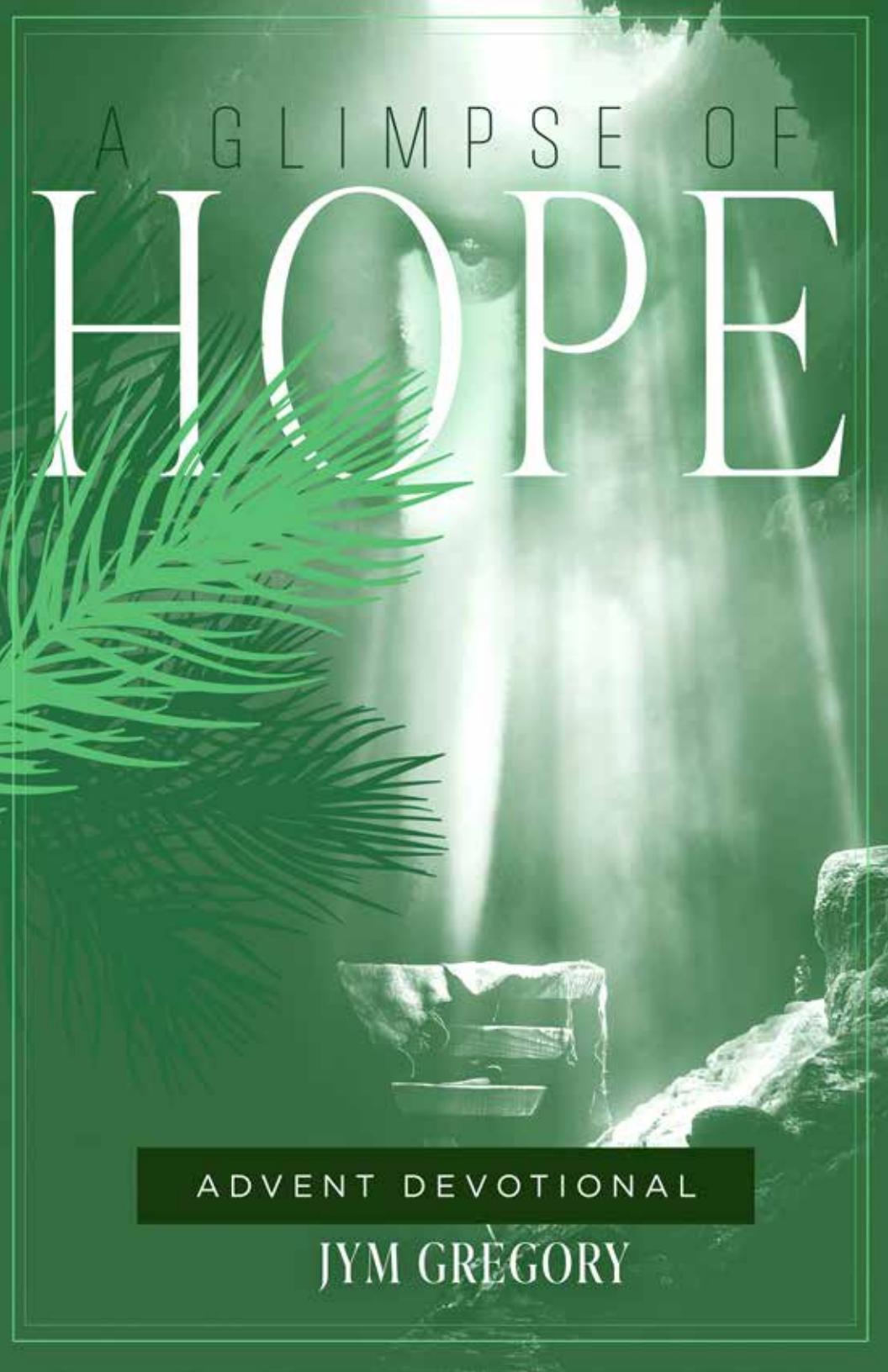


# A GLIMPSE OF HOPE



ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

JYM GREGORY

*The Christian message is that there is hope for a ruined humanity—hope of pardon, hope of reconciliation with God, hope of glory—because at the Father's will Jesus became poor, and was born in a stable so that thirty years later he might hang on a cross*

~~J.I. Packer~~

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# *A Glimpse of Hope*

*In days when shadows were long and hope was scarce,  
a whisper was heard: "The shadow will disperse!"  
A broken people, longing to be whole,  
looked through distant eyes for light and revelation.*

*Kings and kingdoms, prophets and priests,  
the rising and falling of so many.  
Plunder and famine, wars and peace,  
Sorrow followed closely upon sorrow.*

*Weary hearts lost their song: expectations fading,  
like the stars grow dim at morning's dawn.  
Yet still, the whisper stirred. Some listened and rejoiced.*

*Then...silence.  
Year and year, multiplied by hundreds. How long? O Lord!  
A seed, enclosed in woman, a promised confirmed.  
Wrapped in mortal clay, the eternal appeared wearing earth's gown.  
A glimpse of hope in love's new day.*

*Sweet Jesus, promised one, Emmanuel near,  
though meek and fragile, all power confined.  
Through humble birth we see it clear—  
hope found its voice when you appeared.*

*— Jim Gregory*

## WHAT IS ADVENT?

The word “Advent” comes from the Latin *advenio*, “to come to.” It is a period of great anticipation—a time of preparation for the joyful celebration of Jesus’ arrival in Bethlehem. In Western liturgy, Advent begins four Sundays prior to December 25. It is thought that the original intent behind four weeks of preparation for Christ’s birth was to symbolize the four ways in which Jesus enters our world: first in the Incarnation at Bethlehem, second at his arrival in the hearts of newborn believers, third at his death and resurrection, and fourth and finally at his second Advent, when he returns to consummate human history.

Advent has been celebrated by Christ-followers for many centuries, although today it is often acknowledged (particularly within the Protestant tradition) with blank stares. In place of a season of hopeful expectation, preparation, and waiting, many have substituted shopping, busyness, parties, and materialism. From a season of hope we now have a season of loneliness, poor stewardship, and the highest suicide rates in the calendar year. Not all things change for the better.

## FEASTING AND FASTING

In days gone by Advent was known as a “little Lent.” As such, Advent is best marked by setting aside time for prayer and fasting as the Lord leads, and preparing our hearts for the day in which we will celebrate the greatest event in human history—the Incarnation—the moment in time when Emmanuel, God with us, entered space and time to make a way for us to be reconciled to the Father. Fasting reminds us that temporary things do not ultimately satisfy and helps us to remember that when we do feast on Christmas Day (and after), it is a celebration that should be taken with thanksgiving. In the early church, all great feasts were preceded by a time of fasting, which made the feast itself more joyful.

## ADVENT DEVOTIONS

My prayer is that this Advent devotional will help you and your family prepare for the coming of Christ this season. Devotions have played a vital role in our family. With our children now grown, we look back on the many memories we share of our family devotions and readings at bedtime. I realize the difficulties inherent in trying to have consistent devotions, particularly as a family, but their value cannot be overstated. There is, genuinely, no practice you will ever take up concerning your children that is more important than spending time with them, praying with them, discussing Scripture with them, and teaching them. Perhaps you will consider using this guide for roughly one month to supplement your devotions time. If, however, you have never practiced daily devotions for yourself or your family, you may find that having a ready-made devotional will help you get started on this vital practice.

## USING THE ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

There are no set rules for devotions. My suggestion is that you set aside a time each day when you will have at least fifteen minutes of uninterrupted time for prayer, reading, and discussion. Pray that God will meet you in your time of study and for hearts and minds that are attentive. Read the Scripture passage for the day, then consider the accompanying text I have provided. Remember to contemplate what the passage says and means; do not just read it to get it read. The word of God is living and active (Hebrews 4:12), allow it the opportunity to speak to you. If you have older children, I suggest taking turns each day with the reading. For my family, all this generally took place prior to bedtime, but every family is different, so you may find that the morning or during a mealtime is better for you. Try to find a time, if possible, when you are not rushed.

Remember, a devotional is a guide, not a taskmaster. You may decide to spend more than fifteen minutes together. You may decide to read additional passages of Scripture that come to mind or to consider other matters pertinent to you or your family. Each family or individual is unique, so do your devotions in a way that works best for you.

For this Advent devotional I have included not only a reflection on Scripture but also an Advent prayer. The prayer is provided as a possible way to pray as it relates to the text for the day. As such, it is only a suggestion. I offer it as a help to those who may be new to this whole devotional thing and struggle with what to pray about. You are certainly free to ignore my prayer and pray spontaneously on your own. Keep in mind, however, that praying prepared prayers is not wrong. The Psalter (the book of Psalms) is in many ways prepared prayers for the people of Israel (and ourselves) to recite to God.

This year our Advent preaching theme is Glimpses of Hope. We will take time this Advent season to look at the lives of some who foresaw the coming of Messiah and many others who witnessed that coming or benefited greatly from it. We will look at the impact his arrival into our world has brought to so many, and hopefully, be enriched and challenged by their stories.

The love of God was made manifest to us in the Incarnation, when God wrapped himself in human flesh; in the Person of the Son, and dwelt among us. In Jesus, the Light of the world, darkness was dispelled and love came to us wrapped in grace and truth. The Word of God was made flesh, and our world has never been the same. I trust you will bask in this historic reality and in the hope that it brings to us in 2025 and beyond.

God's richest blessings to you this Advent season,  
Pastor Jym

# Daily Readings

## FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

- Sunday (11/30): Isaiah—Foreseeing Prophet
- Monday (12/1): David—The Suffering King
- Tuesday (12/2): Rahab—In the Line of the King
- Wednesday (12/3): Mary—Servant of the Lord
- Thursday (12/4): Joseph—A Just Man
- Friday (12/5): John the Baptist—A Leap for Joy
- Saturday (12/6): The Woman of Samaria—Bearing Witness

## SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

- Sunday (12/7): The Widow of Nain—God's Visit
- Monday (12/8): The Seeking Man—Missed Opportunity
- Tuesday (12/9): The Possessed Man—Captive Set Free
- Wednesday (12/10): Mary of Magdala—First Witness
- Thursday (12/11): Matthew—Sinner and Saint
- Friday (12/12): Pontius Pilate—A Haunted Man
- Saturday (12/13): Martha—Busy Disciple

## THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

- Sunday (12/14): Lazarus—Up from the Grave
- Monday (12/15): Saul Paulus—Radically Transformed
- Tuesday (12/16): The Leprous Man—Heart of Gratitude
- Wednesday (12/17): Nathaniel—Instant Believer
- Thursday (12/18): Talitha Cumi—The Little Girl
- Friday (12/19): The Criminal—Jesus' Last Friend
- Saturday (12/20): The Desperate Woman—Faith Rewarded

## FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

- Sunday (12/21): Cornelius—God Fearer
- Monday (12/22): John—Awestruck Friend
- Tuesday (12/23): Simeon—Nunc Dimitis
- Wednesday (12/24): The Shepherds—It Begins



