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# A D V E N T

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A 4-WEEK GUIDE FOR FAMILY OR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

2017

N. T.  
**WRIGHT**

JONI  
EARECKSON  
**TADA**

TONY  
**EVANS**

FLEMING  
**RUTLEDGE**

JOHN  
**ORTBERG**

PATRICIA  
**RAYBON**

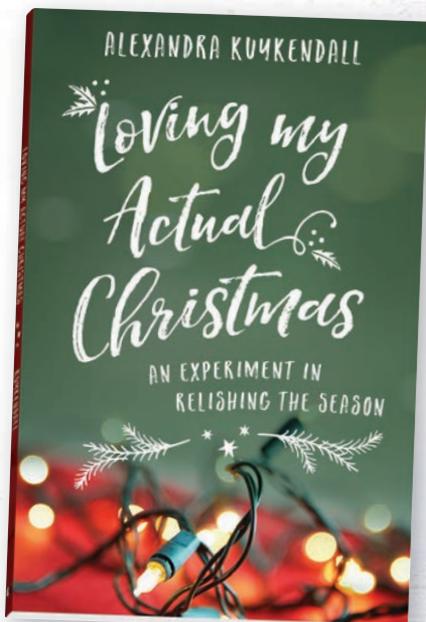
MANY  
OTHERS

**CT**

# THIS CHRISTMAS CAN BE DIFFERENT

Does the thought of Christmas make you feel stressed? What do you truly want from Christmas this year? Part practical, part inspirational, *Loving My Actual Christmas* by Alexandra Kuykendall is designed to help women move from holiday mayhem to living out of their priorities and hopes for this Christmas.

- Excellent small group resource or to read on your own.
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**THIS SEASON CAN BE DIFFERENT, IF WE LET THE STORY PERMEATE OUR HEARTS.**

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# Introduction

Advent comes from the Latin *adventus*, meaning “arrival, approach.” During this season leading up to Christmas, we reflect on the longing of God’s people for the Messiah, which was fulfilled in the arrival of Jesus—God made flesh, Light from Light, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. Advent has another purpose, too: drawing our spiritual gaze toward the future when, as we affirm in the Nicene Creed, Jesus “will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.”

Before Communion, my church speaks these words together: “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” It’s easy to emotionally connect with the first two phrases—Jesus’ death and resurrection are so central to how we speak of and understand the gospel. But I find that I *need* the third phrase; I need to say it and I need to hear it. Maybe you do too. As 21st-century Christians, we need the reminder to turn our focus away from today’s worries and our own self-preoccupation and onto this glorious hope. We need to live with this promise always in spiritual view. In this sense, we also need Advent: four weeks dedicated to reminding ourselves of our hopeful expectation.

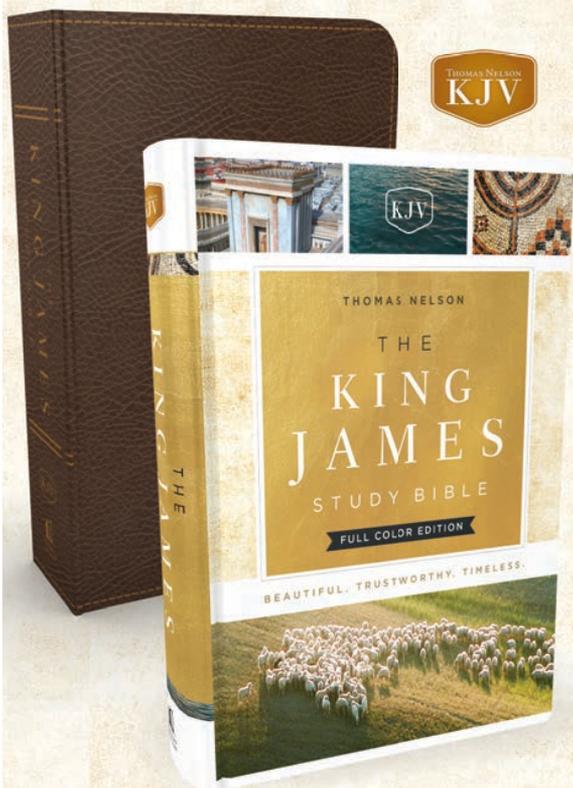
This resource will guide you through both aspects of Advent reflection: the historical waiting for and arrival of Jesus and our own waiting for Christ’s return. You can use these devotional readings on your own, as a family, or with a group. Our **Bible Reading Guide** provides an overview of the Scriptures you’ll engage with each day, and the weekly **Ideas for Families** and **Ideas for Groups** offer creative suggestions, fun projects, and discussion starters to enrich your Advent observance.



*Kelli*

**Kelli B. Trujillo**  
Editor

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**ADVENT 2017**  
A 4-Week Guide for Family  
or Individual Reflection

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**CT'S ADVENT 2017 TEAM**

**PUBLISHER:** Jacob Walsh

**EDITOR:** Kelli B. Trujillo

**DESIGN:** Michael Chuchvara

**MARKETING:** Leanne Snavelly,  
Marisa Tirado

**COPY EDITOR:** Jenna DeWitt

**PRODUCTION:** Cindy Cronk

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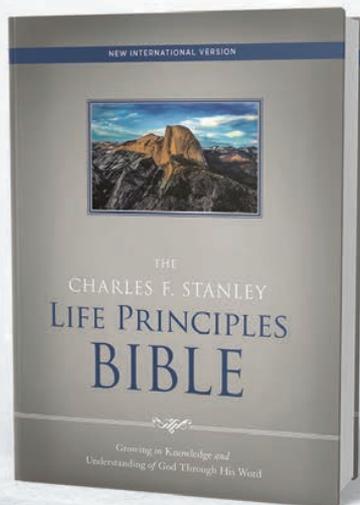


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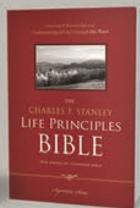
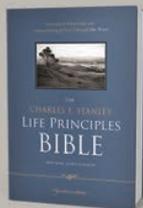


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# Bible Reading Guide

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WEEK  
1

- December 3..... Isaiah 9:2; 60:1-3; Luke 1:78-79
- December 4..... Psalm 130:5-6; Isaiah 30:15
- December 5..... 1 Corinthians 1:7; Revelation 22:12-21
- December 6..... Revelation 21:1-22:5
- December 7..... Isaiah 9:1-7
- December 8..... Isaiah 11:1-5; 42:1-7
- December 9..... Micah 5:2-5

WEEK  
2

- December 10..... Matthew 1:1-17
- December 11..... Luke 1:5-25; 57-80
- December 12..... Luke 1:26-38
- December 13..... Luke 1:26-38
- December 14..... Genesis 3; Luke 1:26-38
- December 15..... 1 Samuel 2:1-20; Luke 1:39-56
- December 16..... Matthew 1:18-25

WEEK  
3

- December 17..... Matthew 1:23; Luke 2:1-7; John 1:14
- December 18..... Luke 2:8-20
- December 19..... Luke 2:21-35
- December 20..... Luke 2:36-38
- December 21..... Matthew 2:1-12
- December 22..... Matthew 2:1-12
- December 23..... Matthew 2:13-18

WEEK  
4

- December 24..... John 1:1-18; Philippians 2:5-11
- December 25..... Isaiah 9:2; Matthew 4:13-17; John 1:4-5, 9

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As you journey through these devotions, you'll spend daily time reading and reflecting upon Scripture. Use this guide to track your progress through each day's key Bible passages.

