

We Look for Light

READINGS AND REFLECTIONS FOR ADVENT

JAMES PRUCH

We Look for Light:
Readings and Reflections for Advent

By James Pruch

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PREFACE: HOW TO USE THIS DEVOTIONAL

This is a devotional guide for Advent with twenty-five entries. Each entry includes a short text of Scripture, a devotional article, and a passage of Scripture to read with reflection questions.

The temptation with any devotional book is to spend more time reading someone else's thoughts *on* the Bible rather than the Bible *itself*. That is why the devotional readings are short. This guide is designed to get you reading and reflecting on the *Scriptures*. Devotional readings are wonderful servants, but bad masters. God's word is where true power for transformation lies.

The reflection questions for the Scripture readings are meant to stir your mind and heart. Please, don't feel confined to answer *just* those questions or even answer them at all. They simply "prime the pump" and, sometimes, only cover a few aspects of the passage. Use them to stimulate your thinking, feeling, praying, and doing.

As you read, you'll find that some days the Scripture reading is very familiar. You'll eat these passages up. Other days, the readings may be incredibly unfamiliar, bizarre, or even confusing. You may be tempted to spit them out and do some household chores. That's not abnormal. Press on. Remember that God is right there with you in these words. Invite him to speak to you through that very word you find strange or uncomfortable or convicting. He will. If you find that you have trouble understanding what any particular passage is about and how it meets you where you're at, read the parts before and after it. Ask God for help. Think over the reflection questions (they might help you understand the text a bit better). Know, however, that the questions are aimed not mainly at helping you do deep study, but fueling contemplative thought, heartfelt confession, whole-hearted obedience, and above all, love for God and for others.

Finally, this devotional guide can be used in your personal time with the Lord, but also with your family or even your small group. However you use it, I pray that it helps you in your pursuit of Jesus this Advent season, for his glory and your joy in him. May the Lord give you a hope-filled Advent as you long for and worship Messiah Jesus!

Glory to God in the highest,

James Pruch

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS ADVENT AND WHY OBSERVE IT?

Christians have long observed Advent, a season of anticipation and preparation to celebrate the birth of Messiah Jesus. It begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day. The word “advent” comes from the Latin word *adventus* meaning “arrival” or “coming.” This Latin word is a translation of the Greek word *parousia*, which in the New Testament scriptures is associated with the second coming of Jesus. God’s people in the Old Testament anticipated the birth of Messiah. In the person of Jesus of Nazareth, he *came*. Now, on the other side of history, we await Jesus’ *second coming*.

While Advent is a time of anticipation, it’s not about anticipating gifts or parties or egg nog (as if anyone is longing for that!). It’s a season of longing for *hope*—true hope in the midst of the darkness of sin, evil, and death. Advent is therefore an invitation to face our own works of darkness and the darkness of a broken world and see the light of Jesus.

Observing Advent is not commanded in Scripture. Observing some days and seasons is a matter of one’s conscience before God. However, consider these reasons for using Advent to cultivate your relationship with Jesus:

- ▶ *Advent reminds us of Israel’s anticipation for Messiah.* We can forget that Jesus entered history at a time when people had nearly lost all hope that God was concerned for them. Advent can be an intentional time to consider, rehearse, and experience their expectation of Messiah.
- ▶ *Advent teaches us patience.* The Christmas season in North America is anything but restful. The commercialization of Christmas has all but stripped it of joy and peace. If we are a people who are waiting for Jesus’ second coming, then we must therefore be a people who *rest* in God’s sovereign care in the meantime. Advent forces us to slow down and relax.
- ▶ *Advent cultivates a longing for Jesus’ second coming.* As Israel waited for Messiah’s first coming, so we wait for his second. We are therefore a people “in between” the times. We rejoice in Christmas and all that it means, but it is not the end! There is more to come. If you often find yourself forgetting that Jesus will return someday, Advent can help recalibrate your heart and help you long for him to come back.

Advent celebrates that, in the midst of darkness, light dawned. More precisely, the Light of the World, was born to overcome the darkness of sin, evil, and death. Christian or not, we all long for light. Deep down, we know there is darkness within. We have a sense of shame, inadequacy, and incompleteness. We know this whether we consciously realize it or admit it, so we “seek light” in things: money, success, sex, power, control, friendships, acclaim, morality, technology, alcohol, food, exercise or a thousand other things. These are good things, but not *ultimate* things. When trusted as ultimate, they will only leave us in darkness.

Do you want hope? Do you want light—this Christmas and beyond? You need something beyond created things. You need something outside of yourself. You need an *Advent*—an arrival of something. Indeed, *Someone*, who will bring light and hope and joy and peace beyond your wildest dreams. Use Advent to stoke the fires of your heart so that you see and savor that *Person*, Messiah Jesus.

DAY 1

We Look for Light

We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows.
Like the blind we grope along the wall, feeling our way like people without eyes.
At midday we stumble as if it were twilight; among the strong, we are like the dead.

Isaiah 59:9-10

While Jesus was most likely not born on December 25, it's fitting that we observe the Christmas season near the beginning of the winter solstice—the time of year with the least amount of sunlight during the day (in the northern hemisphere!). December is a cold and dark month. Yet it's in December that we celebrate the birth of the One who is the Light of the world.

Jesus did not arrive on the scene in a vacuum. He entered into a *story*. A terribly dark story! During the season of Advent, Christians intentionally pay special attention to that time when God's people Israel longed for spiritual light. The prophet Isaiah's day was a dark period in Israel's history. Because of ritualistic religion, injustice, idol worship, and other sins, God vowed judgment on his people. They were told they would face exile from their homeland at the hands of Babylon. Their capital city, Jerusalem, and its temple would be destroyed. Their only hope through and after this was to acknowledge their sin, repent, and trust in God.

Israel was called to acknowledge the darkness *within* them. I don't know about you, but I tend to think that my biggest problems are outside of me, not inside of me. I'm quite adept at making excuses. Perhaps if I were in a different environment, a different situation, or had a different set of variables or people involved, then maybe things wouldn't go so badly. How about you? Do you realize that your biggest problems in life are not outside of you, but *you*? That's what's going on in Isaiah 59. God's "hand is not shortened, that it cannot save" (Isa. 59:1). Of course not! God is perfect and powerful. "But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God" (v. 2). Strike one, two, and three against us. Deny this and you deceive yourself, only to face more and more darkness. But if you acknowledge this, own up to your offenses, and face your darkness, then the light of Messiah will dawn on you.

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read Isaiah 59:1-13

1. What do you hope God does in and through you this Advent?
2. Read vv. 1-3. How has your sin and rebellion contributed to the darkness in your life?
3. Read vv. 12-13. In what ways do you tend to deny that you are responsible for your own sins?
4. Do you see sin primarily as something you have done to break God's rules or break relationship with God? Confess to God the ways you have broken relationship with him.

DAY 2

A Redeemer Will Come

He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede;
then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him.