# week ONE

Only the humble believe him and rejoice that God is so free and so marvelous that he does wonders where people despair, that he takes what is little and lowly and makes it marvelous. And that is the wonder of all wonders, that God loves the lowly.... God is not ashamed of the lowliness of human beings. God marches right in. He chooses people as his instruments and performs his wonders where one would least expect them. God is near to lowliness; he loves the lost, the neglected, the unseemly, the excluded, the weak and broken.

~~~~~ Dietrich Bonhoeffer ~~~~

November  
**30**

# Foreseeing Prophet

Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

**Isaiah 53:1-6**



**ISAIAH**

The Prophet Isaiah lived about 750 years before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. He prophesied “in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah” (Isa. 1:1), and lived at least into the middle part of the 7th century B.C. Needless to say, he never met Jesus, probably did not know what his name would be (see Isa. 7:14), and had no idea that he would be born in Bethlehem in Judea or what the circumstances might be surrounding that birth. He was a prophet, which means he went about the task of forth-telling (proclaiming) the word of the Lord far more than he went about foreseeing (in visions) the future. Like most of the prophets of old, he lived in tumultuous times. By the command of God, he found himself confronting kings and commoners alike with the judgment of God that resulted from an historically (and, in Isaiah’s day, currently) wicked people. He saw the coming of the Assyrian invasion, the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and warned the people concerning its rapid approach. In Isaiah chapter six we read of his call and commissioning by God to be his prophet. Most prophets were prophets by God’s choice, not their own (see, for example, Jeremiah 1:4-10), but Isaiah was an exception. In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah was brought before God the King in his throne room. There he saw marvelous things, and heard the Lord cry out, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Isaiah then replied, “Here am I! Send me.” And thus, the Lord commissioned Isaiah for the task he had laid before him, a task that Isaiah would carry out for the remainder of his life.

As his anointed prophet, Isaiah enjoyed a special relationship with God, but like all the prophets who came before Jesus, he was left with more questions than answers as it related to the coming Messiah. Through the prophets the Spirit of Christ revealed the sufferings of the Messiah and his subsequent glory that would follow. In the New Testament Peter tells us that those same prophets searched intently trying to find what person or time that the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating as it related to Messiah and his sufferings (1 Pet. 1:10-12). Although they did not always get the answers for which they searched, Isaiah was allowed to see the veil pulled back enough to be able to tell his hearers and readers what we now know as history—Jesus the Messiah was born to die, and to give his life as a ransom for many. God became man to bear the sin of his people.

Unlike other prophets, Isaiah was given the opportunity to proclaim both information about the birth of Messiah (Isa. 7:14; 9:1-7) and his death as well (Isa. 53). Isaiah foresaw that the coming Messiah would not arrive as a king riding on a charger, but as a meek and humble man, devoid of the trappings of royalty. Rather than being exalted and lauded, as most Jews believed he would be, Messiah would be despised and rejected. But Isaiah saw more than that. He saw and wrote about the substitutionary atonement of the coming Messiah. He saw that the great accomplishment of the suffering servant would not be the establishment of a new kingdom for Israel, but the bearing of his people's sins. He saw that this servant would be crushed for the shortcomings that we—all of us—laid upon him, and that the death he would die would bring peace and healing for the nations. Isaiah saw what most Jews in Jesus' day could not comprehend, much less accept. The Messiah they had longed for and waited so many centuries for would not reign from an earthly throne but would establish himself as a humble servant. He would live to die and would bear the reproach that we all deserve. The day will come when Christ returns as a king to establish an everlasting kingdom, but that day is a future day, a day not realized fully in the Incarnation.

What was this glimpse of hope? Isaiah could not give us all the details, but he did reveal to us a foreshadowing, a tantalizing picture, concerning what lay ahead for the people of Israel and their expectations for deliverance via the hand of their long-awaited Messiah.

What are your expectations for Jesus? What would you have him accomplish for you this Advent season and beyond? Have you considered whether those expectations are sound? Biblical? Are they based on what you want or what God wants for you? What lies at the center of your hopes? Jesus will fulfill your dreams when, and only when, those dreams align with his purpose and will. The Jews did not get what they wanted from Messiah, but they got what they needed most. And so shall it be for all of us who make the Jesus of Scripture the Lord of our lives.

## DAILY PRAYER

*Father, align my desires with your will, I pray. Let my hope rest in nothing but the hope that comes through Jesus your Son as I enter into this Advent season. Amen.*

# December

# 1

## The Suffering King

Yet you are he who took me from the womb; you made me trust you at my mother's breasts. On you was I cast from my birth, and from my mother's womb you have been my God. Be not far from me, for trouble is near, and there is no one to help.

**Psalm 22:9-11**



The twenty-second Psalm is a psalm of King David, but in reality, it is a psalm of the Messiah. Jesus quoted the opening stanza to this psalm just prior to his death on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" They are the words of David, taken up by the greater David, Jesus, who would be born in David's line. Whether or not David knew he was speaking of the future Messiah is unknown, but it is clear that David was also speaking of his own life. As an earthly king, he knew trouble and disappointment, betrayal and life-threatening circumstances, friendship and loss. David's problems in life were predominately self-inflicted, unlike the problems Jesus encountered. This notwithstanding, Jesus understood the pain and confusion that accompanies times when it seems as if God has all but abandoned you. King David speaks in our passage for today of feeling close to God from his early childhood and knowing that there has never been a day in his life when God was not only his maker, but his sustainer as well. David expresses the anguish of feeling as if there is a chasm between him and his closest companion, and he desires that God "be not far from me."

One might say that "distance" was an issue for many of the Old Testament saints. They did not like feeling alienated from God or wondering if the quietness they were experiencing in their relationship was going to be permanent. Job, the suffering saint, felt this break with God keenly. He had lost all he owned, along with all his children, and he was suffering great physical anguish, but as one reads through the book that bears his name it becomes clear that what he misses most is his close walk with God. He can bear up under almost any strain, but the thought that God is disappointed in him and is demonstrating that disappointment by distancing himself from his cries for help are almost unbearable. Jeremiah lamented the fact that God did not seem to be listening to his prayers, and the Psalms are filled with the shouts of God's people desperate for his intervention in their lives and their nation. Our passage for today starts this way: "...Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest." David had known sweet fellowship with the Father as a young shepherd in the fields.

He had also known them in quiet times of contemplation in which he enjoyed God's fellowship mediated through the natural world around him, which were constantly declaring God's glories (Ps. 19:1-6; 23:1-3). David could not bear separation from God, as he confessed without shame in Psalm 51: "Do not cast me from your presence, or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me."

Like his ancestor before him, Jesus knew this distance from the Father as well. While on the cross, bearing your sin and mine, he knew that a wall of separation had arisen between them and he cried out in anguish, having never known such loneliness before. The words he chose were the words of King David, uttered so many centuries before—the words of a king who was also a prophet—and under the inspiration of the same Spirit that he had asked to never have taken from him, he penned the words of Psalm 22 that speak so clearly of the death that Messiah would die in order to give those of us who know him life and peace. Both David and Jesus knew the close companionship of God the Father. From childhood they had trusted in him—David in the fields, Jesus in the carpenter's shop. They had both been God's man from their earliest days when they drew all their nourishment from their mother. Ironically, it was not the closeness that is formed in the process of nursing that creates such tenderness and love between mother and child that they missed. Rather, it was the bond that they had once known with God that, now taken away, left them crying out.

Have you, at times, felt this distance between yourself and God? Do you lament that distance? Do you find yourself groaning through the day and restless in the night? Take time to be still today for a few moments and read all of Psalm 22. Let it take you through the cries of desperation and the description of the death of Christ as he hung on that cross. Feel the searing pain, hear the taunts and jeers of the crowd. Read through to verse 22 and begin to feel the upward movement of this song as it leads you to praise and worship, as it did for both David and Jesus before you. God will not always be distant. Life is not always about pain and loss. "I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living! Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!" Let these words of David from Psalm 27 comfort you as you wait.

God formed you in the womb and took you from that same womb so that one day, you might set your hope and trust in him. If he is your God, although at times he may seem distant, you can always call on him to come to your side. He is never far from your groaning.

## DAILY PRAYER

*Father, be not far from me today. Teach me to wait upon you and renew a right spirit in me. As I draw near to you, draw near to me I pray. Be not far from me now O Lord, rather, be my constant companion today and every day. I cast my cares upon you, for you have promised that you will never let the righteous fall, that I can exchange my burden for your burden, which is light and which is accompanied by the presence of your Son, who is gentle and humble in heart. I seek to find rest for my soul. Amen.*

# December 2

## In the Line of the King

Before the men lay down, she came up to them on the roof and said to the men, “I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath. Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that, as I have dealt kindly with you, you also will deal kindly with my father’s house, and give me a sure sign that you will save alive my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death.” And the men said to her, “Our life for yours even to death! If you do not tell this business of ours, then when the Lord gives us the land we will deal kindly and faithfully with you.”

**Joshua 2:8-14**



**RAHAB**

It is not often in the pages of the Old Testament that you run into a pagan who knows so much about the God of Israel. Rahab was an innkeeper in the city of Jericho (possibly even a prostitute, the Hebrew word used to describe her is difficult to translate with complete accuracy here). When Joshua sent two men to the city to spy it out, they found lodging in her inn...and danger, for the king of Jericho heard that they had entered the city. Rahab, knowing that the men were in jeopardy, hid them from the king's men and sent them on their way in peace.

Rahab was also a wise woman. She had heard about the exploits of God's people as they entered the Promised Land, and she knew that the gods of the Canaanites were no match for the God who was watching over Israel. Wisely, she changed her allegiance to the one true God. According to Rahab, this information was not secret—all the people had heard and were melting in fear—yet it appears that only Rahab was wise enough not to oppose God. Not only did she refuse to oppose him, even at the cost of being considered a traitor to her own people, Rahab was astute enough to strike a bargain with the spies, thus ensuring life, not only for herself, but for her entire family. When the spies returned safely home, thanks to Rahab's intervention, they reported all that

they had seen and heard. Part of what they had heard was from Rahab herself, giving the men strategic information about the fear that had overtaken all their enemies. When the armies of Israel stormed the city of Jericho soon after, it was the spies who were given charge of Rahab and her family, and when the dust settled, Rahab's clan lived among the people of Israel from that day forward.

In the New Testament Gospel of Matthew we find out that Rahab married an Israelite man named Salmon and became the mother of Boaz, who in turn would marry the Moabite Ruth, who would give birth to Obed, who was the father of Jesse, who was the father of David. All of this is important, because Matthew is telling us that the heroine Rahab was in the line not only of the kings of Israel, but of the ultimate King, Jesus the Messiah. Later in the New Testament we find Rahab commended for both her faith (Heb. 11:31) and her good works (James 2:25).

So what do we learn from the life and actions of this woman with a decidedly questionable background? First, we learn that Rahab, although never having encountered Christ, was commended for her faith in the God of Israel, who would in time send a Savior who would die not only for the sins of his contemporaries, but the sins of future generations of believers, and for the sins of past believers as well. Rahab's faith was a practical faith. She saw that God was powerful and clearly fighting for Israel, and, after apparently weighing her options, she jumped on board with the God she believed could do the most on her behalf. That is not the thinking of a fickle woman, that is the work of a wise woman. We could all learn a bit from that type of practical faith in action. Second, we learn that God is a compassionate and forgiving God. How many times have you heard about how horrible the God of the Old Testament appears to be? Wiping out innocent people, commanding the death penalty for reasonable sins, and forcing easy-going folks to follow strict codes of conduct. To many, he is an ogre and a megalomaniac who always has to have his own way. How wrong we are when we see God through such a lens. Trying to justify our own sinful nature, we put back on the God who created us in his own image our own misguided concepts of right and wrong, and charge him with guilt while proclaiming ourselves both innocent and more wise than he. Simply put, it is a profound mistake. God is the type of God who saves a woman of faith (her family as well) for the simple gesture of seeking him when it makes the most sense to do so. No great acts of submission, no sacrifices, just simple faith. Easy to overlook when you are looking to make a case in the opposite direction. Why not place your own simple faith in this God today? Really, it just makes sense.

## DAILY PRAYER

*Father, would you give me a simple faith in you today? Give me wisdom so that I can see who you are, and place my hope there. We hear to the contrary, Lord, but the fact is that you are a good God, abounding in love and steadfastness. You forgive sins and reward faithfulness, Lord, and that is good news. Today, I place my faith in you anew. Amen.*

December  
3

# Servant of the Lord

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 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. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Luke 1:26-38



If we are to speak of encounters with Jesus in relation to his incarnation, there is no better place to look than to Mary, his own mother. Luke tells us that in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy (Mary's relative who had herself been barren until the day God blessed her with the pregnancy of John the Baptist), God sent the angel Gabriel to Mary in order to announce the birth of Messiah.

Ever wonder what that announcement meant to Mary? Here are a few possibilities many do not consider. First, she was "greatly troubled." Angelic visits are not the normal order of the day, not in our day nor in Mary's. The angel Gabriel said she was "favored," but favored for what? Mary knew enough to know that God does not send angels to say "Hey, good news! It will be sunny tomorrow." When an angel visits, there is work about to be done. Second, the news was frightening. Mary was going to conceive, which is generally good news, unless you are an unmarried teenager in a culture that does not celebrate pre-marital pregnancies. Third, she would be a mother to the Son of the Most High. Mary was a Jew, and she knew what that phrase meant. Her child would be the child of God. Fourth, how would this take place? Would God descend to her in human form and impregnate her like the tales told by the Romans and Greeks concerning their gods?

Was that the God of Israel? Could the Jews have misunderstood Yahweh so completely throughout the preceding centuries to have missed this human characteristic of their God? Finally, what about her fiancé, Joseph? How would he take this news? Mary would likely have been confident here—he would not take it well. But would he turn her over to the religious rulers as an adulteress? Would they take a hard stance and enact the strictest measures of the law for such an offense—stoning? If he showed mercy and simply divorced her (betrothals could only be severed in Israel by a divorce in Mary's day), how would she raise the Son of the Most High on her own?

What we portray as wonderful news that would have been joyfully received is almost assuredly inaccurate. The news that Gabriel brought to Mary was frightening, confusing, and loaded with future problems, both short and long term. We like to picture the scene majestically, with light snow falling and “Silver Bells” playing lightly in the background, but it was a bit more gothic in nature. How did Mary respond? In such a way that proved why she was favored of God. “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

A little over nine months later Mary found out what this encounter with Messiah would mean for her; trouble and pain. The godly man Simeon, who was awaiting Messiah in the temple when Mary and Joseph brought their son to be dedicated, informed Mary that the child would be opposed, and that a sword would pierce Mary's own soul. Mary would live to see that prophecy fulfilled, both in Jesus' three-year ministry and, ultimately, at the cross. But it would not be all bad news. The last we hear of Mary in the New Testament places her with the disciples in the upper room, praying and awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14).

Mary, the common and everyday teenage girl of Nazareth, would live out a much different life than she could have ever imagined—all because of the Incarnation. Jesus would bring to her trouble, pain, and new life. He would save her from her sins. Her light and momentary troubles would give way to an eternal glory that far outweighed them all. Mary would serve her great purpose in God's eternal plan of redemption, and in return, she would herself be redeemed. For Jesus, his adult years would be filled with memories of his mother, as is true for almost all of us. The day would come when he would leave his home and family, but he would never forget the mother who, as an obedient handmaiden of the Lord, nursed him, clothed him, fed him, encouraged, and likely, chastised him. One of his last acts on earth would be to see to her future welfare. Mary, servant of the Lord, and a fine example to every Christ follower since, male and female alike.

## DAILY PRAYER

*Father, prepare my heart to receive you in a special way this Advent season. Focus my attention and sharpen my senses to your ministry in my life. May I be the servant of the Lord, and may it be to me according to your word. When life becomes difficult as a follower of Christ, give me strength and perseverance to move forward. Keep me faithful to you and to the tasks that I receive from you. Amen.*

# December

# 4

## A Just Man

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

**Matthew 1:18-25**



What does it mean to be just? We get the translation “just” from the English Standard Version. “Righteous” is the word used for Joseph in the American Standard Version. Joseph was a just and righteous man, according to the Scriptures, because he chose to remain faithful to God by determining not to marry an adulteress, and by showing compassion to a young woman he surely loved by choosing not to expose her to public humiliation and possible condemnation. Put simply, Joseph demonstrated his justice by deciding to divorce Mary quietly. But that was just a demonstration of his justice; it does not appear that it was the cause for his being just. He was already a just man. “Being a just man,” Joseph was unwilling to put her to shame.

Are you just? If so, how do you demonstrate that? Or are you a stranger to God’s holiness? Unfair question? Can anyone truly be just or righteous? The answer is... yes! Joseph was, Noah was, David was, the centurion Cornelius was, and Joseph’s fiancé Mary was. So how does that happen? To a Jew in Joseph’s day, being just meant being faithful to the law of Moses. It meant making it your ambition to obey the law of God, to celebrate the appointed feasts, to be faithful to the covenant demands, to offer the requisite sacrifices, and to live with a hope and expectation for the coming of the Anointed One. It meant those things, but it also meant having personal integrity and allowing the goodness of the law to penetrate your life to an extent that goodness also penetrated your own thoughts and actions. In such a way, Joseph was a just man.

He was faithful to the law and that faithfulness bore the fruit of righteous actions in his life. He had mercy on his fiancé because he loved her and had compassion for her, but he also knew that he must obey the law and not marry an unfaithful woman.

Some might say, “If he were truly just, he would forget the rules and marry his fiancé anyway!” But that would only demonstrate Joseph’s mercy, not his justice. To have discarded the law in order to show mercy, Joseph would not have been just, he would only have been a merciful lawbreaker—similar to how a merciful judge might choose to let a convicted murderer go free. Nice to the murderer, yet unfaithful to the law.

In a comparable yet much more profound way, God demonstrates his own justice. Unable and unwilling to ignore sin because of his own perfect nature, God chose to both uphold the law and set the captive free. In such a way the righteousness of God is made manifest. In God’s divine forbearance he had passed over the sins of multiple generations, awaiting that day in space and time when Jesus, the earthly son of Joseph the just, would come and make atonement for those sins and the sins of all who would receive him by faith. In this action, God demonstrated his justice while at the same time saving those who belong to Christ by faith (see Rom. 3:21-26). This is a substantial reason for *cur deus homo*—why God became man. Humankind needed saving, but that could not be accomplished by God waving a wand and declaring sin to be okay. A sacrifice was necessary—and not just any sacrifice—a perfect sacrifice was called for.

So, how does one become just in our day? By faith in Jesus Christ, who is Emmanuel—God with us. Our righteousness flows not from our adherence to the law, but from our trust in the only truly Righteous One. And when our righteousness flows from him, we naturally demonstrate that righteousness, as Joseph did, in our daily lives. Joseph was a just man, but his justification would be made complete in the One who was born to his virgin wife, that he might die to make Joseph just, not only in man’s eyes, but in the eyes of the only One who truly matters, God, the Justifier and Savior of unrighteous men and women.

Do you desire to be just? You must know this; human justice (righteousness) does not flow from human activity but solely through the grace of God. “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). Flee to Jesus this Advent season! In him you will find not only justice and righteousness, but through the death and resurrection of this babe we celebrate, you will find eternal life as a free gift of grace.

## DAILY PRAYER

*Lord God, let the righteousness of your Son, Jesus, be mine today and every day. I have no righteousness of my own, and nothing to offer in return for your grace and mercy. Grant me these gifts today. Exchange my ashes for your beauty, my sin for your holiness. I receive this as a free gift of your grace, and I give you thanks for it. Amen.*

December  
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# A Leap for Joy

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.”

**Luke 1:39-44**



John had the unique experience of encountering Christ the first time while he was still a fetus. So much joy surrounded the news that Messiah was coming into the world that it caused even the unborn herald of the Christ to leap for joy when he heard the sound of the mother of Christ's voice. Elizabeth, John's mother, was filled with the Holy Spirit, and John continued in his development in the womb, fulfilling his role as the forerunner of Messiah before he even possessed knowledge of his call.

Approximately thirty-years later John would meet Jesus again, this time as a grown man, a prophet of God, and as the full-fledged herald of Messiah (see Isaiah 40:3-5). At this meeting Jesus would speak for himself, seeking to be baptized by John in the Jordan River. John tried to prevent him, declaring that it was he who needed to be baptized by Jesus, but Jesus insisted that the baptism take place to “fulfill all righteousness.” The recorded words between John and Jesus are few, but when John saw the Holy Spirit descend and remain upon Jesus in the form of a dove, he knew that the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, was in his presence.

John's life was akin to the life of a meteor—brief, brilliant, and ominous. He died a young man, even by the standards of his day. We know nothing of him until he appears in the Judean wilderness, crying out with the voice of a prophet: “Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight paths for him.” He was bold and brash, fearless and righteous. He did not hesitate to address King Herod himself and warn him concerning his adultery.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law were no match for him, and the people loved him. He was given every opportunity to exalt himself yet in every instance he refused, preferring, rather, to decrease so that Jesus might increase. There can be little doubt that in his own mind he was prepared to throw himself behind Jesus' cause as one of his disciples when the time was right, but that time never came. Instead, John fulfilled his purpose, inaugurated Jesus' ministry by baptizing him, and was soon after arrested and beheaded at the bequest of a sensuous, yet maddeningly immature, young woman. In a way, he lived a life similar to that of his master—he was born to die. A tragic end to an explosive life, set into motion so many years before when he heard the voice of his master's mother, and leapt for joy.

To many, John was simply a short footnote in the annals of our world. To Jesus he was much more. To Jesus, John was the greatest man who ever lived that was born in the natural order of things. He was “more than a prophet” (see Matthew 11:7-11). Interesting, is it not, that a prophet without a single recorded miracle or prophecy, who spent his entire ministry on the fringes of society, would be called by Jesus the greatest man who ever lived? John’s joy came not from usurping power or from gathering a following of disciples, nor from establishing kingdoms in his name. His joy came from fulfilling God’s call in his lifetime. His joy came from encountering Jesus the Messiah, even briefly. No doubt he deserved more from a human point of view, but his joy was complete by having the unparalleled privilege of preparing the way for the Lord’s Christ.

Where do you find your joy? What are you pursuing with the belief that it will bring you peace and fulfillment? If it is anything short of a life pursuing Jesus, it will prove futile in the end. A life lived for Jesus, even briefly, is worth ten thousand lives lived for the pleasures of this fleeting world. John’s joy is stamped in eternity, and for countless ages he will reap from it. How long will your joy last? How long will the things that bring you joy last? Has following the wisdom of this world brought with it the peace and joy and fulfillment you hope for? Could it be that something better, something greater, exists? As the writer C.S. Lewis has pointed out with great wisdom: “If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world.” Ponder this possibility today and see if it does not awaken in you a desire for more than what this world has to offer.

## DAILY PRAYER

*Father, let me know the joy of following you this Advent season. Keep my eyes fixed on Jesus, the Author and Perfector of my faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, so that he might sit at your right hand forever in glory. Your ways are beyond my ways, seeing from eternity past to endless future. Help me to trust in your word, in your promises, and in the hope of my salvation, and not in the enticements of this world. Do not allow me to fall away Lord. Keep me in the palm of your hand, help me to persevere, to run the race with joy and endurance. I want to find my joy in you. Amen.*

December  
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# Bearing Witness

Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world."

**John 4:39-42**



"Go, call your husband, and come here" Jesus said to the woman at the ancient well of Samaria. The two had struck up a conversation while Jesus was waiting for his disciples to return from the city of Sychar with supplies. He was in an uncomfortable situation, for he was speaking publicly with an unaccompanied woman as an outsider in this hostile territory. Jesus, being a Jew, was an unwelcome visitor in this part of Roman Palestine, and carrying on a long conversation with a woman would have been roundly frowned upon. The woman's furtive answer was not a surprise to Jesus; "I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband,' for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true." It was a very polite way of saying, "You, woman, are an adulteress and are currently living in sin." "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet..." she said as she quickly changed the subject from her own life to a theological discussion.

One of the most common defenses in our arsenal against the movement of God in our lives is the insistence upon not viewing ourselves through the eyes of a holy God. The Holy Spirit moves to convict us, to break us, so that Christ can heal us, but we immediately throw up a feint designed to draw the attention elsewhere. "I'm not as bad as others," "Jesus loves me unconditionally, he would never ask me to change," "I'm a victim, God surely understands" are but a few of our many excuses. If the pressure gets really strong, we can always cry out our defense on social media, with the virtual assurance that numerous people will respond with encouraging words like "Jesus loves you just as you are, and so do I" or "Only oppressors judge, God loves you without judgment!" When the Spirit is sufficiently quenched, we can go back to our sinful ways and, eventually, watch the conviction fade away completely. The woman of Samaria tried a similar dodge, but she could not quite free herself from Jesus' words.

As the disciples returned, she tried to end the conversation with an “I’m done talking now” statement: “I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will tell us all things.” Jesus’ response gripped her: “I who speak to you am he.”

Something happened to the woman on the way back to town. By God’s grace, the words of Jesus penetrated through her defenses and into her heart. Upon her arrival, she immediately began to spread the news; “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” This sinful woman became the first witness for Christ in Samaria, and many Samaritans believed. Jesus’ words to his own disciples when the woman left were fulfilled; “Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life.”

A mini revival was initiated in this town of Samaria by the testimony of a woman that had a very tainted past. In fact, she was a witness for Christ as a new believer who still had much to clean up in her own life. The words of Jesus convicted her, God wrought new life within her, and now the work of the Holy Spirit in leading her through the process of sanctification would begin. We do not know how long it took for the woman to either marry or leave her live-in lover, nor do we know what else needed to be addressed in her life, nor the order in which God chose to address them. We do know that a city was changed by her encounter with Christ. She, like all of us, threw up her defenses, but the grace of God and the truth of Christ breached the walls. As a result, her life, and the life of many Samaritans, would never be the same.

What about you? Will you hide from God today, or will you do the painful work of opening yourself up to the winds of God as he drives out the dust within? Do not hide your sin from God, it is an exercise in futility. “No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Heb. 4:13). And give account we will, a surely as we live and die, we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Open up, confess your sin, why stand before the God of the universe when that day arrives with nothing in your defense? Jesus Christ is our great mediator. His Spirit does not convict us randomly nor capriciously. He desires to break us so that he can mend us. The woman of Samaria learned this lesson and benefited from it. Why not benefit from it as well today?

## DAILY PRAYER

*Lord, may your grace and your truth penetrate my own defenses this Advent season. I pray that I might be humbled, that I might choose the pain of conviction leading to peace with you over my own self-righteousness. Draw me close to you, illuminate my mind that I might comprehend you. Prepare my heart to rejoice in the truth of your word and my mouth to spread the gospel message of new life in Christ all the days of my life. Amen.*



The Word of the Father, by whom all time was created, was made flesh and was born in time for us. He, without whose divine permission no day completes its course, wished to have one day [set aside] for His human birth. In the bosom of His Father, He existed before all the cycles of ages; born of an earthly mother, He entered upon the course of the years on this day.

The Maker of man became Man that He, Ruler of the stars, might be nourished at the breast; that He, the Bread, might be hungry; that He, the Fountain, might thirst; that He, the Light, might sleep; that He, the Way, might be wearied by the journey; that He, the Truth, might be accused by false witnesses; that He, the Judge of the living and the dead, might be brought to trial by a mortal judge; that He, Justice, might be condemned by the unjust; that He, the Teacher, might be scourged with whips; that He, the Vine, might be crowned with thorns; that He, the Foundation, might be suspended upon a cross; that Strength might be weakened; that He who makes well might be wounded; that Life might die.

To endure these and similar indignities for us, to free us, unworthy creatures, He who existed as the Son of God before all ages, without a beginning, deigned to become the Son of Man in these recent years. He did this although He who submitted to such great evils for our sake had done no evil, and although we, who were the recipients of so much good at His hands, had done nothing to merit these benefits. Begotten by the Father, He was not made by the Father; He was made Man in the Mother whom He Himself had made, so that He might exist here for a while, sprung from her who could never and nowhere have existed except through His power.

ST. AUGUSTINE  
**SERMON FOR THE FEAST OF THE NATIVITY**





# week TWO

The Lord did not come to make a display. He came to heal and to teach suffering men. For one who wanted to make a display the thing would have been just to appear and dazzle the beholders. But for Him who came to heal and to teach the way was not merely to dwell here, but to put Himself at the disposal of those who needed Him, and to be manifested according as they could bear it, not initiating the value of the divine appearing by exceeding their capacity to receive it.