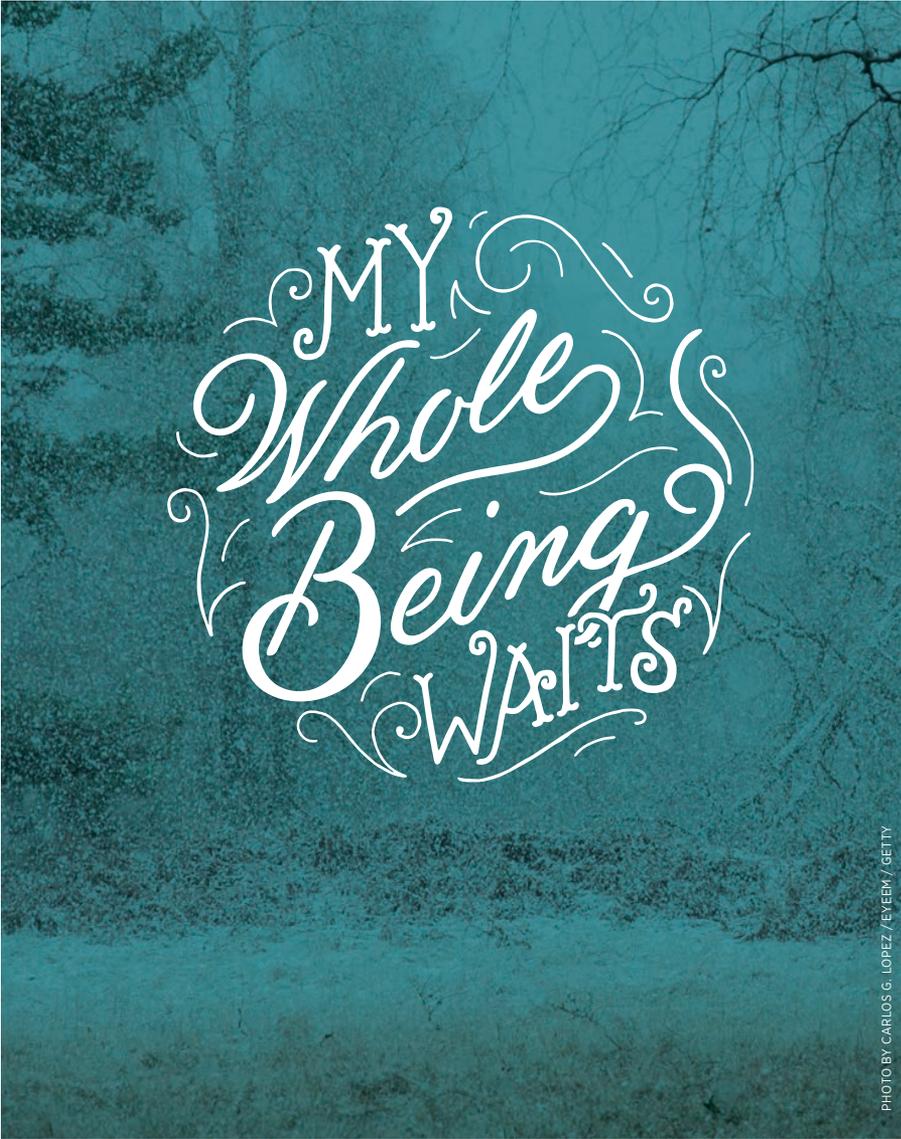
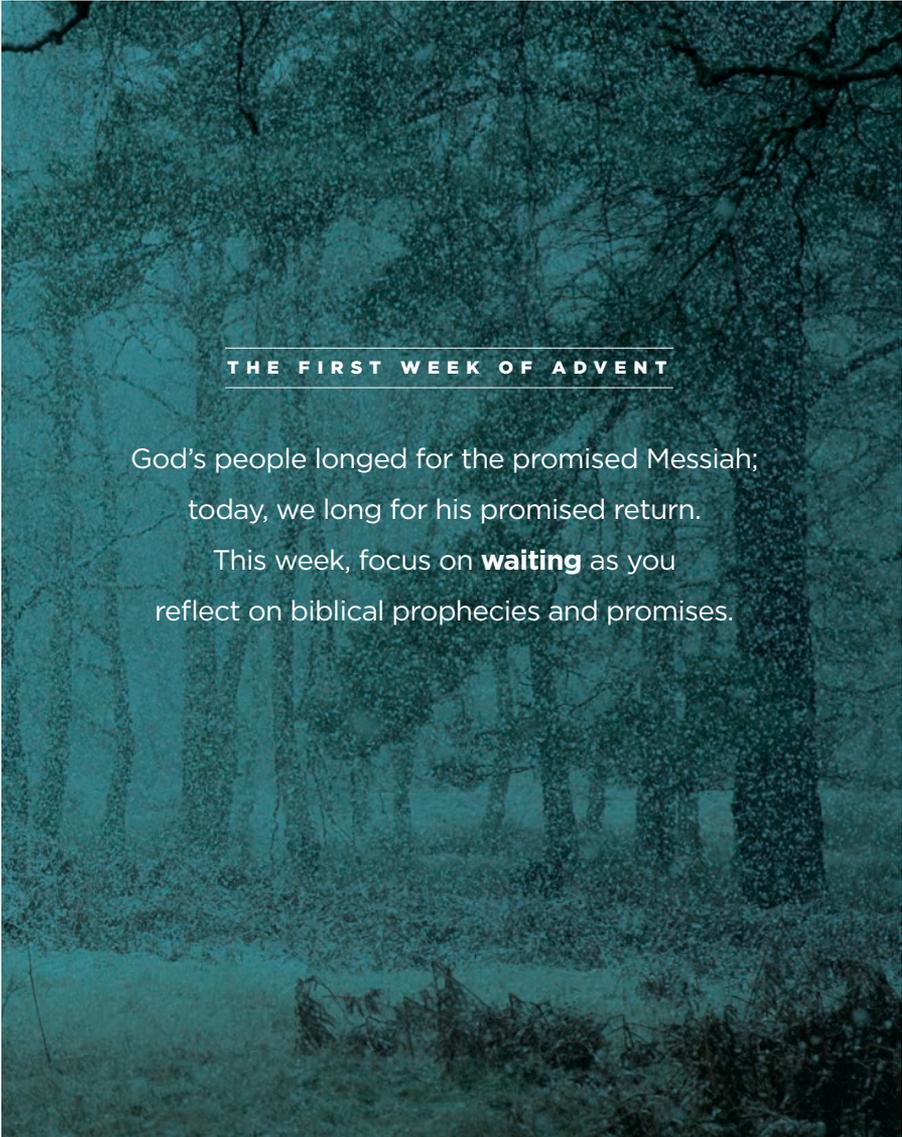


PHOTO BY CARLOS G. LOPEZ / EYEEM / GETTY



THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

God's people longed for the promised Messiah;  
today, we long for his promised return.

This week, focus on **waiting** as you  
reflect on biblical prophecies and promises.



DEC

3

# A Great Light

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

Isaiah 9:2

This past August 21, like most Americans, I donned cardboard glasses with black polymer lenses and headed outside to view the solar eclipse. Watching the moon's trek across the sun was amazing.

But what I found even more amazing was video footage shared by friends who'd viewed the eclipse from the path of totality. As the moon fully covered the sun, dusk instantly fell. They could see the sun's brilliant corona fanning out from the disc of the moon. Stars normally hidden by daylight were suddenly visible. Nature responded to the abrupt twilight: crickets chirped, bats swooped. The campground filled with cheers of excitement. Complete strangers rejoiced together, abandoning anonymity in their collective sense of wonder.

Once I saw that video, I immediately marked my calendar: April 8, 2024. On that date my city will be in the path of totality of another solar eclipse. I know it is coming—and I'm so eager.

Scripture is rich with the spiritual imagery of darkness and light. Consider Isaiah's promise: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned" (9:2). In Isaiah 60, he prophesied, "Your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you," clarifying that all "nations will come to your light" (vv. 1, 3).

We find echoes of these promises

in the New Testament: We hear it in Zechariah's song as he proclaimed, "the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death" (Luke 1:78-79). We hear it in Simeon's praise as he called baby Jesus "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" (Luke 2:32). We hear it in Matthew's gospel, as he declared Jesus the fulfillment of Isaiah 9's promise (Matt. 4:16). And we hear it in the very words of Jesus: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

This season, we intentionally dwell in the darkness of longing. We contemplate the experience of God's people awaiting the First Advent. We reflect on our own hopeful anticipation of Christ's promised return. The brilliance of a total solar eclipse is only a preview of the illuminating glory of Christ's future reign, when, as Isaiah promised, "the Lord will be your everlasting light" (60:19). We know it is coming—and we are so eager.

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**Kelli B. Trujillo** is an Indianapolis-based writer and an editor for *Christianity Today*.

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**Read** Isaiah 9:2, 60:1-3; and Luke 1:78-79. How do you experience darkness in your life or in this world? How is Jesus a light illuminating your life?

# Repentance & Rest

**I wait for the  
Lord, my whole  
being waits,  
and in his word  
I put my hope.  
I wait for the  
Lord more than  
watchmen wait  
for the morning.**

Psalm 130:5–6

## Meditate

on Psalm 130:5–6 and Isaiah 30:15. How can repentance, rest, hope, and longing intersect in your spiritual observance of Advent this year?

EASTERN AND WESTERN liturgical traditions both celebrate Advent, but our practices have a slightly different flavor and focus. In Eastern Orthodox churches, Advent is a penitential season, a “little Lent.” In Western liturgical traditions, we emphasize preparation for Christ’s coming, which certainly involves repentance but also entails rest, hope, longing, and quiet.

Advent holds in tension two complementary but seemingly paradoxical postures of faith: repentance and rest. Isaiah tells us that “in repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength” (30:15). To me, the pain and rigor of repentance seem at odds with the comfort and ease of rest, but in Scripture and in Advent, we find them entwined. We can rest in the certainty of God’s coming kingdom even as we repent for the ways we’ve failed to live up to the vision of that kingdom. Because we hold repentance and rest together, we don’t belittle or ignore what has been dark, twisted, and disappointing in this past year. Rather, we are called to face it squarely while trusting in a God who will prevail in the end.

We live in a noisy culture where we often feel we have to scream just to be heard—where it seems impossible to hear a still, small voice. Advent bids us to quiet down, repent, and lean into longing. Redemption is sneaking into our corner of the universe, just as it was announced to some unsuspecting shepherds on the night of Christ’s birth. Returning to Christ and resting in him isn’t an escape from the darkness of the world. It’s a proclamation that, in the *midst* of darkness, there remains another way—the only way.

---

**Tish Harrison Warren** is a priest in the Anglican Church of North America and the author of *Liturgy of the Ordinary*.

# Come Quickly



THE WRITERS OF the New Testament were a bruised and battered bunch. This is why they wrote so much about heaven. The hope of heaven stoked fire in their bones, and their writings were laced with constant references to the Second Coming of Christ, to the time when their Savior would restore all things and complete the kingdom. Continually they were praying, “Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!” They were *eagerly* waiting for Jesus Christ to be revealed (1 Cor. 1:7).

These suffering saints weren’t trying to escape the painful realities of earth; they gladly endured their hardships. They were able to be happy because they knew heaven would reveal the earthshaking significance behind each tear and affliction. They likened themselves to soldiers poised on the watchtower, workers hoeing for the harvest, athletes straining toward the finish line, and virgins waiting wide-eyed in the night, lamps trimmed, hearts afire, and scanning the horizon for the arrival of their beloved. For New Testament writers who suffered—and suffered much—the world was no party. Rather, they were anticipating the coming Party.

We say “Come, Lord Jesus” with one breath, but in the next, we must always pray, “And until you return, give me grace to bear up under my hardship, peace to accept my life circumstances, and courage to tell others about Jesus Christ so that they too can joyously anticipate the Savior’s return.” So “strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, ‘Be strong, do not fear; your God will come . . . he will come to save you.’” (Isa. 35:3–4).

---

**Joni Eareckson Tada** is an award-winning author and the founder and CEO of Joni and Friends International Disability Center.

**You do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.**

1 Corinthians 1:7

### Consider

1 Corinthians 1:7 and Revelation 22:12–21. Do you “eagerly wait” for the Second Advent? How could the prayer “Come, Lord Jesus” take deeper root in your life?

Taken from *Pearls of Great Price* by Joni Eareckson Tada. Copyright © 2006 by Joni Eareckson Tada. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved. Zondervan.com.

# The Marriage of



**W**e arrive at the last and perhaps the greatest image of new creation, of cosmic renewal, in the whole Bible. This scene, set out in Revelation 21–22, is not well enough known or pondered. This time the image is that of marriage. The New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven like a bride adorned for her husband.

We notice right away how drastically different this is from all those would-be Christian scenarios in which the end of the story is the Christian going off to heaven as a soul, naked and unadorned, to meet its maker in fear and trembling. As in Philippians 3, it is not we who go to heaven, it is heaven that comes to earth; indeed, it is the church itself, the heavenly Jerusalem, that comes down to earth. This is the ultimate rejection of all types of Gnosticism, of every worldview that sees the final goal as separation of the world from God, of the physical from the spiritual, of earth from heaven. It is the final answer to the Lord's Prayer, that God's kingdom will come and his will

**God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.**

Revelation 21:3



# Heaven and Earth

be done on earth as it is in heaven. It is what Paul is talking about in Ephesians 1:10, that God's design, and promise, was to sum up all things in Christ, things both in heaven and on earth. It is the final fulfillment, in rich symbolic imagery, of the promise of Genesis 1, that the creation of male and female would together reflect God's image to the world. And it is the final accomplishment of God's great design, to defeat and abolish death forever—which can only mean the rescue of creation from its present plight of decay.

The living God will dwell with and among his people, filling the city with his life and love and pouring out grace and healing in the river of life that flows from the city out to the nations. There is a sign here of the future project that awaits the redeemed in God's eventual new world. So far from sitting on clouds playing harps, as people often imagine, the redeemed people of God in the new world will be agents of his love going out in new ways, to accomplish creative tasks, to celebrate and extend the glory of his love.

