



Two Journeys

ADVENT



THE
INDESCRIBABLE
GIFT

MEDITATIONS ON
THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

ANDREW M. DAVIS

The Indescribable Gift:

MEDITATIONS ON THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

Andrew M. Davis

2024

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INTRODUCTION

Christmas comes every year with its enticing seasonal sensory delights: the twinkle of Christmas lights, the familiar strains of classic Christmas songs, the aroma of Christmas cookies wafting from the kitchen, the excitement in the eyes of the very young, the anticipation of visits from out-of-town relatives and friends. All those things are rich blessings, no doubt.

But for us as Christians, the best part of Advent is the opportunity it gives us to focus again on the indescribable gift of Jesus Christ to a sin-cursed and desperate world. When the angelic messenger first told the poor simple shepherds of “good news of great joy that will be for all people” (Luke 2:10), he started this worldwide celebration with wonder and amazement. Ever since the shepherds decided to go into Bethlehem to see what the angel was talking about, poor sinners around the world have dropped what they were doing to investigate more closely the gift of the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in the manger.

This Advent devotional is an opportunity for you to do that as well by meditations on various scriptures. It will take you across the entire range of God’s word to prepare your hearts to receive the Christ child in a new and fresh way. May God bless your investigation of the grace of God in Christ throughout this Advent season!

DAY 1

COME THOU LONG-EXPECTED JESUS

ROMANS 16:25-26

Long before Jesus was born, he was the Promised One. Long before his advent in in “the fullness of time,” the chosen race was waiting for him. Long before Mary and Joseph made their journey to Bethlehem, a remnant of godly Jews was expecting him. All of this because God had little by little paid out some of the details of his plan through the prophets. God’s detailed foreknowledge of the future is based on his absolute sovereignty over all creation. It was on this basis that he challenged the idols of Israel to a contest: “*Predict the future, and we will all know you are gods.*” (Isaiah 41:22-23) God knows very well that he would win such a contest for two reasons: 1) the idols represent false gods who don’t really exist; 2) the demons that lurk behind the idols do not know the future any more than any other creature does. Any predictions an angel, a demon, or a man might make is contingent upon God’s permission. If the Lord says, “*It shall not take place, it shall not happen*” (Isaiah 7:7), then that ends the matter. Almighty God sits enthroned above the circle of the earth and its people are like grasshoppers in his sight (Isaiah 40:22). All our plans and predictions are subject to his sovereign will.

On the other hand, from before the foundation of the universe, God has made a detailed and comprehensive plan for the salvation of sinners from every nation on earth. And no power in heaven or on earth can stop it. “*This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations. For the Lord Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who is able to turn it back*” (Isaiah 14:26-27)? Central to that plan is the birth of his Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ, “*in the fullness of time*” (Galatians 4:4)... that is, at exactly the right time in human history.

Knowing that plan, God wisely told a little of it at a time through the Spirit of prophecy. First, to the serpent in the Garden of Eden, God said the seed of woman would come to crush his head (Genesis 3:15). Then, to Abraham, that through his offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed (Genesis 22:16). Then, to Jacob, the exact same promise, all the peoples of the earth will be blessed through his offspring (Genesis 28:14). Then, through Moses and the Law, the purpose of the birth of Christ—the atonement of sins by the shed blood of a Lamb (Exodus 12:7). Then, to David, the promise of coming Son of David who will rule over a kingdom that will never end. Then, through David’s Psalms, many specific details including that the Son of David will be David’s Lord and priest in the order of Melchizedek (Psalm 110:1, 4). Then, through Isaiah, that the virgin would be with child and give birth to a Son named Immanuel, “God with us,” and that he would be a “mighty God” and “the prince of Peace,” ruling on David’s throne forever (Isaiah 7:14; 9:6-7).

Beyond these few references, there are numerous others. Therefore, Jesus was long-expected by all who believed the prophets... the faithful remnant of Jews waiting for the consolation and glory of Israel.

As you make your way expectantly through this busy month of preparations for Christmas, let your heart be filled with gratitude at the fulfillment of the prophetic promises in the first advent of Christ... and with fervent expectations for the glories yet to come in the consummation of his kingdom at his second advent.

DAY 2

HOW DID A CANAANITE PROSTITUTE END UP IN JESUS' GENEALOGY?

MATTHEW 1:5-6; HEBREWS 11:31

The story of Rahab is one of the most remarkable testimonies of God's electing and saving grace in all the Bible. She was a Canaanite prostitute, a woman whose lifestyle would have been scandalous to any upright Jewish man or woman. Given how deeply corrupted were the practices of the seven pagan nations that God sent Joshua and his army in to slaughter, it doesn't take much imagination to speculate on what her daily life consisted of before her transformation. But everything changed for Rahab when reports reached her of how the Israelites had been dramatically rescued from slavery in Egypt by the outstretched arm of Almighty God. Her heart had melted in holy fear when she heard of the stunning destruction of Pharaoh's mighty army at the Red Sea, how the water had walled up on the right and left, allowing the Israelites to cross on dry land, and then how the Egyptian host had all drowned when they tried to pursue. After that, the Jews had easily defeated Sihon, King of the Amorites, and Og, King of Bashan. This caused all the inhabitants of Jericho to melt in terror, knowing that the Jews were coming to dwell in their land... and nothing could stop them.

I don't know when fear moved to faith in Rahab's heart. That is a mysterious working that only the Holy Spirit can do. As the hymn states so plainly, "Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved." The movement from fear of righteous destruction to a hope of salvation is something the Spirit does within the heart of an elect person. Perhaps it was when the two spies came to her home desperately seeking refuge from the Jericho authorities. Maybe she saw her opportunity then... faith sprang up in her heart of salvation from the sword of destruction that hung over all their heads. So, she acted in faith, hiding the

spies, eliciting a promise of safety from them for her and her family, and then sending them off in a direction different from her pursuers. James 2 and Hebrews 11 makes it plain that it was faith in Rahab that moved these actions. And God (through Joshua) miraculously spared Rahab and all her family. Even though her house was built into the city wall and the walls all crumbled as in an earthquake, Rahab and her family were spared. They stayed alive that day because of Rahab's faith.

But amazingly, God had bigger plans for Rahab's future! Though we do not learn of it in the pages of the Old Testament, we find out in Jesus' genealogy that Rahab eventually married a Jewish man named Salmon, of the tribe of Judah, and became the mother of Boaz. This Boaz was the godly Jewish man who married another Gentile outcast named Ruth, a Moabitess, and together they had a son named Obed... the father of Jesse, the father of King David. All Rahab wanted to do was stay alive when the Israelites conquered Canaan. But God took her spark of faith-filled fear and expanded it to an infinite dimension... she was included in the family line of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.

Jesus was not ashamed to include such a woman in his genealogy and to spend eternity with her in his kingdom. Such is the grace flowing through the Christmas message of salvation that is extending to the ends of the earth and to the end of time.

DAY 3

MIRACLE BABIES LEADING TO CHRISTMAS

GENESIS 11:30, 25:21; HEBREWS 11:11; LUKE 1:34-37

It is amazing how many times the topic of barrenness plays into the unfolding story of redemptive history. Few issues have brought as much heartache over the centuries as a woman who is desperate to hold a child in her arms and is frustrated month after month by a failure to conceive. Certainly, the story of Hannah's barrenness and its happy resolution in the birth of Samuel in answer to her fervent prayers is encouraging. But it is nowhere near as significant as the babies who were conceived by the wonder-working power of God leading to the Christmas joy. God's Spirit hovered over some women at key moments resulting in miracle babies essential to our salvation.

