

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord his God, and he shall be great to the ends of the earth; for he shall be their peace. There shall be a great light; you shall have increased at the harvest time. For the yoke of the rod of the staff of Midian. Tumult and war shall be as fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.



ANTICIPATING CHRISTMAS

AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

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CHRISTMAS

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Anticipating Christmas: An Advent Devotional

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INTRODUCTION

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The Old Testament is full of prophecies foretelling the birth of Jesus, our Savior and Messiah. These Old Testament prophecies along with the New Testament narrative give a full picture of the story of redemption.

Salem's Advent devotional this year, *Anticipating Christmas*, draws on these Old Testament prophecies and utilizes the familiar New Testament passages about the birth of Christ.

ANTICIPATING CHRISTMAS

Anticipating Christmas is a four-week devotional that guides you through the Advent season. As you read through the devotions, allow the Holy Spirit to show you how the story of redemption is evident in all Scripture.

STRUCTURE

This book is separated into four sections—one for each week of Advent. Each day has a main Scripture passage, devotional thought, and a prayer. We encourage you to carve out some time each day to read through the Scripture passage. You may even want to look at the verses before and after each passage to give you an idea of the context. The deeper you dig into God's word, the more wonderful meaning you will find.

Thanks to Salem's members and staff for their contributions to *Anticipating Christmas*. Your creativity, hard work, and love for God are evident in these pages.

May you encounter the Savior in a new, fresh, and exciting way this Christmas season.

WEEK
ONE

HERALD THE GOOD NEWS

ISAIAH 40:9-11 | BY BRIAN JENNINGS

Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" — Isaiah 40:9

WHEN THE GREEKS DEFEATED THE PERSIANS AT THE BATTLE OF MARATHON in 490 B.C., a messenger named Pheidippides ran on foot over 25 miles to Athens to announce the victory. When Congress ratified the Declaration of Independence on July 4th, 1776, John Dunlap worked through the night to print 200 copies which were distributed across the country with one making it across the Atlantic, months later, to King George III. When the Apollo 11 astronauts landed on the moon, a camera transmitted the images through a gold-plated antenna 250,000 miles to a radio telescope in Australia, from there to NASA, and then out to 650 million people watching on their television sets. Today, we can receive good news in an instant, notified by our phones in real time as events unfold.

If you had good news to get out in the 8th century B.C., the quickest way was to find the loudest voice, from the highest place, surrounded by the most ears. The good news of Isaiah 40 is that God will come through for His people. He will reveal His glory, bring peace, give comfort, pardon sin, and gather His flock. They had experienced great suffering – war, famine, injustice, oppression, exile. But their God had not abandoned them. Isaiah instructs the people in 40:9-10, “*Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Behold your God!’ Behold, the Lord God comes with might.*” A day is coming when the Lord will arrive to make things right, gather His people and care for them. He will win their battle, declare their independence, and land them in a good place.

This good news was experienced in part when God defeated the enemies of Judah, brought them back from exile, and restored their land. But an even greater experience was still coming – not just for Judah, but for all people. Christmas is the fulfillment and declaration of this good news! The birth of Jesus was announced by angels and a star in the heavens. Our God had truly come, not in might, but as a baby in a manger. He came to tend His flock, gather the lambs of the nations, and gently lead them to salvation. This announcement, first heard by shepherds and wise men, has been told across the earth, printed in countless books, and transmitted to millions of screens. But as widely as it is now known, let us not miss our opportunity to herald the good news: joy to the world, the Lord has come!

Prayer

O Lord, help me take this good news to heart and to share it with others this season.

Amen

THE BLOODLINE & THE BLESSING

ISAIAH 52:7-9 | BY ANDREW OSBORNE

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." — Isaiah 52:7

The imagery in Isaiah 52:7-9 and after stands in stark contrast to the verses and chapters leading up to it. The preceding chapters paint a despairing and even hopeless picture: *"Thus says the Lord... to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation" (49:7) "But Zion said, 'the Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.'" (49:14) "Behold, for your iniquities you were sold..." (50:1)*

Isaiah 51 marks the begin of a turn in the tone, as God pleads for His people to *"Wake yourself, wake yourself, stand up O Jerusalem" (51:17) "Therefore hear this, you who are afflicted," (51:21) Hear what? Hear that "I have taken from your hand the cup of staggering; the bowl of my wrath you shall drink no more;" (51:22)*

This is the good news that the messenger brings in verse 7, the Lord has promised a reprieve! He has said that His people *"shall know My name."* (52:6) and *"All the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God" (52:10)*

What a contrast! It's commonplace for us to say that God has brought us "from death to life" but how often do we stop and really contemplate what that means? What was the death He brought us out of? What was our life like before, or what would it be like now, without Him?

Sometimes those who are most active in their faith can run the risk of becoming so used to the goodness of God that they forget just how much of the goodness they experience each day comes directly from God's hand.

No matter how good something is, if you experience it every single day how quickly it just becomes "normal" and maybe even unremarkable! I know this is what I experience every time I get a fancy new piece of tech like a new computer, phone or camera. It is amazing for a while but it doesn't take long before it just IS and my eyes are on to the next thing.

It is good for us to make an intentional effort once in a while to really stop and think about what God's goodness in our lives actually is, what it would be like to not know God, to not have had His hand directing our path.