---

**N. T. Wright** is the chair of New Testament and early Christianity at the School of Divinity at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland.

## Reflect

on Revelation 21:1–22:5. How does this description of Jesus' future reign speak to your deepest longings?

From the book *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* by N. T. Wright. Copyright © 2008 by Nicholas Thomas Wright. Reprinted by permission of HarperOne, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

# The Promised Child

**For to us a child is born, to us a son is given . . . . And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**

Isaiah 9:6

## Contemplate

Isaiah 9:1-7. How does Jesus fulfill each of the names in verse 6?

ISAIAH 9 is a magnificent celebration of hope in the face of national trauma, disaster, and even despair. Israel is facing foreign invasion, so it is shrouded in “fearful gloom” and “utter darkness” (Isa. 8:22). The Assyrians are threatening to invade from the north and haul them off into exile, which they will do a few short years from the time of this writing.

Against the dark backdrop of national despair and gloom, Isaiah envisions the dawning of the light of salvation (vv. 1-2) which results in great joy for God’s people (v. 3). God is going to bring about liberation from foreign oppressors (v. 4), but more than that, he is going to bring about a complete cessation to warfare itself (v. 5). How is he going to do that? Through the gift of a son: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given” (v. 6).

This magnificent chapter gives us the prophet’s first major exposition of Israel’s coming king, her long-awaited Messiah. Isaiah had already hinted at the birth of this world-transforming child earlier when he announced that “the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” (7:14), which means “God with us.” But, here, in 9:6, he elaborates about who this child will be, using four more names: “And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

What the prophet Isaiah could only see in outline, we now see in full color. This child that is born, this son who is given, is none other than Jesus of Nazareth. He is God’s wonderful counselor. He is God’s wisdom incarnate. He is the embodiment of God’s saving plans for the world.

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**Todd Wilson** is senior pastor of Calvary Memorial Church in Oak Park, Illinois, and cofounder of the Center for Pastor Theologians.

# Bruised & Hungry

DEC

8

WHENEVER ISAIAH'S WORDS were read out loud, Israel would have felt a deep hunger for these words to be true—not just in their future but in the ache of their present. By the time Jesus read a similar passage in front of his synagogue (Luke 4:14–21), Israel had faced approximately 600 years of war, exile, oppression, and cruelty at the hands of oppressive empires. Ethnic tension with Samaritans and abuse by Roman soldiers were everyday realities. The Israelites were a bruised, broken people longing for justice, freedom, and the Messiah who would deliver them from sin.

We feel that hunger, whether we see bruised bodies and hearts in our neighborhoods and on our TV screens or we ourselves are those bruised people. Poverty, natural disasters, racism, injustice, and suffering abound. Advent is not just an invitation to be more aware of God's presence and promise in our own individual lives—it is a time when we look at the richness of these promises in Isaiah and we ask the Lord to increase his presence, healing, and justice in the lives of others.

Isaiah 42:4 says “In his teaching the islands will put their hope.” The “islands” represented strangers or, worse, those who had oppressed them. The islands for us may represent refugees from distant shores, neighbors we care little for, and perhaps even our ethnic enemies. Advent is a season when our awareness of the pain of others causes us to groan and await with greater anticipation the One who is coming again soon. We ask the Lord to expand the rooms of our hearts, and we put our hope in the One who will not falter until he establishes justice on earth. *Lord, come make all things new.*

---

**Sarah Shin** is the author of *Beyond Colorblind: Redeeming Our Ethnic Journey* and works for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.

**A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. . . . He will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth.**

Isaiah 42:3–4

## Read

Isaiah 11:1–5, 42:1–7. Why is God's justice and compassion meaningful to you? Who are the “islands” around you who need his justice and compassion?



# Ancient Hope

Israel always longed for a righteous king. A king who would rule as if he were God himself. One who would rule in righteousness. One who would see that the widow and the orphan, the foreigner, the immigrant, everyone who was on the outside, would have access to the good blessings of the kingdom. This kingdom would be a place of mercy. At times they had kings who sort of ruled in that way, but mostly they had kings who were severely compromised. Many of the kings were cowards and sought their own good over their people's good. Many of them sacrificed even their own young for the sake of wealth that they could gather.

If you read the Old Testament prophetic books, you understand that even though the people of Israel were to live in God's way, they were deeply entangled in idolatry and materialism. They walked outside of the way of God. They lost sight of the goodness of God. Because of their decisions, they were disciplined. They were sent away in slavery and exile; they lived as a people in captivity. The longing of their hearts, even in captivity, was for a great king

**But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah . . . out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.**

Micah 5:2



to come, to rescue them, and to restore the way of God and the goodness of God.

In the midst of their darkest days, their hope was lifted up by the prophetic promises that you read all throughout the Old Testament. Micah 5 says this to a people who were in exile and captivity, “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times” (v. 2). It says about this great king: “He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they [the people of God] will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be our peace” (vv. 4–5).

This is the ancient hope of Israel. When times were darkest, when life was hitting rock bottom, the prophets would urge the people to never, ever lose hope because one day this king would come and the people of God, like sheep, would be well fed, all their enemies would be driven away, and they would live in peace.

---

**Brad Wong** is the lead pastor of The River Church Community in San Jose, California.

### Consider

Micah 5:2–5. How did this prophecy (referenced by the wise men in Matthew 2:5–6) speak to Israel’s deepest hopes? How does it speak to yours?

# Ideas for Families

*Select one or two of these experiences to do as a family during this first week of Advent.*

- Find an online recipe for air-dry or no-bake salt dough, then use it to make simple Christmas tree ornaments as a family. The ornaments will need to dry for one or more days before they can be decorated (paint, sequins, glitter, and so on). Use the experience of waiting for the dough to harden as an opportunity to talk about Advent as a season of waiting. What is it like to wait? What were God's people in the Old Testament waiting for? What are we waiting for?
- Sing the hymns "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" and "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus." Discuss phrases from the lyrics that stand out most to each family member.
- Read Revelation 21:1–22:5 together and consider what we hope for. Have family members write words or draw pictures representing ideas in the passage on self-adhesive notes. Then work together to create a "hope collage" by sticking the notes on a wall of your house.
- Look at the newspaper or online news sites for examples of recent events that are painful, unjust, ugly, or feel hopeless. Use this experience to discuss what we long for: the return of Christ and the reign of his just and righteous kingdom. Praise God, together, for the longing he stirs up in us and for the hope he brings us.
- Read Isaiah 9:2 and 60:3, then turn off the lights and pray by candlelight. (Keep your eyes open as you do so.) Alternately, if weather permits, bundle up to go outside in the evening; read these passages and pray as you look at the night sky together. Together, praise God for being the light that illuminates our darkness.

*This devotional is perfect to use in a small group. Ask group members to read each day's reading. During your weekly meeting, choose from these questions and activities to supplement what you've read during the week.*

## **ICEBREAKERS**

- What is one of your favorite Christmas memories from childhood?
- When do you put up your Christmas tree (or other decorations)? Do you have any traditions around decorating your tree?
- What comes to mind when you think about light in the darkness?

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- How have you observed Advent in the past?
- What do you hope to learn or gain as you observe Advent this year?
- What thoughts or feelings come to you when you consider Jesus as a light in the darkness?
- How does Advent point us to the second coming of Christ?
- In your life of faith, how much emphasis do you place on Christ's return? How does it affect your day-to-day life?

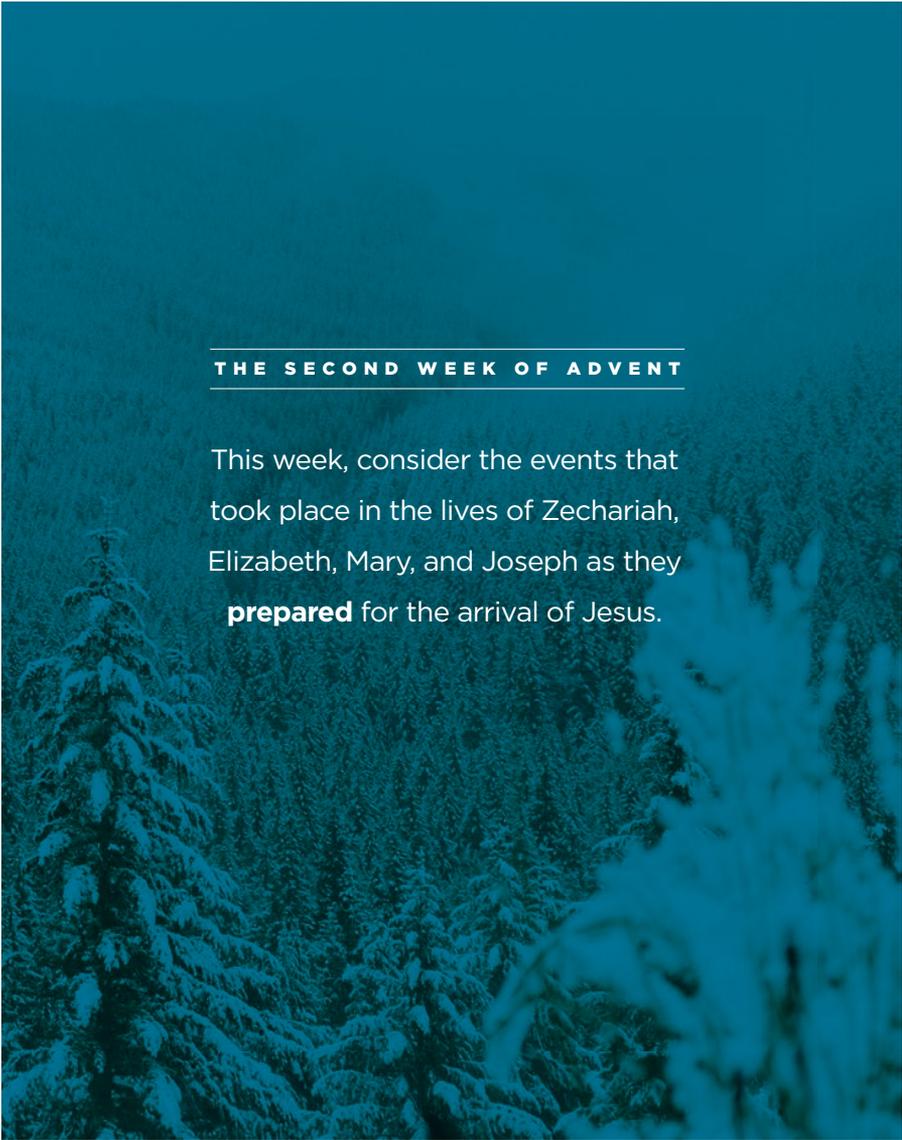
## **OTHER IDEAS**

- Brainstorm ideas of what it looks like to be a light in the darkness in your job, school, or community. Choose one action you'll take this week to bring the light of Christ to those around you in a tangible way.
- Ask group members to think of someone they know who consistently brings light to the people and places around them. What does he or she do?