Sarah is the first. She and her husband Abraham were unable to conceive for the entirety of their married life until he was one hundred years old and she was ninety. Her womb was said to be dead. But God made a promise to Abraham that he would be the father of many nations. And he made a specific promise that it would be through Sarah that the miracle baby would come. Abraham believed that promise. So did Sarah. By that faith, the child of the promise, Isaac, was conceived and born. Isaac was not just any baby but was the living picture of every child of God, born by the power of God, not in the natural way (Galatians 4:29). Rebekah was next, barren, waiting month after month, year after year for a baby. Isaac prayed and God answered. Again, by the power of God the twins, Jacob and Esau, were conceived. And the promises of God were extended through Jacob. Another miracle baby.

So it was also with Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. She and her godly husband Zechariah were unable to conceive for decades. They had prayed and prayed for a child. And God heard their prayer. But only when the perfect time came, and it was obvious that their child would come only by the wonder-working power of the Holy Spirit were their prayers answered.

Of course, the one that matters the most is the one most obviously conceived by the direct power of the Holy Spirit... Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God. The angel Gabriel told Mary that it was by the power of the Holy Spirit that this baby would be in her womb given that she was a virgin. He used Elizabeth's pregnancy as a precedent, but he could have used all these examples. "For nothing is impossible with God."

Salvation entered the world through Mary's miracle baby. Jesus' conception apart from a human father is unique in all of history. But every child of God is born again through the direct activity of the Spirit of God, as Galatians 4:26 implies. And this biblical history of barren women enabled to conceive by the power of God is a delightful picture of that salvation.

DAY 4

A LOWLY VINE BECOMES A MIGHTY CEDAR

EZEKIEL 17:5-6, 12-14, 22-24

Some of the most fascinating and perplexing prophetic images in the Old Testament come from the Book of Ezekiel. From the opening chapter in which Ezekiel has a vision of the likeness of the glory of God that basically stretches language to its breaking point to the final nine chapters which center around a visionary temple complex that has never been built, Ezekiel is a challenging book. The prophet Ezekiel lived during the time of the exile to Babylon, and he was writing to give conviction of sin to Israel as well as hope for their future. Conviction of sin, because the exile had been caused by Israel's stubborn commitment to wickedness and idolatry. Hope for the future because the Jewish nation may well have wondered if they would ever be allowed to live in the favor of God again, restored to their Promised Land with their promised King ruling over them from the lineage of David.

Concerning that last aspect, the lineage of David was by then an utter failure. Deeply corrupt in sin and utterly humiliated by the Babylonians, it seemed impossible for a future Davidic king to arise out of a line so thoroughly trampled into the mud. Degraded through their wickedness, they were devastated militarily by Nebuchadnezzar. Stripped of power, a puppet king from their family line was put on an insignificant throne. Could a Son of David ever rise from that to rule in glory?

Ezekiel 17 helped describe that time of humiliation and also give a promise of future exaltation. The passage says that the King of Babylon went to Jerusalem and carried off her king and the nobles. He put a family member on a throne specifically so that the kingdom would be brought low... like a low, spreading vine crawling on the ground. God made it plain

that this humiliation was part of Israel's punishment for their sins. It would stay low as long as God willed, surviving only by the whims of her Gentile overlords.

But not forever! For the chapter ends with a shoot being snipped off from the top of a cedar and carried back to the Promised Land where it would become a majestic tree with fruit on every branch and shade under every bough. This is nothing less than the eternal Kingdom of Jesus Christ, rising from absolute obscurity under Gentile domination to fill the whole world with its power and glory.

Therefore, we see Jesus born under the rule of Caesar Augustus, his parents forced to go to Bethlehem for the purpose of registering for the census. And we see Jesus dying under the rule of Caesar as well, crucified by Pontius Pilate. Yet despite his seeming lowliness we know that Jesus' kingdom is infinitely glorious, ruling over all the nations of the earth, like a majestic cedar whose branches give protection and provision for all eternity. From the lowliness of the manger to the loftiness of the heavenly throne... all this is pictured in Ezekiel 17.

DAY 5

GLORY HIDDEN AND REVEALED

ISAIAH 53:2

When the angel appeared to the shepherds on the hills surrounding Bethlehem, the glory of the Lord shone around him. But when they went to behold the king of glory himself, he was wrapped in simple cloths and lying powerless in a manger. Why was he stripped of all glory? Why did he have no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him? Why did he “empty himself” of the appearance of his equality with God as Paul says in Philippians 2? Why was the wonderful statement by Charles Wesley true, “Mild his lays his glory by, born that man no more may die”?

This is even more acute when we realize that Jesus did in fact let some of his divine glory shine on the Mount of Transfiguration. And also, when we hear Jesus ask his Father for his glory back, praying, “*And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began*” (John 17:5). How much more did Christ allow his glory to shine brighter than the sun around Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus Road, leading directly to Saul’s conversion! And for all eternity, the New Jerusalem will shine with the glory of Christ such that the city does not need the light of the sun, moon, or a lamp to shine (Revelation 21:23). Clearly there is nothing wrong with Christ displaying overpowering beauty and majesty. So why hide it in his incarnation?

It seems to me that the answer to this question has to do with the work God has to do in the souls of all his people at the moment of justifying faith. God must reveal a hidden glory to the eyes of their hearts, an invisible spiritual glory seen only by faith. Jesus’ humble, even repulsive outward appearance must be penetrated by the powerful revelation of the

Spirit. Christ must be the exact opposite of Satan, who masquerades as an “angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14). So, he must also be the opposite of the Scribes and Pharisees, whom Jesus called “whitewashed tombs,” which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside, full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean (Matthew 23:37). When Jesus was bleeding out on the cross, back shredded by the lash, scalp lacerated by the thorns, hands and feet pierced by the massive iron nails, the prophecy cited above was maximized: no beauty, no majesty, nothing in his appearance to attract the eye. But his glory never shone more brightly than at that hideous, horrible moment. Only the eyes of faith can see through the appearance to the radiant beauty within.

So, God ordained the beauty and majesty of Christ’s person to be seen first by his people, and only then, the beauty and majesty of his appearance. That began at the stable in Bethlehem and was perfected at the cross.

DAY 6

THE DECREE OF CAESAR AUGUSTUS

LUKE 2:1

I can picture Caesar Augustus sitting in a lavish hall, wearing a purple robe of the highest quality and doing the work of a mighty emperor. He looked at a map of his vast domains and fantasized about even greater glory for Rome. He was the one who would boast at the end of his life, “I found Rome a city of bricks and left it a city of marble.” What new conquests would further his dreams, what new plunder could he draw from the distant provinces? He decided a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. His decree would move vast populations. Hundreds of thousands, even millions of people would be physically moved to their home cities and towns to register and to pay their taxes. For that was ultimately the point of the decree, that and the knowledge of populations for the wise disbursal of the mighty but limited Legions. So, he had the decree written on a scroll, and he affixed his seal to it, putting it into law.

But behind his decision was the eternal purpose of God. As Peter would later pray about the joint decision of the Jewish leaders and Pontius Pilate to put Jesus to death, “They did what your power and will had determined beforehand should happen” (Acts 4:28). God’s eternal decree preceded Caesar’s. It was prophesied by Micah around the time of Isaiah that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem Ephrathah (Micah 5:2). Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth and would have had no reason to make the arduous journey to the ancestral town of David’s lineage except that Caesar Augustus had issued that decree. With transportation and communication being what they were in the first century, it is likely that Caesar’s decree was made before Jesus was even conceived by the Holy Spirit in the virgin’s womb. The wheels of providence had to begin turning at just the right time to accomplish God’s eternal plan.

Proverbs 21:1 says, “*The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.*” God’s purposes were as different from Caesar’s as the heavens are higher than the earth; God desired the salvation of his elect from every tribe and language and people and nation; Caesar desired more wealth from taxes.