We need to recognize what He has done for us, thank Him for it, and let it motivate us to become messengers of the Gospel ourselves, to bear *"the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'" to the world around us.*

Prayer

Heavenly Father, help me to recognize the new life you have given me and all the good gifts that have come with it. Help me not to become so used to Your goodness that I fail to recognize Your blessings in every aspect of my life.

Amen

THE MASTER LIE

GENESIS 3:8-15 | BY EMILY JENNINGS

The Lord God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

— Genesis 3:14-15

GOD MUST NOT LOVE ME.

Some lies are unthinkable bold, but most are subtle. Seasoned Christians can slice through obvious ones with familiar texts, but softer, more sinister lies lurk in familiar language near our doubts.

Adam and Eve deserve our compassion. We draw from a deep well of spiritual resources – a complete Bible, curriculum, podcasts, sermons, books, conferences, mentors, small groups and on and on. Adam and Eve’s only reference point for God was God. It seems that God Himself versus our millennia of spiritual progress are effectively a wash in our arsenal for combating lies. We continue believing the same lie they did: God must not love me.

This lie is the master lie and the bitter root of every sin, each doubt, all fear, and (naturally) every other lie. The enemy wields it in countless ways. Just as it drew our first parents toward the tree, the lie draws us into destruction. Satan could take the Job route and decimate economies and families, but that’s wholly unnecessary. The lie works. But the lie is running out of time.

God cursed the serpent with a mortal blow from one man, the Christ. This isn’t only a future promise but a right now promise. The reality of Jesus’ birth utterly crushes to dust the lie that God must not love you. Instead of leaving us under siege, God the Son left Heaven and entered our war to save us as one of us. Yet, the enemy is quietly knitting the lie through your life: If God loved me, He wouldn’t have let this happen. If God loves me, why didn’t He answer my prayer? Between the pain of today and the bliss of Heaven, God has gifted you the steadfast anchors of Jesus’ incarnation and victory over Satan. The lie is finished.

Jesus loves you, this you know. He will crush the snake to tell you so.

Prayer

God, train my mind and heart to crush the master lie by fixing on Jesus’ incarnation and Satan’s demise. Let these events inform my thoughts, words, feelings, deeds, and circumstances.

Amen

FROM STONE TO FLESH

EZEKIEL 36:22-27 | BY KASEY COOPER

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. — Ezekiel 36:22

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT, WE SEE WHAT GREAT LENGTHS God goes to in order to rescue and redeem His people. Each one of these times, the Israelites are less than deserving of restoration, yet our merciful God continues to pursue them. It is such a blessing to read about what God has done in Scripture and how He chooses to reveal His reasoning of redemption. Ezekiel 36:22 says, “*Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of My holy Name.*” Earlier in Ezekiel, the Israelites’ disobedience leads to the profaning of His name among the nations, and now they are now in desperate need of a Savior.

How similar the ancient Israelites are to us today. There is nothing we could have done and there was no other reason for God to send us His Son than the upholding of His awesome and holy Name and to bring glory to Himself by showing His great love for us. We must recognize just how much we need a Savior in order to effectively worship Him with our whole hearts. God proclaims, “*I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh*” (Ezek 36:25-26).

When we give our lives to Jesus, He not only cleanses us from our sins, but God transforms our heart of stone into a heart of flesh. We are a new creation whose hearts long to worship our King and it is only Jesus who can bring a dead heart to life in Him. Jesus is holy and good. He satisfies our hearts with joy so that we can rejoice in honoring His name.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you for giving us such a wonderful gift of a new heart. It is not an improved version of our old hearts, but You have come to live within us and transform us. We ask that You continue to break down the hard parts of our hearts and restore them with Your love and truth. In Jesus’s name. .

Amen

GOD'S PROMISES NEVER EXPIRE

GENESIS 15:1-6 | BY LARRY GREEN

He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

*Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.
— Genesis 15:5-6*

BY THE STANDARDS OF HIS DAY, ABRAM/ABRAHAM WAS A WEALTHY MAN, with gold and silver, servants, and vast flocks and herds of livestock. Before leaving Mesopotamia to go to the promised land, God had appeared to him, promising that He would make him into a great nation, and that all peoples on earth would be blessed through him (Gen. 12:2, 3b). Quite a promise to a rich old man.

Yet despite his great wealth, he was still poor — he was childless, and so his fortune would pass not to a blood descendant, but to a servant. But God had other plans. He appeared to Abraham and said, *"I am your shield, your very great reward. (...) This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir. (...) Look up at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be."* (Gen. 15:1, 4-5)

God's promise must have seemed impossible. Nevertheless, Abraham believed God, and at the right time his son Isaac was born — one little child, a small start; but we can almost hear God telling Abraham, "I'm only getting started." Abraham's descendants, a relatively small group, went to Egypt to escape famine. There they *"multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous"* (Ex. 1:7) By the time they left Egypt some 400 years later, they numbered in the hundreds of thousands.

In Bethlehem at the right time some 2000 years ago, another baby was born, Jesus the Messiah, fulfilling the promise to Abraham that all the peoples of the earth would be blessed through him. And now all who belong to Christ are Abraham's offspring, and God's promise, given so many years ago, remains true: *"Look up at the heavens and count the stars — if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be."*

Prayer

As we meditate on the Messiah's coming, let us remember that You are able to do infinitely more than we can imagine in ways that we cannot fathom.