Prepare  
FOR THE  
Lord

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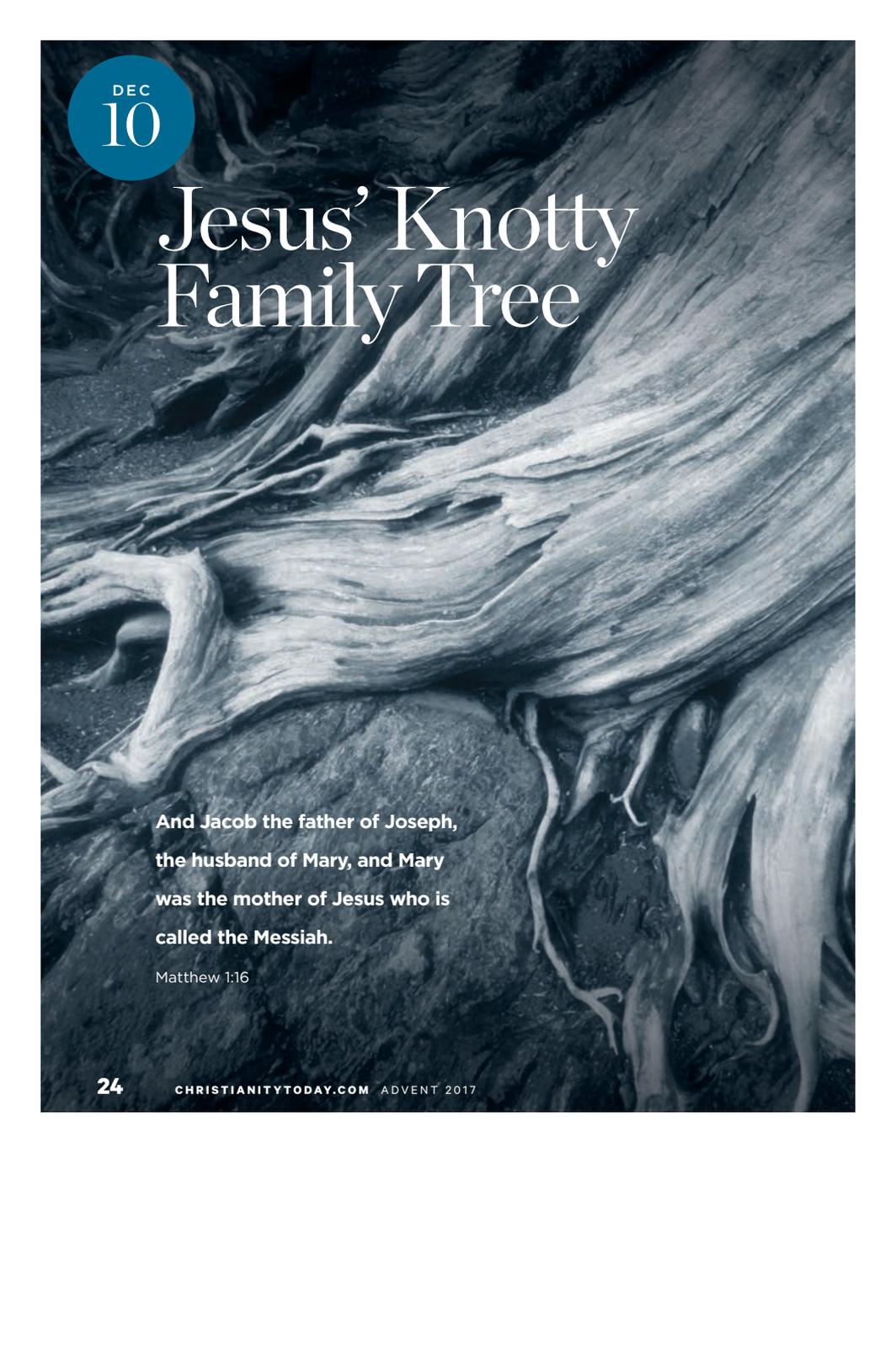


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THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

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This week, consider the events that took place in the lives of Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and Joseph as they **prepared** for the arrival of Jesus.



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# Jesus' Knotty Family Tree

And Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah.

Matthew 1:16

**M**atthew 1:1–17 is one of the dreaded genealogies, with hard-to-pronounce names and no storyline (or so it seems). Yet behind the sometimes unfamiliar names, this text is jam-packed full of stories of how God worked through the messy lives of women and men. This genealogy is a little different, as it sprinkles in a few mothers in the long line of fathers: Tamar, who seduced her father-in-law, Judah, by pretending to be a prostitute; the Canaanite Rahab who actually was a prostitute; the Moabite Ruth; Uriah's wife, whom we know as Bathsheba; and Mary, the mother of Jesus. Here are these five women, standing out amid all the fathers, with a long back story packed into each of their names. Matthew 1 is an embarrassing genealogy—embarrassingly glorious in the way God worked in and through these lives.

Consider the story of Rahab (Joshua 2): A woman with little power, no prestige, and no future, was given power and the opportunity to serve God's people. And she did. Rahab resisted her culture: She saw something within the story of the God of the Israelites that compelled her to fear God and pledge her and her family's lives on her promise of silence.

The story of Rahab is the story of one woman's act of resistance. Rahab's story contrasts greatly with the kinds of stories our culture tells at

Christmastime: stories of happiness, of material success, of glitter and glamour. Matthew is clear that the family tree of Jesus was not a symmetrical, pristine fir. It's knotty (and naughty) and complicated. This was the family Jesus entered, the world Jesus entered, and when we're honest, it's the world in which we all live.

*Advent* isn't just a Christian word for the days leading up to Christmas. The other-worldly call of Advent is to a life of resistance to the gods of this age as we wait, with 2,000 years of Christians before us, for Christ to come and finish his new creation.

Taking time to notice God's work within Matthew 1 may provide us an opportunity to recognize God's work within our own genealogies, our spiritual and biological family trees. This Advent, invite the Holy Spirit to reframe your past, allowing you to revisit your own story in a way that enlightens and demonstrates the beauty of asymmetry, the grace of twisted trees.

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**Joy-Elizabeth Lawrence** is the pastor of spiritual formation at Hinsdale Covenant Church. She lives in the Chicago area with her husband and children.

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### **Contemplate**

Matthew 1:1–17. What significance do you find in the messy stories and lives included in Jesus' genealogy?



# Divine Orchestration

**He will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah . . . to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.**

Luke 1:17

## Reflect

on Luke 1:5–25, 57–80. What does Luke's account reveal about God? How do you imagine Zechariah and Elizabeth were changed by these events?

THERE'S A WHOLE scene relating to the birth of Jesus Christ that Luke paints for us which we might tend to miss. To fully understand the Christmas story, we must juxtapose *two* stories: the birth of John and the birth of Jesus.

These two stories are placed side by side by the author, Luke, because to get the impact of Jesus in the manger, you've also got to get the impact of John in Elizabeth's belly. In order to get the impact of Mary being a virgin, you have to also get the impact of Elizabeth being barren. In order to get the impact of Joseph being the espoused husband to Mary, you're going to have to also get the impact of Zechariah going to the temple on his appointed day. In order to get the impact of Gabriel coming with the message to Mary, you must first see Gabriel being sent by God to Zechariah. In order to get the impact of the Jesus story, Luke, the investigative doctor, tells us we must also have the impact of the birth of John.

Luke tells us God created a situation that not only gave birth to John (whom the Old Testament predicted), but that God came up with a plan that miraculously produced John through Elizabeth and Zechariah. He made sure that Elizabeth and Zechariah were related to Mary, because Mary would need Elizabeth and Zechariah to validate what was getting ready to happen to her. The birth of Jesus Christ, while miraculous in and of itself, is surrounded by an orchestration of the will of God.

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**Tony Evans** is the founder of The Urban Alternative, the senior pastor of Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship, and the author of *Kingdom Man*.

# Highly Favored

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“GREETINGS, YOU WHO are highly favored!” Biblical commentators have fun speculating why Mary was greeted like this. She is often pictured as a devout young woman, pure in heart, whose righteousness won her the honor of bearing Jesus. But in fact, the Bible shows no interest whatsoever in Mary’s life prior to this moment (and relatively little afterward). This announcement to Mary comes completely out of the blue, as if it were an act of sheer grace.

Indeed, an act of grace to Mary and to us. Before we could decide for or against God, before we could show him how religious we are, before we could ask forgiveness for our first sin, before we were the apple of our parents’ eyes, before the foundation of the world, God favored us. Not because he knew we would blossom into greatness. Not because he saw that we would become good Christians someday. Not even because we were humble enough to know we are not good Christians (which is really a kind of stealth pride!). No, we were favored when God knew well enough that we would fail to live up to our potential, that most days we would be miserable little disciples. Yes, in spite of the fact that we would be sad, fearful, doubting, anxious, and sinful people, he favored us.

He has shown his favor in many ways, more than the number of hairs on our head, but every sign of his favor is grounded in the one sign: when he became one *of* us, one *with* us. He did so that we might become not only like him, but—and here’s the sheer grace of it all—one *with him*. Is there any greater favor than to share intimately in the life of God himself?

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**Mark Galli** is editor in chief of Christianity Today.

**The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”**

Luke 1:28

## Read

Luke 1:26–38, then focus on verse 28. What did God’s favor mean to Mary? What does it mean in your life?

# Mary's Powerful Yes

**T**he angel basically says to Mary, “Even though you are not married and still a virgin, you are going to give birth to the savior of the world. You, an unknown girl from an unknown place, will do this very thing, and it is going to interrupt your life. It is going to wreck your peace and your sleep and your friendships, and every inch of your world is going to change. You are the one who is going to do this. His name is going to be Jesus, and one day he will sit on the throne of God and rule forever.”