~~~~ St. Athanasius ~~~~

# December

# 7

## God's Visit

Soon afterward he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her. And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep." Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and "God has visited his people!" And this report about him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country.

**Luke 7:11-17**



It may be that in this miracle recorded for us today we see the heart of Jesus more profoundly than in any other great sign recorded in the gospels. It is one of Jesus' lesser-known miracles; meaning it is a brief event in his ministry, recorded only by Luke and not often discussed today. In fact, it is likely that if you were to ask a well-read Christian to name the accounts of Jesus raising the dead, this is the account that would be passed over. It just does not get the fanfare that his other miracles tend to get. Nevertheless, it opens a window to us into the heart of Jesus, and pulls back the curtain a bit further, revealing yet another reason why God became Man.

The book of 1 Kings records a similar story for us from the life and ministry of Elijah. Elijah was the great miracle-producing prophet in Israel. God directed Elijah to the home of a widow in the town of Zarephath to find a place to lodge and be cared for during a great drought. After some time, the widow's only son died suddenly, leaving her desperate and angry at Elijah. Elijah carried the young boy to his room, stretched his body over the boy three times while crying out to God for the boy's life to be restored, and God answered his prayer and the heart cry of the widow. The boy was restored to her alive. Now Jesus, almost 900 years later, is confronted by a desperate widow who has lost an only son. Will he be able to bring hope into this situation as Elijah had? Is he greater than the prophet Elijah? The answer, of course, is yes.

If you are looking for power and glory here, there is plenty to see. The crowds with Jesus are amazed and fearful. They glorify God because of this great miracle.

They acknowledge that a great prophet has risen among them. There are surely immediate parallels drawn to the well-known ministry of Elijah, and the fame of Jesus is spread throughout the countryside. But be careful not to miss the forest here for all the trees. What we see in this story first and foremost is the compassion of God. The widow did not seek help from Jesus, as Lazarus' sisters (John 11) and Jairus (the grieving synagogue ruler from Mark 5) had. Nobody came to Jesus asking him to make a dead person alive again. He simply came upon a funeral procession, saw the broken-hearted widow in her desperation, and went to her side. It is almost as if Jesus cannot bear to see her weeping. Without any recorded words between them other than Jesus' "Do not weep," Jesus touches the bier used to transport the body, signaling the pall bearers to stop, and commands the dead body to return to life. He then restores the young man to his mother alive.

You have, no doubt, wondered more than once in your life, "Where is God now that I am in such a desperate place?" A good friend of mine who is a medical doctor told me once of a young man he was treating with multiple facial lacerations. He had been driving with a blood-alcohol level well above the legal limit, overcorrected during a high-speed turn, and went off the road and into a pole. He was injured, but his best friend was killed. When my friend entered the emergency room the young man looked at him and said, "Why did this happen?" There were, of course, many reasons why the accident happened, most of them owing to this man's reckless behavior. But he already knew that. What he meant was, "Why does God let bad things happen?" That question is one that will never be answered decisively on this side of heaven. It is the very question that leads many to either faith in Christ, or, in many other scenarios, to a life of doubt and bitterness toward God—it rarely leads to indifference. Tragedy almost always has the polarizing effect of either drawing us toward God or pushing us further away from him. Interesting, is it not, that a singular event can either make a believer out of a non-believer, or a non-believer out of one who once believed, or at least believed they believed? One thing we do know; the Jesus who met the widow of Nain in her time of need, and the Jesus who met our need at the cross, is God, and he is filled with compassion and mercy. He came to bind up the broken-hearted and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. God visited the widow of Nain and her son. God visited all of us in the Incarnation. And God offers all of us abiding hope through the work of his Son on the cross.

Bad things happen in this world, and they will continue to happen until Jesus comes to set things right. In his first Advent we see glimpses of that coming great day, in his second, we will bask in it. To her great relief, the widow of Nain tasted of it on this side of heaven, and she was glad.