Amen 7

GOD'S PROMISED PROPHET

DEUTERONOMY 18:15-19 | BY SCOTT LONG

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen — Deuteronomy 18:15-19

FROM THE VERY EARLIEST DAYS OF ISRAEL'S EXISTENCE, the Jews struggled with living faithfully in the immediate presence of a God who lovingly cared for them. Even from the time of Mount Sinai, when God came down to the mountain, His presence terrified them and they begged Moses to be the intermediary between God and them. This worked for a while, but ultimately, they still neglected to live faithfully according to His commands. And unfortunately, given that Moses was human, he would not be around forever to intercede on their behalf, so what would come of them? In this moment of need, God stepped in and provided for His chosen people.

In this passage, Moses assured the people that after he was gone, God would raise up a prophet from among them and that they needed to trust in the words he would speak to them. Moses told them that his prophet would be trustworthy because of four truths. He said the true prophet would:

1. *...be sent by God.* – Verses 15 and 18
2. *...be like God's model, Moses.* – Vs.15
3. *...speak God's message.* – Verse 18
4. *...carry God's authority.* – Verse 19

While we see numerous examples of this type of prophet throughout the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures, the ultimate fulfillment of this promise of a True Prophet from God is found in Jesus Christ alone!

1. *Just like Moses promised, Jesus was sent by God.* – (1 Jn.4:9)
2. *Jesus was recognized by Luke as the Prophet who was like Moses* – (Acts 3:22)
3. *Just like the prophet referred to by Moses, Jesus spoke God's message.* – (Jn.7:16; 8:26; 12:49-50; and 14:24)
4. *Like the prophet in Deuteronomy, Jesus would carry God's authority.* – (Mt.28:19)

Through Moses, God promised that one day He would send someone to His people, who, like Moses, would speak His very words. Because this person would have God's authority, we must both listen to and obey Him (Dt.18:15,19). Jesus is the One that God was preparing us for. As we prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth, make sure your heart is focused on listening to Him – for He alone bring us God's words of truth and life!

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you alone bring God's words of truth and life. Help me to listen and obey when you speak...

Amen

SING TO PREPARE FOR CHRISTMAS

PSALM 89:1-4 | BY CRAIG HARDEE

*“I will sing of the steadfast love of the Lord, forever;
With my mouth I will make known your faithfulness to all generations.*

— *Psalm 89:1*

TERRY WAS A YOUNG BOY IN THE CHILDREN’S WORSHIP I led in a church in Florida many years ago. He was a likable kid, but very rambunctious. However, he loved to sing. When it came to be close to Christmas, one of the songs we sang was “Go Tell It on the Mountain.” Terry loved “Go Tell It on the Mountain.” He wanted to sing it every week and when we sang it, Terry was very well behaved. So, we sang it every week, until February!

As we get ready for Christmas, we need to be as enthusiastic about singing in preparation for Christmas as Terry was about singing “Go Tell It on the Mountain.”

The writer of Psalm 89 was known to be a very wise man. Only Solomon was wiser (1 Kings 4:31). So when one of the wisest men in history says that he will sing of the steadfast love of the Lord forever, we need to take note and prepare by singing.

We are blessed to have so many awesome songs to sing in preparation for Christmas. My little buddy Terry (who’s actually an adult by now) would suggest we sing “Go Tell It on the Mountain.” But there are many other songs to choose from.

Find opportunities to sing. Sing with us during our worship services. Sing in the shower. Sing with your family. Sing with your friends. Sing by yourself. Sing with others.

May we glorify God as we prepare for Christmas by singing!

Prayer

Father, thank you for the chance to worship you through song as we prepare for Christmas.

Amen 9

WEEK
TWO

A RIGHTEOUS BRANCH WHO GIVES US PEACE

ISAIAH 11:1-10 | BY NITA GREEN

*There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. — Isaiah 11:1*

THE ASSYRIANS ALL BUT DESTROYED JUDAH, but it was the Babylonian exile that brought the kingdom of Judah to an end in 586 BC. The prophecy tells us the Messiah would grow as a shoot from that stump of David's dynasty, from which Jesse was David's father. The Branch will bear fruit and the seven aspects of the Spirit of God will rest on him (the Messiah): he will *"delight in the fear of the Lord."* He will be righteous in judgement, provide justice in decisions, strike the earth with the rod of his mouth and his breath will slay the wicked. His clothing will be made of righteousness and faithfulness. He will be empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will endow Him with wisdom to undertake wise purposes and with the power to carry them out. God's redemption is in the midst of grave judgement on Israel's sin. Only a loving God would do such a thing and provide a way for mankind to repent and make peace with a Savior coming into this world... for us!! He has always had a plan for us, even in the turmoil of sin and destruction we bring upon ourselves.

Verses 6–9 provide examples of how peace will arrive and be seen: the wolf will live with the lamb; the leopard will lie down with the goat; the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them; the cow will feed the bear; their young will lie down together; the lion will eat straw like the ox; the infant will play near the cobra; the young child will put his hand into the viper's nest. What peace and safety! The Messianic age will be one of contentment... just think about it. Oh how we long for it now!

We can have that inner peace now as we know in the 21st century how God made the way for us! The shoot from Jesse became a live human being come down from the Father to be a Baby in a Manager, who would one day take our place on the cross and died that we might live with Him in eternity. He truly is our King Messiah! Praise his name!

During this season of Advent, let us look for the shoot of Jesse, our Messiah who comes to give us peace in a crazy world. He will come to reign as our Prince of Peace in our heart so we can have contentment in a relationship with Him.