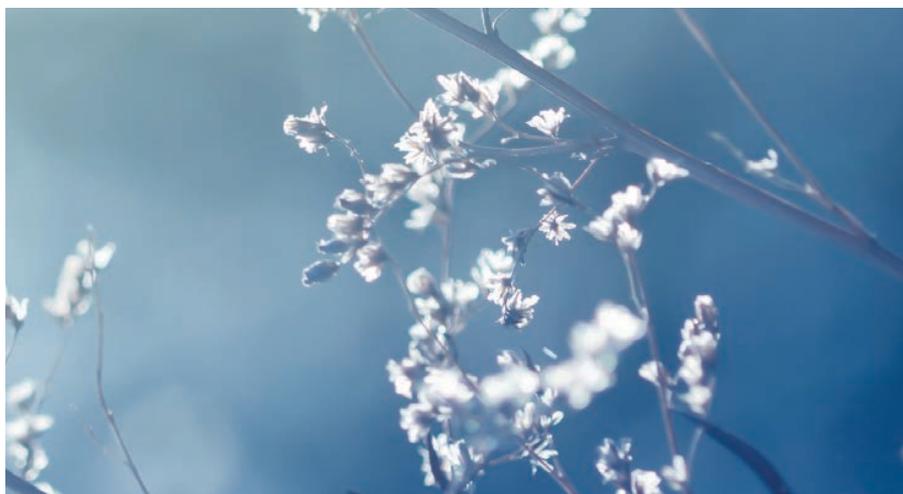
**“I am the Lord’s servant,”  
Mary answered. “May your  
word to me be fulfilled.”**

Luke 1:38

Mary nods her head in consent. “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled” (Luke 1:38).

Mary’s yes was not a muffled consent that led her to a joyful pregnancy, filled with adoring friends and sweet baby showers. Her life instantly became a cascade of gossip and drama—and her very decision to say yes was met with the threat of death.

A woman pregnant before the wedding was assumed to be an adulteress. Scot McKnight points out that at this time, if a suspected adulteress maintained her innocence—as Mary



would have done—she would be taken to a public place (perhaps the gate to the city), her clothing would be torn, and her hair let down (which was how prostitutes at that time wore their hair). She would be left there to be mocked and open to public humiliation. The cultural expectation was that passersby would mock and humiliate her to make an example of her. In Deuteronomy 22, the penalty, if she was taken as an adulteress, could be death by stoning. Mary's yes to God came with great risk—as a yes to God often does.

There was great power in her yes. Mary knew the story of her people, God's people, and the way God took care of his people—in particular, the women who came before her. Women like Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. While Mary knew her situation was dire, she also worshiped a God who cared for his people as they faced dire circumstances. God does not promise relief from trouble, but he promises his presence in times of trouble. Mary worshiped this God and could say yes with great confidence in that God.

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**Tracey Bianchi** is a writer, speaker, and the worship and teaching pastor at Christ Church of Oak Brook, Illinois.

**Meditate**

on Luke 1:26–38. How does Mary's response to God convict, inspire, or challenge you?

# A Declaration of War

**I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.**

Genesis 3:15

## Consider

Genesis 3 alongside Luke 1:26–38. How does the prophecy in Genesis 3:15 deepen your reading of the angel's announcement to Mary?

WHAT HAPPENED WITH Mary, as she listened to this angelic visitor, was prophesied a long time before. In a Garden somewhere in an unknown location there was another woman standing with her husband after they had eaten of a fruit and rebelled against the God who created them. A word came not to them but to another angel, a rebel angel, a snake—Satan. God told this devil that the day was coming when the offspring of the woman “will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Gen. 3:15).

The Virgin Birth is not simply a sweet Christmas story. The Virgin Birth is not a comforting idea. The Virgin Birth is scary, because if we understand what is going on here, we will see that in the uterus of this little Nazarene virgin girl, God is declaring war.

When Mary finds out she's pregnant, the satanic powers go into overdrive. Later they try to tempt her son. They try to destroy him. Ultimately, he is led by his friends and countrymen toward an execution stake where he will suffer the entire curse of death and agony—but even in that, especially in that, he is turning back the snake's power.

God is saying to you exactly what God said in the Virgin Birth to the entire human race: You cannot fix this. Give up and find the freedom that comes in this infant who will grow up to be crucified and raised from the dead. Perhaps what all of us need this holiday season is to cry out with gratitude to a God who fought our Enemy for us. Perhaps we need to say, “All I want for Christmas is a crushed snake skull.” That's the gospel.

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**Russell Moore** is the president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.

# The Magnificat

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ONE PLACE WHERE the prophetic Old Testament message penetrates the story of Jesus is in his mother's song, the Magnificat. We will understand it better if we remember that Mary is from the bottom rung of her society, one of the least and lowest, a member of the group called the *Anawim* that longs for justice.

Over familiarity has caused the Magnificat to lose much of its edge, but when it is put next to its prototype, the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1–10, the theme of justice for those on the bottom of the socioeconomic scale jumps out at us. Both of these canticles are rapturous in their expression; they are outbursts of joy. God's justice will involve a dramatic reversal, however, which will not necessarily be received as good news by those presently on top of the heap. Hannah rejoices in the same terms as Mary: "My heart exults in the Lord. . . . He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor" (1 Sam. 2:1, 8, NRSV).

We can see from all this that the coming of the Lord was not projected as an altogether comfortable event. Those who thought they were secure were going to find that they had built on the wrong foundation. Those who counted on their accomplishments were going to find disreputable people taking up their space. Those who had been religiously observant all their lives were going to discover that God may have been looking for something else. The coming of the Messiah might, indeed, bring not peace "but a sword" (Matt. 10:34).

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**Fleming Rutledge** is the author of *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*, CT's Book of the Year in 2017.

**My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.**

[Luke 1:46–48](#)

### Compare

Luke 1:39–56 to  
1 Samuel 2:1–10.

How do the themes of God's justice and compassion enrich your understanding of Jesus' mission?

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# A Righteous Struggle

**J**oseph was a righteous man (Matt. 1:19). The girl he has promised to marry is going to have a baby, and whoever the father is, Joseph knows it's not him. Joseph must have agonized over this day after day.

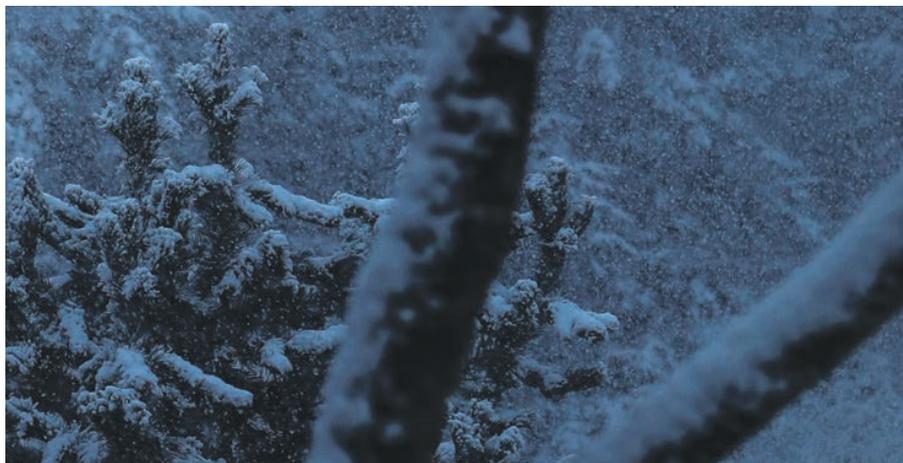
When the angel comes to Joseph, Joseph, of course, already knows Mary is pregnant. How did he find out? Mary would have told him. Imagine how she must have protested to him about her innocence. Imagine Joseph's struggle. An angel? A virgin birth? No way. So he decides to divorce her quietly.

Because we live on the other side of Christmas, we want to rush to the end of the story where everything turns out okay. You might even be tempted to think Joseph was slow spiritually and should have figured out what was going on a lot sooner. But if you do that, you miss the whole point of what Joseph is learning, and of what we can learn from him.

God sends a message to Joseph: "After he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream." Why did God make Joseph wait until after he had to think and struggle

**Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.**

Matthew 1:20



with all this stuff? Why couldn't an angel come to him ahead of time and explain everything and remove that anxiety?

Is it possible that anxiety removal is not God's number one goal for Joseph—or maybe for you and me? Is it possible that in getting his world turned upside down, in having to struggle between what he thought a righteous man ought to do and his longing to show compassion to this young girl, maybe Joseph was being prepared by God to come to a new understanding of what righteousness is?

The angel says, "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife." Why would Joseph be afraid to wed Mary? If he married her, his friends would never accept his account of what happened. If he committed himself to this baby, he would do so at enormous sacrifice. His whole reputation, the work of a lifetime, would be trashed.

When Joseph made the decision to wed Mary, he thought it was the end of his being known as a righteous man. He did not know fully that the child he would adopt would bring to the human race a new kind of righteousness.

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**John Ortberg** is the senior pastor at Menlo Church and the author of several books, including *I'd Like You More If You Were More Like Me*.

### **Reflect**

on Matthew 1:18–25. How might you have felt in Joseph's situation? How do you imagine he was changed by this experience?

# Ideas for Families

*Select one or two of these experiences to do as a family during this second week of Advent.*

- Discuss Mary's and Zechariah's prayer songs in Luke 1:46–55 and 67–79. Which expressions resonate most with family members? Why? Pray together by drawing upon words and phrases from the prayers of Mary and Zechariah.
- Sing the hymn “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence” and reflect on Zechariah's experience of silence. Sing “Of the Father's Love Begotten” and consider the angel's announcement to Mary.
- Prepare a family meal together, giving everyone responsibilities: planning the menu, shopping for groceries, cooking, cleaning, setting the table, and so on. As you sit together to enjoy the meal, talk about the process of preparation. What was it like to prepare for this meal? This week's devotions explore how people prepared for the birth of Jesus. What does it mean to prepare for the Lord?
- Read Luke 1:26–38, then look together at art depicting the Annunciation (there are many classic paintings available to view online). As a family, identify the ideas and moods each painting seems to be conveying. Invite each family member to share their favorite and explain why.
- Go on a “choice drive” as a family. At each intersection, let a different family member choose if you'll turn right, left, or go straight. Afterward use this experience to talk about the many points of decision that faced Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and Joseph in Luke 1. How might they have felt in these situations? What do you think motivated their choices or responses? What can we learn from them?