## DAILY PRAYER

*Father, hear my cry today. You, who are glorious and mighty, who heals the broken-hearted and strengthens the weak. Your Son entered into this world and spoke hope into our desperation. Continue your good work of healing and binding today in and through me, that all may know your glory. Amen.*

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# Missed Opportunity

And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.” And he said to him, “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.” And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

**Mark 10:17-22**



There are a handful of recorded instances of Jesus inviting a person to be his disciple. There are also a few recorded instances of a person seeking to be a disciple and being told by Jesus that he/she cannot be his disciple (in the sense of following him at that moment) but should instead pursue a different course. Our reading for today is one of two instances where Jesus invited a person to follow him only to have that person choose a different path after the invitation was extended. It is a profoundly sad story, yet one in which there is a lesson for all of us.

The man in our reading for today is a man blessed in many ways. He is wealthy, it appears he is a ruler of some sort (Luke 18:18), he is young (Matt.19:22), he has been given an audience with the long-awaited Messiah, and he is wise, at least to the degree that he sought out Jesus for the answers to eternal life. He is also a good man, humanly speaking. He comes to Jesus and asks him the most important question that can be asked: “How can I be saved?” Actually, he asks the question a bit differently than that, because he is looking for a works-based salvation. “What must I do...” is his question specifically. In other words, he has been working hard at being righteous. He knows enough about God to know that he is holy, and he knows that he demands holiness from his people. Therefore, the young man has been working diligently at being holy, and apparently (at least by his own estimation), he has been doing a pretty good job of it. He has the unprecedented privilege of living at the time when God is among his people as the Incarnate Son, and he was born in Israel, which gives him access to Jesus as well.

Here is where his wisdom and desire for salvation are evident. He sincerely wants to know if his righteous acts have merited salvation, and if they have not, what more needs to be done. Jesus, knowing the young man's heart, lists off a few of the moral codes from the law and implies that obedience to them is the avenue to everlasting life. This pleases the young man, for he has obeyed these laws since reaching an age of accountability (thirteen for a Jewish boy). It is Jesus' final demand that closes the door. This demand is not without its reward—treasure in heaven—but it is far beyond what the young man is willing to relinquish. Riches had blinded him, and although he would work hard to be saved and follow rigorous laws, he would not part with his money.

Here is recorded what may have been the biggest missed opportunity in human history. "Over exaggeration!" you say? I doubt it. What could be offered to a human being that has more value? To serve the Son of God, to have treasure in heaven, and to inherit eternal life. A fountain of youth and treasure to go with it. This is a missed opportunity of epic proportions on the man's part. If it were a game show format, the crowd would be screaming from the wings, "Take it! Take it, you fool!" Sadly, the good young man rejects it. He walks away sorrowful, in spite of the fact that the Scriptures tell us that Jesus truly loved him.

You probably already know where this is heading. How have you responded to Jesus' offer to follow him? The stakes remain the same as they were for this young man. Have you walked away sorrowful? Give up what is holding you back—you will have treasure in heaven—and come, follow Jesus. The circumstances have changed with his Advent. The answer to the question posed to Jesus is no longer one of obedience to laws and statutes, but one of surrender to the grace of God extended to you without cost. A free gift of grace received by faith, paid for in full by the one who makes the offer. To turn down Jesus' offer to be his disciple now is an even greater missed opportunity, if that were possible, than it was for the seeking man. Most of the encounters with Christ you will read about in this Advent devotional have happy endings. Sadly, this one does not. Does yours? Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, take up his offer today if you have not yet done so. It will be the best decision you have ever made.

## DAILY PRAYER

*Father, I am thankful that Jesus came to offer his life as a sacrifice of atonement, so that now, through his shed blood, I can inherit eternal life as one made righteous through his work and not my own. My prayer is for those in my life who have scorned that offer or never considered it at all. Soften their hearts, Lord, that they might be open to your call. Grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of your truth and allow them to escape from the trap of the devil. Open their blind eyes to see, and let them know eternal life. Help me to do good works in keeping with my salvation, so that others may see them and give glory to you. Keep me from rejecting anything that comes from your hand. Help me to be wise in this manner. Amen.*

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# Captive Set Free

And they came to Jesus and saw the demon-possessed man, the one who had had the legion, sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, and they were afraid. And those who had seen it described to them what had happened to the demon-possessed man and to the pigs. And they began to beg Jesus to depart from their region. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed with demons begged him that he might be with him. And he did not permit him but said to him, “Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.” And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone marveled.

Mark 5:15-20



It got chilly at night this time of the year on the east side of the Sea of Galilee—the wind sweeping off the lake and over the rutted hills. The region was known as the Garasenes, but to the Jews it was simply no-man’s land. The Decapolis, Ten Cities, Gadara, it didn’t really matter what you called it, it was filled with Gentile sinners, pig herders, prostitutes, pagans and ne’er do-wells. Tonight, the wind was strong, bringing with it a sinister sound that sent deep chills down the backs of the residents of the small village of Gerasa. For tonight, as in numerous nights before, the sounds of wailing wafted through the crisp air, chains clanking, pierced by shrieks of agony. The man of the tombs was haunted tonight, and no one in town would sleep well.

Sounds like the opening pages to a horror novel, yet it is right there in Mark chapter five and Matthew chapter eight. The demon-possessed man of the tombs. The townspeople feared him almost as much as he hated himself. Occasionally, when a few of the braver ones got their courage up (and no doubt during the brightest part of the day), they would gang up on him, shackle him with chains and leave him to die. But the ploy never proved successful, as the man always made his escape, living among the cave tombs, cutting himself with sharp rocks and crying out; anything to alleviate the torture he was suffering under the rule of more demons than could be counted. How he got this way remains a mystery, as do all accounts of demonic possession. It really did not matter to anyone except his family, one supposes, and likely the man himself. As far as the people of the region were concerned, he was better off dead.

Into this sad story comes Jesus of Nazareth. Making an excursion into Gentile-controlled regions to escape the ever-increasing crowds in Galilee, Jesus came with his disciples, ferrying themselves across the lake into this desolate area that no self-respecting Jew called home. The demons in the man grew restless with Jesus' approach, and when the boat finally landed on shore the man was driven by his tormentors into the breach to confront the unwanted intruder. "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me" the man heard himself saying. Now he heard his voice replying to Jesus' command for his name, "My name is Legion, for we are many." Then suddenly, miraculously, he saw with his own eyes again, a man standing before him, a crowd gawking at a spectacle in the distance, the sounds of grunting, snorting pigs, and then silence. The first silence he had known in years, it is safe to assume. The first peace he had felt in what seemed an eternity. He was free. The pagans in the region of the Gerasenes were not pleased. They knew the man in his possessed state, and anyone who had demonstrated power over him was surely too powerful to be hanging around their villages. They preferred for Jesus to move on; he was not welcome on this side of the Sea of Galilee. They could not force Jesus to leave, so they begged him instead. "Depart from this region" they pleaded, and Jesus heeded their plea.

Jesus came to set captives free. "For if the Son shall set you free, you are free indeed," he had said. What would the man do now? Where would he go? His heart now beat only for Jesus, and he would gladly give his life to become his follower. He begged Jesus not to leave, to allow him to share in his life and ministry. But no, Jesus had another task for him. "Go," Jesus told him, "Be my disciple by taking the message of your deliverance to your friends and neighbors. Tell them about your deliverance and how merciful the Lord has been to you." And that is exactly what the newborn man did. Now when he cried out, he would cry out the song of his deliverance and salvation. Never to be tormented again, he was a captive set free to pursue life as a follower of Jesus.

We are all captives to sin, slaves to depravity. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he/she is enslaved. Jesus came to set you free; to break your bondage to sin and to offer you hope and peace. Will you accept the offer? Will you submit to him and exchange your chains for his yoke—a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light? He offers you freedom this Advent season. Do not ignore him. Worse yet, do not implore him to leave you. With a word you can be delivered from a world of darkness to one of glorious light. My mother often advised me to never bite the hand that feeds me. It was good advice, advice I offer to you as well on this day. Invite Jesus into your life and break your bonds once and for all.

## DAILY PRAYER

*Father, set me free. I confess my sin to you. I am a slave to my sin, a slave to this world. I want to exchange my slavery so that I can be your servant. Break my pride and the arrogance that says I can do it on my own. Come to my rescue, Jesus! Compel me to come to you, to come to my senses. Break my bondage to the things that satisfy only for a season, but never for eternity. Set my heart aflame for you and lead me graciously on the path of faith and truth. I give you control of my life today and forever. Amen.*

December  
10

# First Witness

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”—and that he had said these things to her.

**John 20:11-18**



Mary was born in the port town of Magdala on the sea of Galilee. She was a disciple and financial supporter of Jesus' ministry, and one who had been delivered from demonic oppression through the healing ministry of Christ (Luke 8:2-3). We know precious little of her story, but we do know that she was brave enough, along with a few other women, on the Sunday morning after the Passover Sabbath that witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus, to make her way to his tomb in order to anoint his body with the ritual spices typical for a Jewish burial in her day. Jesus' body had been hastily placed in the tomb that fateful Friday due to the approaching Sabbath, when the handling of a dead body would have been forbidden.

Can you imagine the emotions, fears, and questions raging in Mary's heart and mind that Sunday morning? She had committed her life to Jesus, the great prophet and teacher from God. We do not know the extent to which Mary understood Jesus to be the divine Son of God. As his disciple, she could not have missed his clear proclamations and teachings announcing that truth, so, like the other disciples, it is likely that she understood vaguely that Jesus was Emmanuel—God with us—and had massive expectations for his future (and her future) in the kingdom of God. Two days earlier those hopes had been crushed; Jesus had been rejected and hung on a cross. And then the unimaginable happened.

Instead of being saved by God or using his own power to bring an end to the injustice that was being committed... he died! Right there before her and the other watching disciples. In one fateful day, a lifetime of hopes and desires faded away. Now, with a few brave companions, she made her way to his grave to follow the traditions of her people. Undoubtedly, with a confused and heavy heart.

While it was still dark, Mary and her companions made their way to the tomb where Jesus had been laid. After arriving just after sunrise, her grief gave way to shock and fear. The heavy stone barring the entrance to the tomb was rolled away and the body of her Lord had vanished! She hurried to the men, Jesus' closest followers, and shared with them the shocking news. Peter and John ran to the tomb with Mary following behind as closely as she could. John arrived first, but out of fear did not enter the tomb. Peter was not so timid and immediately entered. His curiosity overcoming his fear, John followed behind him, and there, to their amazement, they found Jesus' grave clothes neatly folded and arranged, but his body missing. After some time, they turned and went back to Jerusalem, but Mary remained to weep and mourn. Soon she too found herself gazing into the tomb, and there she saw two men dressed in white sitting where Jesus' brutalized body had once laid. They asked her a simple, yet perplexing, question: "Woman, why are you weeping?" Upon telling them that her Lord had been taken away, she turned to see what she assumed was the caretaker of the garden plot, who repeated the question of the two men. Again, she begged to be taken to the body, only to hear the gardener say her name, "Mary," in an unmistakable voice that sent shock waves through her body. It was the voice of her Master. Eyes now opened to the reality before her, she exclaimed in what must have been a voice just short of a scream, "Rabboni!" (A term in Aramaic meaning "teacher" that Jews used in respectful address to God in prayer). She fell at his feet, clinging to him tightly so as not to ever lose him again. What could have happened? She saw him die! She was at the cross and saw his mangled body, beaten beyond recognition with life ebbing away. She watched them take his lifeless body down and viewed from a distance when they placed him in the tomb and sealed the door with a heavy stone. But here he was, vastly different in appearance but with the same voice that had tenderly spoken to her in the past, calling her to be his disciple, saving her from her life of sin and rebellion. Jesus was alive again. Now everyone must know!

And so, Mary was given the incredible privilege of being the first to see and communicate with the risen Savior. She immediately went to the Twelve, now numbering eleven because of the betrayal of Judas, and became not only the first witness, but the first "witnesser" of the gospel hope. And this was her simple message: Jesus, the God-Man, who came to bring us life and immortality, who lived and died, is now alive forevermore. The message remains as true today as it did on that fateful Sunday morning.

## DAILY PRAYER

*Lord Jesus, give me courage to not only place my hope and faith completely and thoroughly in you, but to proclaim your life, death, and resurrection without fear. This Advent season give me a strong and hopeful voice to share the gospel. Amen.*

December  
11

# Sinner and Saint

As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him. And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

**Matthew 9:9-13**



**MATTHEW**

Ever wonder what may be the least respected profession in our society? Lawyers get teased quite a bit, but in reality, they are generally well respected. Federal employees also take quite a ribbing, especially those who work for the IRS, but again, many people would love to work for the government. There really are very few jobs in America that pay well that do not have thousands clamoring to secure one. But in Jesus' day there were many jobs that were looked down upon by the average Jewish man or woman. Working with unclean animals, carrying on a business that operated during the Sabbath, or working any job that assisted the dreaded Roman occupiers. All these professions were regarded as less than dignified in the Israel of Jesus' day. Those who worked them despite the social stigma were often considered to be outright ungodly. No profession, however, received more hatred and loathing than the profession of a tax collector. These men were despised and rejected by mainstream Jews and were considered accursed. A tax collector could not serve as a witness in a Jewish court of law. They were expelled from the synagogue, and they and their families were subject to open ridicule. These realities notwithstanding, some Jews still took the job. Why? Because it paid, and more often than not, it paid handsomely.

Matthew was a tax collector, which meant he was a Jew who worked for the Romans. That was bad enough, but what made it immeasurably worse was the fact that Jewish tax collectors exacted taxes from the Jews for Rome, and they were paid for their work by overtaxing individuals and keeping the proceeds for themselves. Backed by the powerful Roman government, with its occupying soldiers as their muscle, tax collectors paid off their subscriptions to their employer and then kept the rest for themselves, growing fat off the backbreaking work of their fellow countrymen. For this they were hated and considered no better than common traitors.

That was Matthew: Jew, tax collector, traitor. In our text for today, however, we see Matthew become something else altogether. He becomes a follower of Jesus Christ.

No doubt Matthew had met Jesus previously, probably as he passed by his collection booth day after day during his ministry in and around the city of Capernaum, located in the region of Galilee. Eventually, on one fateful occasion, Jesus stopped by Matthew's booth and simply said, "Follow me." Matthew left his lucrative business and followed. Later, we find Jesus having dinner, very likely in Matthew's home. Matthew's friends are there as well, and seeing as he was a tax collector and had no "normal" friends, those gathered around are the only friends a tax collector could get—other tax collectors. Matthew, who is now a disciple of Jesus, is introducing Jesus to some less than savory associates, and the Jewish religious leaders are witness to the event. They ask a question that is common in our own day. "Why is a religious person hanging around with common sinners?" Doesn't Jesus know that bad company corrupts good character?