But in some ways their purposes were similar. Caesar wanted those resources to flow to Rome to adorn that so-called “Eternal City” with marble and gold for the greater glory of Rome. God wanted the gospel of Christ to ring out from Jerusalem, then Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth for the eternal glory of the New Jerusalem... adorned with living stones from all those peoples, the true “Eternal City” will shine forever and ever.

God’s ways are wonderful, his purposes perfect, his plans inscrutable. And God is still moving temporal rulers, the “Caesars” of today, to make decrees that seem to serve their own purposes but are really serving his—to the glory of Christ.

DAY 7

THE WOMAN AND THE DRAGON

REVELATION 12:4-5

When we think of Christmas devotionals, it is reasonable to think primarily of the peace, joy, and love flowing from scenes of a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and of shepherds and wise men and farmers and all. The terrifying image of a ferocious dragon hovering over a pregnant woman in labor, ready to devour her child the moment it was born, is so far beyond unseemly as to be almost obscene. No one wants to hear a Christmas sermon based on this passage, though (amazingly) I actually did preach such a sermon a number of years ago!

But in a larger sense this image is vital to understanding Christmas in its fullness. The incarnation was an act of warfare against Satan and his dark kingdom. Jesus came to rescue a people enslaved by Satan and demons, a people who could not deliver themselves. Jesus described his exorcisms in this way:

When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up the spoils” (Luke 11:21-22).

So Jesus came to strip Satan of his power and plunder his house of his former possessions—people. The author to the Hebrews agrees: “*Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death*” (Hebrews 2:14-15). This is the violent mission of Christ—to destroy Satan’s dark kingdom by his preaching, by his healings, and especially by his death on the

cross and resurrection from the dead. These things all dealt Satan's empire a blow from which it could never recover.

Yet Satan has fought Jesus every step of the way. And if we could see into the invisible spiritual realms around the little town of Bethlehem, it would not surprise me that the angelic army that appeared to the shepherds that night was also there to keep the demons at bay. That Satan, the dragon, was hovering over the woman when she gave birth to the male child who would rule the nations (Jesus) is made painfully obvious in Matthew 2 when the Satanic puppet, Herod, ordered all the boy babies in Bethlehem slaughtered to make certain that this special baby was dead and no threat to his throne.

In Revelation 12, where this shocking "Christmas" text resides, there is clear depiction of warfare in the heavens (that Satan lost), and of Satan being cast down to the earth in humiliation, and of his failed attempt to kill the baby as soon as it was born, and of his vicious attacks on the followers of Jesus after Jesus' ascension. In all these things, Satan is thwarted and ultimately defeated. But it is reasonable for us to see the dark side of Christmas—that the sweet little Jesus boy came to destroy an evil empire.

DAY 8

A ROCK CUT OUT, BUT NOT BY HUMAN HANDS

DANIEL 2:34-35

In Daniel 2, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon had a dream that terrified him, and he yearned to know what it meant. To be certain of the dream's meaning, he commanded his wise men, astrologers, and counselors to tell him what the dream was to earn the right to give him the interpretation. He promised lavish rewards for anyone who could do this, but he also threatened death by torture to any who could not. God graciously granted Daniel the miraculous knowledge of the king's dream and the certain interpretation of its meaning.

The dream was of a statue of a man, great and tall, which represented the unfolding of human history from Nebuchadnezzar on—a succession of mighty empires one after the other. The statue had a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. The head of gold represented Nebuchadnezzar and the awesome Babylonian Empire. The chest and arms of silver represented the next empire to follow—the Medo-Persian. After that came the next empire—the Greeks. Then the Romans came next, followed by an agglomeration—mingled kingdoms of many aspects.

Suddenly, while Nebuchadnezzar was watching in the dream, a rock was cut out but not by human hands. It flew in like a missile right at the statue, striking it at its weakest point—its feet of clay. This resulted in the entire statue crumbling to the earth, falling in a huge pile. Then a mighty wind came along, sweeping all remnants of the statue away like chaff from a threshing floor. But the rock that struck the statue became a lofty mountain that filled the entire world.

The rock that was cut out but not by human hands represents Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God. He was “cut out” meaning shaped and prepared, made ready for his mission to the earth. But that shaping and preparation was not by human hands—but only by the power of God. Christ was conceived in the Virgin Mary’s womb by the direct power of God the Spirit (Luke 1:35), and his very existence in this world was a miracle done only by the power of God. So also, the growth and development of his worldwide empire of peace, love, and truth was done only by the power of God, not by human hands. It will someday fill the whole world, for “*the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea*” (Habakkuk 2:14). The growth of Christ’s kingdom to the end of the earth fulfilled the statement, “*Not by power, nor by might, but by my Spirit, says the Lord*” (Zechariah 4:6). The growth of the kingdom from something small to something vast is seen in the growth of the holy embryo in Mary’s womb to the final outcome, a multitude greater than anyone can count standing around Christ’s heavenly throne in white robes celebrating their salvation bought by his blood. From a tiny miracle invisible to the human eye to a worldwide empire of glory stretching from sea to sea. That is what Daniel 2 predicts in this Christmas rock cut out but not by human hands.

DAY 9

MARY'S TREASURE

LUKE 2:19

I can scarcely imagine what was going through Mary's mind the night Jesus was born and the shepherds came to see her miracle baby. The story they told of the glorious angelic messenger who urged them to go and see a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, and even more of a mighty host of heaven who were praising God with loud voices, must have been overwhelming. As if simply giving birth weren't enough... not to mention the unique circumstances of their journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and of the crowded conditions in the city resulting in her needing to give birth in a stable. And nothing compares with the absolute certainty of her pure status as a virgin mother, and of the incarnate Son of God now nestled in her arms.

First-time mothers holding their newborn infants cannot stop staring at the child's face. They beam with pleasure, basking in the delight that the baby they have awaited and yearned for is finally here. That is normal. And Mary must have done a lot of that, to be sure. But the deeper issues of this baby's identity and purpose would take a lifetime—indeed, an eternity—to fathom. Mary had already begun that process of reflection, of marveling, of wondering. *"In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"* (Colossians 2:3). That was the treasure Mary was holding in her arms that holy night. He is *"the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being"* (Hebrews 1:3). That was Mary's treasure.

When that baby was grown up, he challenged the chief priests' and Pharisees' contemporary conception of the Messiah with a question: "What do you think about the

Christ? Whose son is he?” They answered, “The son of David.” And so, he was... see his genealogy in Matthew 1:1. But Jesus probed with a stunning insight from Psalm 110.

“How is it, then, that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord?’ For he said, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’ If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?” (Matthew 22:42-45)

At that time, they were stunned into silence. But if they had pressed on in working out what Jesus was really saying, they would have asked Jesus, “Are you claiming to be David’s Lord?” And Jesus could have answered, “I am.”

In the same way, Mary might have begun to realize that night, “I am holding my son and my Lord.” She could have gone deeper and said... “And my Creator, and my Redeemer, and my glory, and my reward.” Were all these things clear to her that night as she cuddled her newborn son and touched his soft face? Certainly not. But they are immeasurably clearer to her now, and they will continue to grow in immensity for all eternity.

That was what Mary was beginning to treasure up in her heart that amazing night!

DAY 10

THE SPIRIT KNIT JESUS TOGETHER

PSALM 139:13; JOB 10:10-11; HEBREWS 10:5; LUKE 1:35

The marvels of the incarnation began from the moment the Holy Spirit conceived Jesus inside Mary's womb. The miraculous part was that twenty-three of the chromosomes necessary for his physical body to begin—the part ordinarily contributed by the father—were supplied by the Holy Spirit directly. Then the process of growth that unfolded must have been the same as a normal human baby, just as later it would be said that *“Jesus grew in stature”* (Luke 2:52).