*Ask group members to read each day's reading, then choose from these questions and activities to supplement what you've read during the week. To incorporate Scripture, choose from any of the passages used this week.*

## ICEBREAKERS

- What is the best Christmas gift you've ever received? Why was it so meaningful?
- Who do you know who exhibits strength and faith in the midst of uncertainty or waiting? How do they exhibit strength and faith?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

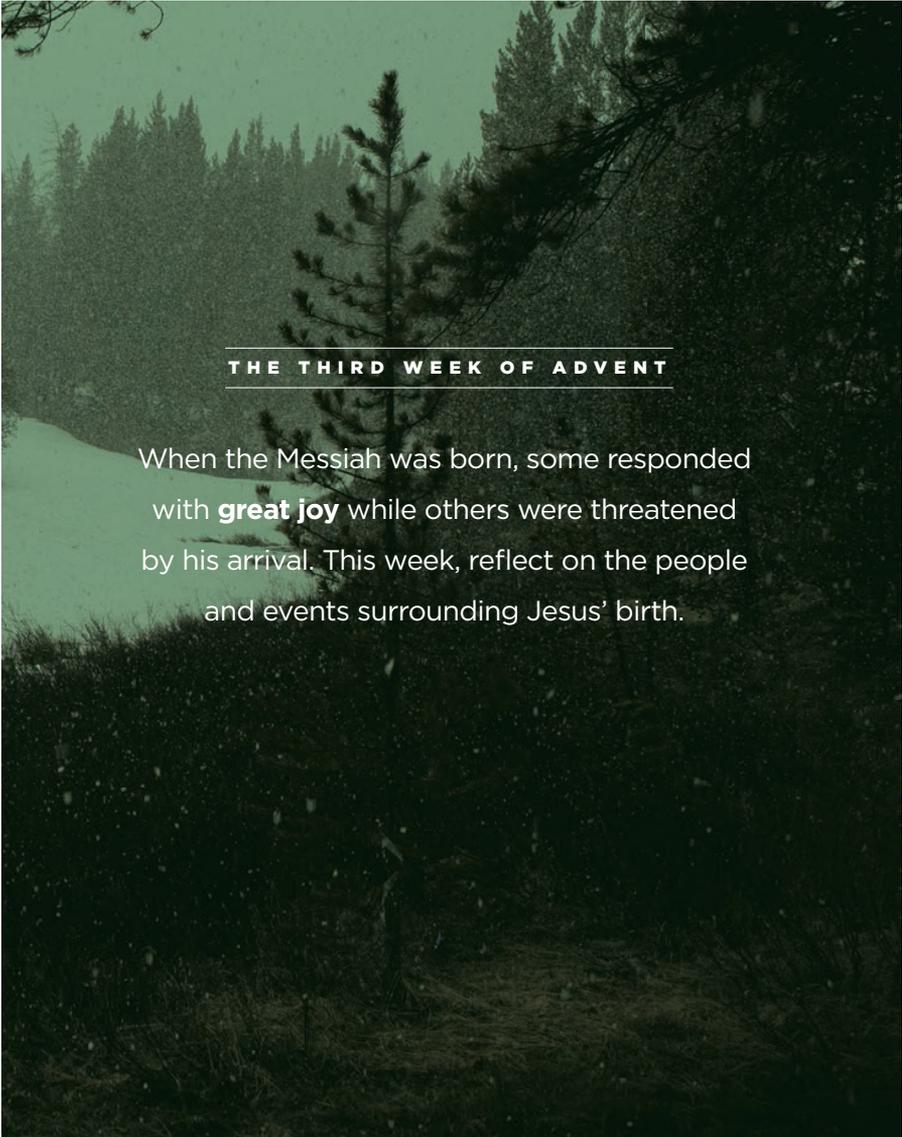
- Read Luke 1:26–38 in several different translations. What new things do you notice about this familiar story?
- Mary responded to a major divine interruption with faith. What divine interruptions have you experienced? What is your natural reaction to these interruptions?
- Evangelicals rarely focus on Mary. Why do you think that is, and what can we learn from her?

## OTHER IDEAS

- Read Luke 1:46–56 and discuss the things for which Mary praised God. Why do you think she praised him for these things?
- Follow Mary's example and lead a unique group prayer time. Invite each person to pray by finishing this sentence: *I praise you, God, because \_\_\_\_\_*. Allow group members to pray as many times as they'd like, listing additional reasons.
- Ask group members to think of someone they know who exhibits strength and faith in the midst of waiting. Have them send a note this week to the people they think of, thanking them for their example.



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THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

When the Messiah was born, some responded with **great joy** while others were threatened by his arrival. This week, reflect on the people and events surrounding Jesus' birth.

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# God with Us

The time came  
for the baby to  
be born, and she  
gave birth to her  
firstborn, a son.

She wrapped him in  
cloths and placed  
him in a manger.

Luke 2:6-7

**T**he Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). He moved to our world. He was born to one of our women, in one of our stables, in one of our villages, in one of our countries, right here on our earth.

The Son of God became limited by space. This eternal, powerful Son of God left heaven and became contained in a microscopic human embryo. He had not yet formed eyes or hands or feet or brain. God was contained. God, who is described in John 1 as the light, for nine months was in total darkness. And when he was finally born, he looked like any other human, maybe seven pounds in weight, unable to feed himself, with eyes slow to focus, hands not quite able to grasp, certainly unable to speak, wearing diapers, totally dependent upon a recently married couple for every necessity of life. And he was the Son of God.

What an incredible journey that he became human for us in order to reach us, in order to communicate to us in our language, in order to save us from sin and death.

The body that was conceived inside of Mary is the same body that was born on Christmas Day, the same body that

grew up in Egypt and in Nazareth. It is the same body that was crucified on the cross, the same body that was laid in the grave, the same body that rose back to life on Easter Sunday morning. It was the same body that ascended up into heaven and is there now. It is the same body that the Bible predicts and Jesus promises will come back to earth again. It is the same body he will wear forever and ever through all of eternity.

The Christmas story is a story of journeys. It is the journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It is the journey of the angels from heaven to earth. It is the journey of the shepherds from the hills and to the village of Bethlehem. But the greatest journey of all is the journey of the Son of God from heaven to earth, from eternity to time, from spirit to body, from deity to humanity.

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**Leith Anderson** served as a senior pastor for 35 years and is president of the National Association of Evangelicals.

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**Read** Luke 2:1–7 alongside Matthew 1:23 and John 1:14. How does the Nativity account shape your view of Christ as Immanuel, “God with us”?

# Choosing the Lowly

**Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.**

Luke 2:10

## Reflect

on Luke 2:8–20.  
Who would you consider to be on the lowest rungs of society today? How do you think God regards them?

IN 2013, the *Seattle Times* reported that Jorge Mario Bergoglio, now Pope Francis, used to sneak out of his archbishop's residence in Buenos Aires, Argentina, to eat with the poor. His escapades in befriending, communing with, and personally helping the destitute living in Buenos Aires help fuel rumors that he currently sneaks out of the papal residence to befriend the poor and give them alms, reflecting God's posture toward those on the lowest rungs of society.

As Isaiah 57:15 tells us, "I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite." Our God is renowned for elevating, dwelling with, and even being born among the lowly.

When the King and Creator of the universe was born as a vulnerable baby, an angel announced his coming to shepherds. Then a whole host of angels lit up the night sky and erupted into a private concert of praise in the countryside. In the first century, shepherds were considered the dregs of society—bottom dwellers. Yet angelic messengers ceremoniously delivered Jesus' birth announcement to them first.

The gospel turns the world's pecking order on its head. Jesus's mother, Mary, understood this and proclaimed in song, "He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble" (Luke 1:52).

What kind of God is this who often chooses to reveal himself to the lowly, first and foremost? We consistently see this loving posture toward the lowly throughout Scripture. May we have the same posture, that we may be more like him.

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**Marlena Graves** is the author of *A Beautiful Disaster: Finding Hope in the Midst of Brokenness*. She lives in Toledo, Ohio.

# Seeing the Gift

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IN LUKE 2, when Jesus is presented at the temple, a devout old man named Simeon rises to meet him. Simeon immediately recognizes that Jesus is nothing less than the Messiah, and praises God that he was able to lay eyes on the Christ, even going so far as to say that now he can die in peace. But what exactly did Simeon see that day? Did a divine sheen surround Jesus, or did Jesus make the sign of the cross with his chubby little fingers? No, from what we can read in the passage, Jesus performs no miracle of any kind, and probably seemed like an ordinary baby.

So why does Simeon react as if he does, as if he had just witnessed a profound miracle of the highest degree? I think this can be partly explained by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, that it was the Holy Spirit who brought Simeon to Jesus and revealed Jesus' true identity to him. What a reminder that we need the Spirit to see Jesus clearly!

But the passage also says that Simeon had been a devout and righteous man his entire life. And being a man who had cultivated an intimate relationship with God for so long, he knows that God is both good and loving, and that whomever God sent to Israel would be good and loving as well. Simeon didn't need to see Jesus do anything amazing to know that he was amazing. Because Simeon trusted the Giver, he was able to see the Gift for what he truly was.

In our own lives, due to our incredibly limited wisdom and comprehension, very rarely will we be able to grasp the true worth of that which God gives us. In moments when we can't comprehend what God is doing, we have to take our eyes off the "gift" and focus instead on the Giver.

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**Peter Chin** is lead pastor of Rainier Avenue Church in Seattle, Washington, and the author of *Blindsided by God*.

**For my eyes  
have seen  
your salvation,  
which you have  
prepared in  
the sight of all  
nations.**

Luke 2:30-31

## Read

Luke 2:21-35.

What do these events reveal about Simeon's intimate relationship with God?

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# Looking for Christ

**Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.**

Luke 2:38

**M**y grandmother started her Christmas season early. Right after Thanksgiving, she launched into gift giving—mailing wrapped presents to my sister and me, each gift selected from the modest general store she'd struggled to own and operate in her all-black St. Louis neighborhood. Yet with every package, my sister and I only begged. *Can we open it?* We failed to see our grandmother's sacrifice, so our mother cut short our excitement. "Christmas won't be here for weeks," she said. "Leave those packages alone."

Instead, Mama piled the boxes in a corner of our small living room. There they sat, willing to be secretly touched, shaken, caressed, smelled, hugged, maybe loved. Then *finally*, as my sister and I saw it, our thrifty parents bought a discounted Christmas tree (when prices dropped). They then placed our grandmother's presents under our tree to wait for Christmas morning.

It was a long wait. My sister and I grew cranky and complaining, longing to rip open gifts we didn't fully appreciate.

To see a gift's true value, we could have learned a lesson from Anna. She's the prophet in the Gospel of Luke who was widowed at a young age, then lived as a widow in the temple

PHOTO BY JONATAN PIE / UNSPLASH



until age 84. Eager to see the Messiah arrive as Savior of Jerusalem—yes, as the world’s great gift—Anna “never left the temple.” She spent her years not cranky and complaining, but worshiping “night and day, fasting and praying” (2:37). As Anna understood, seeing God for who he is means spending time in his service.

I’ve understood that in theory. Then, recently, my husband, Dan, was diagnosed with “aggressive high-risk” prostate cancer. His doctors are optimistic, expecting a cure. But the prescribed treatment could take two years—plus a lot of patience. During this difficult season, Dan could focus on himself. Or he could serve others by taking part in a clinical trial that involves risks. His choice? While looking for healing, Dan is helping doctors worldwide learn what works best.

Such sacrificial service, as Anna knew, gives perspective to a long wait. When Anna finally saw the infant Christ, she recognized God. Then she immediately evangelized. She “spoke about the child to all” who’d waited for his rescue (v. 38). My husband does that now. Waiting for a cure, he talks of Christ, telling everyone that he is coming, just as he said.