Prayer

Dear Father, thank you for providing the shoot of Jesse and giving us this promise. Give us peace and contentment in knowing you as our Savior. Help us to show that peace to others and so they too will come to know you as their Prince of Peace.

Amen

BETWEEN THE PEAKS

MICAH 5:1-6 | BY MIKE COOPER

Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the judge of Israel on the cheek. — Micah 5:1-6

I LOVE TO GO TO THE MOUNTAINS. That first moment when you come around the bend, the road ahead opens up, and the whole mountain range comes into view is one of the most beautiful sights. From miles away the mountain peaks all look very close to one another like one huge never-ending mountain. This is the perspective Micah has in today's verses, because while God allowed his prophets to have glimpses into the future, they didn't get all the details. For them it was like looking at a mountain range off in the distance.

Verse 1 tells us of a siege which results in Israel's king being struck by the rod. The king of Israel was meant to judge and to strike with the rod. But the roles are reversed and Israel's king is going to be humiliated. It is within this drab picture of the King's failure that Micah paints a glorious mountain landscape of a royal king to come.

This King, being born in Bethlehem, will descend from the line of David and fulfill God's covenant that a Davidic king would sit on the throne of Israel forever. However, he won't just be any king as his origin is *"from of old, from ancient of days."* This coming King would be eternal. Verses 4-5 tell us what this king's rule will be like. He shall rule over a united Israel and will rule with justice and care for his people and he will not only bring peace but he will be their peace.

However, as you draw closer to the mountains and you go on a hike and stand on one of those peaks, you will notice the deep canyons or vast valleys that separate them. You see the mountains were really not close together at all. And because we have the benefit of New Testament revelation and historical hindsight, we understand that hidden within the mystery of God's redemptive plan for the world is a plan to send the Messiah in two distinct advents, or "mountain peaks."

In these verses we see both mountain peaks mentioned at the same time. In the early verses of Micah 5 we have this very clear picture of the first advent of the Messiah. God's own Son who put on human flesh and was born in Bethlehem. We also see a clear picture about the second advent of the Messiah: Jesus will return to unite and reign over Israel as her forever, conquering King. We live between these two peaks. We know there was a King who came, and he died, and he rose and ascended to the Father. We know this King is returning. As we wait, Jesus lives to be your shepherd and in Him you have security. In Him, you can rest and dwell secure. He is your peace.

Prayer

Father, help us to rest in your promise that Jesus will one day come again. Thank you for sending him to save us from our sins and to be our Good Shepherd and suffering servant.

Amen

THE BRANCH

ZECHARIAH 6:12–13 | BY JEFF OLDS

And say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts, “Behold, the man whose name is the Branch: for he shall branch out from his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord.

It is he who shall build the temple of the Lord and shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule on his throne. And there shall be a priest on his throne, and the counsel of peace shall be between them both.” — Zechariah 6:12–13

THIS PASSAGE, AT FIRST READING, MAY APPEAR TO HAVE LITTLE to do with the Advent of our Lord, but this is definitely not the case. The online commentary, Enduring Word, brings to light several really exciting thoughts.

The **Branch** is a familiar title for the Messiah (see Isaiah 4:2 and 11:1, Jeremiah 23:5 and 33:15) and refers to fruitfulness and life. It is the same image Christ uses in John 15:5 when He refers to Himself as the vine and us as the branches.

The passage begins with the phrase “Behold the Man”. These are the very words Pilate used when presenting the beaten Christ to the crowds in Jerusalem. But in Zechariah, it is the triumphant Jesus we are asked to behold.

The **Branch** will build the temple of the LORD. This is not a physical temple, but the temple of His people (Ephesians 2:19-22, 1 Peter 2:5).

The **Branch** shall be a priest on His throne. The Enduring Word commentary says, “This was an unthinkable concept previously in Israel because priests did not sit on thrones and kings did not serve as priests. Nevertheless, the **Branch** is different; He rules as both a King and Priest.”

Jesus is the **Branch**!

Prayer

*Father, during this Advent Season, may **Jesus (the Branch)** rule the throne of my heart as King and Priest.*

Amen

DESIRE SOON FULFILLED

MALACHI 3:1-6 | BY JEFF FISHER

“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty — Malachi 3:1

MY AUTISTIC NEIGHBOR LOOKS FORWARD EVERY DAY TO RECEIVING THE MAIL. He hears the truck coming down the street and excitedly comes outside to wait for the mail truck. The truck first comes to my side of the street, goes up the hill and makes a U-Turn to come down my neighbor’s side. He can’t wait until the truck gets to his box to see if he got any letters. Sometimes he will even wave the letters in the air after receiving them!

I get exciting when I see Santa Claus stop at my house and come up my walkway. Not the jolly, red hat Santa... but my Amazon deliverer! Often, I will meet the driver on the sidewalk and say, “Yea! Santa Claus!” My excitement builds up in a way not unlike my neighbor’s.

Anticipation. A building excitement. A longing for a promised delivery.

God was sending a “messenger” to the Israelites to prepare the way for THE “messenger”. John the Baptist is the first messenger mentioned in this verse. He was coming to prepare the way for the Ultimate messenger of the covenant, Jesus. The longed for, desired Messiah was on His way.

Meditate today on the phrase “whom you desire.”

Put yourself in the place of God’s people who were struggling, suffering, waiting, and longing for a Deliverer. Think about the intensity of their longing. Think about how it has built up, especially as their circumstances changed.

