the borders of Israel's territory. Over the past three weeks, we have looked at a number of prophecies about the coming Messiah, written anywhere from 1400-400 BC. Each additional promise is like the effect of a pebble dropped in a still pond: the ripples grow bigger and spread wider the farther they go, until the whole pond is moving in rhythm. That's what the mission of Jesus is all about. The baby in the manger is going to make waves, and the effect of His work will reverberate throughout all creation! Even the heavens are declaring that everything is about to change!

³ See Gen. 49:10 for another Messianic prophecy that mentions a scepter.

⁴ In fact, the *New English Bible* translates the second phrase, "a comet will arise from Israel."

Week 4, Day 2 (continued)

The journey of the Magi reminds us that, even though Jesus came as the Son of David to fulfill the hopes of Israel, His mission was always much bigger than that:

*And now Yahweh says,
he who formed me from the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel may be gathered to him—
for I am honored in the eyes of Yahweh, and my God has become my strength—*

He says:

*“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”*

- Isaiah 49:5-6

Sing: *Joy to the World*

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her King
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing, and heaven and nature sing
And heaven, and heaven and nature sing*

*Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns. Let men their songs employ
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy, repeat the sounding joy
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy*

*He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove
The glories of his righteousness, and wonders of his love, and wonders of his love
And wonders, wonders of his love.*

*No more let sin and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground
He comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found, far as the curse is found
Far as, far as the curse is found.*

Pray

Week 4: The Magi Journey to Bethlehem

Day 3: His Own Did Not Receive Him

Light four candles, and recite John 8:12 -

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Read Matthew 2:1-23

So far this week we have looked at the Magi and their journey to Bethlehem to worship the newborn King Jesus. But now let's consider the other two parties that appear in this story: the chief priests & scribes, and King Herod.

The Chief Priests and Scribes

- Why does Herod assemble the chief priests & scribes?
- What question does he ask them? How do they respond?

Read Micah 5:2-4

- In v. 2, how does Micah describe the origin of this ruler?
- In v. 4, what will this king's rule be like? How far will his greatness extend?

This is really good news! We've already looked at a few passages that point to the future rule of this king (2 Samuel 7, Isaiah 9), but this passage speaks not just about his future, but also about his past: his *"origin is from of old, from ancient days."* This could be referring to Jesus' *eternal* past as God the Son (John 1:1, 8:58), or to the ancient "glory days" of Israel when David was king, like when Isaiah calls him the "shoot" and "root" of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1,10). Either way, Micah is driving home the point that this king will be more than just *another* king. He will embody the best of the best of the kings of Israel, and will extend his glory and rule far beyond all who came before him.

The scribes and chief priests had this good news, but it seems that the *goodness* of this news was lost on them! They knew right where to look when Herod asked them where the Messiah would be born. They had the right information, but it had no effect on them. The shepherds left their flocks to go see Jesus, the Magi traveled 900 miles to pay homage to the king, but the chief priests and scribes—the guardians of the spiritual life of Israel—felt no compulsion to rejoice at the news that the Messiah was born. They were able to direct the Magi where to go, but they never joined in the celebration! They never went and worshiped. Perhaps this was because, as people in positions of power and influence, they knew that the Messiah would disrupt a system that was working pretty well for them. To resist God's purpose because it doesn't fit with your own is a grave error. Indeed, the ambivalence of the chief priests at the news of Jesus' birth will metastasize over the next thirty years into open animosity, culminating in them leading the cry to "Crucify Him!"

But while it would take decades for the chief priests and scribes to get to that point, there was one person whose murderous intentions were clear right from the start...

continued →

Week 4, Day 3 (continued)

King Herod

- What was Herod's initial reaction to the Magi's arrival? Why do you think that was?
- In v. 8, why did Herod tell the Magi to bring him word once they had found the child? Why did they not do this?
- When Herod realized that the Magi did not return, how did he respond? Why?
- How did God protect Jesus from Herod's scheme?

There is a lot of irony in this sequence of events. In order to rescue his Son from the murderous paranoia of Herod, God sends him out of the Promised Land—the one place on earth on which God had set his name, and where He intended to share his presence with his people—and down into Egypt, the land where Israel had been oppressed as slaves for 400 years. Egypt was safer for the infant Messiah than the Promised Land. This says a lot about the spiritual climate of Israel at the time of Jesus' birth: *"He came to his own, but his own people did not receive him"* (John 1:11).