Those who study embryonic development can tell us the stages. At four weeks, the cluster of cells is about the size of a poppy seed. By the end of week five, the baby has a heart that beats 110 times per minute. By week six, blood cells start to develop, and circulation begins... the origin of the very substance that Jesus would shed on the cross for our sins. By week seven, bones begin to form... the bones that God would protect on the cross. By the end of week eight, all the major organs and body systems are developing. Hands and feet start to form... the hands that would touch lepers and heal them, the feet that would walk on water. By the end of the second month, Jesus' forming body would have been almost one inch long. By week ten, the ears have begun to form, the ears that would listen to the cries of blind Bartimaeus for healing. By the end of week twelve, all of Jesus' organs, limbs, bones and muscles were present. The Word was becoming flesh, a body God was preparing for him.

Step by step the Spirit knit Jesus together inside Mary's womb, always knowing the purpose that that wondrous little body was being formed to accomplish. Jesus' body would be the means by which the glory of God would most perfectly be displayed in this world of

sin and death. Jesus' body would extend God's saving grace to suffering sinners. And Jesus' body would ultimately bring an end to the animal sacrificial system forever, the last bloody sacrifice God would ever accept. Through all these microscopic steps the Spirit knit Jesus' body together, just like every other human body he ever formed. But infinitely differently in its outcome!

DAY 11

THE SILENT STRENGTH OF JOSEPH

MATTHEW 1:20-21

I have known about Joseph basically all my life... “Mary and Joseph” were a couple in my mind from childhood, and I remember helping my dad set up our little creche with the figurines representing the most famous family in history. We would place the baby Jesus in the manger, mother Mary (always dressed in a blue cloak) next to the manger, and Joseph, strong and silent, watching over them reverently. After I came to Christ and memorized the account in the Gospel of Matthew, it struck me suddenly at one point that Joseph never speaks a word recorded in the Bible. Mary says things, the angel says things, the magi say things, King Herod says things, Herod’s counselors say things. But Joseph never spoke a word that made it into eternal scripture.

However, his role is significant. I believe a key job description for a godly husband and father is found in God’s stated intention for Adam and the Garden of Eden as recorded in Genesis 2:15. It says there that God put Adam there literally “to serve and protect.” Those are the simplest translations of the two Hebrew verbs in that verse. Remarkably, that slogan often represents the goal of police officers in communities. So, a godly husband serves his wife and children and protects them from harm. So, it was with Joseph. He was betrothed to the virtuous Mary, and the two of them were making their plans for their married life together when the angel Gabriel came to give Mary the astounding news that she would be pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit. When she told Joseph, we have his understandable reaction recorded for us in Matthew 1:19: *“Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.”* It was initially too much to accept her account of her pregnancy; it was and still is unique in all of

human history. He knew the character of Mary, and it was absolutely incongruous for her to have been immoral. But her explanation stretched his soul to the breaking point. He decided for a compromise—divorcing her quietly. He was tender toward her but also righteous and unwilling to marry her under such circumstances.

Then an angel of the Lord told him in a dream the same thing that Mary had told him—the greatest news in all history! Furthermore, the angel told him what his name would be—Jesus, meaning “Salvation is from the Lord.” The reason was glorious: “*because he will save his people from their sins*”(Matthew 1:21). Joseph obeyed the angel even though it would appear that he was complicit in her sexual immorality—most likely even the cause of it. But he silently bore that slander and served her, protecting her honor.

And when Herod determined to kill the baby Jesus, an angel told Joseph, again in a dream, to take him and Mary and flee to Egypt. Joseph obeyed the angel and was willing to flee to a foreign country and find a way to survive. We don't know how he provided for them in Egypt—perhaps with his carpentry skills. But he served them and protected them from hunger and harm when they were their most vulnerable. Then, when the danger had passed, an angel told Joseph once more to return to Galilee where he settled in Nazareth and lived the life of a simple carpenter. Always there were questions about these events; later in life, Jesus' enemies accused him of being a Samaritan, clearly implying he was a child of fornication. Joseph, along with Mary, bore these slanders with dignity and a quiet strength that was essential to Jesus' childhood development. I seek to imitate Joseph here on earth as I look forward to honoring him in heaven.

DAY 12

THE FORM OF GOD AND THE FORM OF A SERVANT

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-8

The mystery of the incarnation is the deepest in all Christian theology. We will spend eternity seeking to plumb its depths, and even when we have perfected minds in our glorified state, we will never complete our inquiry... there will always be more to learn. In this famous passage, the Apostle Paul uses Christ's humility as a pattern for all Christians to follow. We should have the same mind as Christ displayed in his willingness to leave the glories of heaven, take on a human body, and then go ever lower in servanthood even to the point of his humiliating and degrading death on the cross for our salvation. That is the point of this passage.

But the actual verbiage is what fascinates me here. The original language, Greek of course, used a key term, *morphe*, translated by the ESV above as "form." The word means "outward appearance" or "shape," having to do with how Jesus appeared to onlooking observers—angels and humans. Jesus "emptied himself" (verse 7) of the outward appearance of deity—the radiant glory that characterized his position at the right hand of Almighty God. His essence was absolutely unchanged, for he can never cease to be what he actually is—God. The very existence of the universe depends on the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The universe would have instantly ceased to exist if the second person of the Trinity had ceased to be God. But Jesus willingly gave up the *morphe* of God... the appearance, the shape, the presentation, the glory, the look of deity. And he willingly took up the *morphe* of a servant... the appearance, the trappings, the clothing, the demeanor, the poverty, the apparent weakness. The outward appearance of a servant was essential to his mission of salvation.

And since the exact same Greek word is used for both the deity of Christ and his servanthood, it seems reasonable to conclude that Jesus was as much servant as he was and is God. He doesn't play act as God—he is truly God. So also, he doesn't play act as servant—he truly IS servant, through and through. And he was delighted to take on the outward appearance of a servant since that is what he was. Part of that was Jesus being born into such abject poverty and continuing so throughout his life: *“The Son of Man has no place to lay his head”*(Matthew 8:20).

It also stands to reason that the essential nature of being human is to be a servant. We were created to serve God. It is an illusion to think we can be autonomous, free agents doing whatever we want with our lives. The essence of Satan's deception to the entire human race is that we are our own. Jesus modeled that humans are servants if they are living righteously... as much servants as Jesus is God. That is one of the purposes of Jesus' incarnation, clearly on display in the humility of his birth and the downward journey of his life.

DAY 13

THE ETERNAL ORIGIN OF THE INCARNATION

MICAH 5:2

The “Little Town of Bethlehem” was identified by the prophet Micah as the birthplace of Christ about seven centuries before Christ was born. But the plan was formed in the mind of God before the foundation of the world... as the verse says in powerful terms—the origins of the Messiah are “*from of old, from the days of eternity.*” The text says more than that, for it is clear that the coming ruler of Israel will come “*for me*”—that is, for Almighty God. He is the “*Servant of the Lord*” (Isaiah 52:13) who came to do God’s will even at the cost of his life. So, he came on behalf of God to rule Israel.

But the origins of the plan are what boggle the mind, making it reel. The text speaks of the Messiah’s “origins” or “goings forth.” Picture the beginning of a sunbeam from a nuclear reaction on the surface of the sun. It starts its 93-million-mile journey through the darkness and emptiness of outer space to reach the surface of the earth. It had a definite origin, though staggeringly distant from us. It took the Apollo astronauts four days, six hours and forty-five minutes to reach the moon. At that same rate, it would have taken them 1651 days to reach the sun... four and a half years. The sunbeam travelling at the speed of light would take 8 minutes and 20 seconds. But however long, it had a definite point of origin.