What about you? What are you longing for? What are you waiting for? What do you really desire?

Ask God to show you today. Ask God if your desire matches what His will for you is.

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. — *Hymn by Charles Wesley*

Prayer

God, help me to long for you. Help me to desire You. Help me to look in anticipation to Your visits to my life.

Amen

CONTEXT CLARIFIES THE PICTURE OF CHRISTMAS

JOHN 1:1-8 | BY MIKE MCMORRIS

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
— John 1:1*

HAVE YOU EVER LOOKED AT A PAINTING OR PHOTOGRAPH AND NOT UNDERSTOOD WHAT YOU WERE SEEING? Perhaps the picture had people, places, actions, or expressions that did not make sense. Often what is missing in these instances is context. If you just knew the backstory to the image it would make more sense. How do you think people picture Christmas? Who is the focus? Most people will acknowledge that Jesus of Nazareth was a historical character, a great man, a special figure, and/or a prophet. You don't have to look far to see that many people have differing views on the meaning of Christmas – if only people could picture Christmas in the intended context.

I love the book of John for many reasons, one is that it gives us context for Jesus Christ. Take a moment and read through John 1:1-8 with me.

The verses stand alone as God-breathed inspired text introducing Jesus Christ as the Word. Later in verse 14 John writes “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...*” Jesus is the central theme of the Bible and the only relevant context for Christmas. The Savior, celebrated on Christmas, has been eternally present with God the Father and is God. We learn about Jesus as Creator of all things and that in Him is life which is the light of men. Apart from Jesus, mankind is not headed in a way that leads to life. Romans 6:23 reads “*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” Since all have sinned, left alone, all are headed for death – but there is hope in the light. Jesus is that hope and only through Him is true, abundant, eternal life possible.

Verses 6 and 7 speak of John the Baptist and His calling to bear witness about the light of the world, Jesus Christ. John went to prepare the way for the Lord, in part by giving context for the one who would follow John, one greater. Take this opportunity during Christmas and throughout the year to prayerfully share the truth about Jesus – the Creator, Sustainer, and Savior of the world in whom is light and life.

Prayer

Lord, thank you for revealing who you are to your people. Please guide our paths so that we may shine your light through our actions and words. May all hear the good news, the Savior of the world has come and His name is Jesus.

Amen

JESUS THE ONE TRUE LIGHT

JOHN 1:9-18 | BY MARK THOMPSON

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. — John 1:9

LIGHT IS AN AMAZING THING. If you want to, you can get really nerdy about light. We can produce different colors of light based on its wavelength. We can quantitatively measure the brightness of light. We can even measure how well it reveals the colors of objects it illuminates when compared to sunlight, which remains the baseline for excellent light quality. As it turns out, God's design for light was good (to use His word).

Jesus is described as the "true light", and despite the power of the sun, Jesus is far more brilliant.

For those of us who have experienced His saving grace, it's easy to understand the imagery of Jesus taking us from darkness to light – from lost and aimless to saved and purposeful.

Here in John 1, we see mastery of God's plan for salvation, which is different from all other religions. God did not plan to save his people through their good behavior, or through providing instructions on the right sacrifices to be made. Instead Christ, being fully God, came to His creation and people in the form of a humble child to live a perfect life, die the death we deserve and break the chains of sin and death for everyone.

Our role in this is small. We're simply told to receive Christ. That's part of the gift – that it's not our doing, but rather fully God's grace to extend. We're not capable of saving ourselves. Look at the imagery in verses 12 and 13. Those who receive Christ and believe in Him have the right to become children of God, born of God. Jesus says the same thing later in John 3, that one must be "born again." In both cases, we are unable to complete that task. Infants do not direct their own births. They're powerless. Similarly, as Nicodemus asks in John 3, how can a person be physically born again? It's impossible, which is precisely the point.

This should give us confidence in ministry when we receive Christ and ultimately the Spirit of God. God has saved us and only He can save others. It's not our job to change the hearts of everyone. But we should share the true light with the world through our words and actions. We serve a good God, full of truth and grace. And our world needs to meet Him.

Prayer

Jesus, thank you for coming to your creation to save us. Help me to share your light with my community...

Amen

KNOWING AND FOLLOWING THE WAY

MARK 1:1-3 | BY DENNIS COTTEN

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger to you, who will prepare your way — "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"
— Mark 1:1-3

AS WE CONTINUE TO FOCUS ON THE CHRISTMAS SEASON, it is important that we focus on God's way, or pathway, for our lives. In the scripture from Mark 1;1-3, the message gets right to the point. *"The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God."* In other words, the story of Jesus' life, teachings and good news of salvation in Jesus Christ.

The scripture prefaces this beginning by relating the prophecy of Isaiah. Notice the introduction of John the Baptist as a messenger whose purpose is to prepare the way for the Lord. And he did it. He obediently accomplished the way in which God established.

Well, what is the way for us? John 3:16 reveals *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* Jesus is the sacrifice for our sin. Later in John 14:6, Jesus proclaims *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

So there it is. The only way for our ultimate salvation from sin. The birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus reveals the truth of God for us. God's passion for us is evident in that He is determined for us to know the way of salvation and eternal life with Him.

Now, let us appreciate that the way is not only a destination, but a journey. As we travel through our lives, we must strive to stay true to our salvation even through the challenges of life. We are not alone. In Romans 5:5, God's Holy Word reveals *"And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."* Jesus showed us the way and the Holy Spirit continues to show us the way. Now that is the perfect combination gift!