Fortunately, the anger of Herod was short-lived, literally. By 4 BC, Herod was dead, and the angel told Joseph that it was safe to return to Judea. Knowing that Bethlehem might still be in the crosshairs of those in power, Joseph and Mary returned with Jesus to their hometown of Nazareth.

The Real Enemy

This would be the first of many attempts on Jesus' life. His presence posed an unprecedented threat, not just to those in human positions of power, but even more to Satan, "the prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2). Ever since Genesis 3:15, Satan knew that a man would come, engage him in mortal combat, and rescue the world from the curse of sin and death. This is why Jesus was born. As 1 John 3:8 says, *"The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil."*

Satan tried repeatedly to tempt Jesus and derail his mission. Different groups attempted to kill Jesus, but these plots all failed, because Jesus' time had not yet come. In the end, Jesus would die, and Satan's scheming would play a part (John 13:27), but it would happen according to God's purpose and timing (Acts 2:23). Jesus himself said, *"...I lay down my life so that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again"* (John 10:17-18).

Jesus' whole life was lived in the shadow of the cross. He was born for this battle. He would wage war against Satan, sin and death by his *own* death. As the song says, "Nails, spear shall pierce him through. The cross be borne for me and you." Yet throughout Jesus' life, we also see glimmers of the glory of Easter morning. Just as Egypt (the "house of slavery") served as a place of rescue and safety from the wrath of Herod, so also the tomb (the "house of death") served as a kind of second womb from which Jesus rose victoriously as "the firstborn from among the dead" (Col. 1:18).

Through His death and resurrection, Jesus has gained victory over all who oppose him, and he has made a way for us to be reconciled to him, so that we may share in his victory and in the future kingdom He is bringing. This is why Christmas is such a big deal. It's the turning of the tide, the securing of a beachhead in God's gracious invasion to heal His broken world.

Week 4, Day 3 (continued)

Sing: *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*

*Hark, the herald angels sing, Glory to the newborn King
Peace on earth and mercy mild. God and sinners reconciled
Joyful all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies
With angelic host proclaim, Christ is born in Bethlehem
Hark, the herald angels sing, Glory to the newborn King!*

*Christ by highest heaven adored, Christ the everlasting Lord
Late in time behold him come, offspring of the virgin's womb
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail the incarnate deity
Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Immanuel
Hark, the herald angels sing, Glory to the newborn King!*

*Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace, Hail the Son of Righteousness
Light and life to all he brings, Risen with healing in his wings
Mild, he lays his glory by, born that men no more may die
Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth
Hark, the herald angels sing, Glory to the newborn King!*

Pray

Christmas Eve/Day

Christmas is About Family

Light all five candles (including the Jesus candle), and recite John 8:12 -

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

The Beginning of Everything

Matthew and Luke begin their gospels with the story of Jesus' birth, but the Apostle John decided to start his account much earlier—at the beginning of everything.

Read John 1:1-18

This is one of the most glorious passages in Scripture. John speaks of Jesus as the "Word" – wisdom and truth embodied in a Person. He speaks of Jesus eternally being with God, and eternally *being* God. He identifies Jesus as the Creator of Everything, and the source of Life. He is the "true light" that shines in the darkness. This is why we have been reciting John 8:12 all month. Each week we have lit an additional candle, and today all five candles are lit, because this is the day when we celebrate that "*the true light that enlightens everyone [has come] into the world.*"

Yet did you notice what verse 10 says? "*He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.*" Jesus went unnoticed throughout most of his life. The Creator of the universe was a stranger in the world he had made. Even as he revealed his identity through his words and actions, those who should have been the quickest to recognize him were his most violent opponents. "*He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him*" (v. 11).

But did you catch verse 12? Though most rejected him, "*to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.*" This is amazing! Throughout this month, we have seen so many promises about Jesus being the promised Messiah, who will bring peace and wholeness to all of creation. Here in John 1, we have one of the clearest statements about what that wholeness will be like for those who believe: Adoption! We are brought into the very family of God! He becomes our Father, and we become His children! This is astounding.

