

A central illustration of a nativity scene. Mary is seated on the left, and Joseph is on the right, both looking towards the infant Jesus who is lying on a bed of straw. A bright, multi-colored star (the Star of Bethlehem) is shining in the night sky above the manger. The scene is illuminated by a warm, golden light from the manger, contrasting with the dark blue night sky. The background shows a simple landscape with a few trees and a distant town.

in the fullness of time...

Advent Devotional Guide

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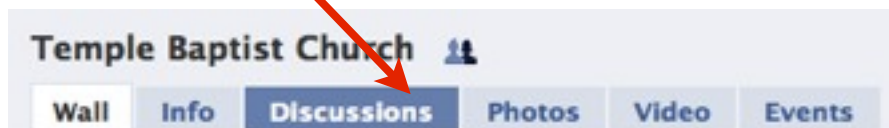
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Introduction

by Christopher Wright

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.” Galatians 4:4-5 (ESV)

The A-Team was one of my favorite TV shows growing up. In every episode, the A-Team would concoct a complicated plan to help some desperately helpless soul. It was vital in every episode that each step in the plan was flawlessly executed. If one detail failed, the whole plan failed, and the A-Team rarely failed. At some point in an episode, the leader of the A-Team, Hannibal, would exclaim, “I love it when a plan comes together!”

At this time of year, we celebrate the infancy of the perfect plan that has rescued our desperately helpless souls. “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son.” Of all the possible ways God could have gone about bringing a sinful and broken people to Himself, the best option, the very best plan, started with a baby in a manger.

Actually, it began long before then. Throughout the Old Testament, we can see the fingerprints of this plan displayed in God’s story. If you really think about it, the Old Testament is about one thing: Jesus. Each story, each family tree, each law reminds us of our need for one who can save us from our desperate situation.

This foreshadowing is very apparent in many of the prophetic writings. In all, there are over 300 prophetic statements made about Jesus¹, including statements about the virgin birth long before the actual event². Isaiah 53 alludes to Christ’s life on Earth:

Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his stripes 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.

¹ Who is Jesus Christ - Old Testament Prophecy of Messiah
<http://www.crosswalk.com/who-is-jesus/old-testament-messiah-prophecy/>

² Isaiah 7:14

This plan has been in the works since the beginning. Then, in the life of a teenage girl and her betrothed came the fullness of time and thus begins our study.

During this Advent season, we are going to take a closer look at four people or groups that played important roles in this plan, people who were faithful to protect the manger. Let us not forget, however, that Jesus did not remain a baby in the manger. Jesus grew up and paid the ultimate sacrifice. As you read and learn about the shepherds, the wise men, Joseph, and Mary, look for those elements that point to the cross. Remembering the manger while looking toward the cross is very well summed up with a verse from one of my favorite new Christmas songs:

The Son of God here born to bleed
A crown of thorns would pierce His brow
And we beheld his offering
Exalted now the King of kings
Praise God for the hallowed manger ground!³

So may you be reminded this Christmas season of the babe in the manger and His purpose on the cross. Don't you love it when a plan comes together?

³ "Emmanuel I Hallowed Manger Ground" by Chris Tomlin and Ed Cash

Shepherds, Day 1

by Craig Tanner

Humility



"Should you ask me what is the first thing in religion, I should reply that the first, second, and third thing therein is humility." - Augustine

"And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night." Luke 2:8 (ESV)

Maybe some of you can still remember the grand entrance of the Prince of Wales on June 21, 1982. Prince Charles and Princess Diana had their first son, who was to be second in succession to the kingship of Britain after his father Charles. There was an extravagant celebration to commemorate the birth of the future king. The skies thundered with the sound of artillery firing, thousands of champagne corks popping, and bells ringing in honor of this baby boy. Flags were raised around the kingdom to the endless shouting and singing, "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow." Large crowds of people gathered outside the hospital after hearing the good news and more than two thousand gifts were given to this new baby boy. Church services were held in his honor as he was prayed for, dedicated, and baptized. To top it all off, this whole production was broadcast to millions of homes around the world. Believe it or not, no one thought of this as being odd; after all, the birth of a king is a big deal.¹ What about the King of Kings? Did he not deserve a royal welcome into the world? The Bible says when Jesus was born he was wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger because there wasn't any room in the inn.² Doesn't this seem like an incalculable injustice? We are talking about the Messiah. According to Scripture, this little baby was the "Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."³ The little child born in Bethlehem was none other than the "all-knowing, all-seeing, all-powerful, and all-glorious Son of God."⁴ The welcome Jesus deserved is far greater than the one he received. The very world itself should have bowed at the cradle of the King, yet we are told his birth went seemingly unnoticed. Humility is a distinct characteristic of Jesus' life. His birth, his ministry, and his death were all accomplished in humility. The same child wrapped in swaddling cloths would soon be the man who humbled himself and took up the cross on which he would die. Just as the announcement of his death was given to twelve

¹ Time Magazine. July 5, 1982

² Luke 2:7

³ Revelation 22:13

⁴ Phillips, Richard. *The Incarnation in the Gospels*. P & R Publishing. New Jersey. 2008. Pg. 101.

ordinary, unqualified, average men, the announcement of his birth was given to lowly shepherds who were out in a field keeping watch over their flocks.

While our own Christmas traditions tend to romanticize many of the characters in the Christmas story, the truth is shepherds were outcasts. Shepherds lived in fields, worked with animals, and were completely unable to keep the traditional ceremonial laws taught by the religious leaders of the day, therefore they were considered unclean. Shepherds were poor, unlearned men who were social and political nobodies. In the time period in which Jesus was born, shepherds were detested second only to lepers. Yet these are the men in whom God chose to reveal the most significant event in human history. He chose the poor, unprivileged shepherds. *“He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate.”*⁵

Most likely shepherds were the kind of people we would be uncomfortable with if they sat next to us in our pew on a Sunday morning, mainly because they wouldn’t look like us, act like us, dress like us, or talk like us. In most churches they would automatically be labeled, sneered at, and talked about for dressing and acting inappropriately; some would wonder whether or not these people should even be allowed in the same room with us smelling like that. The beauty of the Christmas story is that the message of the Gospel came in the most unlikely way through the most unlikely sources. The good news came to the shepherds, not because they had it all together, but because they didn’t! This may sound backwards to us because we tend to work hard to look like we have it all together. Christians are notorious for being “holier than thou” and “hypocrites” for this very reason. We accentuate our positives and bury our negatives in some deep hole where hopefully nobody will find them. That’s not humility; it’s pride.

If anything, our understanding of Christ’s humble beginnings should upset our routines. We tend to believe, whether consciously or unconsciously, that God is always for the good people. Maybe this is why we spend so much time trying to be good. Perhaps we too often forget that the Bible declares, *“All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one”*⁶ and *“our righteous deeds are like filthy rags.”*⁷

Christianity is most clearly confirmed not in our strengths, but in our weaknesses. When we are weak, He is strong. Ultimately, Jesus is our example and his life exemplifies humility. This means Christians should be people pursuing humility.

- ➡ *How does humility encourage us to be real about who we are inside and out?*
- ➡ *How would you describe your attitude? In what areas of your life do you need to continue to pursue humility?*
- ➡ *How does confession and brokenness demonstrate humility?*

⁵ Luke 1:52

⁶ Romans 3:12

⁷ Isaiah 64:6

Shepherds, Day 2

Fear

The fear of God kills all other fears. - Hugh Black

"And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear." Luke 2:9 (ESV)

I can still recall the night when I came face to face with one of my biggest fears. My parents went out of town for the weekend, leaving me home alone. I was afraid someone might break into the house while I slept at night, so I always double-checked each door to make sure it was locked. For added security I slid a butter knife between the door and doorframe of my bedroom since my door lock didn't function. On the third night of staying at home by myself I was startled awake around 2:00 a.m. to the terrifying sound of footsteps in the room above my bedroom. I can still distinctly recall the rush of adrenaline and the feeling of the lump in my throat when I heard someone opening and closing drawers and cabinets. After quickly calculating my options, I abandoned the idea of a quick exit from the house and decided to confront these intruders with my shotgun. Creeping around the corner to the staircase, my heart raced when I saw the lights on upstairs, which only confirmed the reality that someone was in my house. My gun was loaded, the safety was off, my finger was on the trigger, and I made it about halfway up the stairs before I heard the familiar voice of my mother. It seems my parents decided to come home early and forgot to call me with the news. Ironically, the first thing I heard her say was, "I hope Craig doesn't wake up and shoot us." After contemplating making her statement a reality for not warning me ahead of time, I decided to just go back to bed. It's funny how so many of our fears and anxieties occur because of our own false impressions.

I can imagine the shepherds experiencing some of the same feelings and emotions. They were out in the dark of night with only their sheep and the light of the moon and stars. Suddenly there was a burst of bright light as an angel appeared before them. The sheer startling reality of some really bright dude suddenly appearing out of nowhere would have probably be enough to make me run away screaming like a girl. I'm not at all surprised when the Bible says the shepherds were "filled with fear." The question that immediately comes to my mind when I hear this story is, "What are they afraid of?"

The first and most obvious answer is their simple fear of their environment. The sudden light and appearance of an angel not only startles them but also threatens their reality. As humans we can probably all relate. We often feel that our lives or even our way of life may be threatened, so we generally face these things with fear. Most of the time our anxieties are irrational and ungodly as we fret over things like national politics, economic downturns, the stock market, our retirements, our homes, our food, our budgets, and all of our stuff. The

reason these fears are irrational is because we call ourselves Christians and yet we've come to a point where we do not depend on God for any of these things. We find ourselves to be fully capable of providing for our own needs and as a result we don't need God.⁸ This increases our fears and anxieties, however, because our success or failure in all of these things now rests solely on our shoulders. This increases our prayer life, but unfortunately our prayers usually center on asking God to make us more capable of taking care of ourselves rather than helping us to depend on His divine power for life and godliness.⁹ We carry burdens we ought not carry and we welcome fears of things we have no business being afraid of. We waste a lot of energy and anxiety on things that will fade away and spend less time in awe of the eternal things that will remain forever. Charles Spurgeon reminds us that, "Anxiety does not empty tomorrow of its sorrows, but only empties today of its strength."

➔ *What are some irrational fears and worries that you need to give to God?*

➔ **Read Matthew 6:25-33.** *In what ways can you "seek first the Kingdom of God" in your life? Do you believe that God will provide for His people? Does your life match that belief?*

We should also recognize another likely reason for the shepherds' fear. Notice the Bible calls the light that was shining around the shepherds "the Glory of God." Essentially the shepherds saw a light brighter than anything that they've ever seen before because it was, in fact, the very glory of God. We can define this manifestation of glory in this way: "God's glory is the brightness that surrounds God's revelation of himself."¹⁰ Suddenly being in the presence of God's holiness terrified them. This is similar to Isaiah's experience when he came face to face with the holiness and glory of God; he could only say, "Woe is me! For I am ruined!"¹¹ When we encounter the awe inspiring, fear inducing, self-magnifying presence of a Holy God, our only response is awe, reverence, and conviction of how completely unworthy we are to stand in His presence. Fear in this sense is a response of awe and reverence that induces love or worship and a response of terror that leads to recognition of our own pitiful state. "God instilled this fear in people, who at the same time are both attracted and terrified by His awesomeness. Those who have faith can perceive both elements. The unfaithful can only tremble at the coming judgment."¹²

➔ *Do you fear God and how does that translate into the way you act?*

➔ *Does your fear (awe and reverence) lead to greater love for and worship of God?*

➔ *Does your fear (conviction) lead to brokenness and repentance?*

⁸ Chan, Francis. *Crazy Love*. 2008. Pg. 89

⁹ 2 Peter 1:3

¹⁰ Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology*. Zondervan Publishing House. 1994. Pg. 220

¹¹ Isaiah 6:5

¹² The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. Volume two. Pg. 292

Shepherds, Day 3

Joy

"In rejoicing with this joy, their minds were filled, as it were, with a glorious brightness, and their natures exalted and perfected.." - Jonathan Edwards

"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."
Luke 2:10-12 (ESV)

In the midst of the shepherds' traumatizing experience, being startled in the middle of the night by an angel and surrounded by the very presence of God, the messenger encouraged them not to be afraid. The angel didn't come to harm them or judge them; instead he was there to give them a message: "*I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.*"

The message brought to the shepherds this night was intensely powerful. Over the years we have dressed the Christmas story in so much glamour that we often overlook the nuances of meaning that should really stand out in a proper understanding of the New Testament account of Jesus' birth. For instance, take into consideration the use of the term "Lord." This term is used in multiple ways in the Bible. Sometimes it is simply a way of addressing a superior. However, on other occasions in the Bible, the term "Lord" is a translation for the Hebrew term "Yahweh." This means "Lord" can also represent the actual name of the one who is "the Creator and Sustainer of heaven and earth, the omnipotent God."¹³

In our familiarity with the story we may overlook the fact that when the angel said "*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord,*" he was literally saying to these Jewish shepherds that the prophesied Messiah was to be born that day and he is God Himself! The terms Christ and Lord being used together would have blown their minds! This was a shocking, unexpected reality to these Jewish men who knew the prophecy of a Messiah, but never would have grasped the understanding that God himself was being born in the flesh.

Another interesting perspective on this verse is the fact that the Messiah was born *to* the shepherds. Recently we've had a lot of couples in our church that have been pregnant. It's always exciting to get the call that one of the ladies is going into labor because my wife and I get to rush up to the hospital to see the newborn baby. It's a great joy to see and hold a newborn, but it is an altogether different type of joy when it's your own baby. When our boys were born and we were able to hold them for the first time, we experienced an indescribable joy that was exclusively ours since they were born to us. Jesus was born to live and die for

¹³ Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology*. Pg. 544.

sinners like you and me. Each Christmas we should be reminded of the unspeakable joy found in the birth of this baby boy who took on flesh for the sake of those who will receive Him in faith.

One other concept that would have left the shepherds scratching their heads was the fact that the angel declared to them that the Messiah who is God in the flesh was to be born, and that the sign of his coming would be a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths lying in a manger. These would certainly have been unexpected accommodations for the coming Messiah. Writing in the eighth century, the Venerable Bede said, “It should be carefully noted that the sign given of the saviour’s birth is not a child enfolded in Tyrian purple, but one wrapped round with rough pieces of cloth; he is not to be found in an ornate golden bed, but in a manger. The meaning of this is that he did not merely take upon himself our lowly mortality, but for our sakes took upon himself the clothing of the poor.”¹⁴

All of this is good news that would be for all the people! God came to earth and was born in human flesh unto those who were poor in spirit.¹⁵ The angel said to the shepherds that this good news should produce great joy! It stands to reason that joy should be the primary characteristic expressed in contemplating the Christmas story. I would go even further to say that joy should extend beyond the Christmas season to become one of the most important qualities found in the church. The joy I’m speaking of here is the joy that is from the Lord and has Jesus Christ as its object. It’s the joy in understanding that God has come to seek and save the lost. It’s the joy that Christ has come to save us from darkness and to save us to His Marvelous light. It’s the joy that by no merit of our own we’ve been adopted into the family of God and become heirs of His Kingdom and share in his characteristics. “All these attributes of my God are mine. His power is my protection. His wisdom is my guidance. His faithfulness is my foundation. His grace is my salvation.”¹⁶

We should find in the church the supreme expression of joy on earth. After all, the church itself exists to bring glory to God through the proclamation of the Gospel, which begins through the words of an angel to a group of shepherds, “I bring you good news of great JOY!” When thinking about how joy should be expressed in our lives, I’m reminded of the joy King David had as he “danced before the Lord with all his might.”¹⁷ I wonder, do we passionately love Jesus in such a way that our lives reflect this kind of joy?

➡ *If someone were to describe your life, would joy be a term that describes you?*

➡ *What joy do you have in the birth of Jesus Christ and how might that be expressed in your life?*

¹⁴ Bede, “In Lucam,” quoted in *The Incarnation in the Gospels* Reformed Expository Commentary

¹⁵ Matthew 5:3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

¹⁶ Spurgeon, Charles. *How To Have Real Joy*. Pg. 69

¹⁷ 2 Samuel 6:14

Shepherds, Day 4

Peace

"God cannot give us happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing".
- C.S. Lewis

"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 pleased!' - Luke 2:13-14 (ESV)

Several years ago a group of our college students went to a Passion Conference in Nashville, Tennessee. College students showed up from around the world to fill the 15,000-seat stadium. I distinctly remember how stunned I was to look around at thousands of people whose voices were praising Jesus. The power of all those voices singing in unison was enough to send chills up my spine. Once the service was over, we were all divided into smaller groups and sent out to different venues throughout the city. Before being dismissed, however, we were told to walk through the streets of the city without speaking. Imagine 15,000 people walking through the streets of Nashville in silence. The power of our silence was enough to cause people around the city to just stand in awe of what they were seeing. I remember thinking to myself, "Is this a small glimpse of what it might look like to worship God in heaven?"

The shepherds had the privilege of witnessing with their own eyes what it looks like to see a multitude of the hosts of heaven praising God. After the Angel of the Lord proclaimed the message of great joy to the shepherds, there was suddenly a whole multitude of the hosts of heaven praising him saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" Seeing and hearing these things must have been an intense experience, and yet what was most profound is discovered in the message of the angel's praise.

The announcement that the all-knowing, all-powerful, everlasting God had taken on "the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men"¹⁸ and God had "sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law,"¹⁹ was followed by two important phrases, "Glory to God" and "Peace on Earth." In the first of these expressions we see that God is highly glorified in sending his Son. J.C. Ryle says, "Now is come the highest degree of glory to God, by the appearing of His Son Jesus Christ in the world. He by His life and death on the cross will glorify God's attributes--justice, holiness, mercy, and wisdom--as they never were glorified before."²⁰ That which was accomplished through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ brought the highest potential glory to God. Paul ends the

¹⁸ Philippians 2:7

¹⁹ Galatians 4:4-5

²⁰ Quoted in *The Incarnation in the Gospels* Reformed Expository Commentary. Pg. 110

Book of Romans saying, “to the only wise God be glory forevermore THROUGH Jesus Christ!”²¹ God’s glory through Jesus Christ should be the theme of the church and the greatest source of joy in our hearts.²²

➡ *In what ways does your life reflect the Glory of God found in the transforming work of Jesus Christ?*

➡ *Is God’s glory through Jesus Christ the theme of your church?*

The second expression of praise brought forth by the heavenly host was “peace on earth.” The coming of Christ not only brought glory to God but also brought peace on earth. There are two very important things implied by this statement.

First of all, peace on earth is not referring to worldly peace such as the ending of wars or the everyday struggles of life. It is referring, instead, to peace for the soul: peace with God through the forgiveness of sins and peace with one another by the power of the Spirit uniting believers together in one mind.²³

Several years ago during the spring turkey season here in Missouri, I went out hunting. While sitting out in the woods, listening to the peaceful sounds of nature and enjoying the amazing scenery, the guy I was hunting with said something that still haunts my thoughts to this day. He pointed around at the trees and scenery and said, “You know, I love being out in nature. This is my peace with God.” The error of this statement and the reality of this man’s lostness struck me in such a way that it literally made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I began to get that sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. There is no peace with God apart from the saving work of Jesus Christ. Because of this, the second implication is that peace is not for everyone, but only for those with whom God is pleased.

The King James Version of the Bible translates Luke 2:14b as “Peace on earth, Good will towards men.” Modern day translations more accurately translate it as “peace on earth among those with whom he is pleased.” The angels were declaring that God’s peace rests on those who believe on the name of his son. Jesus Christ is the “Good will” given to men and the means by which they receive peace. According to Romans, those who remain in the flesh “cannot please God” and therefore will not receive the peace on earth experienced by those who Christ Jesus has set free “from the law of sin and death.”²⁴

➡ *Have you experienced the peace that comes only in a transformed life through faith in Jesus Christ?*

➡ *How does the peace of God encourage unity among believers?*

²¹ Romans 16:27

²² ESV Study Bible. Notes on Romans 16:27.

²³ 1 Corinthians 1:10, Ephesians 4:3, Ephesians 4:13,

²⁴ Romans 8:2, 8

Shepherds, Day 5

Faith

"Faith is a living and unshakable confidence. A belief in God so assured that a man would die a thousand deaths for its sake." -- Martin Luther

"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." - Luke 2:15-18 (ESV)

Thinking back on my life, I'm always amazed at how much has changed in thirteen years. Everything that is happening in my life now is a result of some of the things that happened early on. When I was younger I had zero confidence in myself and was extremely shy. This is probably why I really didn't like being around people all that much. I know, this doesn't really sound like the makings of a good Associate Pastor. It was so bad that when I was forced to take a speech class in high school I would write the speeches but I refused to present them in class, so I barely passed the class by just doing extra credit. You can imagine the tremendous anxiety I experienced when I began to realize that God was calling me into ministry. It was bad enough that I would have to be around a bunch of people and actually talk in front of them, but then add to that the fact that I never really went to church before this point so I knew absolutely nothing about the Bible. This was enough to make me want to run screaming in the other direction. God, however, would not let me go. I had no earthly idea how I was going to do what I needed to do, nor did I ever in a million years think that I even could do it. With the thought looming over my head that I wasn't skilled for this and that I would likely fail miserably, I stepped into the life of ministry. This didn't happen because I was confident in myself. It happened because my faith in God allowed me to take a step I otherwise never would have taken. The confirmation of God's calling in my life came after my initial step of faith, kind of like the experience of the shepherds.

We can presume that the shepherds had faith in what was revealed to them because the Bible says as soon as the angels left them the shepherds decided to immediately go to Bethlehem to see this thing that had happened. When they arrived, what they found was Mary and Joseph and a baby lying in a manger. This was their confirmation of God's calling and the sign, which was promised to them by the angel. Immediately upon seeing the reality of what they had been told, the shepherds began to share the message. At the risk of sounding foolish, the shepherds told people what had happened to them. To many, their story would have been far-fetched: angels appearing to them to declare that the Messiah was born in such humble and poor conditions and that this baby was none other than God himself. Regardless of what might happen or how people might react, they had faith in the revelation they received from God and so with confidence the shepherds told others what they had seen and heard.

Having faith often means doing what may seem foolish or unwise to the rest of the world. It means trusting in something unseen and often times unplanned without fully knowing the end result. It is complete trust and confidence that as long as we “seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness,” then He will take care of us.²⁵ The Christian life should be characterized by a faith in God that leads us to do things that might seem abnormal or radical to the rest of the world. The way we live, the way we love, the way we give, the way we work, and the way we play should all be exceptional when compared to the standards of the world.

Unfortunately, this doesn't seem to be the norm. In fact, we seem to do the opposite. We continually want to play it safe, rather than live by faith. The biggest reason we are unwilling to live by faith is because if we do it may cost us something. If we live by faith then God might want us to do something we don't want to do or want us to live in a way that we don't want to live. If, in faith, we sacrificially love people, then we may have to show compassion and love for others who we normally just ignore. We may have to be people who are kind, gentle, patient, and forgiving of one another, and in the process we may need to put the needs of others above our own needs and desires. If, in faith, we give sacrificially, then we might have to give up some of our own comforts and security. We may have to stop planning to live in comfort in the future in order to help those who are needy in the present. Simply looking at the way we live and the things we treasure is a good indication of whether or not we trust in God enough to live radically different from the rest of the world.

It seems to me that our lives and maybe even our churches are comfortably shaped around ways not to live by faith due to apathy created out of our selfish desires to live easy and peaceful lives without conflict. We live in such a way that if God really didn't exist then our lives and churches wouldn't be any different than they are now. The Book of Romans declares that the “righteous shall live by faith.”²⁶ It is by faith that we are saved and it is through faith that we should live each day.

➡ *What are you doing in your life right now that requires faith?*

➡ *Do you live in such a way that people who don't know you would have no doubt that you have faith in Jesus Christ?*

The Bible says that all who heard what the shepherds had to say “wondered at what they told them.” Obviously everyone who heard what the shepherds had to say didn't believe them and yet they experienced a sense of wonder. Maybe this would be the same sense of wonder those outside of the church would experience if we started to live radically different than those around us.

➡ *Does your belief in Jesus transform how you act, think, speak, love, give, etc?*

➡ *Are you living radically different than those who don't believe in Jesus?*

²⁵ Matthew 6:33

²⁶ Romans 1:17

Shepherds, Day 6

Worship

"It is not enough for us to be where God is worshipped, if we do not ourselves worship him, and that not with bodily exercise only, which profits little, but with the heart." - Matthew Henry

"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 2:19-20 (ESV)

Having heard the message and having seen the sign given to them by the angels, the shepherds did the only thing left to do in response to such an awesome sight: they worshiped. Worship is simply that, a response to God's revelation and call. Worship is a reaction to the divine presence of God.

When the shepherds approached the manger, it's likely that Joseph and Mary would have been both confused and startled. However, when the shepherds began to share how they received the information regarding the birth of the Messiah, Luke records that Mary "treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart." The shepherd's visit would have been both an encouragement and confirmation to Joseph and Mary that the promises of God were indeed true. Mary admired the message of the shepherds as the pieces to the divine puzzle began to fit in place. She continued to ponder these things, likely being in awe of all that was happening around her as the promises of God continued to be fulfilled.

Likewise, the shepherds, having seen all that was promised to them through divine revelation, continued to glorify and praise God. This is the most reasonable response to the truth that was revealed to them. Notice the story of the shepherds ends with an imitation of what they had seen the angels doing after bringing them "Good News of Great Joy."

Just as the characters in the Christmas story had reason for their celebration and worship, we too have cause for such a response. Hebrews says, "Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe."²⁷ Worship is an essential element in the life of the church and one of the most valuable characteristics expressed in the hearts and minds of believers. True worship is an outpouring of response from a changed heart rather than an inward feeling from forms of outward expression. J.C. Ryle says, "A little child is easily quieted and amused with gaudy toys and dolls and rattles, so long as it is not hungry; but once let it feel the cravings of nature within, and we know that nothing will satisfy it but food. So it is with man in the matter of his soul. Music and flowers and candles and incense and banners and processions and beautiful vestments and confessionals and man-made ceremonies of a semi-Romish character may do well enough for him under certain conditions. But once let him 'awake and arise from the dead', and he will not rest content with these things. They will seem

²⁷ Hebrews 12:28

to him mere solemn triflings and a waste of time. Once let him see his sin, and he must see his Savior.”

The splendor of the Christmas story is found in some of the little details that we often overlook. The shepherds’ narrative gives us a glimpse into what true worship looks like. It’s not a fixation on certain styles; it’s not about music, it’s not about presentation, and it’s not even about the times or places that worship takes place. Worship is all about Jesus. It’s about bringing glory to God and praising his name for the things He has done and the truth he has revealed to His people. Worship is in essence a way of life rather than something that we do. The Book of Romans says we are to continually offer ourselves in sacrifice to God as our “spiritual act of worship.” Notice in Luke it says that the shepherds “returned, glorifying and praising God.” This means they went back to their lives as shepherds, but they were changed men. Now as they watched over their flocks by night they were glorifying and praising God. These things which they had seen and heard transformed their lives into spiritual worship. Worship wholly affects our life in such a way that it pours out in what we do, what we say, how we think, and the ways in which we express our gratitude and praise for the person and work of Jesus.

It is unfortunate that worship can be one of the most difficult and divisive issues among Christians. Worship is one of the clearest characteristics of a heart transformed by the divine presence of God and it is one of the easiest Christian characteristics to understand. The biggest danger that threatens worship during the Christmas season is the seemingly never-ending distractions of life. We get caught up in the world and lose sight of what Christmas is all about. John Piper says, "If you don't feel strong desires for the manifestation of the glory of God, it is not because you have drunk deeply and are satisfied. It is because you have nibbled so long at the table of the world. Your soul is stuffed with small things, and there is no room for the great."²⁸

Let’s take time this year to slow down and worship the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. As the old cliché says, “He is the reason for the season.” This Christmas my prayer for you is that you would “let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.”²⁹

- ➔ *Will there be room in your heart for those things which are great this Christmas season?*
- ➔ *Does your life reflect a life sacrificed as a spiritual act of worship to God?*
- ➔ *What are some things that distract you during the holidays and how can you focus on Jesus during the Christmas season?*

²⁸ Piper, John. *A Hunger for God*

²⁹ Philippians 1:22



Wise Men, Day 1

by Pam Hagan

The Decision

"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." Matthew 2:1-2 (ESV)

What do we really know about the Magi? We automatically think, ah, the three wise men, the kings from the Orient. But when we read their story, recorded only in Matthew's Gospel, rather than rely on our Christmas dramas and songs, we realize the Bible does not refer to them as kings or specify a number--maybe there were two or seven or twelve. Neither does Matthew offer details about their lives, not even their names.

Historical research tells us that Magi were originally priests and experts in mysteries and magic from Persia or southern Arabia who practiced astrology, divination, and the interpretation of dreams. They studied the skies, sacred writings, and the supernatural, and were considered learned men of their time. Still, we know little of these particular Biblical figures who take such a prominent place on our stages each Christmas season.

We're left with questions. What compels a "wise" man to leave his home, work, family, possessions, and security to undertake such an arduous and dangerous journey--to follow a star? What did these men know that made this quest so captivating? Did God speak to them, perhaps in their dreams or through one they interpreted for someone else? Did they, from their Old Testament study, see the star, sense that this supernatural sight was from God, and understand its signal of the Messiah about whom they had read?

As usual, God does not provide the details; as always, however, He provides the essentials. We know the Magi saw the star and set out to find the One worthy of worship. They didn't wait; they didn't hesitate; they didn't let the details of everyday life deter them. They simply responded to His direction. Do we need to know more than that?

Since the fourth century, the Epiphany has been linked with Christ's manifestation of himself to the Magi. These Gentiles traveled hundreds of miles to find the Messiah of Jewish scripture. In their wisdom, they did what God's chosen people failed to do: they acknowledged Jesus for who He is and bowed down to worship Him.

We like the story of the Magi because it shows us how to respond to the most important decision we will ever make: simply to focus on God's direction and to seek the One worthy of worship.

As the Christmas pins and t-shirts remind us, "Wise men **still** seek Him."

➔ *Let's pray today for someone who needs to make the wise decision to follow Jesus and, also, for Christians to renew their focus on following Him, undeterred by the myriad distractions of everyday life.*

➔ **Additional readings:** *Jeremiah 23:1-8; John 14:15-24; 2 Chronicles 15; Hebrews 11*

Wise Men, Day 2

The Disturbance

"When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of

Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

"And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.'" Matthew 2:3-8 (ESV)

Herod the Great was not the rightful heir to David's throne. When he heard of the Magi search, he was understandably disturbed. A rightful heir posed a huge problem to his power. Appointed by the Roman government, Herod maintained strong ties to Rome while also currying favor with the Jews to solidify his position; he did whatever necessary to protect his status. Ruthless and distrustful, he had no qualms about eliminating anything or anyone in his path, including a wife and two sons. We know the fate he ordered for the infants of Bethlehem. He made enemies and feared revolt. He knew Old Testament prophecy and that the Jews expected a formidable military Messiah to come soon. Of course Herod would summon the Magi and attempt to trick them into helping him find the newborn king. He lied about wanting to join the worship wagon; he wanted this threat destroyed.

Likewise, the chief priests and teachers had reason to be disturbed. The long expected Messiah would usurp their power and position, drastically changing their lifestyles. And, when we think about it, they were right. In his book The Jesus I Never Knew, Philip Yancey states "No one who meets Jesus ever stays the same" (25). Even as a helpless baby in a manger, Jesus is a disturbing figure. An encounter with Jesus requires a response.

Theologian Elton Trueblood observes "that all the major symbols Jesus used had a severe, even offensive quality: the yoke of burden, the cup of suffering, the towel of servanthood, and finally the cross of execution. He warned His followers to 'count the cost.'" Jesus preached submission, commitment, dying to self in total surrender of our will to His, obedience, and humility. He socialized with the poor, the sick, the outcast, and bestowed status on women and children. Jesus loves the unlovable. He honors the dignity of people, whether He agrees with them or not. How disturbing is it that Jesus commands us to do the same?

Yancey also says, "From Jesus I learn that, whatever activism I get involved in, it must not drive out love and humility, otherwise I betray the kingdom of heaven. How easy it is to join

the politics of polarization. How hard it is to remember that the kingdom of God calls me to love the woman who has just emerged from the abortion clinic (and, yes, even her doctor), the promiscuous person dying of AIDS, the wealthy landowner who is exploiting God's creation. If I cannot show love to such people, then I must question whether I have truly understood Jesus' gospel" (245).

Jesus is a disturbing figure for all who encounter Him: His presence unsettles those who refuse Him; His commands unsettle those who follow Him. When we compare what we know to do with what we do, we may, like the Biblical figures in today's scriptures, be disturbed.

Is there something outside your comfort zone Jesus wants you to do? The Magi undertook an incredible journey to find Him.

- ➔ *Pray today for the perseverance to follow Him, even when obeying disturbs our comfort.*
- ➔ **Additional readings:** *Matthew 5; James 1 (some "disturbing" passages)*

Wise Men, Day 3

The Journey

"After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was." *Matthew 2:9 (ESV)*

From Persia or Southern Arabia to Jerusalem to Bethlehem, the Magi followed the star, hundreds, perhaps a thousand or more miles. If they averaged 20 miles per day, they would have traveled for many weeks. Much would depend upon the weather, the road conditions, and their method of transport. Did they ride camels, as we assume from our Christmas stories? Was much of the distance covered on foot? Were they carried on pallets, befitting their status, by numerous servants? What would such a journey have entailed at this time? Even for men of wealth and position, this undertaking would not have been easy. One of the songs in our Christmas musical for this year affirms their challenge: "Accustomed to their privilege, their life a royal feast, they leave their kingdom comforts for a star in the East. The journey seems so endless, what promise does it bring? Though the road is rough and rugged, it leads them to the King."

In his poem, "The Journey of the Magi," T.S. Eliot describes in more gritty detail what the Magi may have endured. Presented from the point of view of one of the Magi, the poem describes a long and difficult journey, not a continual celebration of anticipation. It was "the worst time of the year...the ways deep, the weather sharp, the dead of winter...the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory, lying down in the melting snows...the camel men grumbling and running away...hostile cities and dirty villages charging high prices...." The Magi were sore, tired, questioning, sometimes thinking "this was all folly." Although not a complete picture of their trials, the poem reminds us that this journey was not a pleasure cruise. Travel was a life-

risking endeavor. Nevertheless, the Magi did not stop--they kept on, following the star, until finally it stopped over the place where the child lived.

The Magi story illustrates God at work, leading the way. He used a spectacular star in His heavens and the expertise and curiosity of learned astrologers on His Earth to reveal His greatest work of all. He led these scholars of ancient texts to Jerusalem, to Herod who, in turn, sent them to Bethlehem. (Don't you love it that God used Herod to accomplish His purpose!) He provided guidance so specific that it led them to the exact house where Jesus lived. The good news is that He is still at work providing personal guidance, using His creation, His Word, and His people to lead others to Jesus. Those who seek Him will, like the Magi, find Him.

In retrospect, the speaker in Eliot's poem reflects, "All this was a long time ago, I remember, and I would do it again..." Although the journey may be long and hard, finding Jesus will render it all more than worthwhile. To paraphrase the old hymn, when we fix our eyes on Jesus, when we focus on His face, we won't be worrying about the things of earth. We'll only see "the light of His glory and grace." Kind of like gazing on a spectacular star.

- ➔ *Let's pray today for the discernment to see God at work, in whatever our circumstances.*
- ➔ **Additional readings:** *Psalm 73; Romans 1*

Wise Men, Day 4

The Joy

"When they saw the star they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy." Matthew 2:10 (ESV)

Herod directed the Magi toward Bethlehem, five to six miles south of Jerusalem. As they began the final phase of their journey, that same star reappeared, leading them to the precise location of the king they sought. The Message aptly paraphrases, "Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. It led them on until it hovered over the place of the child. They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place! They had arrived at the right time!" What a wonderful feeling to know their journey was justified. They were not thinking of the expense, the time away from home, the taunts of those who thought them crazy, or their tired, achy bodies. They were simply rejoicing and enjoying the moment.

Philip Yancey, in The Jesus I Never Knew, poses the question "If Jesus came to reveal God to us, then what do we learn about God from that first Christmas?" His answer includes several characteristics that describe God, including humility and courage, but another crucial attribute is His approachability. Jesus was not the burning bush or the pillar of fire or the Ark of the Covenant--the touch it, you die--of the Old Testament. "In most religions, *fear* is the primary emotion when one approaches God. In Jesus, God found a way of relating to humans that did not involve fear. A new approach was needed, a New Covenant...one that would not

emphasize the vast gulf between God and humanity but instead would span it” (37-38).
Definitely reason for joy!

The Bible has a lot to say about joy, and the source of joy is unmistakable. Psalm 16:11 states, “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy.” Ecclesiastes 2:26 tells us, “For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy.” Romans 14:17 reminds us, “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” The true focus of Christianity is Christ. Joy comes from knowing Him, not from circumstances. In fact, we often see the truest expressions of joy amid horrendous situations.

During WWII, Corrie Ten Boom and her sister Betsie were imprisoned in Ravensbruck, the notorious women’s extermination camp. Although both were devout Christians, Betsie taught Corrie a lesson in experiencing joy: she insisted they practice Philippians 4:4, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” and thank God for every single thing in their filthy, rancid, overcrowded, flea-infested barracks. Corrie reluctantly agreed. She thanked God that they had been assigned to the same building, that there had been no inspection and they were secretly able to keep a Bible, and that the crowding meant more women to whom they could witness, but she balked at thanking God for the fleas--that was too much. Betsie reminded her that the Bible didn’t say “in pleasant circumstances,” it says “in all circumstances.” Corrie conceded and gave thanks for the fleas while inwardly believing Betsie wrong. The sisters lived out their joy in Jesus. They ministered to both the physical and spiritual needs of the other women, teaching them about the source of their joy, sharing their Bible, praying with them and for them, providing a hope that had previously seemed impossible. Much later, the sisters learned why they had so much freedom in their barracks, why the guards never inspected the large room more closely. It was because of the fleas! The guards refused to enter the flea-infested room.

When did you last rejoice with exceedingly great joy? Does a time quickly come to mind? Or is it easier to relate a list of complaints and disappointments? Jesus assures us with His promise in John 16:22, “So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”

Jesus is the source of joy, and the wise know it. How much more effective would our witness be if we shared Him with great joy? Let’s thank God today for the joy we know in Jesus. Let’s mean it as we sing “Joy to the world, the Lord is come!”

➔ **Additional readings:** *Psalm 16; Philippians 4*

Wise Men, Day 5

The Worship

"And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh." Matthew 2:11 (ESV)

By the time the Magi arrived in Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph were married, living in a house, and adjusting to family life. Jesus was probably one to two years old. Again, God omits the details, leaving us to wonder what Jesus was like as a little boy. Was he precocious, walking and talking at an early age, or was he just an ordinary child? Was he talkative and rambunctious or quiet and reserved? Did he pick up sticks and pretend they were swords or use them to draw pictures in the dirt? When the Magi entered the house, what did they see in this toddler that so profoundly affected them? How did Jesus react to their display of homage? Did he have any interest in their gifts? What happened to those gifts, anyway?

We probably think there were three Magi because Matthew lists three specific gifts. Different theories exist about the significance of these gifts. One suggests that they simply represent the typical gifts given to a king: gold as a valuable currency, frankincense as a perfume, and myrrh as an anointing oil. Another offers a spiritual meaning: gold was generally considered a symbol for a king, frankincense a symbol of a deity or priest, and myrrh, a spice used as an embalming oil, a symbol of death. Either way, the gifts were deep expressions of worship, of heartfelt sentiment.

In O. Henry's classic short story, "The Gift of the Magi," (and I'm sure an English teacher at some grade level made you read it...) a poor, young, husband and wife each sacrifice their most prized possession to buy the perfect Christmas gift for the other. He sells his watch to buy her jewel-rimmed, tortoise shell combs for her beautiful hair; she sells her hair to buy an expensive gold fob chain for the watch he inherited from his father. O. Henry concludes with these words: "The magi, as you know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones...and here I have lamely related to you the chronicle of two foolish children who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days, let it be said that of all who give gifts, these two were the wisest...They are the Magi." His point? Like the Magi, this young couple gave the best that they had; they gave from the heart.

Perhaps today's scripture verse, more than any other, reflects the wisdom of the Magi. They humbled themselves, bowed before Jesus, and brought gifts worthy of a king. The Archeological Study Bible reiterates that the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh were not just any gifts; they were "the most valuable, transportable, and marketable items of the day." The Magi presented Jesus with only the best. They saw Jesus for who He is. They knew that true worship is God-centered, not self-centered. It acknowledges God because He is the

creator, perfect, just, and righteous; there is no other like Him. Only He is worthy of our worship.

Biblical teacher Beth Moore says we must believe that God is who He says He is and that He can do what He says He can do. The Magi were able to do that. How would our worship change if we were able to do that, too?

Today, let's resolve to believe God is who He says He is. We may not have the wealth of the Magi, but, as Christina Rossetti expressed in her famous poem, "What can I give Him, Poor as I am? If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb, If I were a wise man I would do my part, Yet what can I give Him, Give my heart." After all, that's the gift of worship He really wants.

➔ **Additional readings:** 1 Chronicles 16; Romans 12

Wise Men, Day 6

The Way

"And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way."
Matthew 2:12 (ESV)

The Magi had successfully completed their goal--to find and pay worship to the newborn king. Was the trip what they had expected? What effect did it have on them? Philip Yancey reminds us "Often a work of God comes with two edges, great joy and great pain." The Magi experienced exceedingly great joy. Conversely, because of this encounter, their lives surely experienced great change as well, and change can be painful, even when it results in a better way.

Yancey describes that first Christmas as "One night in the cold, in the dark, among the wrinkled hills of Bethlehem...God, who knows no before or after, entered time and space. God, who knows no boundaries, took on the shocking confines of a baby's skin, the ominous restraints of mortality." Everything changed. The birth of Jesus began a new era, which ultimately involved the death of the old one. In this case, the Magi "way of life" (paganism, magic, divination, etc.) ended: they could not return home and simply resume their old lives; they would no longer be comfortable in their old ways. As they may have contemplated what this meant for their future, these dream interpreters were warned in a dream of their own to avoid Herod and find another way home. This would probably involve a less traveled route, unfamiliar territory, a more difficult return. But, the Magi, in their wisdom, again listened to God and obeyed His direction. They followed His way.

C.S. Lewis maintains, "The Christian way is different: harder, and easier. Christ says 'Give me All. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of

your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half measures are any good...Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours.” What happens when we are willing to submit our way to His? To choose His way?

Author and research professor of church history at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, John D. Woodbridge, Ph.D., explains why in its first hundred and fifty years, Christianity spread so quickly. “One reason is that many Christians were not just taking care of their own, but they were caring for neighbors, the poor, and widow, the hurting, and they were very loving...The lifestyle of Christians matched their teachings, so that many early Christians were not afraid to say, ‘Imitate us as we imitate Christ.’” Christians acted so kindly and generously that people were attracted to them. Another historian adds, “Christians astounded the ancients with their charity.” That illustrates God’s way. Woodbridge goes on to assert that today’s Christians are uncomfortable saying “imitate us” because they’re worried their own lives won’t stand up to scrutiny. To be effective, Christians must achieve “consistency between beliefs and behavior.” That only occurs when we live His way.

Finding Jesus always leads to a different way. Although it may at times be uncomfortable or painful, unfamiliar or less traveled, it will always be the better way. He came to show the way. The Magi were open to His lead; they changed their direction, submitting their will to His. Are we willing to do the same?

Let’s try to slow down long enough today to listen for God’s direction, to follow His lead, and to serve someone who needs to see His way. Let’s resolve to live our beliefs the better way. Wouldn’t it be great to astound this community with our kindness and charity in His name?

➔ ***Additional readings: Psalm 1; 25; 86; John 14***

Joseph, Day 1

by J.D. Huitt



Introduction

Joseph. This guy could quite possibly be the most underrated and easiest overlooked figure in Biblical history. Think of the typical Christmas Eve pageant and who is featured in it. Obviously, you're going to have baby Jesus as the centerpiece, and rightfully so. Being an eternal member of the Trinity and the Son of God tends to earn you top billing at the event that also bears your name...or any other event for that matter. I can still remember being part of a Christmas pageant one year and wondering if Jesus had been born in a bar rather than a manger, because our plastic representation of Him smelled a whole lot like cigarette smoke. I suppose we could have done something about it, but it just didn't seem right to squirt baby Jesus in the face with Febreeze, so we just dealt with it.

In the typical pageant, Joseph's job is to do...well...nothing. In the pageant that I was a part of, this suited me just fine, since I was playing the part of Joseph. I was sporting a beard at the time, which in the church world automatically qualifies you to be Joseph at Christmastime (and Jesus at Easter). I was told to just stand by plastic smoky Jesus, place my hand on Mary's shoulder, and "look fatherly."

Please don't misunderstand me. I don't want to downplay the role that God played in the lives of the other men and women of the Christmas story, but the truth is that Joseph just doesn't get a whole lot of credit. Thumb through the hymnal the next time you're at church and tell me how many songs there are in the Christmas section that even mention him. Unless I'm mistaken, the answer is zero. Yet, here was a man that was shouldered with one of the greatest responsibilities imaginable: raising God.

Grace Like Joseph's: (Part 1)

"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." Matthew 1:18-19 (ESV)

One of my fondest memories is the day that I asked my wife to marry me. We had been dating for about a year and were both ready to advance our relationship to the next level. I won't go into detail, but the proposal itself had a lot of moving parts that required that everything go right. It also required a certain amount of deception on my part in order to keep the whole thing a surprise. After all was said and done, everything went off without a hitch and she said yes. Later, my soon-to-be wife made sure to point out how deceiving her in order to maintain the element of surprise was a funny foundation on which to build our new life.

We opted to go for a short engagement and get married as soon as possible. Although the time between the proposal and the exchange of our vows was relatively brief, I can remember it as being a very exciting time. We picked out our rings, planned for the wedding ceremony, bought a new house, and did all of the other stuff that engaged couples do to prepare for marriage. It was great. I loved it, but all of that excitement and anticipation would have come crashing down if my fiancé had come to me and dropped the bombshell that although we were both supposed to be virgins, she was pregnant.

This is where we find Joseph in the first chapter of Matthew. In verse 18, it says that he and Mary “had been betrothed.” In the Jewish world, an engagement was almost as binding as marriage. Today, if an engaged couple ends their relationship, the girl gives the diamond ring back to the guy, they part ways, and all is finished. But in the ancient Jewish culture, a legal divorce was in order.

I can only imagine how Joseph must have felt when he found out. I know for me, the grief, the anger, and the feeling of betrayal would have been overwhelming. I can’t say for sure how I would react, but in my mind, I would imagine that the relationship would be over. In other words, I would be out for justice.

Joseph had this right too. According to Jewish law, he could have sought justice and had Mary stoned to death.¹ But in verse 19, we see a very different reaction. He doesn’t want to put Mary to shame by publicly branding her as a cheater. He doesn’t want to make a big scene or spectacle of the situation. He just wants to divorce her quietly and move on with his life. Here, we see what kind of a man Joseph is. We see a man who is full of grace.

➔ *What would have been your reaction if you were Joseph?*

➔ *When you are sinned against, are you the type of person who reacts with grace or are you the type that seeks to get even?*

Joseph, Day 2

Grace Like Joseph’s (Part 2): Grace that We Get

“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.” Matthew 1:18-19 (ESV)

If justice is getting what you deserve, grace is getting what you do not deserve. In the case of Mary and Joseph, what Mary deserved, according to the law, was to be stoned with

¹ Read Deut. 22:13-29. It’s worth your time and knowing the Jewish law will give a little more context to the overall story.

rocks until she died. That would have been in accordance to the law. But what she gets is grace.

In the same way that Mary received grace from Joseph, we receive undeserved grace from God through His Son, Jesus. In his book Religion Saves (and Nine Other Misconceptions), author Mark Driscoll defines grace as follows: “Grace is God the Father in love doing good for ill-deserving sinners through God the Son by God the Spirit.”²

God’s grace manifests itself in many different ways. One way, called common grace, is enjoyed by all people in all places throughout all time. So when we watch a sunset, bite into a juicy steak (medium-rare), enjoy laughter with friends and family during the holidays, or wake up refreshed from a good night’s sleep, this is a result of God’s common grace to all. Sin has wrecked our world, but the common grace of God allows for all to experience some measure of blessing and not fall under the immediate judgment that could have come when sin entered into the picture. Although we enjoy the benefits of God’s common grace and are thankful for it,³ it is insufficient to save us from the wrath of God against our sin. For this, we need God’s saving grace.

➔ *What are some other examples of common grace that you can think of in your own life?*

Saving grace is the grace that God gives us for salvation through Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. If you don’t understand grace, you don’t understand the Gospel.

The Bible is clear from the beginning about how sinful we really are. Our condition apart from Christ is best summed up in Romans 3:10-18, which says:

None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in the paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes.

Merry Christmas. You’re evil right down to your wicked black heart. Since God is a God of justice, the sin and wickedness in us that violates His holiness and sets us at odds with Him has to be punished. But thankfully, God is a God of grace who saves sinners, changes their hearts, and adopts them into His family.

This is huge. I mean epic. The greatest miracle of the Bible isn’t the parting of the Red Sea, the flooding of the Earth, or making a donkey talk (although I personally find that one pretty cool). The greatest miracle of the Bible is God, in His grace, taking an undeserving, hell-

² Mark Driscoll, *Religion Saves (and Nine Other Misconceptions)* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 110

³ See Acts 14:17 and 17:25 for a few examples of where the Bible speaks of common grace.

bound sinner that is hostile to Him and completely changing the sinner's spiritual DNA so that they may become one with Him.

Being a good Jew, Joseph would have been familiar with the passage from the book of Ezekiel that painted a picture of what God does in the hearts of sinners by means of grace:

And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God.⁴

With this new heart come new desires, new passions, new joy, and a new focus that is God-centered and not man-centered. The grace that had been given to Joseph not only saved him from his sin, but it gave him a new heart that allowed him to avoid the entrapment of sin.

- ➔ *Have you ever considered the depths to which grace has covered your sin?*
- ➔ *Knowing that God's grace results in a new heart that has the ability to be obedient to Christ, how does this affect how we deal with the temptation to sin?*

Joseph, Day 3

Grace Like Joseph's (Part 3): Grace That We Give

"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." Matthew 1:18-19 (ESV)

The saving grace that comes through Jesus not only saves us from our sins, but it saves us to a new way of life. Because we have been given grace, we are now empowered to give grace. In Ephesians 2:8-10, it says:

For by *grace* you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

⁴ Ezekiel 11:19-20

You see, grace changes us. It changed Joseph too. Had it not been for the grace that Joseph had been given, I seriously doubt that he would have had any grace to give, but because he had been given in abundance, he was able to in turn give in abundance.

But that's not how we operate, is it? We are very good at receiving (or demanding) grace, and even better at withholding it. It is difficult to forgive with grace because deep down, we don't really believe in grace. We believe in karma.⁵ People who do good things will have good things come to them and people who do bad things will get what's coming to them.

Grace doesn't make sense.

Grace is backwards.

Grace is upside down.

Grace caused Joseph to do some things that may have seemed crazy to his friends and family.

And it should cause us to do the same.

Grace will move a student to befriend the kid who seems to get on everyone else's nerves (and theirs too). Grace will move a woman to forgive the spouse that has cheated on her, even when those closest to her are telling her to get out. Grace will move a man to take the money that he was going to spend on some nicer looking carpet and use it to travel to a country ripped apart by AIDS so that he can help build an orphanage for those left behind. Grace will move a couple to adopt a child from that orphanage. Grace moved Jesus to look down from the cross at a mob that was jeering and spitting on Him and ask the Father to forgive them.

We live in a world that is marred and ugly because of sin, but the grace of God is making it beautiful again. It is made beautiful on the inside from the grace that we get and is being made beautiful on the outside from the grace that we give.

- ➡ *How is Joseph a good model for grace received and grace given?*
- ➡ *Do you find grace something that's easy to receive but hard to give? Why is that?*
- ➡ *From whom are you withholding grace? How could grace change them? How could it change you?*

⁵ "Whoa, whoa, whoa...karma's that stuff that other religions like Hinduism and Wicca believe, but not us Christians." Ever use the phrase "What goes around comes around"? Gotcha!

Joseph, Day 4

Faith Like Joseph's (Part 1)

"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). Matthew 1:20-23 (ESV)

Have you ever wondered how Joseph went about explaining Mary's pregnancy to his family and friends in town? I have no clue what I would have said. Somebody asks you about the rumors that have been flying around concerning your fiancé's ever-growing midsection. You have two options to explain. Option one is to lie and say that she's taken quite a liking to the Twinkies and Hostess Cupcakes, but being a good Jew and all, breaking a commandment just doesn't seem quite right. Option two is to just lay it out that your fiancé is still a virgin but just happens to be pregnant by a miraculous work of the Holy Spirit, and that the child she's carrying is the promised Messiah who's come to save humanity from grip of sin and death. How do you know for sure? Well, that's easy. An angel told me...in a dream.

Try feeding this line to a group of people and they're going to think that this is the worst lie ever concocted. They will think that you're just trying to cover up a few late night rendezvous with Mary in the hay loft, or they're going to think that you're the biggest imbecile in history for falling for the old "immaculate conception" line. Socially, you're looking at a lose-lose situation. For Joseph to face this in the way he did would have required an immense amount of faith.

➡ *How would you define "faith"?*

➡ *What is a situation in your life where faith carried you through?*

Faith in Joseph's Day

Faith in Joseph's day had fallen on hard times. God had gone silent for 400 years, which would be trying for anyone's faith. The last word that He'd spoken had been through the prophet Malachi, and that message hadn't exactly ended on a bright note. God basically said that He was sick of the priests, He was sick of their empty religion, and that what He'd really like to do is just shut the doors to the temple and rub excrement on their face.⁶ Naturally, this had to be a bummer for the priests, so what did they do? The same thing that all religious people do best. They made some rules.

⁶ Not making this up, read Malachi 2:3

We know these religious rule makers better as “the Pharisees.” In their defense, the intentions of the Pharisees and their rules may have not been so bad. Throughout the Old Testament, we see God continually sending down judgment on the Israelites for disobeying God and worshipping lesser gods. The Pharisees didn’t want that to happen again, so they decided that God’s Law needed a hedge around it so that people wouldn’t get too close to being disobedient. The problem is that they just went a little too far. Okay, they went a lot too far.

For example, one of the Ten Commandments that was given to Moses on Mount Sinai to “remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.”⁷ Good idea. A day of rest with no work. I vote “yes.” But in order to make sure that the Sabbath was kept holy, the Pharisees wanted to add a few rules. In order to keep people from working on the Sabbath, “work” was divided up into 39 different categories. One of those categories forbade plowing of any kind. The system was so rigid that if someone were to stand from their chair and the legs made a little trench in the dirt, they could be accused of violating the Sabbath!⁸ This was just one of 613 laws were created to keep people from violating the Law of God. These guys had unknowingly made the Law the object of their faith rather than God.

- ➔ *What is the difference between faith in God’s Law and faith in God?*
- ➔ *What is the connection between faith in God and God’s Law?*

Joseph, Day 5

Faith Like Joseph’s (Part 2): Faith in Our Day

“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). Matthew 1:20-23 (ESV)

Believe it or not, things in Joseph’s day weren’t too much different than they are today. Contrary to opinions that might be flowing in the undercurrent of the church, Christians aren’t the only ones who have faith. In reality, everyone has faith. It’s just the object of faith that differs from person to person.

Some people place their faith in their job only to have that faith rocked when they find themselves laid off. Some place their faith in family only to have their faith crushed when their

⁷ Exodus 20.

⁸ Kelley, Michael, *The Tough Sayings of Jesus II* (Lifeway Press, 2008), 83.

kids rebel or their spouse turns out to not be as perfect as they were supposed to be. Some people place their faith in sports. We could go on, but you get the point. For our purposes, we'll just stick with faith as it pertains to belief in a higher power.

You may be surprised to know just how many people in the United States have faith in God, or a higher being of some sort. In his book Lost and Found, Ed Stetzer found that of people between the ages of 20-29, 81% believe that God or a higher supreme being actually exists.⁹ Now of those who were polled, we don't know exactly what they mean when they say they believe in "God." It could be Jesus, Allah, Krishna, Oprah, or some unknown all-powerful sky fairy. Whatever the case, I'm encouraged to know that so many people have faith.

Paul found himself in a similar situation on a trip to Athens. In Acts 17, it tells that the people of the city were "very religious" and Paul takes notice. Using their faith as a starting point, he goes on to tell them about Jesus, who is the one true God. Paul is never threatened by the people's belief in other gods, nor does he bash or belittle their faith.¹⁰ He simply acknowledges it and seeks to take his audience a step further into a relationship with the real God.

Misguided faith isn't just an issue outside of the church, though. Just as it was a problem in Joseph's time, it's a problem now. One of my favorite authors and pastors, Tim Keller, puts it the following way in his book, The Reason for God:

There are two ways to be your own Savior and Lord. The first is by saying, "I am going to live my life the way I want." The second is described by Flannery O'Connor, who wrote about one of her characters, Hazel Motes, that "he knew that the best way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin." If you are avoiding sin and living morally so that God will have to bless and save you, then ironically, you may be looking to Jesus as a teacher, model, and helper but you are avoiding Him as Savior. You are trusting in your own goodness rather than in Jesus for your standing with God. You are trying to save yourself by following Jesus. That, ironically, is a rejection of the gospel of Jesus. It is a Christianized form of religion.

The question that we in the church must continually ask ourselves is, "What is the object of my faith?" Ultimately, the object of our faith is what we will give worship and glory and honor to. If the object of our faith is our own happiness, Jesus will become a tool that is used so that you can "become a better you." If the object of our faith is to see Christianity regain a position of prominence in our country so that we might become a "Christian nation" once again (assuming that we were even one to begin with), then Jesus becomes the leverage that we need to secure votes. If the object of our faith is to see a blanket morality that covers our

⁹ Stetzer, Ed, *Lost and Found: The Younger Unchurched and the Churches That Reach Them* (B & H Publishing 2009), 21.

¹⁰ *They Like Jesus, But Not the Church* by Dan Kimball is an excellent book that deals with Christianity & other world religions in addition to numerous other topics. It's definitely worth a read.

communities and nation, then Jesus becomes the reason that we adopt extra-Biblical rules and boycott a cartoon mouse.

Simply put, if Christ alone isn't the object of our faith, then the object of our faith, no matter how well intentioned, is nothing more than an idol.

➔ *What is the object of your faith? Is it possible that rather than being the object of your faith, Jesus has become a means to your object?*

➔ *How can we keep Jesus as the center of our faith?*

The Source of Faith

It would be easy for us to look at Matthew 1 and say that was easy for Joseph to have faith. He had the luxury of an angelic intervention in his dreams. The same thing for all of those Old Testament dudes. Moses had a burning bush. Elisha saw his buddy swept up to heaven in a chariot of fire. Even Balaam got a talking donkey. Where's the stuff like that to increase our faith? Why don't we get a flaming shrub? Where's our talking donkey?

The fact is, we don't need any of those things because we have Jesus and that's enough. In the book of Hebrews, the author takes a moment to go through the Old Testament and highlight some heroes of faith.¹¹ After inducting all of these men and women into the hall of fame, he says this in chapter 12:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of God.

Not only is Jesus the object of our faith, He's the source of it. Not only that, but He's the one who perfects it. As with everything, it all begins and ends with Jesus.

¹¹ Hebrews 11

Joseph, Day 6

Adopted Like Jesus

"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." Galatians 4:4-5 (ESV)

If you were to ask yourself who Jesus' dad was, you would most likely answer, "God the Father." You would be right. Multiple times throughout the Gospels, Jesus prays to God and refers to Him as "Father." What is often overlooked is that Jesus had another dad, Joseph.

Of course, Joseph didn't provide the Y chromosome that resulted in the maleness of Jesus' physical formation, nor did any of Joseph's DNA reside in Him, but make no mistake about it: Joseph was Jesus' *real* dad. It was through his adoption of Jesus that prophecy was fulfilled concerning the Messiah coming from the line of David.¹² As you read on throughout the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, you see Joseph referred to as Jesus' "parent." If Jesus were to get lost in the marketplace (which seems unlikely to me) and cried out "Dad," it would have been Joseph's head that turned in response.

It would be through the death and resurrection of Joseph's adopted Son, Jesus, that we would be adopted into the family of God. In the book of Ephesians, Paul writes that we were once "children of wrath" and "sons of disobedience," but through God's infinite grace and love, He calls us, changes our hearts, gives us new eyes to see, and adopts us into His family.

This is why the physical adoption of children is such a beautiful thing. It's a picture of what God has done with us.¹³ All around the world, there are literally millions of orphans who are without hope. Some of them, like those in parts of Africa, live with the AIDS virus that claimed the lives of their parents. Others, like those in southeast Asia or eastern Europe, leave their orphanages only to be trafficked into the sex trade or to enter into a life of crime. In the same way, we once lived without hope. But through Christ, we now have the hope of a greater life through our adoption into God's family. When churches get involved and get passionate about the ministry of adoption, the children from around the world that are brought into the families in the church serve as a physical reminder of just how great, merciful, and kind our Heavenly Father has been in His adoption of us.¹⁴ They remind us of the hope that we have in Jesus Christ, who had a loving dad that adopted Him.

¹² Check the genealogy in Matthew 1:1-16. The line doesn't come through Mary.

¹³ For more on the theology of adoption, Russell Moore's *Adopted for Life* is a must read.

¹⁴ For more on how churches can be involved in the ministry of adoption, visit <http://www.showhope.org>

- ➡ *Think of the people who are members of your family. Now think about those in your church. Those who are in Christ have all been adopted into the same family as you. How does this change your perspective on how you view the people in the church?*
- ➡ *How does God's adoption of people impact how you view the physical adoption of orphans?*
- ➡ *Sometimes, people who have had cruel or unloving earthly fathers have trouble thinking about God and relating to Him as a heavenly Father. How might Hebrews 12:10, Matthew 7:11, and Luke 11:13 help to show how an imperfect earthly Father is different from a perfect heavenly Father?*



Mary, Day 1

by Carol Lueken

Mary: Submissive to God's Will

"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 1:38 (ESV)

It has often been said that a person's true character is revealed only when a response to the unexpected is demanded. Certainly nothing could have been more unexpected to the teenage virgin, Mary, than a visit from an angel announcing to her that she would soon become the mother of the Son of God.

In response to the angel's pronouncement, Mary asks only one question: "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

The angel explains to Mary how this miracle will occur and reminds Mary that "nothing will be impossible with God." From the focal scripture, it is apparent the angel had provided the only explanation Mary needed to willingly accept her role in God's plan to save mankind. She did not concern herself with the response of Joseph, her parents, or the village to her pregnancy. Thoughts of divorce, disgrace, or death by stoning did not overwhelm her. Mary offered no excuses; she immediately embraced God's call upon her life, trusting God to do all He says He can do, even to perform miracles.

To carry out His miraculous plan of salvation, God selected the mother of His son most carefully. After all, raising the Son of God would entail great responsibilities. Above all else, if she were to truly be a godly parental example, she needed to have a humble, submissive spirit--the same kind of spirit that would be required of Jesus. Indeed, in Luke 22, we read of Jesus agonizingly praying on the Mount of Olives before his arrest and ultimately saying to His Father, "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." He, too, embraced God's call, just as His mother had done. He, too, trusted God for a miracle--the miracle of resurrection. Mary had taught Him well.

How have you responded to God's call upon your life? Have you excitedly accepted it, ignored it, or adamantly refused it? When the angel spoke to Mary about God's plan for her life, Mary did not ask for time to pray about it. She made no recommendations on behalf of someone else who could surely do a better job. She did not insist she lacked the adequate resources to be a part of God's plan, even though she had no assurance she would even have a roof over her head once word spread of her pregnancy. She simply submitted humbly and completely to God's will for her life.

➔ *This Christmas season, pray for a submissive spirit. What could bring greater glory to God than all of His children accepting their individual calls as joyously, eagerly, and willingly as Mary did?*

➔ **Devotional Passage:** Luke 1:26-38

Mary, Day 2

Mary: Faithful to God's Call

"And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."
Luke 1:45 (ESV)

When Mary arrived at Elizabeth and Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth, the Holy Spirit immediately led Elizabeth to proclaim Mary's blessedness. Mary was not blessed materially, but spiritually. Though a descendant of the great Israelite king, David, Mary was a woman of humble means. Mary walked to the home of her cousins; servants did not carry her there. No entourage accompanied her. There is no evidence that she arrived with trunks filled with exquisite gowns. Nor do we read of her presenting expensive gifts to Zechariah and Elizabeth in anticipation of their own blessed event. Mary had come humbly and simply to share her joy in being chosen to bear God's Son.

Mary was to have a prominent role in the fulfillment of Messianic prophecy. Great numbers of women from the line of David would have fit the requirement of virginity, but there was only one individual whom God trusted to nurture and mold the humanity of His Son—a woman who believed that what God told her would certainly come true. Elizabeth understood that Mary was blessed because she believed. In John 20:29, Jesus says to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Mary had, indeed, seen an angel of God, but she could have dismissed that visit with any number of excuses had it not been for her faith--a faith which could have been easily shaken had it not been so great. After all, how much affirmation and encouragement would she have initially received from those nearest her with whom she could have shared her story--the village rabbi, her teenage friends, her own mother? What a preposterous story: God had chosen Mary to be the Mother of the Messiah. Yet, Mary believed.

Regarding belief, Peter writes, "Though you have not seen him [Christ], you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory" (1 Peter 1:8). We see in "The Magnificat" that Mary did not reserve her joy for the birth of her son; she rejoiced in anticipation of the miraculous event. She did not need to see the miracle. She knew it would occur; God said so.

God has bestowed His unmerited favor--His grace--upon all His people. Mary experienced a miraculous conception and lived in the confidence that she would see her baby--God's Son--face to face. We have experienced the miracle of salvation, and we can live a life of inexpressible joy knowing that one day, we, too, will see Jesus face to face. We need only to believe God's Word. Mark 11:23 says that whoever "does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him."

➔ *Pray that you and those you love might experience inexpressible joy this Christmas season based on being chosen by God and fully trusting in His Word.*

➔ **Devotional Passage:** Luke 1:39-45

Mary, Day 3

Mary: Receiving God's Gift

"And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name."

Luke 1:46-49 (ESV)

Mary acknowledges her need of a Savior--a need common to mankind--as she praises God for the gift of salvation, a gift to be realized through the birth of her Son. At Christmas, we often hear the following question: "What do you want (or need) for Christmas?" The intent of the questioner is to find the "perfect" gift for the recipient--one the recipient will truly treasure--one that won't be returned to the mall or sit idly on a closet shelf.

In Luke 1:49 Mary further declares, "for he who is mighty has done great things for me. . . ." God had presented Mary with, not one, but two perfect gifts--the gift of salvation and the opportunity to be the Mother of His Son. Her spirit rejoiced!

Every Christian has received the treasured gift of salvation. However, that is not the only gift God desires His children to have. It is apparent in 1 Cor. 7:7 that God has uniquely designed one or more additional gifts for each Christian--spiritual gifts presented by the Holy Spirit. Psalm 139:13-16 tells of the role God plays in the creation of every individual and of His plans for them from their very beginnings. It only stands to reason, then, that these spiritual gifts are perfectly chosen.

Perhaps that truth is hard to believe, however, given the scene "under the Christmas tree." Do any of the following statements sound familiar? "This is not the right brand." "There must be some kind of mistake; I didn't ask for this." "This just doesn't fit quite right." "What am I supposed to do with this thing?" Though spiritual gifts cannot be returned to Wal-Mart, they may be destined to remain forever out of sight and unused. The uncertainty of what's inside may even cause a gift to remain forever unopened. Can you imagine God's dismay and disappointment? It's not that He "thinks" He has chosen the perfect gift for His child; He has!

As a betrothed teenage girl, Mary could have longed for many "perfect" gifts--a gorgeous wedding gown, a dazzling gold necklace, or a palatial home in which she and Joseph could live as man and wife. But we know from her reaction to God's gift, this is not what she desired. Psalm 37:4 says, "Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the

desires of your heart." Mary's first love was God, and He gave Mary her deepest desire--Himself.

➔ *Choose to open all of your Christmas gifts this year with great joy and abandonment, and delight in them, as Mary did--especially those gifts chosen just for you by God Himself. Even more importantly, ask God for His guidance in using your gifts to minister to those who need to experience the love of Christ this Christmas season.*

➔ **Devotional Passage:** Luke 1:46-56

Mary, Day 4

Mary: Walking in the Light

"Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." Luke 2:19 (ESV)

Imagine Mary gazing into the eyes of her newborn and seeking to comprehend the fact that she had just given birth to God's Son--the one whom Isaiah called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). If, indeed, it was comprehensible, at least on some level, what an overwhelming realization it would have been for the poor, humble, uneducated, inexperienced teenager. The shepherds confirmed what Mary had already been told and believed: He was the Savior, Christ the Lord. His birth had been prophesied and anxiously anticipated for generations. Yet, how were the prophecies of old going to be made manifest in Jesus' life? What did His birth really mean, for both Mary and Jesus?

Mary had nine months to prepare for Jesus' birth, but how does one truly "prepare" for such a momentous event--an event that would change the lives of all mankind? This was no ordinary baby; this was the Messiah. Though Mary knew God's purposes for both her and her son, there was much about Jesus' mission, and much about her own role as His mother, that she did not know. The young mother must have had many questions and been in need of much direction.

What was certain was that she held a boy child in her arms whom she was responsible for nurturing. Mary had to trust God to help her to be a godly woman and carry out her divine mission. No "how-to" books had been written for raising the Son of God. No TV reality shows had been produced to give guidance in caring for the long-awaited Messiah. No rabbis had been trained to counsel the parents of the Prince of Peace. And certainly, no grandmother had ever raised a child like Jesus. Mary was "on her own."

Of course, we know from Scripture that we are never truly on our own. In Proverbs 3:5-6, we read, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."

Mary's deep faith that had brought her thus far with God would help her to continue to trust Him to lay out the path upon which she was to walk. As she continued to ponder in her heart exactly how she would fulfill her role as the Mother of Christ, she knew that God would clearly guide her.

➔ *What are you pondering this Christmas season? Has God called you to a task or a mission that you have no idea how to complete? Is it totally beyond your comprehension? Do as Mary did: trust God completely. He will light your path.*

➔ **Devotional Passage:** Luke 2:8-20

Mary, Day 5

Mary: Paying the Price

"Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." Luke 2:34-35 (ESV)

Much had already happened; much had already been spoken that Mary could only marvel at, ponder on, or treasure in her heart. As Simeon spoke to Mary in the temple of the sword that would pierce her soul, she could not possibly have foreseen the degree of suffering that her Son would one day endure as He fulfilled His earthly ministry, let alone the anguish His role as Savior would bring to her life.

Undoubtedly, Joseph and Mary were still reveling in the joy of Christ's birth when they presented Him at the Temple. Grasping the responsibility of raising a child (especially the child of God) would take some time, but the commitment had already been made to do so.

Likewise, when Christ saves an individual for eternal life, there is much joy in many hearts over the new birth, the "new creation" (See 2 Cor. 5:17). However, there is responsibility involved once again in this new life, both on the part of the "spiritual parents," those who have helped to bring about this new creation in Christ, and on the part of the believer, the one who has experienced this new birth.

Trusting God for salvation demands a level of trust that can result only in an ever-deepening discipleship. It is often said that Mary was the first disciple. Certainly, she recognized her need of a Savior, believed her Son to be that Savior, and yielded in obedience to God's call upon her life in every circumstance. Though Mary's commitment may have wavered from time to time due to her human nature, she never left Jesus' side. She followed Him from the manger to the cross, always faithful to her unique calling as the Mother of God's Son, despite the cost.

During the holidays, we are often faced with "the cost" (time, money, emotion, energy) of following Christ, sometimes preferring instead to follow selfish desires--desires related to the

things of the world. Jesus says in Luke 14:33, "any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." The cost of true discipleship is expensive.

Mary willingly paid the price. She watched her baby boy--the little boy whose first smile she had so lovingly returned, whose cheek she had so sweetly kissed, whose tears she had so tenderly dried, whose curious mind she had so carefully nurtured--suffer humiliation, rejection, and an excruciatingly painful death on a Roman cross. Mary could do nothing more than watch and pray while the familiar old hymn says, "Jesus paid it all."

➔ *What are you willing to "spend" on discipleship this Christmas?*

➔ **Devotional Passage:** Luke 2:22-35

Mary, Day 6

Mary: Looking to the Future

"Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home." John 19:25-27 (ESV)

Mary had spent over 30 years of her life nurturing and tending to the needs of God's Son. She had loved Him, protected Him, and, undoubtedly, defended Him. Now God was taking Him from her; He was dying before her eyes. Despite her intimate relationship with Jesus, she may have been no more prepared for His death than His disciples.

Jesus was aware of the difficulties that lay ahead of his mother. At this point in her life, Mary had most likely been widowed and was growing advanced in years. Mary would not only have to deal with the grief of losing her Son, she would have to find a way to provide herself with the necessities of life. In addition, there would be the inevitable "talk." How was she to respond to the accusatory or derogatory remarks about her Son? Even Jesus' own siblings had still not accepted the truth that He was the long-awaited Messiah. How would she continue to deal effectively with such a painful situation? Certainly, Mary's future would be filled with trials.

Indeed, James, the brother of Jesus, writes in his letter that all Christians must expect to meet trials of various kinds (See James 1:2-3). They will come to all believers as they did to Mary in order to produce a life of steadfastness, a life lived in faith regardless of troubles and afflictions encountered by the believer. In the midst of difficulty, remember Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." God leaves no one hopeless.

God had a plan for Mary, one that would give her "a future and a hope." Jesus, in honoring this woman who had cared for Him so faithfully in His humanity, placed her in the

care of John, his beloved disciple. John would meet Mary's physical needs, but even more importantly, John was a believer, and he would help meet her spiritual needs as they continued to serve God together as devoted disciples of Christ.

Luke identifies Mary as being one of those present in the upper room "devoting themselves to prayer" as they awaited the coming of the Holy Spirit (See Acts 1:12-14). Mary's intimate relationship with her Son, Jesus, did not end at the cross. He now nurtured and encouraged her as she had Him. Living out her life in steadfast discipleship, Mary looked forward to that day when He would come and gather her, and all his faithful disciples, in His arms to live with Him eternally.

➡ *Earnestly seek to share Christ with someone this Christmas who is in need of "a future and a hope." Offer the gift of eternal life.*