Here we see the heart of Jesus. He understands what God the Father meant in Hosea 6:6 when he said, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Whom else would "God with us" hang around? Jesus came to save sinners, not people whose self-righteousness was wrapped tightly around them like a blanket. People who think they are righteous have no need for a savior. Matthew qualified perfectly as a recipient of Jesus' saving ministry. Hated, rejected, a sinner in every sense of the word, wealthy by the world's standards but lacking everything necessary to enter the kingdom of God. When he met Jesus, he saw his great need and jumped at the opportunity not only to turn his life around but to change the course of his future as well. Jesus did not have to ask twice. The traitorous sinner had become a saint.

A famous booklet was written almost 1,000 years ago by St. Anselm of Canterbury which he entitled *Cur Deus Homo?* "Why the God-Man?" Why did the Son of God enter our world? Here is your answer. He came to save those who need saving. "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick," Jesus said to those who asked his disciples, "Why does the Rabbi eat with tax collectors and sinners?" How right he was. No one who does not know and believe the bad news concerning their condition can ever bring themselves to seek good news. It is superfluous. A waste of time. An answer searching for a problem. But how about you? Are you sick? Do you need a physician today? If all is well for you, you are likely not looking for a savior. But surely you know better. All is not as it should be, is it? Turns out you do need a savior. If you are looking for an answer to your condition in life, look no further than the man Matthew immediately followed when called. Look to Jesus of Nazareth, the humble Jew from Galilee.

## DAILY PRAYER

*Father, thank you for sending Jesus to save sinners. This Advent season, keep my sin ever before me, not as a means to beat me down with guilt, but as a constant reminder of how much you have forgiven me. In turn, give me eyes of compassion toward others who are still blind and lost. Give me a heart that desires mercy. Teach me to extend grace as it has been extended to me. Amen.*

## Word Made Flesh

A gentle stirring in the night, deep within the maiden's womb. An overshadowing. In a world unseen by mortal eyes, a knitting together. Bone, sinews, eternal Spirit. That which was from the beginning, eternally begotten, timeless...now conceived. Supernatural hand withdrawn: nature accommodates. Cells divide and divide again. Blastocyst becomes embryo and embryo a fetus. A quickening. Messiah, cradled within the holy virgin.

Day gives way to day, week to week. A young soul magnifies the Lord and rejoices in God her Savior. He who created all things, who fills the universe...grows. Fateful day approaches. A decree, a census, a journey to ancestral lands. The allotment of Judah, Bethlehem Ephrathah—house of bread—home of kings.

It begins. Birth pangs, fear, shrieks in the night.

Shepherds tend their flocks. Angelic choirs assemble. Stillness—a quiet before the storm shattered by an infant's cry. Life and immortality.

A light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

Jesus, son of Mary. Word made flesh.

—Jyn Gregory

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 there shall 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. The zeal of the *LORD* of hosts will do this.

Isaiah 9:6-7

December  
12

# A Haunted Man

Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up. Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream." Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Let him be crucified!" And he said, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!" So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.

**Matthew 27:15-26**



PONTIUS  
PILATE

I must admit that there is a tinge of pity in me for Pontius Pilate. He was the Roman procurator, or governor, of Roman Palestine during the ministry years of Jesus. History tells us that he cared little for the Jewish people he ruled and less for their religion and what he saw as its endless trivialities. What he wanted was peace. Not that he abhorred violence, he could be as violent as the next Roman procurator, but it was peace that he needed in Palestine to prove to his superiors in Rome that he could govern well, which would in turn get him out of this God-forsaken corner of the empire and back to a rich and prosperous (and peaceful) province, where he could relax and enjoy the wealth and security of a Roman provincial. The Pharisees were throwing a wrench in his plans, as they were wont to do, by bringing before him a young fire-brand preacher who frightened them with his popularity and his willingness to denounce their hypocrisy publicly. Pilate knew this all too well, but he was between a rock and a hard place on this one. Killing a single Jew was of little significance, and having a love for justice was not one of his traits, but for some reason he found himself intrigued by this lowly Jew who was accused of proclaiming himself a king. The Pharisees and the crowd that backed them wanted a crucifixion; Pilate wanted to be left out of the equation.

There is nothing in biblical or extra-biblical writings that would lead us to believe that Pilate had ever met Jesus. He had undoubtedly heard of him, but Jews were known for always having on hand at least one major figure calling for the overthrow of Roman rule. That is why a large contingent of Roman soldiers were garrisoned right at the Jewish temple, in the Antonia Fortress. There was always trouble afoot in Jerusalem. Now Pilate had before him one of those rabble-rousers, but Jesus was different than the rest. Why was he peculiar? He remained silent during his interrogation. He behaved more like a sheep waiting to be butchered than a prophet ready to do battle. And where were his followers? Here he stood, silent and alone, and he did not seem interested in debating the qualities of Roman rule or the rights of the Jewish nation. I suspect that Pilate wished he could talk with Jesus, but even when Jesus answered direct questions, he did so in a way that indicated that the conversation would not be long.

Finally, Pilate was forced to act. He had one ace up his sleeve, a tradition that would allow him to release a single prisoner to the Jews as a way of acknowledging their most sacred festival—Passover. He would place before them two men: one, a certain Barabbas, a notorious thumper who had committed murder during an uprising. The other, this humble man who was called Christ—the Anointed One. Surely the crowds would take back their prophet, and Pilate could go home in peace. But this was not Pilate's day. The Pharisees had biased the crowd, and they cried out for the blood of the innocent and the release of the guilty. Then came a message from Pilate's wife, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man!" Now Pilate was convinced he must do something, but what? His cowardice would not allow him to rise to the occasion, and his hand was forced. He tried to relieve his conscience by washing his hands publicly from the responsibility for Jesus' death, then turned him over to his first great ordeal before the crucifixion, the dreaded scourging with the cat-of-nine-tails. The fate of Jesus now set, Pilate went home loathing the day that had passed.

Pilate failed the test. He came face to face with Jesus, and instead of falling at his feet, he sent him to his death. He did, at least, get the last word in with the Pharisees. When Jesus was crucified, Pilate instructed that the sign placed over his head announcing his crime should read, "Jesus, the king of the Jews." The Pharisees insisted that he change the wording to say, "he claimed to be king of the Jews." But here Pilate remained steadfast, "What I have written, I have written," he said. Boldness, for sure, but a boldness that came too little and much too late. See to it that you do not arrive late to your epiphany concerning Jesus as well. "Behold," he says, "I stand at the door and knock."

## DAILY PRAYER

*Father, help me to be courageous in the face of adversity. Steel up my heart for truth and righteousness. May I stand up for the weak and helpless, and may I hold fast to Christ against all odds. Let this Advent season be the season in which I take a firm stand for Jesus Christ. As I cast aside this world and its wisdom, let me hold fast to the one who, for the joy set before him, endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of God. Amen.*

December  
13

# Busy Disciple

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."

**Luke 10:38-42**



**MARTHA**

Not all of Jesus' disciples were men, there were women who considered him their master and teacher as well. Some of them were with Jesus through much of his earthly ministry, and some of them were responsible for meeting his and the twelve disciples' financial needs. Jesus' inner ring of disciples, known in the gospels and the book of Acts as "the Twelve," were also designated by him to be apostles, but others followed him closely, and some of them were women. Martha and her sister Mary were counted in that company.

Martha and her sister also had a brother named Lazarus. Their family was beloved by Jesus, and he spent significant amounts of time with them when he was traveling near their village, called Bethany. Luke tells us that Jesus was traveling through the area and that Martha invited him to stay with them. This may be their first meeting, or it may also be that Jesus had come to Bethany specifically to make this visit to his friends. In any event, Jesus took up his typical task of teaching those who had gathered, and Mary, Martha's sister, took her place at his feet as one of his pupils. While this was taking place, poor Martha was carrying on the traditional role of a woman in that culture and was waiting on those who had gathered, seeing to their every need.

You can picture the scene; Jesus is quietly teaching with a small crowd gathered in what was probably an open courtyard area. Someone needs water from the well. More people have just arrived and need their feet washed and some bread or fruit to refresh them. Now someone in the crowd needs directions to the nearest inn, and Martha is scurrying about taking care of all these needs. After some time, she finally gets a moment to stop and catch her breath. She has not heard a thing Jesus has been saying, but she looks quickly at the crowd and sees her sister sitting at Jesus' feet, absorbing everything he is saying without a thought for Martha or the needs of their guests! Martha is infuriated.

Her inconsiderate sister is acting like a man, learning from the Rabbi, and she is worn out doing what is necessary to be a good hostess. Truth be told, she is probably a bit put out with Jesus, too. Here is Mary, sitting at his feet, and he does not seem to have the sense to notice Martha's harried condition nor the willingness to tell Mary to get off her hindquarters and get into the kitchen where she belongs. Martha interrupts the master, certain that she will gain an ally in him if she can just draw his attention to the clear injustice that is taking place. But she is mistaken. When Jesus is apprised of the situation he does not come to Martha's defense. Instead, he gently reminds her that the best place to be when he is teaching, whether man or woman, is at his feet, learning how to be a disciple. Martha was an anxious and troubled woman, and she needed to learn that the only thing necessary to do when Jesus teaches is to listen and obey. Jesus will not take from Mary something that is good for her while at the same time pleases him. She is faithful, wanting to be taught and trained in kingdom principles. Waiting on people takes a back seat to such a desire.

Now, do not come down too hard on Martha; it is not like she turns her nose up to Jesus' teaching; she is simply caught up in her culture's expectations. There is no sin in serving people, and hospitality is a noble virtue. Martha needed to put things in perspective, not change her entire worldview. Sometime later, when her brother will become ill and die, she will encounter Jesus again (see tomorrow's devotion), and there we see Martha at her best. In that narrative we see that she has grown in her faith and does in fact have a deep and abiding love and trust in Jesus. That love and trust will be rewarded with the privilege of hearing Jesus call out to her brother, now four days dead and laying lifeless in a tomb, with the words, "Lazarus, come forth!"

There is a lesson here for all of us. How many "necessary and important" things do we put in front of our relationship with Jesus? How many good things interfere with the best? How many times do we excuse ourselves from serious, focused time in God's word, or from other opportunities to learn or to live out our life with Christ to accomplish less important things? Is hospitality sinful? Of course not. Sports? Music? Camping? Travel? None of these, nor a thousand other joyful activities, are sin-producing in themselves. Nevertheless, how many good things crowd out the voice of Jesus in your life? The voice that is calling you to choose the "good portion"?

Choose that good portion friends, and what you learn that leads to greater growth in Christ will never be taken from you. Jesus came to give you life, and life more abundant and free. Do not let lesser things keep you from that abundance. See to it that you do not find yourself, after a long and busy life, having traded beauty for ashes.

## DAILY PRAYER

*Lord, keep me from being so hurried in life that I let you pass by without notice. Keep my anxious heart from overriding my devotion to you and my desire to know you intimately. Help me to choose the best things in life and not settle for what is common. Amen.*



# One Small Child

One small child in a land of a thousand.

One small dream of a Savior tonight.

One small hand reaching out to the starlight.

One small Savior of life.

One king bringing his gold and riches.

One king ruling and army of might.

One king kneeling with incense and candlelight.

One king bringing us life.

See Him lying, a cradle beneath Him.

See Him smiling in the stall.

See His mother praising the Father.

See His tiny eyelids fall.

See the shepherds kneeling before Him.

See the kings on bended knee.

See the mother praising the Father.

See the blessed infant sleep.

One small child in a land of a thousand.

One small dream of a Savior tonight.

One small hand reaching out to the starlight.

One small Savior of life.

DAVID MEECE





# week THREE

Open wide your door to the one who comes. Open your soul, throw open the depths of your heart to see the riches of simplicity, the treasures of hope, the sweetness of grace. Open your heart and run to meet the Son of eternal light that illuminates all mankind.

~ St. Ambrose of Milan ~

December  
14

# Up From the Grave

Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

**John 11:38-44**



Only a few humans can tell a story about life after death from experience. Lazarus was one of them. Jesus and Lazarus were friends, but we do not know when they met nor how they had grown close. We only know that they loved each other, for when Lazarus was on his death bed, his sisters, Mary and Martha, sent Jesus a message telling him, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." Jesus, upon receiving the message, inexplicably remained where he was for two more days without so much as a movement in the direction of Bethany, the hometown of Lazarus and his sisters. This action baffled his disciples, for they knew two things from experience: Jesus loved Lazarus, and Jesus could heal him.

Ever wonder why God does not fix bad things for good people? The problem of evil is one of the great weapons non-believers wield in their attacks on the validity of Christianity. If God is good, why does he allow evil? If God is great, why does he not eliminate it? God is either not good (since he allows evil to exist), or he is not all-powerful (since evil continues to exist). So goes the theory which attempts to negate the existence of God. Here, however, is a concept we may wish to include in the discussion: God is both good and great, and there are reasons why evil exists in this world—reasons that we as humans either cannot understand (therefore God leaves us in the dark), or cannot accept (therefore God refuses to tell us more plainly than he already has). Jesus lived out the reality of evil in this world, both in the lives of his friends and in his own life as well.

And so, after waiting two days, Jesus made the day-long journey to Bethany, only to find that Lazarus had died the day in which he was notified and had already been in the grave four days. There is some evidence that a Jewish tradition existed suggesting that when a person dies, his/her soul lingers about the body, waiting to re-enter, but after the third day it moves on, leaving no hope for the dead. Although the belief was an unbiblical superstition, there is some indication that Jesus' lingering had something to do with this widely held belief. He would demonstrate decisively to those most prone to such tales that he held the keys to life and death. Upon his arrival in Bethany he was led to the tomb of his friend, and there he confronted death with a wide-eyed crowd watching.

It is interesting to note that Lazarus had nothing to do with this encounter with Jesus. He was in the tomb, unaware of any events leading up to his resuscitation. He was not seeking Jesus, but his sisters were, knowing that Jesus could heal their brother (although disappointed that he did not arrive until it was too late). The miracle of his restoration to life was a sign, John tells us in his gospel, primarily for Jesus' disciples, that they might place their faith in him. We are not told in Scripture what Lazarus had to say to Jesus after they unwrapped him from his grave clothes. I am guessing it was something like, "Good to see you again my friend, thanks for the supernatural jolt." Maybe not. But wouldn't we all like to sit around a fire and hear Lazarus spin some yarns for us? He would certainly have tales to tell.

The Jesus we celebrate at Advent is Savior and God. Death holds no mastery over him, nor anyone else that has placed their hope in him. The odds are very good that you will never have the experience of tasting death in this life only to live again. But you can know the power of the resurrection in your life. It is the power that is at work in believers both to save them and transform them into the image of Christ (Eph. 1:18-20). Remember today that, if you know Jesus, the power of God is working in you, despite the evil present in this world. You are never left to your own devices. In Jesus, the future invades the present. Eternal life becomes a present reality his followers experience both now and into eternity. He who has the Son has life! (1 John 5:12).