Isaiah 59:16

The problem of darkness and hopelessness in yesterday's reading is answered in today's. We do not have the resources and answers for our problems in ourselves. The solution has to come from outside of us. God knows this. As he looked down on the earth, he saw that there was no one—not one!—who could undo the damaging effects of sin. Only God himself could work redemption. “A Redeemer will come [advent!] to Zion” (v. 20).

Verse 17 describes God's coming: he has to arm himself to battle against it sin. You might be thinking, “This doesn't sound like hope! A warrior-God? This sounds like judgment!” Yesterday, we saw that *we* are the problem. If that is the case, if we grope for the wall like the blind and we tend to run toward darkness rather than away, what hope is there for us when God arrives on the scene?

God himself comes to do battle, yes, but he does it unlike anything you'd expect. He takes the retribution his enemies deserve. That *you* deserve. The little baby Jesus that arrived in Bethlehem was light in the darkness. There was a bright star above the manger where Jesus lay to show that. Jesus is the “light of the world” but this light didn't stay in the manger. He journeyed to the cross and faced darkness. Real darkness: God's judgment. And he did this so that you wouldn't have to. This opens up our eyes to see that hope is not a circumstance or an event. Hope is a *person*, *Jesus the Messiah*. Messiah is God's man in history, the one who is *anointed* (that's what the word means) to bring redemption to a lost and broken world. Jesus, the Redeemer, has come! He is the light in the darkness. He pays for your rebellion and revolt. He intercedes when no one else could. This is grace. This is the hope of Advent.

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read Isaiah 59:14-21

1. What people or created things do you often look to for salvation?
2. Read vv. 14-15. How do these verses remind you that salvation cannot be found in anything other than God?
3. How does the picture of a warrior-God challenge your idea of what God is like?
4. Read v. 18. Who are God's enemies here and how will God repay them? Why is God's wrath on his enemies good news for you?
5. How does Christ's coming give you reason for praise and gratitude?

DAY 3

When the Stump Blooms

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.

Isaiah 11:1

Think for a moment about your most helpless situation in life. You probably felt like God had forgotten about you or, worse, that he never cared in the first place. God's people in the Old Testament were well acquainted with this feeling and it made them long for Messiah even more.

It's hard to determine when Israel's anticipation for Messiah reached its height. Year after year after year, it seemed that God's kingdom would never fully come as promised. Kings died, the people worshiped idols, and Israel was at odds with the nations around them. Finally, because of their unrepentant sin, Judah, the southern kingdom, saw their worst nightmare come true: exile. (Israel, the northern kingdom, was exiled to Assyria more than a hundred years prior.) The hope of a God's kingdom on earth seemed all but lost when Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and took Judah's survivors as prisoners of war.

Isaiah promised that exile was coming a century before it happened. God's beloved people, whom he had planted, cultivated, and grown tall and strong, would be cut down to a stump. Stumps bear no fruit, provide no shade. They are useless (unless you need a chair). How could this be? Didn't God see? Didn't he care?

In the midst of judgement, however, there was hope. From that seemingly hopeless stump "a shoot" would arise from Jesse, the father of King David. The descendants from David's line failed as kings. They, along with the kingdom, were cut down. But God remembered his promise, the promise he made to David that not all would be cut off. There would be *one*. *One* branch of the family tree would survive and he would rule over a kingdom that would never end. This One is Jesus.

When it seemed that there was nothing but the stench of death and the darkness of despair, God intervened: he made a glorious flower bloom from a stump. As the old carol goes, "This Flower, whose fragrance tender with sweetness fills the air, dispels with glorious splendor the darkness everywhere."

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read Isaiah 11:1-16 and Jeremiah 23:1-8

1. What seemingly hopeless situation are you in now?
2. If Christ has brought you ultimate redemption from sin and death, how can you trust him to lead you through the seemingly hopeless situation(s) you are enduring now?
3. Read Isaiah 11:1-9. What parts of this did Jesus fulfill in his life on earth? What parts still need a complete fulfillment?
4. Read Jeremiah 23:6. What does it mean that the Jesus' name is "the LORD is our righteousness"? What does that mean for you today?

DAY 4

The True King

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder.

Isaiah 9:6

Every four years in the United States we are reminded that no one leader will rule forever. Even in countries where there are dictators or monarchs, they eventually die and someone else comes into power. Human government, while good and ordained by God, is not ultimate. It's easy to forget this. Sometimes, here in America, we think if we only had the right president, then we'd be able to stop terrorism. *Then* we'd solve racial tension. *Then* the economy will bounce back.

Human government, at its best, does bring safety, security, and enjoyment of freedom. But government can never bring us ultimate safety, security, and freedom from the enemies we fear most: sin, death, and Satan himself. When we put too much confidence in human government, we find ourselves devastated that our country and world are not what we hoped for. Israel wasn't what it hoped. So they asked God for a human king (1 Sam. 8). Eventually what they found is that all those men failed. And Isaiah promised God's people that, one day, a son would be born who would be a true king, a forever-king. This son, of course, is God's own Son. Jesus is the only King who can bring this world into order and conquer the only enemies can really harm us.

It's not hard to discern if we trust in human government or Jesus government. A few simple questions can help. Do you often find yourself tuning into your favorite cable news program with angst or anger? Do most of your conversations turn political? Do you most of your social media posts have to do with defending or lambasting a particular political ideology? Do you feel devastated or crushed thinking about what would happen if the "other" party wins? If you answered "yes" to those perhaps you have your eyes on the wrong king.

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read Isaiah 9:1-7 and Psalm 2

1. When are you tempted to put your trust in human leaders?
2. What do you think your desire for justice and righteousness in nations and world leaders says about your need for a true King?
3. Read Psalm 2:8-9. How can Jesus simultaneously be a king who both draws all people to himself *and* conquers the nations? What does this say about his character and mission?
4. How does being a citizen of a kingdom that will never end impact the way you live in this world?
5. Is Jesus your Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace? How might you trust him today and this Advent to be these things for you?

DAY 5

Hoping for Another Advent

For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth,
and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind.

Isaiah 65:17

One of the greatest lines in J.R.R Tolkien's trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* comes when Sam Gamgee awakes after the ring was destroyed at Mount Doom. Waking up a bit fuzzy, he thought the great wizard Gandalf was dead and that the hope of defeating evil was all but lost. Yet when he saw that Gandalf, dazzling and bright, was alive, Sam rejoiced, "Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. *Is everything sad going to come untrue?*" Tolkien goes on to write, "[Sam] himself burst into tears. Then, as a sweet rain will pass down a wind of spring and the sun will shine out the clearer, his tears ceased, and his laughter welled up, and laughing he sprang from his bed."

This is a beautiful picture of what awaits everyone who hopes in Jesus. Like Sam, we recognize that this world is not what it should be. This world is a sad place and we long for it to be changed. The Christian hope is that when Jesus returns, he *will* bring a new heavens and new earth. He *will* make everything sad come untrue. He *will* wipe away our tears and well up our souls with laughter.