In other words, the way is already prepared for us to follow during our journey in this life, we just need to stay on track.

Prayer

Blessed Lord God, thank you for sending your Son for showing us the way of salvation from our sin. Your Holy Spirit provides for us the way we should follow to eternity with our Heavenly Father through our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen

WEEK
THREE

THE FORERUNNER

LUKE 1:14-17 | BY GREG OWEN

...and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared. — Luke 1:17

F ORERUNNER (NOUN):

- 1: one that precedes and indicates the approach of another: such as
 - a: a premonitory sign or symptom
 - b: a skier who runs the course before the start of a race
- 2: one going or sent before to give notice of the approach of others: harbinger
- 3: predecessor, ancestor

In Luke 1:14-17 we read about when the angel Gabriel visits Zechariah and tells him that Elizabeth (who was barren) will bear him a son who will become John the Baptist. John's ministry was to get the people ready for Jesus' earthly ministry.

Before Jesus came to the earth the first time, John the Baptist was sent as a forerunner to prepare the people. Gabriel told Zechariah that John would *"turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God,"* and *"turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."*

When I think of indicators that signify the approach of Christmas a few worldly items come to mind: Christmas decorations in stores (way too early!), Christmas music on the radio (again, way too early!), the Elf on the Shelf and Santa's Naughty and Nice list. These last two items also serve the purpose of hopefully getting our kids to slightly change their behavior in hopes of getting more or better Christmas presents. Our kids know Santa is coming and bringing them gifts, so they want to behave better.

John prepared the people for Jesus' earthly ministry and many people turned to the "Lord their God." Even now in today's times, we should be preparing others for Jesus' second coming so that they can turn their hearts and be ready for Jesus' return. Just as our children want to be on Santa's nice list, we should want to be on Jesus' "nice" list. As we prepare for the coming celebration of Jesus' birth this year, we should not just change our behavior for two months out of the year, but for the entire year.

Prayer

Dear Lord, help us - through our words, our actions, and our prayers - to help You prepare a way for others to come to You during this season of Advent, and throughout the entire year.

Amen

EXCHANGING PRESENTS FOR PRESENCE

LUKE 1:18-25 | BY DARYL HYDEN

And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.

— Luke 1:19

AS A CHILD I LOVED VACATIONS, – my birthday, and especially spending time with my friends and family. But when the first day of December came, I could only think about one thing: visiting Santa! I remember asking him to bring me a Barbie, a bike, those sneakers that doubled as roller-blades... you know, things I thought I just HAD to have. I knew it would be several weeks before I would get to sit on his lap; but when that day came, it was something special. I waited all year to be in the presence of the one who could change my life through the gifts he would possibly bring me.

What can we learn in this Advent season from the life of Zechariah? Verse 19 from the above Scripture stands out to me. Zechariah is in the temple, going about his day, doing his priestly duties. Then suddenly Gabriel shows up! Can you imagine? Gabriel says something that we must not miss: *"I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God..."* Zechariah was introduced to an angel who had just been in the presence of God!

Gabriel's declaration about the birth of the forerunner to the Messiah would set in motion God's plan to make a way so that you and I no longer need to depend on an angel who is in God's presence. We can be in His presence ourselves. Did it occur to you where Zechariah was standing? He was behind the veil that, roughly 33 years later, would be torn from top to bottom opening up access for us to be in the presence of God! Because of Jesus, we now have access and a relationship that even astounds Gabriel himself.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank You for the true meaning of Christmas. Thank you for sending your Son so that we can have a relationship and eternity with You.

Amen

GOD WANTS TO SHOW UP!

LUKE 1:39–45 | BY MARK PRESSLEY

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. — Luke 1:39–40

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN OVERWHELMED WITH THE CARES, STRESSES, TURMOIL or just the grind of life? It happens to all of us at some point in our lives. Your job is crazy or your family is sideways or you're teetering on the brink of some life precipice. In those moments, we often will seek out that person in our lives that we trust to listen to us and help us find our footing. I'm sure that was part of Mary's motivation to go visit her cousin Elizabeth. Yes, she had accepted the honor (and responsibility) of carrying the Messiah, but she knew the culture around her would see her as something much less wholesome when her pregnancy became public. She was probably anticipating the dirty looks, gossip, exclusion, and likely cruel treatment that would soon burden her.

So, Mary takes a trip to see Elizabeth, excited to share the news of her pregnancy, but also probably expecting to unload her worries on the ears of the older, wiser woman. Then something happens that she had just recently experienced. God shows up! But this time He doesn't speak through an angelic messenger. He speaks directly through His Holy Spirit. Mary had likely hoped to release some of her anxiety by speaking with Elizabeth, but instead the Lord replaced Mary's anxiety with His blessing. Mary had planned to find peace by spending time with Elizabeth, but God gave her peace by reminding of the One who she carried and where she had already placed her faith.

What an incredible lesson for us. Even in the midst of a surge of faith or a mountain top experience, the world is waiting to creep back into our lives and drag us down. During those times we should seek counsel from other believers as we are commanded in multiple places in the scriptures, but we shouldn't forget that God is waiting for an opportunity to show up. As we celebrate many of our Christmas traditions, don't forget to anticipate that God is going to show up and surprise us just as He did 2000 years ago.