Why did Jesus wrap himself in flesh and live among us? To conquer death, and to put an end to our fear of death (Heb. 2:14-15). Jesus did that very thing many years ago in the little village of Bethany. With a commanding voice he called forth his friend from the grave. "Lazarus, come forth!" He will do it again in the future, and both you and I, if you have placed your hope in Christ, will experience that power and that joy! Rejoice my friends, for Jesus is the great death-eater.

## DAILY PRAYER

*Father, I pray that the eyes of my heart may be enlightened to know the hope to which you have called me, the riches of your glorious inheritance in the saints, and your incomparably great power for those of us who believe. That power is like the working of your mighty strength, which you exerted in Christ Jesus when you raised him from the dead and seated him at your right hand (Eph. 1:19-20). Please let that resurrection power transform me today. Amen.*

December  
15

# Radically Transformed

For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus... And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only were hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me.

**Galatians 1:11-17, 22-24**



SAUL  
PAULUS

Saul was a Pharisee, which means he was a teacher of the Jewish law and a religious leader for the people of Israel. He trained under a famous rabbi of his time, the respected and learned Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). He was born into the powerful tribe of Benjamin, spoke Hebrew as a first language, and according to his own testimony, was "faultless" in his observance of the law. We do not know if he ever met Jesus personally during Jesus' earthly ministry, or if he was even in Israel during the time of Christ. He was born in what was known as the Diaspora (the dispersion of Jews outside Israel), in the city of Tarsus, and came to Jerusalem to train and be educated, probably as a teenager.

Saul was zealous for Israel, zealous for Judaism, and zealous for the traditions of his Jewish fathers. We are introduced to him in Scripture when the first martyr, a godly man by the name of Stephen, was being stoned to death. The "witnesses" who served as the executioners laid their coats at Saul's feet, most likely a reference to the fact that he was the man in charge. As persecution spread after the death of Stephen, Saul took the lead, hunting down Christians first in Judea, then throughout Israel. Upon hearing that Christians were spreading their teachings in the city of Damascus, Paul obtained letters from the religious leaders in Jerusalem to go there, arrest as many Christians as he could track down, and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial and punishment. It was on that fateful trip that Saul met Jesus, not as the incarnate Son of God, but as the risen Lord and Christ.

Saul, temporarily blinded by the encounter, was led into the city where he was ministered to and prayed over by a man named Ananias. Saul's sight was restored, and he immediately began preaching the gospel to those who would listen. Eventually, he became a missionary (primarily to the Gentiles outside Israel) and his name was changed to the more Romanized "Paul."

Thirteen of our New Testament books were authored by this same Paul. Countless churches were established across the Roman Empire through his ministry, and the church expanded beyond a Jewish sect to a world-wide movement, made up of Jews and Gentiles, slaves and freedmen, men and women. God took a staunchly conservative Jewish teacher, removed (figuratively) his heart of stone and gave him a heart that was ablaze for the glory of God and the salvation of all peoples. Paul never asked to become a follower of Christ. He was not seeking Jesus—Jesus was seeking him—and upon confronting Paul, told him that he (Paul) would be his witness to kings and their people, and gave him what he needed for ministry. It is interesting that Paul makes clear that God had called him from his mother's womb. That means that during those many years that Paul was training for life as a Pharisee, persecuting the church of God, and hounding Christians to their deaths, he was all along a vessel that would be used by God for the proclamation of the gospel. It appears, by Paul's own admission, that he did not find God, but that God found him, revealing to Paul his Son Jesus, who had been with him from the beginning. Paul was created by God to be a Christian missionary.

Paul's meeting with Jesus was a dramatic show of force on God's part. No doubt a modern cinematographer would depict it with bright lights accompanied by a blast of wind and fire forcing Saul to fall off his horse and be pinned to the ground. Regardless, it radically transformed him into a new man—a new creation—and turned him into something he had once fought adamantly against. And so it is with all who are called by Christ. The old has passed away. Behold! God makes all things new (2 Cor. 5:17). We may say that one of the reasons that God became Man in Christ was to accomplish this very thing. To reconcile men and women to God and turn sinners into saints.

Paul's confrontation with Christ recounted by him in our passage for today was not his only encounter with Jesus. After his fateful meeting with him on the road to Damascus, it seems he met with him again, maybe many times, over the next period of his life (possibly three years) in the Arabian desert. The gospel Paul shared was not his, nor any man's, but God's, and the gospel that saved him is the very same gospel that has saved you, or will save you, if you so choose. It is a gospel that transformed a hardened man into a persecuted saint. And we should all give God glory because of him.

## DAILY PRAYER

*Father, as you have made me and chosen me, I now choose you and seek to know you more and more. I thank you for transforming me and making me a new creation in your Son, Jesus. May my life reflect Jesus so thoroughly that others will glorify God because of me. Amen.*

December  
16

# Heart of Gratitude

On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” When he saw them he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went they were cleansed. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus answered, “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” And he said to him, “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.”

**Luke 17:11-19**



It has been said by some that we never need to say “thank you” to God because God knows everything and therefore already knows that we are thankful. This is likely not the most accurate line of reasoning. Although it is certainly true that God knows everything, to carry this reasoning to its logical conclusion would clearly indicate that we have no need to say anything to God, either in thanksgiving, praise, or supplication, since he is all-knowing. The Bible, however, encourages us not only to pray to an omniscient God but to express our thanksgiving to him as well. In fact, the word used in the original language for “giving him thanks” in our text for today (eucharisteo) is utilized in Scripture virtually always to designate giving thanks directly to God. The leper was giving thanks to Jesus as one would give thanks to God, and Jesus not only seemed to appreciate that fact but praised the act even though it came from a Samaritan, whom the Jews despised.

Consider the life of these lepers before they encountered Jesus. Flesh rotting away with no hope of recovery. Living in community together because no one else would live in community with them. The pain from their open wounds nagging them constantly, and the stench from their sores a constant reminder of their unclean condition. They undoubtedly endured frequent infections and fevers with no medicinal help, and through it all they were completely ostracized by other humans. Forced, if they were Jewish, to cry out, “Unclean! Unclean!” as they walked along the roadway to warn all within earshot of their approach. They could not work in Jewish society; therefore, they enjoyed no income outside of a gift or alms from a sympathetic passerby. If they had once been blessed to have a family, that family was no doubt unable or unwilling to assist them in any significant way now.

Outside of rare exceptions, lepers were doubly cursed, both dying and impoverished. Into their world stepped Jesus of Nazareth, and upon recognizing him they were quick to cry out for help. "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us," they shouted at the top of their lungs, careful to keep their distance lest they be accused of trying to infect the very man they sought to entice to their aid. Jesus sent them to the priests so that they could be declared clean in keeping with the law. The miracle had already begun, and upon acting out in obedience to his word in faith, they were all healed. Once the miracle was completed and recognized as the great act of mercy it was, nine went on their way, ostensibly forgetting the man who made it possible, but the tenth could not. Gratitude engulfed him. Imagining all the many ways his life would be changed for the better, he could not complete his appointed task without returning to give thanks. Praising God, who alone can heal lepers and bring sinners to repentance and faith, the leper returned to Jesus and fell at his feet...eucharisteo - giving him thanks as God. And why not, can anyone but God heal a leper with a word? Little did the leper know, but the man who was born to die for his sins had more to offer him than health and cleansing. He held within his power the hope of everlasting life.

How often do you stop to give God thanks? The apostle Paul asked the Corinthian believers this interesting question: "What do you have that you have not received? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not?" Is there anything in our lives that is not ultimately given to us by God? Do you know Christ in a saving way? Is that very fact not worthy of a lifetime of thanks and praise? Do you eat a full meal whenever you choose? Is that a reason for thanksgiving? Can you thank God for the gift of life, and the assurance of an eternity in a resurrected body that will know no pain or sorrow? Undoubtedly there are situations in your life that you wish were different. Scenarios that you wish you could forget. We all would love to be able to change past actions or decisions. Has not God promised to cast our sin behind his back, to fling it away as far as the east is from the west? Is this not glorious to you? Does it cause you to respond with thanksgiving? We have much for which to be thankful. Do not be guilty of ingratitude before a loving Father this Advent season. Give thanks to him with a grateful heart.

## DAILY PRAYER

*I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise. I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word. On the day I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased. All the kings of the earth shall give you thanks, O LORD, for they have heard the words of your mouth, and they shall sing of the ways of the LORD, for great is the glory of the LORD. For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar. Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and your right hand delivers me. The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands. Amen. -Psalm 138*

# December 17

## Instant Believer

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Jesus answered him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.” And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

**John 1:43-51**



Have you ever gone from a doubter to a believer in an instant? Ever watched your favorite basketball player pull up for a very long jump shot with the game on the line? You shout, “Nooooo! What are you thinking?” only to see the shot sail through the net, causing you to yell even more fervently “Yes! Way to go...perfect shot!” Sometimes what you are hoping for becomes reality in unexpected ways right before your eyes.

Nathaniel’s doubts were answered in a far more important way on the day he first encountered Jesus. Filled with questions about the dubious background of this new teacher Philip told him about, Nathaniel went to see for himself. Nazareth? Does anything good come from that backwater village in Galilee? But while approaching Jesus he overheard something that changed his doubts to belief instantaneously. “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit,” Jesus said as he in turn laid his eyes on Nathaniel. The natural question followed, “How do you know me?” And then the earth-shattering revelation—Jesus knew Nathaniel long before he met him, he even observed him sitting under a fig tree without having been in physical proximity to him. Now, we may wonder, why does Nathaniel jump to such a quick conclusion? Is it not even remotely possible that someone had told Jesus about Nathaniel? Could he not have been making a lucky guess?

Fig trees dotted the landscape of Roman Palestine, and although the odds would not necessary have been in Jesus' favor, just maybe he was taking a shot in the dark that paid off. Although Jesus' statement is amazing, does it warrant a confession like, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel"?

A clue lies in what Philip said to Nathaniel when he found him. "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote..." Nathaniel was waiting for the Messiah, anticipating his coming, anxious for his arrival. He knew the Scriptures and he believed, we can assume, that Philip knew them as well. He knew that Messiah would be the Son of God, and he knew that only God was omniscient and omnipresent (knowing all things and present in all places). These facts, and probably others of which we are simply unaware, were enough to cause Nathaniel to shout out his testimony concerning Jesus. It appears that Jesus himself is skeptical of Nathaniel's quick conversion to faith, but instead of chastising him he promises him further confirmation, such that Nathaniel will have no doubts whatsoever as to the nature of the man he has just met.

Faith is a hard thing to pin down. Some come to know Christ as a child and never doubt again. Some take years and years of study before they come to a conclusion concerning Jesus' claims and then continue their studies throughout life as a way of confirming all that they have come to believe. Others will never believe, remaining skeptics throughout life, looking at and living in a world created by the hand of God that is shouting out his existence every moment of every day, yet blind to the reality. Safe in their own doubts, they are free to pursue life on their own terms, confident that they will never be called to account. Some come to a perceived faith in Jesus (perceived by them, and oftentimes by others as well), only to "deconstruct" that faith later in life, repudiating all that they once believed. Nathaniel was not like that, he was willing and anxious to believe, he simply did not know where to place his faith until he encountered Jesus of Nazareth. He had been pursuing the Lord, anticipating the One who had been promised through the writings of Moses, the great deliverer of the people of Israel, and the prophets, those who had (via the work of the Holy Spirit) foreseen his coming. He had prepared himself for the truth when it was presented to him, and when those expectations were confirmed, he accepted the truth and proclaimed his allegiance. History tells us that for Nathaniel, there was no looking back.

In his patient waiting, this true Israelite was not disappointed. Neither will you be if you pursue this very same Jesus of Nazareth—and you too will see greater things.

## DAILY PRAYER

*Lord, increase my faith. I want to know you and trust you, to be filled with hope in you, and to be willing to shout "You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel" at a moment's notice. Give me peace, Father, that you are who you say you are, that you have redeemed me, and that I will enjoy eternity in your presence when doubts assail me. I place all my hope in you today, all my trust in you today, and give all my praise to you today. Amen.*

December  
18

# The Little Girl

While he was still speaking, there came from the ruler's house some who said, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Teacher any further?" But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the ruler of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." And he allowed no one to follow him except Peter and James and John the brother of James. They came to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, and Jesus saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. And when he had entered, he said to them, "Why are you making a commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. But he put them all outside and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him and went in where the child was. Taking her by the hand he said to her, "Talitha cumi," which means, "Little girl, I say to you, arise." And immediately the girl got up and began walking (for she was twelve years of age), and they were immediately overcome with amazement. And he strictly charged them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Mark 5:35-43



TALITHA  
CUMI

Jairus, the synagogue ruler, was getting worried. When he left home to look for Jesus his daughter was alive, but just barely. By God's grace he found Jesus quickly, and with very little effort was able to persuade him to accompany him back to his home, where she was waiting for his touch. Now a woman had stopped their progress by inappropriately touching the hem of the Master's robe, causing him to stop in his tracks, seeking the culprit. Their conversation seemed to go on forever. Yes, he was pleased that Jesus had demonstrated mercy to the woman, from the little he overheard from their conversation she was certainly desperate. But so was he! His little girl was sick, on the verge of death. If Jesus did not pick up the pace she would be beyond the reach of anyone, even a great healer like him. Finally, the conversation was drawing to a close, but then he saw them—servants from his home—making their way toward him through the pressing crowd. His heart went cold, for he knew the news could not be good. When they told him that his daughter had died, and to trouble the Master no more, it was like a knife to the heart. Now all was lost.

But immediately Jesus stepped into the conversation, "Do not fear," he said, "only believe." Now they resumed their journey, but why? Jairus' head was muddled from the grief and shock. He followed along dutifully, but only out of reflexive action; his world had just come to a sudden halt. Arriving at the home, Jesus addressed a crowd of people around the doorway.

Jairus thought he heard something about not weeping, for the child was only sleeping. He heard muffled laughter, but it was all meaningless anyway. Now Jesus jostled him back to reality, asking him and his wife to follow him into the home, along with three other men, disciples of the Master he assumed. When things grew quiet, Jairus was able to fix his eyes upon his precious child laying on her mat where he had left her, looking like she did so many times before when he came to her and nudged her awake, kissing her and welcoming her to the new day. Those wonderful mornings would be no more. Her waking days were over.