Jesus is the “*radiance of God’s glory,*” come from eternity past as the true light that enlightens every person (Hebrews 1:3; John 1:9). Philip said to him, “*Show us the Father.*” Jesus said, “*Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father*” (John 14:8-9). Jesus’ “*goings forth*” were “*from of old, from the days of eternity.*” Before God said, “*Let there be light,*” he had already planned the coming of his Son into the world. Before there was any way to mark

time—any earth to rotate on its axis, any sun, moon, stars to mark seasons and days and years—before there was evening and morning and the first day, before any of that, Jesus' goings forth had their origin.

But in some sense, this entire language is what theologians call “anthropomorphism,” shaping the infinite mind and character of God into human language and experience. To be more perfectly exact, God has never had a new idea pop in his mind, and he never will. God has never “worked something out” or “come to a conclusion.” God has never pondered a conundrum and solved it. Omniscience means God already knew it. Therefore, there really was no “origin” to the conception of the incarnation. God always knew he was going to send his Son into the world in the fullness of time to a place the Jews would call “Bethlehem Ephrathah.”

Ponder that. Then worship the eternal mind which determined to save your soul by this indescribable gift.

DAY 14

IMMANUEL

MATTHEW 1:22-23

The name “Immanuel” captures the essence of the incarnation and of the essential mystery of Christmas. Christ is “God with us” in the deepest and most profound ways. The name had its origin in Isaiah 7, which Matthew quotes in his account. There the Lord had commanded the wicked king of Judah, Ahaz, and the sinful Jewish population living in his tiny kingdom to ask him for a sign of his assistance. Judah’s Jewish enemy, Ephraim (Israel), led by their evil king Pekah and the Arameans under their pagan king Rezin had made an alliance to invade Judah, topple their Davidic king (Ahaz) and put up their own puppet king on Jerusalem’s throne. Ahaz and the people of Judah responded with trembling hearts rooted in faithless sin. God moved the prophet Isaiah to come to Ahaz and speak to him and to the whole population saying “Calm down! God is never going to allow that to happen!” Then God (through Isaiah) challenged Ahaz to ask for a sign, “*whether in the deepest depths or the highest heights*” (Isaiah 7:11). That is an amazing phrase, for it ultimately points to Christ. But Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign.

Isaiah in exasperation says, “*You are trying God’s patience! Therefore, the Lord will give you a sign anyway. The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and give him the name Immanuel*” (Isaiah 7:14). This statement is one of the most complex prophecies of Christ in the Old Testament, because it is difficult to maintain the uniqueness of the virgin birth of Jesus centuries later and say that there was some kind of sign given *at that time* to Ahaz and Judah. I believe in Ahaz’s time an actual child was born and given the prophetic name Immanuel—God with us. This child became a living timepiece of the end of the threat to Judah. Before that child was old enough to reject evil and choose good, before he was old

enough to eat butter and honey, the land of the two kings they were dreading would be laid waste.

The real issue is this word “Immanuel.” The reason Judah need not fear the severing of the Davidic kingly line was because the sovereign power of God was making that impossible. Why? Because it was God’s unshakable will that a Savior would be born for all the world from David’s lineage, and the temporal ambitions of two earthly rulers could never overturn the hand of the omnipotent God. But God is “with us” in a far more profound way than guaranteeing that Jesus would someday be born. God is with us to work our eternal salvation, to protect us from every enemy that could assault us, and to free us from the final enemy itself—Death.

Centuries later, Paul would ask the question, “*If God is for us, who could be against us*” (Romans 8:31)? Jesus represents God walking with us through the same pain and suffering we experience daily, fighting temptation and sin as our champion, bearing our sin and the righteous wrath of God as our substitute, and rising from the dead as our eternal pattern. Immanuel means the omnipotence and perfection of God completely dedicated to our eternal blessedness. That is something worthy of celebration, not just in December, but forever and ever!

DAY 15
GABRIEL

LUKE 1:19

Though there are over one hundred million angels (Daniel 7:10), only two are given names in the Bible. Gabriel is one of them... the other is Michael. The giving of names to angels shows that they are personal beings with intellect, emotions, identities, and personalities. The name Gabriel means “God is my strength,” or perhaps “God is a mighty warrior.” Since Gabriel appears to Daniel in Daniel 8:16 and 9:21 and then appears to both Zechariah to announce the future birth of John the Baptist and to Mary to announce the conception of Jesus, it is obvious that angels are immortal. The time span between Daniel and Mary is over 500 years. Gabriel hadn’t aged a day!

Not only that, but Gabriel was also a privileged angel with special access to the throne of God. He told Zechariah, “I stand in the presence of God.” In Revelation 5:11, angels are depicted standing in circles around the throne of God, implying differing levels of proximity and access. Gabriel was ministering directly to God and was sent from the throne of God four different times in scripture with key messages to the servants of God. In Daniel 8, he was sent to tell Daniel the meaning of a vision of Alexander the Great. In Daniel 9, he came “in swift flight” to Daniel to answer his prayer and reveal to him the mysterious “seventy weeks,” the timespan that would lead to the rebuilding of the temple and the coming of the Messiah. In Luke 1:11, Gabriel was sent to Zechariah while he was burning incense in the temple and gave him the news that he and his barren wife Elizabeth would have John. Because Zechariah did not believe Gabriel, he struck him mute until his words would be fulfilled. Gabriel established that, because of who he was and his honored position of standing in the presence of God, who cannot lie, it would be impossible for Gabriel to be telling a lie about John’s coming birth.

Best of all, it was Gabriel who was sent to the Virgin Mary to give her the astounding news that she would conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit and give birth to the Son of God (Luke 1:26-38). The astonishing nature of his announcement was so great that he finished with the words, “*For nothing shall be impossible with God.*” Gabriel was thus highly honored with such a message, and he fulfilled it perfectly.

I wonder how much he fully understood about that last and greatest message. Daniel 12 depicts angels openly questioning other angels about information being revealed about the future. And 1 Peter 1:12 says that angels had longed to inquire about details related to the coming of the Christ. They were learning in a way very similar to human beings, although without the hindrance of the sinful flesh. So, I believe that both angels and redeemed saints in heaven will spend eternity learning the glory of Christ, studying the majesty of his person and his works.

And Gabriel, the mighty messenger of God, will be among us, learning, marveling, and celebrating the full implications of this announcement to Mary, the final message he brought in scripture:

“You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end” (Luke 1:31-33).

DAY 16

WONDERFUL COUNSELOR

ISAIAH 9:6

The four titles given Jesus Christ in this famous passage are mind-boggling, worthy of many Christmas devotionals, many sermons, many books, indeed, an eternity of careful study by our glorified minds. However, for this brief devotional, I want to zero in on the first one Isaiah lists: Wonderful Counselor. The Hebrew word translated “wonderful” is the word used for the signs and wonders God did in Egypt. It is generally used for anything that causes amazement in people, but especially miracles. Jesus did more and greater miracles than anyone who ever lived before him or has lived since. For three years, he healed every possible disease, sickness, injury, malady known to man. His healings were effortless, instantaneous, and completely effective. There was literally nothing he could not do. Beyond that, Jesus had total power over demons; he drove them out with a word, or sometimes even with just a thought (as in the case of the Syrophenician woman’s daughter). And most spectacularly, Jesus had power over nature. Even the wind and the waves obeyed his voice. He could defy gravity, walking on water and ascending through the clouds. He could pass through walls—the stone wall of his tomb, the locked door of the upper room. Jesus’ power was limitless and astonishing. . . he was truly “Wonderful”—a wonder-worker unlike any other man.