Bringing the Family Together

One of the things I love about Christmas in our culture is how much we value being together with family. We will travel across the country, or even to other countries, in order to be together for Christmas. We write songs about how much we want to be "home for Christmas." It just seems like Christmas and family go hand in hand.

This is also what can make Christmastime so hard. When family relationships are strained or broken, the mixture of fond memories of how things used to be and the pain of the way things are now can make this season unbearable. The void left by family members who have passed away always seem larger at Christmastime, even if decades have gone by. Younger family members may not know any different, but for those who remember what it was like before, there will always be someone missing from the table.

continued →

Christmas Eve/Day (continued)

There is a weight that comes with remembering how things used to be, and God knows this better than any of us. Who other than God can remember what it was like to walk with Adam and Eve in the Garden in the cool of the day (Gen. 3:8)? Unbroken fellowship with his image-bearers, in a world uncorrupted by the curse of sin and death—only God knows what that was like! When that relationship was broken, and everything began to unravel, and God had to drive Adam and Eve out of the Garden, He alone knew just how bad things would get—and just how far he would have to go to bring us back.

A Relentless Pursuit

The entire biblical story is driven forward by God's relentless pursuit of His people—his desire to win us back, even as we keep running further from Him. In the beginning, God wanted a people to live in *relationship* with him and *reflect* him in his world. Our rebellion hasn't changed God's desire—it just makes it much harder. Yet God will stop at nothing to bring His family back together.

God took Abraham, made his family into a great nation, rescued them from slavery in Egypt, and formed a special relationship with them: *"I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God"* (Ex. 6:7). Then he set them at the crossroads of the nations, so that they might be his display people, living out their relationship with God before the nations, so that others may come to know Him. There was only one problem: the display people didn't want to display! They kept running after other gods, other kings, other things, instead of Him. God was patient, and called out to them again and again, but they continued to stray.

*I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me;
I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me.
I said, "Here am I, here am I," to a nation that did not call upon my name.
I spread out my hands all day to a rebellious people,
who walk in ways that are not good, following their own devices
a people who provoke me to my face continually...* - Isaiah 65:1-3a

Even when God took on flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, and came to Israel as their Messiah, *"his own people did not receive him"* (John 1:11). Just days before his crucifixion, Jesus lamented over his people in words that are heavy with sadness, anger, and *affection*:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often I would have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! - Matthew 23:37

Jesus knew that, in a matter of hours, the people would call for his execution, but he wanted them to know how much he still wanted a relationship with them! He did not fight against them, did not resist their plot to destroy him. He humbled himself, even to the point of death on a cross (Phil. 2:8), because He knew that this was the only way to break the rebellion within our hearts! He was put to death by sinful men in order to save men from their sin! By suffering the ultimate rejection, He has made a way for us to be reconciled.

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but made alive by the Spirit. - 1 Peter 3:18

Jesus came near to us in order to bring us near to God. He has given us *"the right to become children of God,"* (John 1:12) and he has given us His Spirit to bear witness that we really have been adopted into God's family (Rom. 8:15-16). May we never lose sight of how amazing this grace is!

Christmas Eve/Day (continued)

Gloriously Familiar

God is bringing his family back together! The relationship that was broken in the Garden has been reconciled by Jesus, and will be fully reconciled when he comes again. He will forever cast out all who oppose Him, and those who believe will be with him forever:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.”

- Revelation 21:3-5

Can you imagine what this will be like? It will be new to us, but for God I imagine it will be gloriously familiar. This is how it used to be—and what he always intended it to become! Finally, the family will be back together, never to be parted again.

Remembrance and Expectation

This Christmas, may you stand in awe of Jesus, the one who came to us in order to bring us to himself. As you gather with your family, even with all of its missing pieces and imperfections, may you remember God’s relentless desire to gather *his* family together from every tribe, tongue, and nation (Rev. 5:9-10). Advent is a season of remembrance and expectation: As we celebrate the glory of Jesus’ first coming, we eagerly anticipate the day he comes again.

“Surely, I am coming soon!” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. - Revelation 22:20

Sing: Come Thou Long Expected Jesus

*Come thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free.
From our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art.
Dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.*

*Born thy people to deliver, born a child and yet a king
Born to reign in us forever, now thy gracious kingdom bring.
By thine own eternal Spirit, rule in all our hearts alone;
By thine all sufficient merit, raise us to thy glorious throne.*

Pray