If only they had been a little more determined on their journey home things might have been different. But now Jesus was moving to her side. A moment of silence passed, and then he heard the words from Jesus' lips, gentle, yet with the force of great authority, "Talitha cumi," he said, "Little girl, I said to you, arise." Immediately she stood to her feet with the help of the Master and walked to the waiting arms of Jairus and his wife. She was alive! Overcome with amazement and joy, they wept and praised God. And then Jesus said something quite mundane, "Give her something to eat." Of course...of course! She would certainly be hungry, and now that life had returned to her feeble, fever-racked body, she would need to eat. Jesus, the God of the supernatural, was also the God of everyday life.

For the little girl this must have seemed like a dream. Delirious with fever, she likely drifted in and out of consciousness in the days leading up to her final hourA. Then, she slipped quietly out of life, only to wake, as from a restful night's sleep, looking into the eyes of a stranger. Do we read too much into this to assume that she had never seen eyes of compassion like the ones she saw for the very first time that day? Possibly. But what a way to wake up from death, looking into the eyes of the only one who has ever conquered it.

I suspect it will be much like this for those of us who know Christ. We too, barring the singular event of his return in our own lifetime, will pass from life to death someday, only to awake looking, I have no doubt, into the eyes of our own Master, who lived, died, and rose to life, never to die again. One day all of us who know Christ will hear the words; "Arise," "Come forth!" "Get up." These are the commands recorded for us in Scripture as Jesus, three times, raised the dead to life. These are but a glimpse—a taste—of what awaits all those who have placed their hope in Jesus, who assures us, "Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die" (John 11:25-26). Our bodies are made of dust, friends, but not our souls. The one who made both has promised to never leave us nor forsake us. The little girl, her mother and her father Jairus found that to be true in this life. We will all find it to be true in the next.

## DAILY PRAYER

*Father, I ask you to be there for me in life, and to be there for me in death. Give me courage not to fear the troubles of life, nor the pangs of death, but to believe fully in you and your promise of life everlasting. May my peace be the peace of Christ, who conquers death and brings life and immortality to life. Amen.*

December  
19

# Jesus' Last Friend

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

**Luke 23:39-43**



## THE CRIMINAL

The last embers of life were fading out in Jesus. He had endured a sleepless night, celebrating a Passover meal with his disciples before the temple guards arrived with Judas the betrayer leading them. This was followed by an arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, and then to hasty nighttime trials, a transfer to Pilate, the Roman procurator, then to Herod, the Jewish king, and finally back to Pilate. His accusers had plied him with many questions throughout the evening; then came the unlawful beatings at the hands of both the temple guards and the Roman soldiers placed in charge over him. Finally, he was stripped, tied to a post and whipped with a cat of nine tails, tearing through his back and into his muscles. Marched to the place of execution and nailed to a cross, he now hung naked and bleeding profusely, only to have to endure the taunts and jeers of the crowd and the two men crucified on his left and right. One of the men, our passage for today demonstrates, cursed Jesus while at the same time begging to be saved from his fate. The other, however, saw in Jesus one last hope.

We know virtually nothing about this man who encountered Jesus at the last moment on his saving mission. He was a criminal, to be sure, he admitted as much. The gospel of Matthew tells us slightly more, that he was a thief. Matthew, Mark and John tell us nothing of his conversation with Jesus, leaving only Luke to tell us about the event. He would have been only one of the estimated tens of thousands that Rome crucified before outlawing the practice in 337 A.D. under the emperor Constantine.

We all know that crucifixion was a bloody and brutally painful affair, although the two men who were executed with Jesus would not have been beaten as extensively as Jesus was. Both men lived longer than Jesus, requiring their legs to be broken prior to the start of the Sabbath to hasten their demise. It is likely that this man started

the afternoon mocking Jesus, but over time, came to the realization that there was something different about him, causing him to turn away from his cursing and to seek hope in Christ instead. The other gospel writers tell us that both men were deriding Jesus. It may be that only Luke was privy to the full conversation that took place between Jesus and the soon-to-be convert. How he acquired the information remains lost to us. Regardless, before death overtook the men, both were able to find consolation in the other—Jesus, hearing a final kind word before death, and the criminal, finding hope in salvation.

Many questions are raised about this final conversation for Jesus. How could he offer salvation to a man who likely spent the better part of his life hurting people? He did not confess Jesus as Lord and Savior. There is no verbal repentance, nor the opportunity for confirmation and proclamation of his faith through baptism. But surely we over-think the situation when we try to make his salvation experience normative for how people are saved. He was on a cross, with death a certainty within hours or days. He was going nowhere, and his request of Jesus, "...Remember me when you come into your kingdom," was both a cry of repentance and a confession of faith. Like almost everyone in first century Palestine, this dying man had heard of Jesus. Now he was hanging by his side, bleeding out and finding each breath more difficult to come by than the one preceding. Ours is not to ask how he could be saved, but to rejoice in the fact that he was, and that it becomes clear evidence for us of the hope we all have since the New Covenant was established by Jesus—salvation comes by grace through faith, not by works (Eph. 2:8).

In the criminal who hung beside him, Jesus found a final friend. He was a final confidant, a man who was sharing his experience. The criminal, for his part, found salvation at the very moment in human history in which it was fully purchased, at the cross of Christ. The blood that Jesus was spilling at the time he conversed with his new friend was the very blood that would make salvation a possibility for the criminal, and for you and me. "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace..." (Eph. 1:7). It is never too late for us, not while we have breath in our lungs. Salvation belongs to the Lord, and it was the Lord who shared it with that criminal that dark day.

We may wonder why the criminal got a "free pass." If so, we must wonder about our own salvation as well, for we all have it coming, and we all deserve what we get. Unless, of course, our sin, our guilt, and our punishment gets laid on Jesus instead. He was willing to accept that in the case of his last friend—he is willing to accept it for you as well.

## DAILY PRAYER

*Father, thank you for the hope that is derived from this narrative in the life of Jesus. And thank you for all the thief on the cross, and I, have been afforded in Christ. My hope lies not in riches nor strength, but in the blood of Jesus my Savior. Amen.*

December  
20

# Faith Rewarded

And there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and who had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse. She had heard the reports about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his garment. For she said, “If I touch even his garments, I will be made well.” And immediately the flow of blood dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. And Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone out from him, immediately turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my garments?” And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing around you, and yet you say, ‘Who touched me?’” And he looked around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling and fell down before him and told him the whole truth. And he said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

**Mark 5:25-34**



THE  
DESPERATE WOMAN

Some of the lingering illnesses that people suffer cause us to pity them, pray for them, and reach out to them. Some do not seem to bother us at all. For many, a woman suffering from what amounted to a twelve-year menstrual flow simply does not register as a problem we care much about. After all, people suffer from much more serious ailments which are far more deadly. Embarrassing? Yes. Inconvenient? Absolutely. Debilitating? No. But consider for a moment what this woman in Jesus' day had to endure.

To be a Jew meant to be part of a community. That community was celebrated through Judaism, the relationship established between the people of Israel and their covenant God. In Jesus' day, that relationship was lived out primarily in the home and in the synagogue. Occasionally, good Jews had to be ostracized from that community for short periods of time due to uncleanness. Maybe a close relative had died in their home; they may have taken part in a funeral or accidentally stepped on a grave; they were on their short monthly cycle, or they were ill or had an open wound. After sitting out of community events for a short time, and possibly a ritual bath to wash away the uncleanness, they would quickly rejoin their friends and family. Not so for a woman suffering from a perpetual menstrual cycle. First, she was always unclean, with no way to make herself clean again, therefore excluded from synagogue worship and the celebration of her faith. Second, she was, by definition, barren, therefore it is very unlikely that she was married.

A husband is not with her when she meets Jesus, and with divorce so easily attained in the Judaism of Jesus' day, it is highly unlikely that a husband would have stayed with a woman who could bear him no children. This woman who sought Jesus was broken, ashamed, and destitute after paying for numerous unsuccessful medical interventions. In a word, she was an outcast.

One thing this woman still possessed, however, was faith. She had heard reports about this man named Jesus, a great healer who spoke with authority and demonstrated the power of God. Seeing that he was nearby, she determined that she would go to him. But how could she approach a man of God while she was unclean? She would do the unthinkable; she would secretly approach him from behind, touch him and then make her escape. She would intentionally break every rule of decent conduct for an unclean person and intentionally touch the Rabbi. Her moment came, and she reached out her hand. Touching him ever so lightly on his prayer shawl, her touch of faith was rewarded. Instantly she knew that she was made clean. As she attempted a stealthy retreat, a huge problem arose. Jesus stopped and began to look at the crowd around him. Someone touched him! Not just an innocent jostle from the crowd either, but intentionally, seeking a miracle. "Who touched my garments?" he shouted. Terrified, the woman approached him, caught in her act of desperation. She had made the Master unclean. There was nothing else she could do but quickly confess her sin and take her punishment. However, this was no ordinary rabbi; unwittingly, she had encountered Jesus the Messiah. Rather than rebuke this woman for having the audacity to transfer her uncleanliness to him, Jesus spoke to her with compassion and love. "Daughter," he called her. Not "sinner," not "outcast," not even "woman;" but "daughter." "Go in peace," he said, "and be healed of your disease." A disease, incidentally, that no one could cure even though the search had gone on for twelve years. A disease that Jesus ended not with an extraordinary show of power, not even with a word, but with a solitary touch.

Have you encountered this Jesus? Have you placed your hope and trust in him? If so, go in peace today. The peace that Jesus offers to all who come to him on his terms, without guile while seeking to know him as he has revealed himself—not as a figment of our imaginations. The peace he offers is a peace that surpasses understanding. Place your faith in Jesus today, my friend, and know peace with God. Place your hope in Jesus today and know a relationship with the God of grace and compassion.

## DAILY PRAYER

*Father, grant me your peace today. May I know in a spiritual way the touch of Jesus. May I extend peace today as you extend peace. Give me eyes to see the hurting today. Give me eyes to see the unlovable and love them through me. Help me to be a doer of my faith and not just a hearer of it. Give me the faith I need to trust in you completely. Heal me of my doubt and fear and mold me into your image. Amen.*



Wilt thou love God as he thee? Then digest,  
my soul, this wholesome meditation.

How God the Spirit, by angels waited on In heaven,  
doth make His temple in thy breast. The Father having  
begot a Son most blest, and still begetting—for he ne'er  
begun—hath deign'd to choose thee by adoption, co-  
heir to His glory, and Sabbath's endless rest.

And as a robb'd man, which by search doth find his  
stolen goods sold, must lose or buy it again, the Son  
of glory came down, and was slain. Us whom He had  
made, and Satan stole, to unbind.

‘Twas much, that man was made like God before, but  
that God was made like man... much more!

JOHN DONNE  
**HOLY SONNET 15**





# week **FOUR**

*The Lord did not come to make a display. He came to heal and to teach suffering men. For one who wanted to make a display the thing would have been just to appear and dazzle the beholders. But for Him who came to heal and to teach the way was not merely to dwell here, but to put Himself at the disposal of those who needed Him, and to be manifested according as they could bear it, not vitiating the value of the divine appearing by exceeding their capacity to receive it.*

~~ *St. Athanasius* ~~

# December 21

## God Fearer

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, "Cornelius." And he stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea." When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him, and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

**Acts 10:1-8**



It is a mistaken assumption to think that all Gentiles in the first century were pagans who cared nothing for the God of Israel. There were a few enlightened men and women who realized that the God of the Jews was the one true God. They were few and far between, but they did exist. One of those Gentiles was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in the Roman infantry. It is interesting to note that every reference in the New Testament to a Roman centurion is a positive one. Centurions commanded a regiment of one-hundred foot soldiers and comprised the backbone of the Roman army. They were known to be men of exceptional courage and intelligence. The New Testament seems to agree that these men were, by and large, men of outstanding character.

Cornelius was a "God-fearer," a moniker that designated a Gentile who worshiped the God of Israel as the only true God, and who followed the moral code of Israel (while not participating in the ritual sacrificial system). They were not full converts to Judaism, but they did worship on the periphery of the faith. In Acts 8 we hear of the Ethiopian eunuch, who had gone to worship in Jerusalem at the temple and was met by Philip on his way home. Through Philip he encountered Christ. It appears that God saw to it that these God-fearers had the opportunity to hear and know about Jesus in the early days of the church.

Cornelius was a good man, respected by the Jews, and a true worshipper of God. So much so that his whole household (family and slaves) also worshipped God. He worshipped God, but he did not know salvation through Christ. God goes to extraordinary means to bring the gospel to Cornelius. Notice that the angel does not come to Cornelius and

tell him about Jesus. That is never the role that angels take upon themselves in Scripture. They are servants of God, sent to minister to humans, but they do not share the gospel (at least not the gospel of salvation), that is the work of godly men and women. God arranges a meeting between Cornelius and the apostle Peter so that Peter can do what all Christians are called to do—share the hope they have in Christ through the gospel. After Cornelius' vision Peter (staying two days away in Joppa) also receives a vision, and a meeting is arranged.

When Peter arrives at the home of Cornelius he finds him waiting. But not just Cornelius; he and his relatives and close friends have joined with him and his family to hear from the man of God that was promised to them. Cornelius was not just anxious to hear for himself the news, he wanted everyone he knew and loved to hear it too! Although Peter is not quite sure why he was asked to come, he takes the opportunity to share the gospel, and before he even finishes talking, God moves sovereignly to save Cornelius and his gathered friends. It is as if God cannot wait to give Cornelius the gift of life in return for his years of worship, even though that worship was performed in ignorance. Notice how little Cornelius had to do with any of this. God saw his desire, put together the meeting, waited for Peter to share (and almost finish), and then poured out the Holy Spirit upon all those gathered in the home. Cornelius was the grateful recipient of a gospel he did not even know existed until God brought it to him. Notice, however, that Cornelius was not saved because he was ignorant. Good man that he was, he still needed to hear the gospel and respond in faith. So do those who have not heard the gospel in our own generation.

Our God is not unkind, nor is he arbitrary, he loves those who love him with an everlasting love! Those who seek him will find him; this is the promise of Scripture. “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and they that come to me I will never turn away” (John 6:37). Are you a God-fearer who has yet to respond to the gospel of God and so be saved? Seek him today! The Scriptures promise you that, when you seek him with all your heart, will find him. And, like Cornelius, you will find that it was God seeking you first.

Ignorance is not bliss, my friends, it leads to death. Faith comes by hearing the word of Christ. God ensured that the good man Cornelius would become the born-again man Cornelius. You need not wait for angelic intervention; the truth lies before you today.