He was also a perfect counselor. Even some of Jesus’ enemies were in awe of his words, saying, “*No one ever spoke like this man*” (John 7:46) Jesus had “*the words of eternal life*” (John 6:68), perfect in wisdom. Jesus has become for us wisdom from God (1 Corinthians 1:30). In Christ “*are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*” (Colossians 2:3). The wisest thing any sinner can ever do is flee to Christ for salvation, and all scripture is written to give us that wisdom (2 Timothy 3:15). We are desperately in need of his counsel. In the time

of King David, there was a wise counselor named Ahithophel, and it was said of him that his advice was like one who inquires of God. When David was a young warrior, he was characterized by consistently inquiring of God, asking “Should I do this?” or “Should I do that?” God guided him with perfect wisdom, and it was by this that his throne was established. How much more do we need the Wonderful Counselor, Jesus Christ. Every action we take is based on some prior thought. If we think well, we live well. If we think poorly, we live poorly.

Unfortunately, Adam’s sin has sunk our intelligent race into mental darkness. We are naturally darkened in our minds and hearts and unable to discern truth from error or wisdom from folly. Therefore, we act corruptly, foolishly going our own ways and storing up wrath for Judgment Day. Jesus is a brilliant light of wisdom shining in our present darkened age. His counsel is infinitely better than that of Ahithophel, or even the most brilliant thinkers of our race. Because Jesus is God incarnate, to inquire of him is not merely “like” one who inquires of God... that is exactly what we are doing. When Jesus tells the rich young ruler to sell everything he has and he will have treasure in heaven, and then to follow him, there could not have been better wisdom spoken. When he commanded all the Jews of Jerusalem to come to him and drink (John 7), that was perfect counsel. When he advised all his followers to deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow him, that wisdom was better than gold refined seven times in a furnace.

So, this Christmas, as you picture the gift of Christ from heaven to earth, ponder this one phrase “Wonderful Counselor.” And ask his wisdom for your soul’s eternal benefit. As the psalmist said, *“You are always with me. You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory”*(Psalm 73:23-24).

DAY 17

TENTS

JOHN 1:14; HEBREWS 11:9; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:1, 4

John 1:14 is one of the most theologically rich verses in the Bible, and it has a long and significant history in the development of the Christian conception of the incarnation—the central truth we celebrate at Christmas. Athanasius, the great 3rd century scholar who fought against the doctrine that Christ was God’s first and greatest creation (a heresy known as Arianism and taught in our day by the Jehovah’s Witnesses), based his greatest book on John 1:14: *On the Incarnation of the Word*. The idea of Jesus as “Word” and his “becoming flesh” usually takes center stage when Christians ponder John 1:14. But I want to look at the second half of the verse: “*and made his dwelling among us.*” The Greek word translated “made his dwelling” comes from a root related to tents—*skene*. That was the word used of the Tabernacle in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. So, John 1:14 literally says, “*The Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us...*”

The theme of God’s people dwelling in tents is a very rich one. The author to Hebrews discusses how Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were all tent-dwellers in the Promised Land. They confessed that they were “aliens and strangers” in the land that God had sworn to give them, and they died in faith, not having received that promise. Their tents were symbols of impermanence, and their tent-dwelling mentality was a testimony to their faith in a “*city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God*” (Hebrews 11:10). Impermanence. That’s what a tent is all about.

So, also Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:1-4, pondering the resurrection body, speaks of the impermanence of the mortal bodies in which we all are living. He calls his mortal body “this

tent,” saying he is deeply aware of its destruction by aging and death. Because of that, he feels effectively naked, unclothed, longing for a permanent “home,” the resurrection body.

Therefore, when John speaks of Christ pitching his tent among us, he was alluding to his willingness to take on a mortal body and submit to death’s tyranny to rescue us from death for all eternity. The moment Christ rose from the dead, he took on a permanent “dwelling place” for his soul—a resurrection body. He no longer lives in a tent but in a permanent home. And because he was willing to “pitch his tent” among us dying people, someday so shall we.

DAY 18

KING HEROD'S TRAGIC PARANOIA

MATTHEW 2:16; PSALM 2:10-12

What kind of man would issue such a wicked order, the slaughter of all the male infants to ensure that one particular boy baby could never rise to challenge him? Ironically, this is the very man called “Herod the Great.” Ultimately the greatest thing about Herod was his evil. But despite his overwhelming jealousy and murderous rage, God’s plan could not be stopped.

What does history reveal about the king who gave this command?

Under his rule, the temple was refurbished and expanded with massive stones and garnished with marble and gold. The temple of Jesus’ lifetime was generally called “Herod’s Temple.” Herod did this in part to compensate for his true ethnicity as well as for the hatred he had earned from the Jewish population. What of his ethnicity? Amazingly, he was given the title “King of the Jews” though he was actually Idumean, not a Jew at all! His father, Herod Antipater, had done some favor for the Romans and as a result, Herod’s family was given the right to rule Judea under Roman rule.

Herod was the consummate politician, and he did everything to curry Roman favor and maintain his power. In return, the Roman Senate gave him an army and with it, he extended his reign to Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.

He was also ruthless and pitiless as a ruler; he slaughtered Zealots who opposed any Gentile rule over the Promised Land. Herod wanted to be guaranteed they wouldn’t do that to Roman rule, so he simply slaughtered them all. Herod had ten wives and twelve sons. One of his wives, Mariamne, had a brother named Aristobulus, who was high priest. Herod felt threatened by him, so he had him murdered. He then killed her as well. He was so paranoid

that he had his two eldest sons put to death... his entire life was one of plots and assassinations designed to keep him in power.

One of the final acts of his life was to arrest a number of the leading men of Jerusalem and command that they be slaughtered the moment he died. His reasoning: "The people will not weep when I die, and I want them weeping, even if they weep over the death of someone else."

As I ponder the career of this tyrant and his paranoid attempt to slaughter Jesus the moment he was born, I can't help but think of Psalm 2. In that Psalm, the nations and rulers of the earth plot against the Lord and his Messiah. Their desire is to stop the Messiah's rule and throw off his authority. But Almighty God, enthroned above the highest heaven, laughs at their puny efforts. Then he threatens them directly with his wrath, warning them to be wise and delight in the Son of God. Herod's wicked paranoia was all for naught. He died shortly after Jesus was born, ending all his glory. The temple he adorned for the praise of his name was eventually destroyed by the Romans he sought to please. And the one born King of the Jews will reign on his throne as King of kings forever.

DAY 19

GOOD KING WENCESLAS: A PICTURE OF CHRIST

2 CORINTHIANS 8:9

In the summer of 2003, I had the great privilege to visit one of the most beautiful cities in the world, Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic. In the Old Town near Prague Castle stands an imposing bronze statue of a warrior on a horse. It is Wenceslaus, whom the Bohemians view as their “patron saint,” and who is well-known as the subject of John Mason Neale’s Christmas carol “Good King Wenceslaus.” Many American Christians know the song and hear it sung every Christmas, but few know the story of this man of God.

Wenceslas was born around 907 in the castle of Stochov near Prague. At some point in history the castle was destroyed. However, there remains an oak tree in that place which was supposedly planted by his godly grandmother Ludmila when Wenceslas was born. Legend has it that his nannies watered the tree with his bath water, which supposedly made the tree strong and ready for long life. The church Wenceslas attended also exists today.

At first, Wenceslas was raised by Ludmila, who was committed to the Christian faith. Then, when he was about 13 years old, his father died, and Wenceslas succeeded him as duke. Because he was too young to rule, his mother, Drahomira, became regent. Drahomira was opposed to Christianity and used her new power to persecute followers of Christ. She refused to let Wenceslas see Ludmila because she was afraid they would scheme to overthrow her. Not long after Ratislav’s death, Ludmila was murdered at Tetin Castle—strangled, it is said, at Drahomira’s command.