Prayer

Dear Lord, open our eyes and hearts to your presence as we celebrate the birth of our Savior.

Amen

THE BEST THING IN LIFE IS FREE

LUKE 1:67-80 | BY PETER THOMPSON

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, — Luke 1:67-80

WHAT IS SOMETHING YOU'VE HAD TO WAIT A LONG TIME FOR? It could even be something you're still waiting for. Something you'd dreamed and hoped for that felt like it took forever to come. It may be finishing school, landing a dream job, finding a spouse, or winning a championship. Or maybe it was lunch on a Sunday when it seemed like the pastor would never get to the end of his sermon and you were sure that everyone in the service had heard your stomach voice its impatience.

How do you imagine it will feel, or how did it feel, when all that waiting comes/ came to an end? In today's passage, we get a glimpse at Zechariah's response to the end of his waiting. Remember, he's been waiting 9 months just to speak (v 18-22), and even longer than that for a child. And yet, when his child is born, when his mouth is opened, his praise is for the coming Christ. It's not for his firstborn son or for the return of his voice.

What would cause a man to rejoice more for his wife's unborn nephew than for the immediate and personal blessings he just received? Well, for one, the Holy Spirit filled him (v 67). But in addition to that, Zechariah knew God's promises. He knew that his people, the Jews, had been waiting for centuries for the promised Messiah. He knew of God's covenant with Abraham and His promises communicated through the prophets. And though there were immediate blessings to be thankful for, Zechariah was overcome by the glory and wonder of the coming Jesus Christ. He rightfully sees that, just as the creation of light signaled the beginning of creation, here the coming light, Christ, ushers in the redemption and restoration of humanity (v 78-79).

Like Zechariah, we are also called to wait and anticipate the Messiah, though for us it's His return we hope for. So as you wait for Christmas, that dream job, the end of school, a spouse, or even just the Sunday lunch, don't forget that we are awaiting something even greater. And, like Zechariah's son, John the Baptist, we are called to spread the news and prepare others for Jesus' coming again.

Prayer

Dear Father, we eagerly await the return of Jesus. Help us to live in light of His coming, making the most of the time and talents you've given us.

Amen

GOD WITH US MEANS HE IS ACTUALLY WITH US

ISAIAH 7:10-15 | BY JOHN SUMMERVILLE

Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. — Isaiah 7:10-15

IF YOU GO BACK EVEN A FEW VERSES TO THE BEGINNING OF CHAPTER 7, you see King Ahaz was in some deep trouble. The Syrians and the northern 10 tribes were attacking Judah. Although great fear swept the entire land because of the impending doom, Isaiah was sent by God to encourage Ahaz, to bring him good news. Isaiah was there to speak for the Lord, and the Lord was offering to answer with whatever sign Ahaz wanted.

Perhaps it was fear on the part of Ahaz. Perhaps it was unbelief. Regardless, Ahaz wasn't going to ask for a sign.

Like Ahaz, sometimes when situations seem hopelessly dire, when we feel like we are under attack from superior forces all around us, instead of turning to God, we want to curl up in a ball, pull the covers over our heads, and we fear turning to God for our solution.

Isaiah was bringing good news for the present. Ahaz was going to win. God was going to fight the battle.

And Isaiah was bringing even more good news. This news was in the distant future. A virgin would conceive a Son. A Son was to be born. He would be called Immanuel.

Immanuel means God with us.

So, when you're beaten up, afraid, insecure, underappreciated, overlooked, and the world is collapsing all around you, remember God sent His Son, His one and only Son, Jesus. He died for us so that we can have eternal life by believing in Him. God is with us. He is actually with us.

In times of stress and trials or in times of joy and celebration, you can always turn to Jesus.

Prayer

Lord, whenever I feel like hiding my face from You, help me to instead turn my face to You.

Amen

THE PERFECT PLAN

LUKE 1:26–35 | BY ALYSSA POWELL

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. — Luke 1:32–35

GOD’S PLANS ARE FULL OF WONDER AND SOVEREIGNTY. Often, he doesn’t do things the way we think they should be done. Praise God that He doesn’t do them our way. He is all knowing. We most certainly are not. His plans are perfect. Mary wondered what sort of greeting was coming from the angel. Her thoughts aren’t much different than ours when life’s plans change. Mary wondered, “How could this be?” It doesn’t make sense, but God was in the plan and it was perfect.

Mary would bring a child into the world. The Savior. The one God’s people had been waiting on. Mary was to name him Jesus. The angel said, *“He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end.”* God was fulfilling promises and prophesies. The long-awaited king was coming in a most wonderful, magnificent way to be the Savior of the World.

We can trust God’s plan. We can trust in God’s goodness. When his plans don’t make sense and when they seem hard, we can know that He alone is sovereign, and we praise Him for the mysterious ways in which He works all things for His glory and our good.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we praise you for the wonderful ways you work. Your plans are perfect and good. Help us to trust in your sovereign plans even when they do not make sense to our human mind and heart.

Amen

DARKNESS AND LIGHT

ISAIAH 9:2-7 | BY AMANDA KIELY

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder.

— Isaiah 9:2-3

DARKNESS IS ALWAYS PRESENT IN THIS FALLEN WORLD, at a macro level such as the wars causing immense suffering overseas, or the darkness in our personal lives from sin, grief, financial hardships, relationship issues or health challenges. As I type this I'm preparing for my second skin cancer surgery this month; the first time my doctor called about the Melanoma they found, I let darkness settle for too long. But what I love about this time of year is the constant reminder of God's perfect light. Whether it's the Star Wars house my kids make me drive by countless times in December or the simple flickering candle in the window, we can't escape the lights. God's light can bring us peace if we surrender to His way and His Word no matter what is happening in this world or in us.