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**Patricia Raybon** is an award-winning author of books and essays on faith, race, and grace.

### Consider

Luke 2:36–38.

How can you best serve others while waiting to see Christ?

# Worth the Journey

**On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him.**

Matthew 2:11

## Contemplate

Matthew 2:1-12.

What words would you use to characterize the wise men's pursuit of truth? What is most compelling to you about their example?

THE MAGI WERE thoroughly, completely pagan. But they had this inkling that there was truth out there worth the longest, most dangerous, most arduous journey—worth bringing their best gifts for. Something in their hearts that said, *There's something out there. Let's go looking.* They decided to go hundreds of miles at great expense to try to find out if it was true. The people least in possession of the truth were those most passionately in pursuit of it.

These Magi men come into Jerusalem and they're not guarded at all. They're asking everybody, "Where's this king that was to be born? We want to see him and worship him. Do you know where he is?"

Their question finally reaches Herod, who is disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. It's interesting that Herod gives the best piece of advice in the story: "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him" (Matt. 2:8). He's lying. He's not going to worship; he's going to go with a dagger hidden in his cloak. But would you pay attention to what Herod is saying here?

*Go and make a careful search for Christ.* When you find him, worship him and tell others, that they might worship as well. He is the one worthy of the long journey. He's the one worthy of all the gifts you might give him; gold, incense, whatever precious thing you've got. He's the one for whom it's worth it to defy a king and take the long way home—which is what these men do. They will inconvenience themselves however they must—because this is Christ the Lord.

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**Mark Buchanan** is an associate professor of pastoral theology at Ambrose Seminary and the author of numerous books including *Your Church Is Too Safe*.

# Born King

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MATTHEW 2:1–2 TELLS US: “During the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?’”

Those two verses stirred up a hornet’s nest. Do you see the problem in Herod’s mind? He senses that he’s about to lose power and influence to this newborn king. Never mind the fact that Herod is around 70 and this is an infant. Herod is threatened—the news of the Magi coming in search of this baby was unsettling to him.

Herod’s immediate response to the Magi was to attempt to manipulate them into divulging the location of his rival (vv. 7–8). But after they visit the baby, the Magi do not return to Herod because God warns them in a dream. They begin to realize that a new king is always a threat to those who love power.

We’re not typically threatened by a little baby, but neither do we want to bow before a king. It’s not just King Herod who has been threatened by the birth of the Christ child. We, too, don’t want him to tell us right and wrong. We say, “I’ll date who I want to date.” “I’ll marry who I want to marry.” “We will raise our kids the way we want to.” “I’ll manage my resources the way I want to manage them.” “I will determine my morality.” “I will sit on the throne of my life.”

Mankind’s first reaction to someone else sitting on the throne of our life was rebellion. Herod was threatened by the coming of Christ. Don’t make the same mistake; we must be willing to give up our puny dynasties for a higher authority.

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**Dave Stone** is senior pastor of Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky.

**When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.**

Matthew 2:3

## Revisit

Matthew 2:1–12, focusing now on Herod. How does Jesus’ authority as King of Kings challenge your own sense of autonomy?



# Blood in Bethlehem

**K**ing Herod the Great—threatened by talk of a new king of the Jews that might upset his political alliance between the Jewish authorities and the Romans—decided to stand up and act like a king. He massacred all the boy babies around Bethlehem. And how that story contrasts with our cherished views of Christmas.

“Oh little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.” That’s a lie. *Oh, little town of Bethlehem made miserable by the birth of Jesus.* Streets running red with blood while mothers wail for their lost children—that’s the way the Bible does Bethlehem.

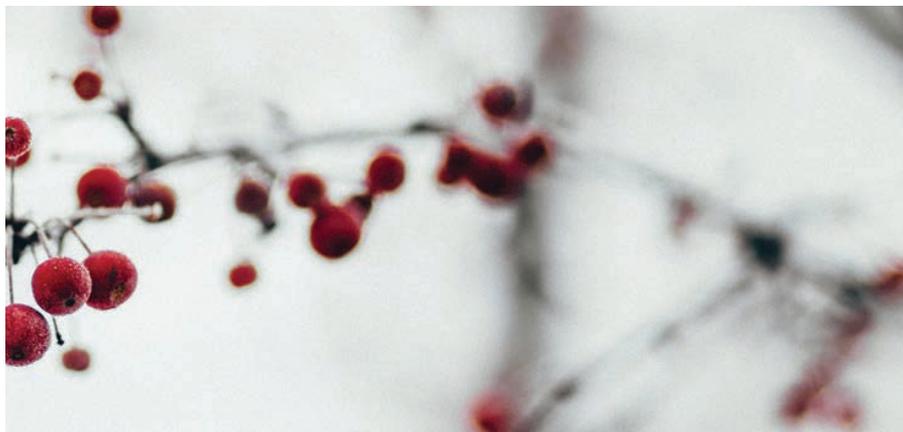
Matthew’s Christmas pageant ends not with tinsel-covered angels proclaiming goodwill but with Rachel weeping for her slaughtered babies. Herod was no fool. He’d been in power long enough to be able to tell a political rival when he saw one.

Thus, Herod joins other political leaders—Hitler, Pol Pot, Stalin, Mao—those who didn’t mind a little murder, particularly of children, in order to advance political ideals.

We don’t like this Christmas story. But the Bible, thank God, always tells the truth, and it calls it Bethlehem.

**When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under.**

Matthew 2:16



At the end of the story of the Nativity, after the angels go back to wherever they came from and after the shepherds and the wise men go home and the baby Jesus and his family head for Egypt as refugees, we hear the screams of mothers weeping for Jewish babies. Our nose gets rubbed in the politics of it all, and the blood and pain and sorrow, before the Bible will let us leave Bethlehem. And even though this is not the Christmas story we want, it may be the Christmas story we need, because any God who is unwilling to come to Bethlehem won't do us much good. If any God is going to save us, God will have to come down, down to where we are, because we can never get up to God.

At Bethlehem we see a prelude to events that take place later at a hill just up the road called Calvary. The one called King of the Jews goes head to head with our kings and our kingdoms, our politics and our power; and there is pain and violence, and there is weeping and blood. At last Herod will get his way with Mary's baby. And Matthew says all of this was for us and our salvation. All in the name of love, all for us. And it began in Bethlehem.

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**William H. Willimon** is professor of the practice of Christian ministry at Duke Divinity School.

**Read**

Matthew 2:13-18.  
Why is the Slaughter of the Innocents an important part of the Nativity story? What might we lose if we skip or ignore it?

# Ideas for Families

*Select one or two of these experiences to do as a family during this third week of Advent.*

- The angel declared Jesus' birth was "good news that will cause great joy for all the people" (Luke 2:10). Discuss each of these phrases as a family: *good news, great joy, all people*. What do they really mean? Why are they important?
- Gather some baby or kid supplies to use as object lessons: diapers, bottles, Band-Aids, teddy bears, and so on. Invite family members to each hold an item as you discuss what it is like to be a child or a little kid. Contemplate, together, the idea that the God of the universe was born as a human baby!
- Read Matthew 2:1-12 and Luke 2:1-38. As a family, draw quick cartoon sketches of the shepherds, Anna, Simeon, and the Wise Men. Then discuss: Each of these people recognized and honored Jesus for who he was. What does their example show us? What can we learn from them?
- Sing the hymns "Break Forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light" and "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing."
- Gather a baby picture of each family member (if possible, even include images of grandparents and great-grandparents). Look at the pictures and discuss traits of each person you may recognize even when they were babies. Use this experience to talk about how remarkable it was that Simeon and Anna recognized baby Jesus as the promised Messiah.
- Reflect on Anna's immediate response to seeing baby Jesus: telling others about him! Create a Christmas card as a family that tells about Jesus, then mail it to someone to share the good news.

*Ask group members to read each day's reading, then choose from these questions and activities to supplement what you've read during the week. To incorporate Scripture, choose from any of the passages used this week.*

## **ICEBREAKERS**

- The wise men followed the star to find Jesus. What is the "star" that drew you, or is drawing you, to Jesus?
- Bring a basket with the characters of a nativity set to your group meeting. Pass around the basket, asking group members to take turns sharing which character they most relate to this season.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

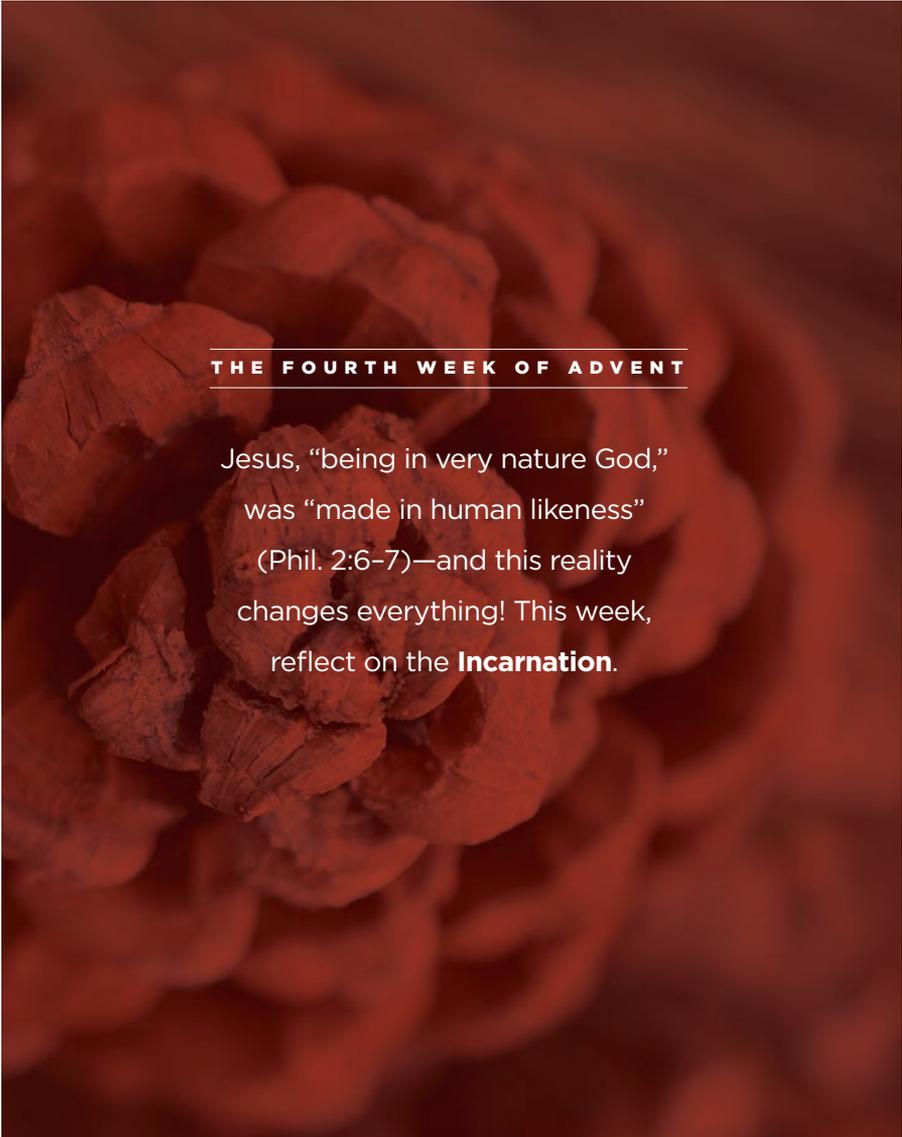
- How did people respond to Jesus? Consider the reactions of Simeon, Anna, Herod, the wise men, and the shepherds.
- Consider the wide variety of people whose stories we get to peek into after Jesus' birth: Simeon, Anna, Herod, the Wise Men, and the shepherds. What do you know about each? Why do you think the reactions from these people were recorded in the Bible?
- Think through the people in your family, church, school, or community and consider how they respond to Jesus' birth. What variety of responses can you imagine?
- Consider your own response to Jesus' birth. What thoughts and feelings does it stir up for you this year?