But the loss of his grandmother did not stop Wenceslas from seizing power. At the age of 18 he overthrew his mother’s regency, just as she had feared, and began to rule for

himself. Wenceslaus was a stern but just monarch, and he stopped the persecution of priests and tamed the rebellious nobility. He was best known for his kindness to the poor, as depicted in later verses of the carol. He was especially charitable to children, helping young orphans and slaves.

Many of the Bohemian nobles resented Wenceslas's attempts to spread Christianity and were displeased when he swore allegiance to the king of Germany, Henry I. The duke's most deadly enemy proved to be his own brother, Boleslav, who joined the nobles who were plotting his brother's assassination. He invited Wenceslas to a religious festival and then attacked him on his way to mass. As the two were struggling, Boleslav's supporters jumped in and murdered Wenceslas. "Good King" Wenceslas died on September 20, 929. He was in his early twenties and had ruled Bohemia for five years. Today he is remembered as the patron saint of the Czech Republic.

The words to the carol "Good King Wenceslas" were written by John Mason Neale and first published in 1853. In the carol, Wenceslaus looks out from his comfortable castle and sees a poor struggling peasant out during a snowstorm on the feast of Stephen (December 26). He and a page leave their castle to bring food and pine logs to the peasant, and as the wind grows more intense and the night grows darker, the page fears that he may collapse in the snow. Wenceslaus tells the page to follow his steps, which, miraculously, warm the page's freezing feet. The godly ruler and the page complete the trip to the peasant's home safely.

There is no historical record of this event, but it is consistent with the character of Wenceslaus. It is also a beautiful picture of the humility of Christ, who "though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, so that we, through his poverty might become rich." As Wenceslaus looked out on the snowy field from his comfortable castle perch, so Christ looked out on a sinful world from his heavenly throne. As Wenceslaus ventured forth into darkness

and cold to minister to the needs of the peasant, so Christ took on a human body to save us from sin. However, the sufferings of Wenceslaus and those of Christ cannot be compared. Neither can the blessings of those who received Wenceslaus's benevolence be compared with those who received Christ's gifts.

May the Lord richly bless your celebration of his Advent. May his example (and that of Wenceslaus) motivate you to give sacrificially to the physically and spiritually needy.

DAY 20

THE MAGI: EARLY FRUIT FROM A WORLDWIDE HARVEST

MATTHEW 2:1-2, 9-11

From before the foundation of the world, God had planned to save a vast number from every tribe and language and people and nation. When he called Abram out of Ur of the Chaldees, he said that through his offspring, all peoples on earth would be blessed. God is not the God only of Jews but of Gentiles also (Romans 3:29). So while he was primarily revealing his saving plan with ever-increasing clarity to the Jewish nation alone, he was also providentially working in other nations, preparing them to hear the gospel at the right time.

Part of that preparation was the diaspora of the Jews throughout the realms of the Gentile nations that conquered them, including the Babylonians. The Jews that were exiled there brought with them the ancient scrolls of the prophets and their hope that the prophecies of the coming King would still be fulfilled. Daniel was among those hope-filled exiles. He was established in the court of King Nebuchadnezzar and was trained to be among his counselors. Those counselors were of various ranks and types and were listed several times in the Book of Daniel, including Daniel 2:2: *“The king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and astrologers...”* The precursors to the Magi of Matthew 2 almost certainly were among that group. The word “Magi” links them to a priestly caste of the Medes, according to the ancient historian Herodotus. They were active throughout Babylon, Persia, and the entire Mesopotamian region during the Old Testament era and were priests of the Zoroastrian religion. Zoroastrianism was the official state religion of Persia and the dominant religion throughout the ancient Near East in the centuries before Christ. It is amazingly still practiced today by the Parsees of India, who fled Persia when the Muslims came to power.

Zoroastrianism has some parallels to Judaism: monotheism, animal sacrifice, a hereditary priestly class like the Levites who would offer the blood sacrifices for the sins of the people. But the religion was a Satanic counterfeit: the Zoroastrian priests employed the occult—sorcery, wizardry, astrology, witchcraft... things directly forbidden in the scripture. The ancient world tended to blend superstition and science; there was little difference in their mind between the science of astronomy (studying the position and movement of the stars) and astrology (the occultic use of the stars to predict human affairs). The Magi were experts at both, and they were so highly esteemed that they came to be greatly desired as counselors to the kings of the ancient Near East; they rose to positions of power in the courts of the kings in the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, and Greek empires. We get the word “magistrate” from the word “Magi,” so also the Latin word for “teacher” is “magister”.

The Magi that came to see Jesus were more than just stargazers, however. They had specific content about the child whose birth and birthplace the star indicated. This content could only have come from God, most likely by the prophets of Israel. Daniel may well have sowed seeds of prophecy that were passed down for six centuries among the Magi until the time came for Jesus to be born.

The Magi coming all the distance from the east represent God’s intention that Christ receive worship from distant tribes and languages and nations. The gifts they gave represent their hearts of worship, which is exactly what they did when they presented them.

When the saving plan of God worldwide is accomplished, there will be countless other gifts of love and worship offered to Christ by Gentiles who have been led by scripture and providence to find him. How amazing will our heavenly fellowship be, enriched by their testimonies!

DAY 21

THE GOVERNMENT WILL REST ON HIS SHOULDERS

ISAIAH 9:6-7

Every four years, America faces the prospect of another presidential campaign by which imperfect people elect an imperfect person to lead a deeply flawed nation for four years. In 1947, Winston Churchill said in a speech to the House of Commons, “It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.” This sardonic statement seems to imply that democracy is deeply flawed, but it’s better than absolute monarchy, dictatorship, communism, or anarchy. What Abraham Lincoln called government “of the people, by the people, and for the people” is only as good as the people. And the Bible reveals that “the people” are deeply sinful. It is true that the separation of powers established in the U.S. Constitution greatly mitigates the corruption that one man’s heart can inflict on the nation. But it is right for Christians to yearn for something far better.

The coming kingship of Jesus Christ is exactly that and infinitely more than anything we could ask for or imagine. Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would have perfect character, a blending of the supernatural with the natural, resulting in the incarnate Son of God as also the Son of David, sitting forever on David’s throne. He will have miracle-working power, perfect wisdom, eternal lifespan, and an absolute commitment to peace. He will reign with exact justice and righteousness, and his kingdom will never end. The weight of authority will be greater than any man has ever known, but his shoulders will be infinitely strong to bear that yoke.

Best of all, the “increase of his government” will never end. The Hebrew word translated “increase” gives a sense of richness, blessedness, wealth, prosperity... but also multiplication. Christ’s kingdom will eternally GROW! How will that be possible, given the fact that procreation will end with this present age, and in heaven the redeemed will neither marry nor be given in marriage? I believe the answer is that the glories of Christ’s kingdom will eternally grow in the minds and hearts of his people as they increasingly understand the infinite majesty of Christ. We will study the great works of Christ that he achieved in redeeming his elect from every nation on earth and every era of history. And as we continue to learn those great achievements, we will glorify Christ more and more and more and more... forever.

Psalm 111:2-4 holds the key to this insight. *“Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them. Glorious and majestic are his deeds, and his righteousness endures forever. He has caused his wonders to be remembered...”* What that means is that for all eternity, Christ will teach us his great works in and through the lives of his countless redeemed in this present evil age. We will learn and learn and learn... and delight in everything Christ ever did. And therefore, his glory will increase forever!

So, what an amazing government he will have in heaven, a kingdom of perfect righteousness and radiant glory in which his subjects will delight forever in submitting to his rule.