Does rejoicing come easy for you this time of year or is difficult, if not nearly impossible? Hebrews 12: 1-2 says *"And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross..."* Jesus was able to remain joyful in this world filled with darkness and suffering because he never lost sight of where he was heading: the right hand of the throne of God. So let's come together as we prepare our hearts to rejoice and reflect on the birth of our Savior. Because He came, the suffering and darkness of this world is never wasted. Think of one way you can bring light, truth and hope to others today. Text or call a friend you haven't spoken to in a while, pay for a stranger's meal, donate to someone in need, hand out positive affirmations with a Bible verse at your local coffee shop, or simply tell someone you love what they mean to you.

Prayer

Lord, I pray that you will help me feel your light and peace as I prepare my heart for Christmas. Please help me to lean on your way and Word rather than my own flawed heart and understanding. I pray that your presence will bring joy and rejoicing to everyone walking through darkness in this world today.

Amen

WEEK
FOUR

FAITH LIKE JOSEPH

MATTHEW 1:18-25 | BY TAMMY PRESSLEY

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commended him and took Mary home as his wife. — Matthew 1:24

BESIDES THE INFANT JESUS, Christians focus on a few other people and things when talking about the Christmas story. The main ones seem to be Mary, Gabriel, the shepherds, the host of angels, Herod, the wise men, gold, frankincense, myrrh, and the shining star. There is one person who almost always receives little or no recognition in the story—Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus.

While Joseph is usually ignored, and very little is found in the Gospels about him, he does indeed hold a very important place in God's plan for His Son. After all, Joseph gave Him protection, gave Jesus His name, and gave Him a home and vocation.

When Joseph learned that Mary was pregnant, he made plans to do what he believed would be the best thing: divorce her quietly and preserve her honor by keeping the whole situation quiet. God had a different plan for Joseph, though, and sent an angel to him in a dream to let him know what to do. Joseph knew this dream was from the Lord, and he kept his heart open to what God wanted from him.

Joseph obeys the angel's command and takes Mary home as his wife. More than likely, he was judged as being sexually permissive, something considered unworthy by an upright Jew. But he had faith that this was God's will for him. He accepts the responsibility of raising Jesus as his own son because he had faith that this was God's will for him. Joseph doesn't hesitate to leave Bethlehem and move to Egypt when later told by an angel in a dream to do so because he had faith that this was God's will for him.

When we read about Joseph's experience, we see a faithful man who was able to change his plans to stay in God's will. It's not always easy to have faith when things don't go as we envision, plan, or desire. Though we may have our own plans in place, it is important to keep our hearts open in case God may tell us to do something different. As we anticipate Christmas, let's follow Joseph's example and have faith that God's will for our lives is better than any plans we come up with on our own.

Prayer

Dear Lord, we know what you have planned for us is best. Please help us to accept Your will and change our plans if needed to abide in it. May we, like Joseph, be found faithful.

Amen

EXPECTATION!

JOHN 3:16-17 | BY JAMIE HYDEN

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

— John 3:16-17

LET ME BEGIN BY ECHOING THE WORDS that I heard this morning and that, as a child, I said every year on this day – “IT’S CHRISTMAS!!!!” Merry Christmas. I wonder what it was like in your house this morning. Maybe you are reading this before the morning has begun. If you have young children, you may have been up since before sunrise. As I think back to Christmas Day as a child, I think of one word – **expectation!** All December long I wondered what was in those packages under the tree, and as I went to bed Christmas Eve, I could not sleep because of the expectation of what I would find as I ripped into those packages the next morning. One year, I remember waking up at 3 a.m. and staring at those presents until I finally woke my parents up at 6 a.m. Expectation!

What can I say about John 3:16 and 17, our Scripture for today, which has not already been said? Join me in thinking about the context of these wonderful verses. One night the teacher of Israel, Nicodemus, comes to Jesus with expectation, wondering who in the world this Teacher could be. He had heard the stories and the rumors, just as many had. Could this guy be the One? Nicodemus came with the expectation of finding out just who this God-sent Teacher was. What is so cool about this account is that Nicodemus was not the only one with expectations: Jesus expected Nicodemus. He was not surprised by his visit or his questions. He was expecting them. Old Saint Nic (oh sorry – wrong Nic!), old Nic came expecting answers and instead He was let in on a God-ordained mission. A mission that involved the Son being lifted, being given and being sent. A mission of redemption for the entire world, even for a well-learned Pharisee. A mission that would display love unlike he (or we) had ever seen before. Nicodemus came expecting answers and He received the heartbeat of God!

Today as you reflect on Christmas, sit with the Savior. Talk with Him. Listen to Him. Learn from Him. If you do, you may not leave with what you expected, but just like Nicodemus, you will leave with **much more** than you expected. Don’t miss that privilege. Your Savior is expecting you!

Prayer

Father, thank You for Jesus. May You help me in the joy and busyness of today to sit with my Savior for a while. Help me, Father, to dwell on the Gift you have given that far surpasses any earthly treasure I could receive. As I look with great expectation to a new year many each day be filled with the truth that today I could see my Savior’s face! Come Thou Long Expected Savior!

Amen



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