Can you imagine? No murder. No cancer. No bankruptcy. No tornadoes. No earthquakes. No floods. No car accidents. No rape. No blindness. No deafness. No speech impediments. No genetic disorders. No miscarriages. No infertility. No hunger. No thirst. No theft. No paralysis. No divorce. No lust. No orphans. No widows. No selfishness. No addiction. No drunkenness. No suicide. No child abuse. No pride. No exploitation. No fraud. No greed.

Yet this is *not yet*. Just as Israel awaited the advent of Messiah's first coming, so we await his second coming. Advent provides intentional time and space to cultivate in us a desire for a redeemed world where everything sad will come untrue. There is a simple prayer that expresses this longing. May we learn to pray it in earnest this Advent: "Come, Lord Jesus! Come!"

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read Revelation 21:1-8

1. Do you pray, "Come, Lord Jesus!?"? Make that your prayer now!
2. What frustrates you about our current world? What excites you about the new creation?
3. Read v. 4. What do you anticipate it being like when Jesus wipes away your tears?
4. How can the expectation of a new world where the sad things are going to be done away with change the way you live in this world?
5. Have you been able to slow down this Advent to appreciate the glimpses of the new creation? Why or why not? How can you today?

DAY 6

The Word Became Flesh

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory,
glory as the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

The unique thing about John's Gospel is that it predates the birth narrative of Jesus. Not just by a few years or decades. It goes back before the foundation of the world, into the annals of eternity.

John introduces us to the Word—*logos* in the Greek language. *Logos* does not really mean “word,” as we know it in English. We simply don't have another word that expresses its meaning. In Greek philosophy, *logos* carried with it the idea of a central, divine, organizing principle of the universe. What John does is connect this idea to the beginning of creation (“In the beginning...”, Gen. 1:1) to convey the notion of God's divine self-expression. Thus, John goes beyond the Greek philosophers who came before him. The *logos* is indeed central to the origin and purpose of the universe. But it's not an impersonal force or an idea. This Word, this *logos*, this self-expression has found fulfillment and completion in a *person*. John identifies this person as the “the only Son from the Father” (v. 14), the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ.

God's solution to the brokenness of this world was not to ignore it, start over, or let us fend for ourselves. He *entered*. The God who created the universe and everything in it, took part in his creation. It's like Shakespeare entering *Romeo and Juliet* or *Macbeth* and participating in the story he's writing. Can you believe it? A Creator who lives not only *among* created things but *partakes* of flesh and blood, skeleton and muscle, tendons and ligaments? One who gets hungry, stubs his toes, enjoys sunsets, and, yes, even goes to the bathroom? It seems too good to be true.

But it's not too good to be true. It's the miracle of the incarnation. Advent means the end of vague spirituality, it also means the beginning of God-in-the-flesh spirituality. Christmas is the celebration that God has acted in time and space. And this changes everything.

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read John 1:1-18

1. How should the fact that God enters creation in flesh and blood change your outlook on the physical and material?
2. Read v. 11. Who are Jesus' “own”? Why didn't they receive him? How is that a warning to you?
3. Have you received Jesus and become a child of God? If not, what's holding you back? If so, how should your life be different?
4. If you know grace and truth through Jesus, how then should you live today?
5. Read John 14:9. How can you cultivate a desire to look at Jesus, and therefore God, more and more?

DAY 7

At Just the Right Time

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

It's obvious that we live in a culture averse to waiting. Self-check out lines. Two-day shipping. Fast food. Microwave dinners. Netflix. The Christmas season is no different, at least for most of us. We easily get caught up in the hustle and bustle. Before we know it, December 25 has come and gone and we never took a moment to enjoy it.

When we pay attention to Advent, it affords us the opportunity to more intentionally meditate on God's deliberate and meticulous plan. It's during Advent we are reminded that "when the fullness of time had come" God sent Jesus. The Apostle Paul told his readers that before Messiah came, we were imprisoned under the law. That is, the law showed how sinful we were. We needed a deliverer and God couldn't come soon enough! The people of Israel probably thought, *Where is Messiah? We're tired of waiting already!* If only God had rush-delivery!

But God wouldn't be rushed. At the right time in human history, when peoples and nations, shepherds and kings, paupers and priests, had been prepared for Messiah, his words, and his actions, Jesus came. Not a minute too soon or too late.

When was the last time you slowed down? When was the last time you, with unhurried delight, met with the Lord, your spouse, a friend? Perhaps you are dealing with a "delay" right now and you wish God would hurry it up. Take heart. He sees you and cares. But he also sees the bigger picture. If he can be trusted with the right moment to send Jesus, he can be trusted in the smaller delays in your life. This Advent, let God's deliberateness in sending his Son in the fullness of time give you pause, calm your rushed soul, and turn your eyes to worship him.

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read Galatians 4:1-7

1. Do you feel rushed this Christmas season? Is there something you need to stop or say "no" to?
2. Read v. 25. How does the freedom you have in Jesus free you from the hustle and bustle of the season?
3. Is God currently making you wait for something? How does Jesus' arrival at the right time in history give you reason to pause and trust God in the meantime?
4. What practices can you integrate into your life this Advent that might help you better reflect on God's deliberate and meticulous plan of redemption?

DAY 8

Listen, Trust, and Obey

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.

Matthew 1:24

Every Christmas season, Joseph gets the short end of the stick. I understand it to some extent. Joseph never speaks in Scripture. He's not the one carrying the second Person of the Trinity in his womb. Besides all that, he's not a mother. Everyone knows that without mothers, our homes (and the world) would fall apart!

Yet when we encounter Joseph in Scripture, we don't find a distant, lazy man who rejects responsibility. We find a silent man, yes, but one who is thoughtful, responsive, kind, and obedient. In our culture today where many fathers are either absent or aloof, here is a prime example of fatherhood.

Joseph was betrothed (i.e. legally pledged to be married) to Mary. When it was discovered that Mary was pregnant *before* marriage, he didn't want to make a public spectacle and humiliate her. In those days, a child born outside of marriage was tremendously shameful. Yet being a "just man," he wanted to quietly divorce Mary, not shame her. As he gave thought to this, the Lord appeared to him in a dream and told him not to fear and that he should name this baby, implying that Joseph would be the adoptive father of this child.

When Joseph woke up, he obeyed. Period. At great cost to his reputation, he took Mary and her baby in and, when the child was born, he named him Jesus, as he was told to do. In Joseph, we see a profound, yet simple example of how God calls all of his people to respond: listen, trust, and obey.

Of course, this little story is not *mainly* about Joseph. It's mainly about a God who intervenes in human affairs, who interrupts our plans, who challenges our assumptions of what is good and just and what it means to follow him. Above all, this story is about a God who speaks. He spoke to Joseph in that moment, but ultimately he speaks through the *baby* whom Joseph would adopt. This baby would grow up into a man and call his people to abandon all to follow him. Abandon your plans, your reputation, your assumptions. Abandon yourself. God called Joseph to do that, and he calls you and me to do the same.