DAY 22

THE REASON FOR THE SEASON... ACCORDING TO JESUS

JOHN 12:46

Year after year, pastors, songwriters, authors, poets, and others keep coming up with new angles by which to see Christmas... from the perspective of Mary, or Joseph, or the Innkeeper of Bethlehem, or King Herod, or Caesar Augustus, or the magi, or the shepherds, or the wise men, or even the little drummer boy! The best motive for these efforts is to present in fresh ways “The Reason for the Season,” the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to a perishing world.

However, the best perspective on the reason for the coming of Christ must ultimately come from Jesus himself. And there are a remarkably high number of purpose statements Christ entrusted to the world in the four gospels. Here are a few of them with some comments.

Christ came into the world:

1. To fulfill the Law and the Prophets: *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”* (Matthew 5:17)

2. To do his Father’s will by saving the elect: *“Then I said, ‘Here I am-- it is written about me in the scroll-- I have come to do your will, O God.’”* (Hebrews 10:7)

“For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me but raise them up at the last day. For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son

and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."(John 6:38-40)

3. To judge Satan and all wicked people: *"For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind."*(John 9:39)

"Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out."(John 12:31)

4. To give us abundant life: *"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."*(John 10:10)

5. To preach in the cities of Israel: *Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else-- to the nearby villages-- so I can preach there also. That is why I have come."*(Mark 1:38)

6. To testify to the truth and build a kingdom of truth: *Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."*(John 18:37)

7. To give light to those who walk in darkness: *"I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness."*(John 12:46)

8. Not to judge the world but to save it: *"I did not come to judge the world, but to save it."*(John 12:47)

9. To call sinners to spiritual healing through repentance: *"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."*(Luke 5:31-32)

10. To feed the world with his flesh: *"I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats*

of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."(John 6:48-51)

DAY 23

A LIGHT SHINING IN DARKNESS

ISAIAH 9:2; JOHN 1:4-5; LUKE 2:8-9, 23:44-45

The theme of darkness is a pervasive one in the Bible. John tells us, *“God is light and in him there is no darkness”* (1 John 1:5). In that verse, light represents the holiness and the glory of God; darkness represents evil. So also, Isaiah 9:2 asserts that, in their sinfulness, people all over the world walk in darkness. The darkness consists in ignorance of God and his ways, shameful deeds which people want cloaked, and the absence of beauty and truth. To walk in darkness is to make one foolish choice after another, leading to a devastating end. Jesus said, *“If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a ditch”* (Matthew 15:15). This spiritual darkness is devastating, and the ultimate end of such a life is to be cast into eternal darkness.

Therefore, it is appropriate that Jesus was born at night, and that supernatural light shining in darkness made that night unlike any other in history. The shepherds saw the angel of the Lord, and the light of the glory of the Lord shredded the darkness. The magi were led at night by a supernatural star that brought them to Bethlehem. So also, it is appropriate that when Jesus died, the light of the sun was extinguished, and the land was shrouded in total darkness. For the most powerful display of the glory of God there has ever been was the death of the incarnate Son of God on the cross. There the attributes of God were put on radiant display for the eyes of faith to see—God’s love, power, justice, wrath, grace, wisdom—indeed all the attributes of God shining in this present darkness.

So, as we celebrate Christmas this year, let us understand these symbols: darkness and light... the darkness of sin and the light of the glory of God. Let us thank God that we

who were at one time walking in darkness now walk in the light of Christ. And let us anticipate a perfect world eternally illuminated by the glory of Christ.

DAY 24

THE TRUE STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

GENESIS 28:11-12, 16-17; JOHN 1:51

What an awesome dream filled the mind of Jacob that night. Here was this fugitive from the wrath of a defrauded brother, a con-artist and deceiver, yet filled with a genuine faith that would lead him to glory. Exhausted from his travels, he lay on the cold ground with a stone for his pillow. Soon after he fell asleep, his mind was filled with an unearthly light. He saw a stairway that began on earth and reached to the heavens. Higher and higher it rose until it pierced the clouds. And on that stairway were angels ascending and descending in service to God. Angels are usually depicted in radiant glory, often with wings by which they move with amazing speed to serve God's purposes. *"He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire"*(Hebrews 1:7) But here, they employed a more ordinary, even human means of reaching from heaven to earth and going back again. Undoubtedly the purpose of the image was for the benefit of all who would inherit salvation, including Jacob.

We sinners often try to build our own stairways to heaven. I think of the Tower of Babel, constructed by human ingenuity and labor, seeking to reach to the heavens in such a manner as to boast forever at the accomplishment. The one enthroned above the heavens laughs at the puny efforts, for God had to descend to see what they were doing... they weren't even close! But the efforts of sinners to soar from the cursed earth by good works has continued unabated in every generation, right up to this present day. Whether by technology, or philosophy, or religion, man seeks to rise. But all such efforts must fail.

For there is only one true stairway to heaven, and his name is Jesus Christ. It was for this reason that Christ came from heaven to earth, to lift the sons of the earth from their

wicked squalor, deceiving nature, and hard-hearted rebellion to the true “house of God” by the only “gate to heaven.” Jesus clearly linked himself to Jacob’s dream by his stunning proclamation to Nathanael in John 1. Someday all of us who believe in Jesus will see heaven opened, and Jesus returning to earth with an army of angels. At that time, he will send out his angels to gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other. Then we will rise from the earth through his power. So, we will be with the Lord forever.

It was to establish this true stairway to heaven that Jesus came to earth two thousand years ago. This is what we celebrate at Christmas!

DAY 25

THE GREATEST GIFT GOD COULD GIVE

ROMANS 8:32

Christmas Day is known for the giving of gifts, many gifts, sometimes extremely costly gifts. I sometimes marvel at the ads that show an expensive luxury car in the driveway with a huge red bow on top and the giver walking the blindfolded recipient to the dramatic moment of unveiling. I wonder, “Do people really give \$75,000 gifts for Christmas?” Such people move in a stratosphere with which most of the world is unaccustomed!

But how can any material gift compare with the infinite worth and value of the true Christmas gift, the one given to the world two thousand years ago in Bethlehem? How can we put a price on God’s lavish generosity in giving his Son to a rebellious and raging world? Romans 8:32 gives a glimpse into the value of that gift to God himself. According to the logic of that verse, God considers all other things in his immeasurable treasury (which includes all of creation!) to be of lesser worth than the gift of his Son, incarnate in the virgin’s womb, slaughtered at Golgotha, and raised on the third day. The God who did not spare— withhold—his only begotten Son but gave him up for us all would not withhold any lesser gift. The phrase “gave him up” refers to the atonement, where God poured out his wrath on him and allowed death to have mastery over him. Any other thing that God could ever give is infinitely less than that.

C.S. Lewis once wrote, “He who has God and everything else has no more than he who has God only.” That means that God is worth more than “everything else.” What is “everything else?” It is all of creation... all created things in the universe. By the same logic we can look at the gift of Jesus Christ the same way. He who has Christ and everything in the

universe has no more than he who has Christ alone. Because Christ is everything! In him all the promises of God are yes and amen. In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. In Christ is life and that life is the light of people. If we put the weight of the glory of all created things on one side of the scales, and Christ on the other, the weight of the glory of Christ would be as one million pounds and the weight of all creation would be as a dust speck or a drop of water from a bucket.

Therefore, if there is anything missing from your assembly of gifts on Christmas morning, it is as nothing. So, if there should be anything finally missing from your list of desires and goals and yearnings and possessions when you lay on your deathbed, it will not be because God was holding out on you. God gave the greatest gift he could ever give in Christ incarnate and crucified.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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