## DAILY PRAYER

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade! Father, you know what I need before I do, and you are moving to meet my needs before I even ask. Thank you for caring for me the way you do. I pray that this Advent season I will seek you in order to know you. Give me the desire to grow in my faith. Fill me with your Holy Spirit so that I may grow closer to you every day. I pray also that you will give me both the willingness and the opportunity to share the good news that I have heard. Amen.*

December  
22

# Awestruck Friend

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”

**Revelation 1:17-18**



JOHN

John and Jesus were friends—probably cousins as well. In all likelihood they grew up at least acquainted with each other. It may be one of the factors why he (along with his brother James) was so ready to jump out of his father’s boat and join the ministry of Jesus when he called him to be his disciple. During Jesus’ three-year ministry, John was, it appears, constantly by his side.

It may seem strange, then, to see John falling down as though dead when he meets Jesus again in the book of Revelation. Admittedly, things have changed a bit. Jesus has been resurrected and ascended to heaven for approximately sixty years, and John has been plugging along as a missionary and teacher all that time. John is almost assuredly the last of the surviving disciples of Jesus (the Twelve) by the time he receives a vision while in exile on the remote Aegean island of Patmos. He was sent there by the Roman government for the crime of being a Christian leader; likely as a demonstration of Rome’s mercy to an aged man. The authorities of that day could easily have had him executed outright for his faith and teachings in what had become an outlawed religion. Rome had already put many of the faithful to the sword, watching them be devoured by wild animals for sport, or flat out crucified them, but John was sent into exile. He was an old man now, and at least for a short period, Rome had turned its attention away from outright attacks on Christianity. In the ebb and flow of empire mandated persecution of Christianity, John was arrested during a slow season. Therefore, his life was spared, and he was exiled to a lonely island far away from anywhere he could cause trouble. It was here that he met Jesus again after a long period of absence from him physically.

During the years they spent together in ministry, John and Jesus grew close. John was with him at his Transfiguration, and he was given the seat of honor at the Last Supper, reclining back on the bosom of his friend Jesus. They, along with the other eleven disciples, spent countless hours together, eating, sleeping, and traveling in a close-knit community. Of Jesus’ approximately 120 followers during his earthly ministry, the Twelve were singled out to receive the bulk of his time and training. Of the Twelve, Peter, James, and John were singled out for the closest training; but it seems that John held the highest honor.

In fact, a rumor surfaced after the resurrection that John would not die until Jesus returned. John cleared up this rumor in his gospel account. Nevertheless, people knew that Jesus and John were very close.

And so, many years later, John meets his old friend Jesus in a vision on the Lord's Day. You can imagine what your reaction would be to seeing an old friend again after so many years. But as we already discussed, things are different now. Jesus' love for John has not changed, but he is no longer veiled in the Incarnation, he is the risen Savior. John meets Jesus this time in Jesus' resurrected state, as the Glorious One, and there are no happy hugs and renewed banter and inside jokes. John sees his friend and falls at his feet in worship and adoration as if he were collapsing in death. This time John looks at Jesus and sees one who appears "like a son of man." His feet are like bronze glowing in a furnace, his voice is like the sound of rushing waters, with eyes like blazing fire, holding seven stars in his right hand, with a double-edged sword protruding from his mouth. His face shone like the sun shining in its brilliance. John is awestruck by his encounter with Jesus, his friend and teacher, now revealed as he is, the Son of the Living God.

Do not fall into the delusion that Jesus is your pal, your co-pilot, or a friend who winks at your sin. He loves you and died for you. However, he is God, he is glorious, and he is risen from the dead. He is, spiritually speaking, your brother and your Savior, but he is not to be trifled with. Have you pictured him in your imagination as a smiling benefactor, encouraging you while turning a blind eye to your rebellion? Scrub that picture from your mind. Our trite culture today likes to portray Jesus as a meek and mild—rather effeminate—man who needed to be helped along the dusty roads he traveled. Nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus was born into this world to die a savage death. He knew what awaited him, yet during the last days of his life he turned his face "like flint" toward Jerusalem (Isa. 50:5-7; Luke 9:51-56). He was a man who lived like a man, who faced death like a man, and who died like a man. We come to Jesus laid out on our faces, not waltzing into his presence like someone who is owed something.

John had the distinct honor of meeting Jesus in this world in two ways, as the incarnate Son of God and as the resurrected King of heaven and earth. Jesus loved him dearly and demonstrated that love to him in this world. John loved Jesus in return and found out directly what it was like to interact with him as a human man and as the Son of Man who judges the living and the dead. One encounter was not like the other. How will you encounter this Jesus? Every knee will bow to him one day. Will you bend your knee in adoration and obedience, or as a rebel who kneels not by choice, but by necessity?

## DAILY PRAYER

*Father, you have seated your Son in the heavenly realms at your right hand, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age, but also in the age to come. I want to know Jesus as a friend but prohibit me from seeing him as anything less than who he is today. I praise you for your grace Lord Jesus, and for your glory. Amen.*

December  
23

# Nunc Dimitiss

And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord... Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."

Luke 2:22-32



SIMEON

Ever wonder how long Simeon was waiting—day after day in the temple courts—for the Messiah to be revealed? The Bible does not share that information with us. Could have been days, weeks, months or years; maybe even decades. He waited because, as a man who knew the power of the Holy Spirit in his life, it was made privy to him that if he would patiently wait he would live to see the Lord's Messiah, who would bring about the "consolation of Israel." Simeon wanted to see hope and salvation for Israel and he knew that these could only come about through the work of Messiah, the long-awaited hope of Israel.

It is said that patience is a virtue. If so, it is a virtue that very few of us actually possess. "Patient" is not the moniker that most historians and social observers would use for our day and age if they had to describe us in a word. We Americans are always in a hurry. In a hurry to get to work, in a hurry to get to the next stoplight, in a hurry to get through the check-out line, in a hurry to get to bed, and in a hurry to get up so that we can hurry through our next day. Our motto seems to be, "If it isn't done fast, it isn't done well." Simeon, it seems, lived a life in contrast to this experience.

The people of Israel had been waiting for Messiah for over a thousand years. During that time the nation experienced many highs and lows. She saw the reigns of David and his son Solomon, where the borders of Israel reached their furthest extension, almost encompassing all that God had promised them if they would remain faithful to the covenant he cut with them. A promise, incidentally, that would not be realized due to Israel's constant apostasy.

A civil war was followed by a divided kingdom; a succession of mostly unfaithful kings; then the almost unbelievable destruction and deportation of the Northern Kingdom. All of this was followed some 140 years later by the destruction of Jerusalem itself and the scattering of the Kingdom of Judah to the nations. A return to the Promised Land by a remnant of Jews during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah was then followed by 500 years of long waiting while never again experiencing the glory of her former days. And then along comes Simeon, a righteous and devout Jew. Not a king, not a prophet, but a saint—one set apart by God—who was also waiting, but waiting while holding fast to a specific promise. Simeon would see the King of Israel.

What are you waiting for? What is the hope on the horizon that you have your eyes fixed upon? The Bible tells us that people perish for a lack of vision. We find ourselves with nothing to look forward to, so we sink into oblivion, trudging hurriedly from one day to the next with death as our only reward. Simeon refused to live that way. He had hope in his heart, that God would comfort his people and bring to them, finally, the blessed Messiah. He lived on because he kept a vision in his mind of the promise of God to save his people and to bless the nations through them. He believed, and that belief kept him alive, waiting in (or near) the temple. And when the day came, when he set his eyes upon Jesus, when he encountered the Promised One and took him in his arms, his heart swelled and his voice cried out a hymn of thanksgiving. Now he was ready to die, God's promise to him specifically, and to the nation of Israel collectively, fulfilled. He probably did not know this little babe in his arms was born to carry the sins of the world. But he knew that trouble lay on the horizon for this child, for he warned the babe's mother, Mary, that the child was born not only as a light of revelation to the Gentiles, but "for a sign that is opposed..." (2:34). Opposition notwithstanding, Simeon had set his eyes on the God-Man who would bring salvation to his people, and to all the nations.

Will you be ready to depart in peace when your time comes? Are your eyes fixed upon a hope that will allow you to die without fear and ready to meet God? "Therefore we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18). If you cannot say "yes" to this question...what are you waiting for? Today is the day of salvation.

## DAILY PRAYER

*Father, help me to live in each moment that you give me, not to get caught up in the hurry of this world, but to fix my eyes on the hope that you have promised me in your word. While I wait, keep me trusting whole-heartedly in you. I want to be found ready when you call me home, or when you return in the clouds with a cry of command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. You are a light of revelation to me. Thank you for giving me eyes with which to both see and believe. Amen.*

December  
**24**

# It Begins

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is well pleased!” When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

**Luke 2:8-20**



## THE SHEPHERDS

Life as a shepherd in the days of Jesus was not easy. It was a job for the poor, which meant it did not pay well, and the risks were great. Although lions and bears were no longer frequently sighted in Israel in that day, they still existed, and the shepherd's weapons amounted to a staff and, if he possessed one, a sling. Days were long, nights were cold, and sheep are notoriously stupid. It took constant vigilance to keep them safe and in line. And so, when the opportunity arose, and when the grazing was ample enough to combine flocks for a feeding, the shepherds no doubt looked forward to an evening enjoying the company of other shepherds. To find safety in numbers and to pass the night along with tall tales and warm drinks was likely a rare treat.

On just such a night, somewhere around 4 B.C. in the territory of Judea, a Roman province on the eastern Mediterranean seaboard, shepherds gathered to keep watch over their flocks. But this would prove to be a gathering like none other, because on this evening, sometime during the watches of the night, an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone forth brightly.

All these men had no doubt experienced danger in life, and some had probably faced wild animals while defending their sheep more than once, but a fear gripped them like they had never known. The angel who frightened them, however, had good news to share. Somewhere in the town of David (Bethlehem), a Savior was born. More than that, this Savior was Christ, the long-awaited Messiah. They were provided the information they needed in order to go and see this sight for themselves, but before they could gather their things, a great multitude of angels appeared, proclaiming praises to God and announcing peace to all those with whom God was well pleased.

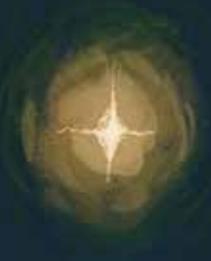
It had already been a singular night, but the best was yet to come. Making their way to the stable they had been told about, they set their eyes on Jesus the Messiah. It is safe to say that it was not like anything they would have expected. For there, in a manger used to feed livestock, lay a little boy with his surprised mother and father nearby. As the shepherds looked on, their eyes became the first outside of Mary and Joseph to behold what God looked like when he took on flesh and became Man, and he was amazingly normal. No bright lights, no halo, no neon sign pointing down from the rafters above declaring “Here lies the King of Israel.” Nevertheless, there he lay, Emmanuel—God with us—wrapped in swaddling cloths and laying helpless in a manger. A strange way to save the world.

And so, we wrap up Advent 2025. We have considered twenty-five human beings, most of them as normal as you and me, and the impact that knowing Christ (or for the Old Testament saints, knowing the God who would send the Christ) had upon them. God is in the business of changing lives, and in so doing, he changes the world, one life at a time. For almost 2,000 years the world has moved on, and in many ways, moved past, the Advent of Christ. Many ask the same question that was being asked in the lifetimes of Jesus’ own disciples; “Where is the promise of his coming?” Jesus arrived punctual to his hour, not a moment too late, not a moment too soon, and so shall he arrive at his second advent. His delay is a result of his mercy, not a result of his tardiness (see 2 Peter 3:4-10).

We have considered these glimpses of hope and the impact that had on both individuals and the world as we know it. Now, we must all consider what his coming again will mean for us. The early church summed up this expectation of our faith this way: ...And his future appearing from heaven in the glory of the Father to sum up all things and to raise anew all flesh of the whole human race (Irenaeus: Against Heresies). Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again friends. The second Advent of Christ is not ours to determine, it is ours to anticipate, and to hasten with our prayers. Even so, Maranatha—come quickly, Lord.

## DAILY PRAYER

*Father, as Advent draws to a close, I pray that you will hasten the day when your Son returns. Teach me to live in anticipation of that day, when Jesus will split the skies and descend, leading a heavenly host, to make his home with us. As I put 2025 behind me and move into, Lord willing, 2026, let me do so with thanksgiving in my heart and a renewed desire to know you and to make you known. Amen.*



# First Light

The earth awakes under rural Ephrathah like a slumbering giant, content to remain in the embrace of dawn. Women-folk scurry to the city well while men take in the morning over warm milk and news from the evening gone by.

Shopkeepers busy themselves while the master of the inn makes preparations for the day. Soldiers, deep in dreams, sleep off the night's revelries. Their hired women gather wares and make ready for another day of taunts and jeers.

Sheep graze on the rolling hills. Shepherds sit silently around hot embers, flush with wonder at the news and visions of mighty ones dancing in their heads. Weary, yet strangely warm...strongly alive. Israel's hope but a stone's throw away.

East wind blows — fresh with the scent of harvest — echoes of voices, shouts of praise. Gloria in Excelsis Deo wafting on invisible waves. Night watchman makes ready his report (strange rumors abound). Determined to once again forget all in the season's new wine.

A baby at his mother's breast, unwashed but alive. His knowing Father considers all yet stays the course. New husband fetches food and drink, filled with hope, yet solemn and watchful. Livestock fill the air with bawls and snorts — the stench of everyday life ripens the shallow room.

Virgin ponders her strange surroundings, treasuring memories, reliving events. She recalls it all now: gawkers, faces blurred by the passing pain, eyes wide with wonder and trembling with awe. "Behold the harbinger of the Lord." Soul soaring as it awaits the fateful sword.

Magi mark the skies for stars that herald the news. Camels loaded and made ready with gifts for a king. Slow journey across the desert sands. Jerusalem's usurper awakers with a cry — omens ripe in the heavens.

Nature anticipates the coming events, subject and frustrated, cursed with man but hopeful for redemption. Mother and Child drift away in a warm embrace. The trees quiver with delight.

All this and more at Bethlehem's first light.

—Jym Gregory

# O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

LATIN HYMN - 12TH CENTURY

O come, O come, Emmanuel  
And ransom captive Israel  
That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appear  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free  
Thine own from Satan's tyranny  
From depths of Hell Thy people save  
And give them victory o'er the grave

O come, Thou Day-Spring, come and cheer  
Our spirits by Thine Advent here  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night  
And death's dark shadows put to flight

O come, Thou Key of David, come,  
And open wide our heavenly home;  
Make safe the way that leads on high  
And close the path to misery

O come, O come, Thou Lord of might  
Who to Thy tribes, on Sinai's height  
In ancient times did'st give the law  
In cloud and majesty and awe  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel