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read Matthew 1:18-25

1. Put yourself in Joseph's shoes. How would you have responded?
2. Imagine the alternative scenario in which Joseph *did not* obey. How would that change things?
3. Read verses 24-25. It's been said, "Character is who you are and your reputation is who people think you are." What do these verses say about Joseph's character? Why is character important to you?
4. Is there a specific opportunity for you to listen, trust, and obey Jesus? What must you do?

DAY 9

Call His Name “God Saves!”

“She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Matthew 1:21

What’s in a name? In our culture, naming children is a lost art. Typically parents pick names they like. There may be some family or personal significance, but the meaning of a child’s name rarely matters. This was not the case in the ancient world. Names had to do with identity. You *are* what you’re *called*. Take Moses for example. His name means “to pull/draw out of water.” Remember Moses’ story? He was sent down the Nile River in a basket and he was *pulled out* by Pharaoh’s daughter. So she called her new son, “Pulled out of water.” A bit funny if you think about it, but it would remind Moses, every time he heard his name who he was and where he came from.

Fast forward many years to when Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit. The angel told Joseph that Mary will have a baby boy, “And you—Joseph, his adoptive father—shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” Joseph is given the privilege of naming this most precious child a name that will proclaim to the world his identity. The name Jesus comes from the Greek translation of the Hebrew name Yeshua (Joshua in English). It literally means “Yahweh [the LORD] saves.”

We see a similar phrase, “Salvation belongs to Yahweh [the LORD]” only twice in the Old Testament (Ps. 3:8; Jonah 2:9). But the *concept* is on every page. It is clear that only God can deliver his people, and over and over again he does! In the climax of God’s redemptive work, he enters human history as a *baby*. It only makes sense that his earthly parents would call him, “God saves!”

Yeshua (Jesus) was probably a very common name in the first century. Israel, after all, was waiting for God to save them. There were perhaps many Israelites who named their sons *Yeshua* in anticipation and hope of God’s redemption. Yet this Yeshua would not simply be another ordinary boy whose name pointed to the God who saves. He would be *the God* who came to be the Savior of his people and the whole world.

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read Isaiah 43:1-13

1. Take a moment to reflect on the name “Yahweh saves!” How does this comfort you today?
2. What false saviors do you sometimes turn to for deliverance?
3. Jesus obviously fulfills this passage in Isaiah 43—he is the servant (v. 10) and is the perfect representation of God in the flesh (the savior, v. 11). What does it mean that the newborn Jesus is fully God? How does that either challenge or reinforce your belief about the nature and work of God?
4. How do you need to cry out, “God save me!” today? Where do you need deliverance?

DAY 10

God with Us in Our Sufferings

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.”

Matthew 1:23

For many people, Christmas is the most brutal time of year. Whether it’s the death of a loved one, a recent divorce, loneliness, or something else, Christmas can be a sad reminder that life is not how it should be. Even if Christmas is a happy time for you, the indwelling power of sin and the general brokenness of the world is a testimony that life is not as it should be.

If you are suffering this Advent season, you might ask, “Where are you, God? Why do I suffer so much?” When we are at the lowest point, we may ask questions, but answers aren’t what we *really* want. What we want (and need) is to be embraced by someone who has been there.

On that first Christmas night, when Mary bore Jesus in a dirty stable, the world was no different from ours. It was filled with disease, war, oppression, injustice, famine, hunger, and hatred. The problems were less noticeable because Mary and Joseph didn’t have Twitter or CNN, but they were no less prevalent. While “long lay the world in sin and error pining,” the baby boy Jesus, entered with a most precious name: Immanuel, which means “God with us.”

The God of the Bible is sovereign over the entire world, including all the brokenness. Yet he is not immune to suffering. He enters this broken world and suffers *with us*. God may not always give you answers. But he gives you himself, which is better than answers.

In Jesus, God joins us in our sufferings and sadness. In him we meet “a man of sorrows...acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces” (Isa. 53:3). When you are weighed down with the brokenness of this world and wondering where God is, take comfort that at the end of his life, Jesus asked his Father the same question: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). Take comfort, too, that Jesus *was actually* abandoned by God so that you can rest in knowing God will, truly, always be with you. *Especially* in your sufferings.

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read Isaiah 53:1-12

1. Isaiah 53 is rightly associated with what Jesus did on the cross. But how does this passage help you understand his incarnation (i.e. his taking on flesh)?
2. What are you going through right now? Does it feel like God is with you? Why or why not?
3. How does the fact that Jesus knows what you are going through, better than you do, help in times of hardship?
4. How do you try to avoid suffering? This Advent, how can you embrace suffering, like Jesus, and pursue God in the midst of it?

DAY 11

The God of the Impossible

“For nothing will be impossible with God.”

Luke 1:37

You are probably familiar with the spy thriller film series, *Mission: Impossible*. To date, there have been six films in which Ethan Hunt, the main character, goes on a *different* mission. Take a moment to ponder that. *Mission: Impossible*. Six *different* missions. The missions don't seem to be impossible after all!

The way God entered the world and prepared the way for his arrival, on the other hand, *was* impossible. At least it seemed to be. God promised he would send one final messenger, before Messiah. The fact that there would be a messenger wasn't impossible. Just the *way* he would come. A woman named Elizabeth conceived in her old age—much older than the prime childbearing years. Her child? John, the final messenger. God overcame the laws of nature and did the impossible.

With Messiah, however, God upped the ante. This time, he would use a *virgin*, a woman who had never been with a man. That woman was a poor, unwed teenager named Mary. When Mary questioned the angel who foretold Jesus' birth, “How can these things be?” The angel replied, “Nothing will be impossible with God.” *Nothing*.

Later in life, Jesus had a discussion with his disciples about how hard it was for rich people to be saved. Some thought, “If rich people—the most important and successful people in our society—can't be saved, then how can anyone be saved?!” Jesus' response harkened back to that simple yet wonderful news the angel declared to his mother all those years ago: “With God all things are possible.” In other words, if salvation is up to people, no one will be saved. Thankfully, it's *not* up to people. It's up to God.

That's the whole point of the virgin birth. Salvation would not—could not—be a human work. It would be a total, complete work of God *for* us, from start to finish. From conception to cross. Does it seem too good to be true? Impossible even? With God, it's not impossible after all.

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read Luke 1:26-38

1. How do you think you would have felt or responded had you been in Elizabeth's shoes? In Mary's?
2. Do you see your salvation as God overcoming the impossible? Why or why not?
3. What is something hard going on in your life right now that is simply too much for you to handle? How can you trust God today in the midst of this seeming impossibility?

DAY 12

The Great Reversal

“He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty”

Luke 1:51-53

Imagine that you are teenage Mary when an angel of the Lord appears to you announcing that you will conceive the Son of God. Yikes! Understandably, Mary is nearly in shock when she hears the news. This is the biggest day in her young life—any young life.

But she recovers quickly. She realizes that God is up to something. Something bigger than her. So she sings. And what does she sing? She sings that in this miraculous conception of her baby, God is making good on his promise to raise the humble and crush the proud. The religious people, the PhDs, the stock brokers, the politicians—they will be brought to nothing. This is the story of how God has always worked in the world. It’s just now happening in the most incredible way possible. A way no one expected. The God of the whole universe is going to become small. Very small.

If in God’s economy, the mighty will be brought down, then it begs the question: do I want this story to be my story? Do I want to be low and humble rather than important and exalted? Mary embraced this. Will you? How did she do it? Her eyes were on her own son—God’s Son. In Jesus, we see the God who not only exalts the humble, but humbled himself to the point of having an umbilical cord—then growing up and going to a cross to die for sins not his own, but mine. Yours. The world’s. It’s the great reversal. And through Jesus, the poor would become rich; the lame would walk; the blind would see; the guilty would be pardoned; the slave would go free; the orphan would find a home.

This is the greatest reversal, indeed. And when you look at the baby who makes it all happen, you will be humbled and ready to embrace God’s story and make it your own.

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read Luke 1:46-56

1. What is so amazing about this prayer from Mary?
2. Do you want to be low and humble in the world’s eyes in order to be exalted by God?
3. Read vv. 54-54. Why is it important that God keeps promises? Do you believe him when he promises something?
4. Jesus flips the values of the world on their head. Where do you see this happening in your own life? Where are some of your values that you need to re-evaluate in order to faithfully follow Jesus?
5. How does Jesus’ death for you move you toward humility? What pride must you confess?

DAY 13

The End of Self-Help

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people”

Luke 1:68

Zechariah is the father of John the Baptist. He sings a wondrous song at the birth of his son about another son—Mary’s son. His song has a simple, yet earth-shattering message: in the baby Jesus, God has come to town. This isn’t anything new of course. God had been coming to save his people for centuries!

Zechariah begins, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has *visited* and *redeemed* his people” (v. 68). These words “visited” and “redeemed” are reminiscent of the Exodus and how God saved his people when they were slaves in Egypt. Showing up to save. That’s what God does.

Why did God visit and redeem his people? Zechariah mentions two reasons. Enemies (v. 71) and sin (v. 77). Whether it’s ancient Israel, Zechariah, or us today, we’re all in “Egypt” apart from God’s grace. We are all shackled from embracing God because of sin, evil, death, and Satan. We are all slaves to the kingdom of darkness and are desperate for freedom.

And everyone is trying to tell us how we can be rescued. Politicians, economists, educators, celebrities, even athletes. Everyone has a solution. What’s more is that we continually try to save ourselves. We see the brokenness in us and in the world around us and we create our own system of salvation. It might be through religious practice, personal morality, making money, romantic relationships, good grades, or professional resume. Anything. Ask yourself, “What do I look to for safety and security and freedom?”

It doesn’t take long to realize that self-help simply won’t cut it. Self-help couldn’t help Israel under the dominion of the Egyptian empire. It couldn’t help Zechariah. And it won’t help you or me either. It’s all too easy to try to climb ladders to get up to God. Yet what we need is God to come down to us. If the world is broken, no solution *in* the world will suffice. It has to be God. Only God can clean up the mess we’ve made. Only God can free us from our enemies, both inside and out. Zechariah’s song reminds us that God has come to town. And when he comes, it’s the end of self-help.

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read Luke 1:57-80

1. In what ways do you try to save yourself?
2. Read v. 68. The word “redeemed” means to be bought back. What are some areas of life where you need to see God’s redemption?
3. Read v. 69. Why is phrase “the house of his servant David” important? Does it matter that Jesus has come from a real-live human family?
4. What enemies do you have? Where do you need to ask God for help from your enemies?

DAY 14

The End of Fear

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people... to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear.”

Luke 1:66, 74

There is a popular Christmas song that unwittingly instills fear in the hearts of little ones. You know it well. It goes like this: “You better watch out. You better not cry. You better not pout. I’m telling you why...He’s making a list, he’s checking it twice, gonna find out who’s naughty or nice...He sees you when you’re sleeping. He knows if you’re awake. He knows if you’ve been bad or good. So be good for goodness’ sake.”

You better watch! Be good for goodness’ sake! Billions of people in this world are motivated by fear. They fear their boss so they work hard. They fear their parents so they make curfew. They fear their spouse so they don’t contradict them. They fear jail time so they don’t cheat on their taxes. Most of our obedience comes from fear of consequences.

But when Jesus comes to town, it’s the end of fear. You don’t need to watch out because he’s making a list and checking it twice. No, Jesus actually delivers you from the things that should really scare you: sin, death, and hell. But wait, there’s more. He not only delivers you from those terrible things, he becomes your new Master who loves you and accepts you. You are no longer a slave, motivated by fear, but free to serve him whole-heartedly with joy.

Now, what about when you slip up and become afraid? It *will* happen from time to time. Turn your eyes back to Jesus. Again and again and again. Reflect on the fact that no one was reluctant to approach Jesus for fear of being rejected. When you read about this man in the Scriptures, you get the sense that even if you fail him, he’d forgive you. He was always firm, yet kind. He was always truthful, yet never arrogant. He had no sin or shortcoming, yet he was incredibly humble. Don’t you want a Master like that?

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read Luke 1:66-80

1. Read v. 74. How were Israel’s former “masters” (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Rome. etc.) harsh and cruel? How have your old masters been harsh and cruel?
2. Are you afraid of Jesus? Why or why not?
3. How does Jesus show himself to be a merciful, gracious Master to you?
4. Read v. 79. Have you experienced peace by knowing Jesus? If not, why not?
5. Who in your life would benefit from hearing about how Master Jesus has saved you from fear?

DAY 15

Gloria in Excelsis Deo!

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

Come to Bethlehem and see Christ whose birth the angels sing; come, adore on bended knee, Christ, the Lord, the newborn King. Gloria, in excelsis Deo! Gloria, in excelsis Deo!

We know these words well from the third verse of the classic Christmas hymn “Angels We Have Heard on High.” They are almost too familiar and common because we sing them every December year after year. Because of that, you might sing them with little or no excitement. It’s rote. It’s ritual.

Often God becomes familiar and common to us. He is not as glorious—valuable, worthy, majestic, splendid—as he once was to us. *I know all that already*, we think. So we get bored with him. This happens *not* because God is common. He’s *not* boring! Rather, it’s because we’ve actually deceived ourselves and been captivated by a cheap substitute. We have exchanged what is beautiful and holy for what is ugly and common. The Bible puts it this way, “[People] exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (Rom. 1:23). We have worshiped what is created and trampled upon the Creator who is worthy of all glory, honor, praise, and blessing.

Christmas is God’s response to this. At Christmas, God enters the common to show us that he is the glorious one who is worthy of our worship. That night in the fields of Judea, God was like a proud father, pulling out all the stops to announce the birth of his Son. And to whom did he send his biggest, best choir of angels? To *common people*—shepherds! Not the media or Wall Street or Hollywood. The angels sang, *Glory to God in the highest! The Creator entered his creation! He’s the best thing in the universe! He’s what you’re looking for! He is the only one who can save you and bring peace!*

Do you hear the angels? Will you come and see this Christ? Come! Come adore him on bended knee and give glory to God in the highest!

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read Romans 1:18-25

1. What created things do you celebrate, value, and delight in more than God?
2. Why is God worthy of highest glory? What is it about the birth of Messiah that shows his glory?
3. How has the busyness of this Christmas season distracted you from true glory in God?
4. Take some time to praise God for his glory. (Consider singing, “Angels We Have Heard on High”!)

DAY 16

Peace for Me?

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

Luke 2:13-14

The Christmas season often seems to bring anything but peace. We rush to stores, to parties, to pageants, to worship services. During the time of year when we raise our glasses and toast to, “Peace on earth and good will to men!” we often find ourselves asking, “Can there really be peace for *me*?”

Could it be that our busyness during the Christmas season is a search for peace? Could it be that we believe, somewhere deep within us, that in our pursuit of material things, friendship, good food, sentimental feelings, generosity, morality, or something else we will eventually fill a void? Could it be that we know we are not alright and that we need something—anything—to make us right?

On that first Christmas night, in the fields of Judea, not too far from the town of Bethlehem, shepherds were watching their flocks when out of nowhere, a heavenly host began to sing. “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.” Here is the announcement of the ages: peace is available! Now, peace is not the absence of any stress or conflict or physical tumult. Peace is being restored to loving relationship with your Creator. How does this happen? It’s not something we can purchase or achieve. It’s something we *receive* through what this baby Messiah in Bethlehem will do many years later. Baby Jesus did not stay in the manger in Bethlehem. He grew up to be a man who went to a cross in Jerusalem to die for sinners to reconcile them to God. There, on that cross, he *himself* becomes our peace. So there will be peace for anyone who trusts him and loves him. Even for you.

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read Luke 2:8-20

1. Where do you look for peace?
2. Imagine you were one of the shepherds. How do you think you would have felt hearing this message?
3. It says that the shepherds “went with haste” (v. 16) after they heard this message. How might you run to Jesus with haste each day as you remind yourself of the good news?
4. Read v. 19. Why did Mary treasure up these things? Do you treasure the things you read and know about the Messiah?
5. Do you have peace with God? How might you turn to him today and trust him for peace?

DAY 17

The Fall and Rising of Many

“Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed...so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

Luke 2:34-35

Put yourself in Mary and Joseph’s shoes. At Jesus’ dedication in the temple, a sweet old man says, “Your Son will light up the dark world and show people what God is like and why they need him and he will be their Savior. And yet, some people will oppose him. So much so that this is going to be like a sword thrust through your gut, Mary. And, oh yeah, your heart is going to break, too.”

Ouch. Not what you expected, huh? But it’s true. Jesus brings some down and raises others up. He is a light that divides. When God comes to town in the person of Jesus, the truth about you and me and everyone else will be exposed. That’s what light does. It reveals what’s there. Some people hate this and it causes them to stumble over Jesus.

How do you know if you are rising or falling because of Jesus? If you sense how low you are and that you are nothing, be comforted, God delights in those who are low. If you run to the light of Christ not mainly because of all the darkness in the world around you—and there *is* darkness—but because of the darkness *in* you, be comforted. These are the ones who rise. God in his grace is drawing you to himself and humbling you.

On the other hand, if you are impressed with your morality or religious accomplishments or your occupational ambitions, God is opposed to you. If you think that you are “generally good” and not in need of God’s gracious intervention, the gospel will be a stumbling block to you. Who Jesus is and what he came to do will mean nothing to you.

How do you move from falling to rising? Like Simeon, humbly take your eyes off yourself and fix your eyes on Jesus. Then you will sing Simeon’s song with him: “Now you are letting your servant depart in peace...for my eyes have seen your salvation!”

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read Luke 2:22-35

1. Have your eyes seen Jesus as your salvation? If not, why not? If so, are you increasingly seeing his majesty and beauty?
2. Read. v. 32. Jesus is a light to the Gentiles—the nations. In what ways can you engage in shining his light to the nations?
3. Read. v. 35 and Hebrews 4:12-13. What has God been revealing about your heart? What areas of your life are you trying to keep from being exposed to other people?
4. Throughout the Gospels, it’s actually the religious people who stumble over Jesus. What religious activities or personal morality have actually *kept* you from Jesus?

DAY 18

Every Tribe, Language, People, Nation

And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him.

Matthew 2:11

Long before the birth of Jesus, God had promised another birth that was integral to his plan of redemption. In Genesis 12, the Lord appeared to a man named Abram. God told Abram that he would be the father of a great nation and that all the families of the earth would be blessed through Abram's family. There was one problem—Abram and Sarai had no children. So a few chapters later, in Genesis 15, God promised them a son who would be the first of more children than they could ever count.

From the beginning of God's plan, we see that redemption was aimed at the entire world, not just the Jewish people. Unfortunately, throughout the Old Testament, we also see that the Jews were not the light to the nations they should have been and the nations did not acknowledge Yahweh as the one, true God. At the end of the Old Testament, Israel is an isolated, marginalized people and the promise to Abram (later Abraham) looks all but broken. How would God make good on this promise?

It happens in the birth of Jesus. A couple of years after Jesus is born, we are introduced to a group of people called *magi*. That's a Greek word often translated "wise men" but *magi* really means "magicians." They were something like alchemists and astrologers—really smart guys. But they were not Jewish. They were probably from Persia, Iran, or even as far as India or China. They were monotheists (they believed in one god), but they worshiped Zoroaster, *not* Yahweh. Yet here they are, searching for the king of the *Jews*. Here they are, laying their costly treasures down at *Jesus*' feet. Here they are, laying *themselves* down to worship *him*.

It's easy to overlook these mysterious magicians. But they are more than extras in a Christmas play. In that little house, in that little Jewish town, the *nations* came to worship a little boy who would eventually die on a cross to save Israel *and* the whole world. Jesus is the true son of promise, for everyone who believes in him will be blessed. In the magi's act of faith and worship, the promise to Abraham is being fulfilled. And in this we also catch a faint glimpse of that day in eternity when every nation, tribe, people group, and language will proclaim together, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne!" (Rev. 7:9-10).

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read Matthew 2:1-12

1. Have you ever given the story of the magi much thought? How does this story inspire you?
2. Read vv. 3-4. What is so troubling about Herod's reaction to the magi? What should he have known? How should he have responded?
3. Does your response to Jesus parallel the magi or Herod?
4. Heaven will be the ultimate diverse place. Does that excite you? Why or why not?

DAY 19

The Snake-Stomping Baby

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

Genesis 3:15

The opening scene in Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ* shows Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, in deep agony, sweating blood, as he prays to his Father. The burden of what he’s about to do on the cross is weighing on him and Satan is there, tempting him. A snake slithers up to Jesus’ hands. Jesus stands up, bracing himself, and stomps on the serpent. While Jesus really did pray in the garden before going to the cross, we can’t be so sure about stomping on the snake. Whether it really happened is beside the point. The scene is visually referencing something quite important from the beginning of the biblical story.

In Genesis 3, after Adam and Eve sinned, God immediately made a promise to the Satan who posed as a serpent that fateful day. The serpent had deceived the first humans. Their sin brought death to God’s perfect world. But the serpent would not have the last laugh. God promised that Eve’s offspring would come to do battle against the serpent. The offspring would bruise the serpent’s head; the serpent would bruise his heel. In other words, the serpent would suffer a fatal blow, but it wouldn’t be a pain-free victory for the offspring. This offspring is none other than Jesus. The fatal blow happened on the cross.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus endured Satan’s temptations, unlike Adam. Throughout his life on earth, he delivered people from demonic possession as a sign that the kingdom of light was dawning and would overwhelm the kingdom of darkness. Then, on the cross, Jesus satisfied the wrath of God on sinners like you and me, delivering the death-blow to sin, evil, death, and Satan himself.

Christmas is God’s declaration of war on the serpent. The same helpless baby born in Bethlehem grew up to triumph over the serpent. As the Scriptures say, “He partook of [flesh and blood] that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil” (Heb. 2:14).

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read Hebrews 2:5-18

1. How real is it to you that Jesus has triumphed over Satan?
2. How is it that Jesus’ death destroys 1) the one who has the power of death? and 2) death itself?
3. When you consider that Jesus was made like you, in order to save you, how does this influence your appreciation for his endurance in temptation? How can his victory change you?
4. Are you enslaved to the fear of death? How do you need Jesus to free you today?

DAY 20

Let There Be Sight!

“For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.”

John 9:39

Have you ever been frustrated at someone who cannot see what you see? Perhaps it's something in a sports game, a movie, or a math problem. It can be maddening. But what if it's something more serious, like their character? The truth is that we all have things about ourselves that we do not see. That's the nature of being human. We are blind to our most glaring personal deficiencies.

In John 9, Jesus heals a blind man. Echoing the creation account of Genesis 1-2, the one who said, “Let there be light!” now says, “Let there be *sight!*” and takes mud and rubs it on the man's eyes to help him see. But that's not the only point of the story. There's more going on than what meets the eye (see what I did there?). There is a group of people called the Pharisees who are angry that Jesus did this so they cast this healed man out of the synagogue. Jesus goes to find the man and says, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.”

Jesus was born for judgment's sake. You might be thinking, *But I thought Jesus came to save us?* Of course he did. But he cannot save without simultaneously judging. In other words, he draws a line in the sand. Those who *do not see*—that is, those who realize they are in the dark because of their own spiritual need—will be given the light of eternal life. On the other hand, those who *see*—that is, those who self-righteously *think* they are righteous on their own—will actually become blind.

The physically blind man in the story gets healed, but he is representing a greater reality. He illustrates that we are all spiritually blind and need to hear Jesus' gracious word, “Let there be sight!” May he open yours eyes and mine this Christmas.

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read John 9:1-41

1. What surprises you about this passage? What disturbs you? What encourages you?
2. John, the author, is trying to make a bigger point than just a physical blindness being healed. What is it? Why does it matter for you?
3. Why are the Pharisees so angry? How would you feel if you were in their shoes? How would you feel if you were in the blind man's shoes?
4. Read v. 39 again. Are you one who “sees” or do you know you are blind and need healing?
5. Jesus is clear that he came for judgment's sake. How does this change your view of Jesus? How should this make you appreciate his grace more?

DAY 21

Born to Die

“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve,
and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Mark 10:45

In ancient times, as today, kings were born in royal palaces and not subjected to the same kind of everyday hardships that “normal” people face. As the saying goes, “It’s good to be the king!” Jesus, however, is a different kind of king. He was not born in a palace, but in a barn. He was not spared hardships but endured a lifetime of suffering culminating in an excruciating death. Unfortunately, his disciples did not see this.

In Mark 10, James and John, two of Jesus’ disciples in his “inner circle,” asked Jesus if they might reign with him when he came into his glory. They saw leadership not as service but power and control. The other disciples got wind of it and became angry at them. It’s pure speculation, but I imagine they were not angry at James and John’s selfishness. They were probably angry James and John asked Jesus before they did! Selfish ambition makes a mess of everything.

Jesus doesn’t miss the opportunity, though. He corrects them. *You know that’s how the world does leadership, right? They think of greatness in terms of who has the best seat in the house, who wears the finest clothes, who has the most power. But in my kingdom it’s backwards. You want to be great? Be nothing. You want to be powerful? Serve somebody. You want to reign with me? Then come, die with me.*

Jesus was not born to kick back and have lowly people wait on him hand and foot while he reigned with an iron fist. Jesus was born to die. In his death, he served us by taking our place, paying the infinite debt we owe God because of sin. And when we fix our eyes on this Servant who ransomed us from slavery to self-glory through dying, we, too, will become servants who die to self and reject worldly power for something far better.

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read Mark 10:35-45

1. Consider the best leaders you have ever followed? What did you admire about them?
2. Do you see leadership as an opportunity to lord it over someone or serve them? When you see the darkness of “lording it over” come upon you, how do you respond?
3. How should the circumstances around Jesus’ birth, life, and death shape the way we live in God’s kingdom? Do these things make any difference at all?
4. If Jesus was born to die, what does that mean for you at home, school, work, etc.?
5. How can you grow as a servant? Where do you need to “die” with Jesus and become more like him?

DAY 22

I Came for the Sick

And Jesus answered them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

Luke 5:31-32

I recall one time I went to the doctor for a physical exam. I was there because, I thought, *this is what responsible adults do*. The doctor came in, looked at my chart, noticed my age (I was about 25 at the time) and said, with a condescending tone, “What are you here for?” “For a physical,” I replied. “You don’t need a physical,” he said. “You are healthy.” Whether he knew it or not, he was communicating a spiritual truth: only sick people need a doctor.

Jesus often crossed paths with a group of incredibly stuck-up religious people called the Pharisees. The Pharisees thought they were better than everyone else. Do you know what? They were. Unfortunately for them, their kind of “better” didn’t matter all that much to Jesus. The Pharisees made a profession out of external morality. They couldn’t see that they were spiritually sick and in need of a doctor. In reality, they were not healthy—no one is. They *thought* they were. Matthew (also called Levi), on the other hand, was a corrupt tax collector—not religious by any stretch of the imagination—and yet was attracted to Jesus because he saw him as a spiritual doctor who was able to heal his sin-sick soul.

Paradoxically, it’s those who see their silliness in trying to save themselves and realize they are hopeless on their own who actually have reason for hope. It’s the people who know they have a spiritually fatal disease who repent and go to Jesus. When the light of the cross shines on you, by God’s grace—not your intelligence or religion or anything else—you see your darkness. You face it. You own up to it and you humbly go to the Doctor.

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read Luke 5:27-32

1. What do you think about Matthew “leaving everything” to follow Jesus? (Consider that Matthew had a very lucrative business as a tax collector!)
2. Tax collectors in the first century were not well-liked. They were crooks who added to government taxes to supply their income. Imagine Jesus eating with a whole host of them. What could you compare that to today? How does this shape your thoughts about Jesus?
3. Do you identify more with the Pharisees or Matthew? Why?
4. How can you ask the Lord to open your eyes to your spiritual sickness today? Where do you need him to do his divine surgical work?

DAY 23

Christmas: A Mission to the Nations

[Through Jesus we have received] grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

Romans 1:5-6

The first Christmas was a mission trip. *The* mission trip of all mission trips. Jesus left the comforts of his home in heaven to come *here*, a foreign land. Why did he come? It was for nothing less than to inherit the nations as his own possession, drawing all men to himself. In the opening words of his great letter to the Romans, Paul says as much. Jesus “was descended from David according to the flesh” (Rom. 1:3)—reminiscent of the angel’s announcement that a Savior, Christ the Lord, was born in the city of David. And for what purpose? Nothing less than “to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name *among all the nations*” (Rom. 1:5).

At the beginning of Jesus’ life, the *nations*, represented by the magi, came to worship him (recall Day 18). At the end of Jesus’ life on earth, Jesus said to the disciples, “Therefore, as you go, make disciples of all *nations*!” (Matt. 28:19). And at the end of history, this will come to completion as the *nations* are gathered together to sing praise to Jesus (Rev. 5:9; 7:9).

We rightly think of Christmas as a time for good-will and generosity to the poor. But what if we saw Christmas through a missional lens? Jesus left the comforts of his home. He became like the people he wanted to save. He preached hard truths to these people. He showed compassion and love to them. He sacrificed everything, even his own life, for them.

He’s the ultimate missionary who now calls his saved people to join and imitate him in reaching the nations. The question is not whether the mission will be completed. It will. The only question we face is whether or not we will be a part of it.

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read Romans 15:8-21

1. Read vv. 9-12. What do you make of these Old Testament passages that predict the Gentiles/nations will come to know Christ?
2. Are you passionate about the renown of Christ among all the peoples of the world? If it passion is not as high as you’d like, how can you cultivate it?
3. What opportunities do you have around you to spread the gospel? How might you engage with the spread of the gospel to the unreached?
4. How can you orient your prayer life around God’s mission? What are some nations/peoples/missions that you can be praying for this Advent season and beyond?

DAY 24

You Are the Fertilizer of the Earth

“Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away.”

Luke 14:34-35

“You are the salt of the earth.” I’ve always struggled with this word from Jesus. Not because I don’t want it to be true, but because it never seemed to make sense to me. Do we make people taste better? That’s why I use salt on my food. I didn’t appreciate Jesus’ words until recently when I learned what salt was used for in the ancient world.

In Jesus’ day, salt was a bit different from our common table salt and was mainly used as a fertilizer to help dry soil retain its moisture. It also doubled as a preservative for manure piles to prevent them from becoming useless as fertilizer. This makes good sense considering Jesus lived in an agricultural society in an arid climate where the soil was not conducive for growing crops. It also helps us understand Jesus’ words in Luke 14:34-35, “Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or *for the manure pile*. It is thrown away.”

So what’s the point? Jesus is actually saying, “You are the fertilizer—the manure!—of the earth.” He’s saying that for us to have influence in the world, we need to infiltrate the places where nothing seems to grow. As salt (and light, too), we bring life and flourishing to the arid places, those sectors of society that are barren, rotting, and dead. We don’t have to look far for those places—they are all around us in broken relationships, financial problems, addictions, abuse, injustice, and blatant rejection of the gospel. If we are not doing this, Jesus says, we are of no use.

You might be asking, *What in the world does this have to do with Christmas?! It has everything to do with Christmas.* Jesus is not calling us to do something he himself did not do. His *advent* was into *this world*, this dry soil and decaying manure pile where nothing grew. And he brought life and flourishing. The call to follow him is to be his fertilizer so that, in his grace, he might bring bountiful and lasting growth to a world that desperately needs him.

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read Luke 14:34-35 and Matthew 5:1-16

1. Where is God calling you to go to be salt and light?
2. How are you tempted to avoid the arid places for fear of being stained by them? (You may consider reading 1 Cor. 9:19-23 for more on this.)
3. How do the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12) help you understand what being salt and light in this world should look like?
4. Who did God use to lead you to Jesus in the midst of your own brokenness? How can you imitate them?

DAY 25

He Emptied Himself

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

Philippians 2:5-7

Christmas Day is a *full* day. Stockings full of goodies. Tummies full of treats. Living rooms full of laughter. Hearts full of joy. It should be this way.

Yet on the first Christmas, in that lowly manger in Bethlehem, a great emptying had just taken place. The Son of God emptied *himself*. The One who set planets in space, lit up the sun and stars, knows when the mountain goats give birth, tells the ocean waves where to start and stop, and knitted you together in your mother's womb, took on flesh and blood. He became vulnerable and breakable. The Creator became part of his creation. The Author entered the pages of his story. Jesus, from his first cries to his last breath, had infinite power at his disposal and *yet he never took advantage of it*. That's what it means that he "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself." The Sovereign King became a lowly servant for your sake and mine. It was the only way he could save us. What a God! What a Savior!

Now, the interesting thing about Philippians 2 is that Paul is actually telling us how *we* ought to live in light of what Jesus did. He's calling us to embrace the same disposition of humility. If you follow Christ, the one who emptied himself *for* your sake, then you should empty yourselves for the sake of others.

It's one thing to sing "mild he lays his glory by" with a cheery smile. It's altogether another thing to live our lives that way. Maybe you are a parent, boss, coach, teacher, or anyone in some kind of authority. Maybe you have some kind of advantage over others. Do you empty yourself and count others more significant than yourself? Do you serve them? This happens by God's grace, not your own power. The beauty of the gospel is that when we embrace Jesus by faith, God is gracious and faithful to give us his Spirit so that we progressively become more humble like Jesus. Christmas recalibrates us toward this self-emptying. It wasn't beneath Jesus to become small, insignificant, unimportant, and meek. That's the whole point of his incarnation. If we trust and follow him, then it shouldn't be beneath us either.

Scripture and Reflection Questions

Read Philippians 2:1-11

1. Imagine not taking advantage of a high position or authority you have. How does considering the difficulty of this make what Christ did all the more glorious?
2. What is comforting about this passage? What is convicting?
3. Where do you need to see God move in your life to grow in "counting others more significant" than yourself?
4. How might you model Christ-like service and empty yourself today?