## **OTHER IDEAS**

- Who are the people in your community who may especially struggle at Christmas? Choose one way your group can reach out to someone this season.
- Choose one person from the nativity story to focus on this week. Imagine yourself in his or her shoes. What thoughts or feelings do you have? What questions cross your mind? Then reflect: What new insights have you gained?

*The*  
WORD  
*Became*  
FLESH

PHOTO BY CAMERON OXLEY / UNSPLASH



THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

Jesus, “being in very nature God,”  
was “made in human likeness”  
(Phil. 2:6-7)—and this reality  
changes everything! This week,  
reflect on the **Incarnation**.

DEC  
24

# God with Skin

The Word became flesh  
and made his dwelling  
among us. We have seen  
his glory, the glory of the  
one and only Son, who  
came from the Father,  
full of grace and truth.

John 1:14



**I**n John 1:1–14, John uses the word *logos*, which is translated as “Word.” *Logos* sounds a lot like words we know, like *logic* or *logical*. When the Greeks heard the term *logos*, they would have thought of the logical, rational principle that they believed governed the world. When John’s fellow Jews heard the word *logos*, they would have thought about the Word—the One whose very nature it is to communicate, to reveal, to express, to connect. They would have thought of the One who, in the words of John Calvin, is and was and always will be the divine “Speech” that seeks to make himself known to us.

On that first Christmas, the divine Speech, the living Word, the rational principle behind the universe, became one of us—took on skin so that we might know him.

At the Council of Nicaea, our spiritual forebears hammered out the Nicene Creed, part of which affirms that Jesus Christ was God, but part of which also affirms that Jesus Christ was mysteriously human. This is more than some kind of abstract theology that makes no difference in our lives; this very truth can change our lives and our eternity.

Jesus Christ was fully human. He knows what it is to be hungry and tired, he knows what it is to be broke. He knows what it is to feel all alone. He even knows what it feels like to have his prayers unanswered and to feel abandoned by

God on the cross. He said, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). Jesus knows what it is to be abused, to be tortured. He knows what it is to be tempted to sin. And though he didn’t sin, he knows the feeling of shame that comes from sin because on the cross he absorbed our sins and our shame, and the sins and shame of the world. No matter what it is you’re going through, Jesus understands because he has been through it and he stands with you in your pain, tribulation, or hardship.

God took on skin so that we might know him. God took on skin so that he might more fully know us through human experience. And God also took on skin so that we might become like him. Our text says, “To all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become the children of God” (John 1:12)—to become people who bear in our very being, as John says, “the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (1:14).

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**Ken Shigematsu** is senior pastor of Tenth Church in Vancouver, British Columbia, and the author of *God in My Everything*.

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**Meditate** on John 1:1–18 and Philippians 2:5–11, reflecting on the meaning of the Incarnation. How do you desire to respond to God?

DEC  
25

# Shine His Light

**The light  
shines in the  
darkness, and  
the darkness  
has not  
overcome it.**

John 1:5

Imagine, in the beginning, this grand conductor  
Hands poised in silence and darkness  
Telling instruments when to ascend their notes  
With one brush of his hand  
Stars and sun and moon  
Draw their bows across strings  
And fire up the skies with light  
Water rushes percussive  
Surging and beating its timbre

God's light has a way of changing nothing into something  
This earth we know  
Started off void  
Nothingness  
Until God said "Let there be light"  
And there was light and life and breath  
Shards of brightness interrupted earth's nothingness  
Until earth was never the same again

Our lives started off void  
Until God said let there be light  
We were blind  
With no sight for love or peace  
This is no surprise  
Since the beginning humanity has been hiding  
Using shadow and cloth and figs  
To cover mistakes, imperfection, sin  
But you, God, never hide  
Because you have nothing to be ashamed of  
Nothing to be guilty of, nothing to hide from  
No matter how hard we try we cannot hide from you

So you sent your Son  
Who carried heaven's brightness around his shoulders  
Used the light of a star  
To lead three wise men to a lowly manger

To meet a virgin who'd birthed a savior  
For to us a child is born  
To us a Son is given  
Son of God  
Wonderful Counselor  
Emmanuel  
Everlasting Father  
Prince of Peace

A redeemer has come to rescue captives  
To save the prisoners from themselves  
It pierced our eyes  
Cut to our soul  
We could barely lay our sights on him  
Who paid our ransom  
Him, who is the embodiment of light and salvation

The Son of God came to shine  
That our eyes might focus on the one who sent him  
That he may search and know us  
That our hearts may desire to follow him  
That our hearts may be open and laid bare before him  
That we may follow the light of the world  
Walk in the light of the Lord  
That we would be light to a dying world

God is still saying, "Let there be light"  
And his light still shines  
On hearts and souls  
Gives truth and hope

May the way we love  
Shine his light  
May how we spend our cents and seconds  
Shine his light  
May our hearts and minds  
Shine his light  
May our lives  
Shine his light

### Reflect

on Isaiah 9:2;  
Matthew 4:13-17;  
and John 1:4-5, 9.  
How will you shine  
Christ's light?

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**Amena Brown** is a spoken word poet, speaker, event host, and author. Her latest book is *How to Fix a Broken Record*.

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# Ideas for Families

*Select one or two of these experiences to do as a family during this fourth week of Advent.*

- Find inspiration from Amena Brown's poem on pp. 54–55 to write poetry to celebrate Christmas. Either create a poem together as a family, or invite family members to write their own then share them with each other.
- Turn off the lights in your home (other than Christmas tree lights) and use flashlights to play hide-and-seek. Have fun together, then discuss the idea of shining the light of Christ in our own lives.
- Worship God together by singing the hymns “Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne” and “O Come, All Ye Faithful.”
- Shine the light of Jesus by serving a neighbor. For example, you could shovel snow, bake and deliver cookies, invite them over for a meal, or anonymously deliver a care package.
- Together, read Philippians 2:5–11 as a prayer and expression of praise to Jesus.
- Read John 1:1–18 in your Bible and also in The Message paraphrase. Discuss: How does this passage relate to Advent and Christmas?
- Reflect together on the entire Advent season: What is one idea or biblical story that stands out most to each family member? Use colorful dry-erase markers on a window or sliding glass door to create a “stained glass window” together that visually represents each person's answer. When you're done, discuss: How was your faith enriched by our family observing Advent together?



# I Ideas for Groups

*Ask group members to read each day's reading, then choose from these questions and activities to supplement what you've read during the week. To incorporate Scripture, choose from any of the passages used this week.*

## **ICEBREAKERS**

- Share your favorite Christmas tradition from childhood or present-day.
- Tell us about one of your favorite ornaments. What makes it so special?
- What is your favorite Christmas song and why?
- What new hope do you have as you enter the new year?

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- In what ways does Jesus—God in the flesh—reveal God's character to you? How does Jesus expand your understanding of God's love?
- Consider the mystery of God putting on flesh and moving into the neighborhood to be among us. What does it make you feel? What questions come to mind? How does it give you hope?

## **OTHER IDEAS**

- Go caroling as a group. Pick a few favorite songs ahead of time and pass out lyrics.
- After Christmas, throw a party with your small group to celebrate the season. Invite group members to bring a favorite holiday dish to pass. Then share: What new insights do you have into the Christmas story? How did God reveal himself to you this season?
- Read John 1:1–18 together. Our world often feels dark, but Jesus is truly a light in the darkness. Discuss: How have you witnessed Christ's light this season? Who made the light real for you this month?

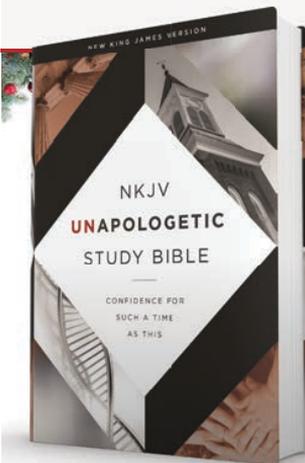
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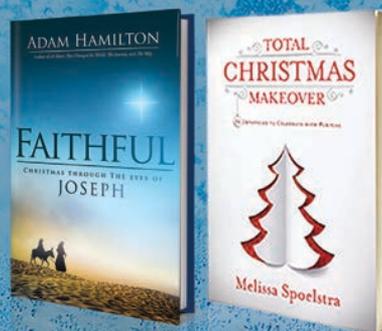


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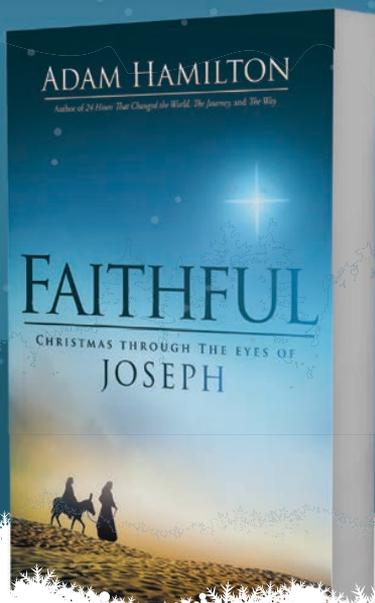
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**Adam Hamilton** is senior pastor of The Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, one of the fastest growing, most highly visible churches in the country. Hamilton is the best-selling and award-winning author of *Moses*, *Creed*, *Half Truths*, *The Call*, *The Journey*, *The Way*, *24 Hours That Changed the World*, *John*, *Revival*, and *Not a Silent Night*.

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