

A 25-DAY ADVENT DEVOTIONAL ON THE COMING OF THE SAVIOR

GOD



with

US



JOSHUA COOLEY



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Merry Christmas!

I don't know about you, but I need those words more than ever right now. Just like millions of others, I love this time of year and all the warm traditions it brings. But stockings, sleigh bells, and ol' St. Nick can only take you so far. What I cherish most at Christmas is the message of gospel hope that the holiday reminds us of.

It's the message of the Sin Destroyer that God first declared in Genesis 3:15. It's the message of the Suffering Servant that Isaiah foresaw in Isaiah 53. It's the message of the new covenant that Jeremiah pronounced in Jeremiah 31. It's the reason Bethlehem's nighttime sky exploded with heavenly light as thousands of angels proclaimed, "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased" (Luke 2:14).

Praise the Lord that he "became human and made his home among us" (John 1:14), gift-wrapping all his love, mercy, and grace toward humanity in swaddling cloths and laying them in a manger. This is what fills me with hope and wonder at Christmas.

Regardless of where you're at in your spiritual journey, I'm guessing that you need a reminder of gospel hope, too, right now. So please accept this small Christmas gift—from me to you. This devotional features twenty-five advent-themed entries from two of my Tyndale House books—*Creator, Father, King: A One Year Journey with God* and *The One Year Devotions with Jesus: 365 Devotions to Help You Know and Love the Savior*.

Special thanks to the amazing folks at Tyndale, who worked really hard to make this devotional available by December 2020, less than two months after the release of *Creator, Father, King*. It's a great privilege to partner with such a wonderful publishing team.

Romans 15:13 says, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (ESV). My prayer is that this resource will help you put your hope and trust in the Lord as we worship the Christ-child-turned-Savior anew this Christmas. If you enjoy what you read and want to dive deeper into your faith, I encourage you to check out my full books. You could even begin one of them on January 1!

May your hope be in the Lord this holiday season and into the New Year!

Joshua Cooley

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Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation.

COLOSSIANS 1:15

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To begin the Advent season, it's only natural to start at the beginning.

No, not at Jesus' birth. That's not even close. To find Jesus' beginning, you'd have to go back way further than that.

In fact, if you were in a time machine going backward through history, you'd have to zoom past the Bethlehem manger. You'd have to leave Daniel, David, Moses, and Abraham in your stardust. And when you finally reached the creation of the universe in Genesis 1, guess what? You'd have to fill up the fuel tank (time travel requires premium unleaded) and keep on truckin' backward into eternity past.

Ultimately, though, your mission would fail. That's because Jesus had no beginning. He has always existed. In other words, Jesus was alive before Mary gave birth to him in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago in ancient Palestine.

Whoa. Talk about a brainteaser.

WHAT'S IT MEAN?

How can someone be alive before they are born as a baby?

For humans, it's impossible. Our lives begin in our mothers' wombs, we live seventy to eighty years on average, and then we die.

But not Jesus. Because he is fully God, Jesus is eternal and all-powerful. He has always existed, and his power is limitless. Today's verse says Jesus existed "before anything was created."

Jesus is not a created being. He never had a beginning. He has existed for all time with God the Father and God's Spirit, the other two persons of the Holy Trinity. If you were drawing a time line for Jesus' existence, it would not have starting or ending points. The line would go forever in both directions!

This is difficult to understand. Our human brains can only process so much, and eternity is a tough concept. But Jesus is eternal because of who he is.

This is important to believe, because if Jesus was created, he would be limited in his power, like us. But he's not. He is fully God and all-powerful. And he's worthy of all our worship!

NOW WHAT?

Ask the oldest person in your family (probably a grandparent or great-grandparent) to share stories about what life was like when he or she was your age. Then remember that Jesus is infinitely older!

DID YOU KNOW?

The period before Jesus came to earth as a baby is called his "pre-incarnate state." Incarnate means to be flesh and blood like humans. So pre-incarnate means the time before Jesus became flesh and blood.



God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, and through the Son he created the universe. The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God, and he sustains everything by the mighty power of his command.

HEBREWS 1:2-3

So if Jesus has existed forever (yesterday's devotion), what was he doing all that time before being born in Bethlehem? Since he's all-powerful and all-knowing, did he spend his days . . .

- beating every video game ever invented?
- playing golf on Pluto?
- helping the angels with their math homework?

Doubtful.

Here's what we know: at some point in eternity past, Jesus was actively involved with God the Father in creating the universe. When Genesis 1:1 says, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," Jesus was right there too!

Colossians 1:16 affirms this when it says, "Everything was created through him [Jesus] and for him." And Hebrews 1:2 says, "Through the Son he [God] created the universe."

Since Creation, Jesus has also kept the universe running smoothly. Hebrews 1:3 says, "He sustains everything by the mighty power of his command." And Colossians 1:17 says, "He holds all creation together."

It's by Jesus' infinite power that the earth revolves around the sun, planets remain safely in their orbits, and stars twinkle in the nighttime sky. Amazing!

We also know that before coming to earth, Jesus enjoyed wonderful fellowship with God the Father (John 17:24) and shared God's glory (John 17:5). Otherwise, the Bible is mostly silent on Jesus' existence before he came to earth.

WHAT'S IT MEAN?

Why doesn't the Bible tell us more about pre-Bethlehem Jesus? That's a mystery. But we know enough. The Bible provides everything God wants us to know about his Son. As 2 Timothy 3:15 says, "The holy Scriptures . . . have given you the wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus."

Through God's Word, we know that Jesus is our eternal Creator, our loving Savior, and our almighty King. He made us and he holds the entire universe together with just his words. That's incredible, praiseworthy power!

NOW WHAT?

Spend time making something special: build a house out of LEGOs, do a craft, or bake some cookies with your mom. Whatever you make, you need supplies or ingredients to create it, right? Now consider how Jesus created the entire universe out of nothing at all. Wow!

DID YOU KNOW?

The sun is one of Earth's closest celestial neighbors, and yet NASA estimates that it is 93 million miles away. This should start to give you an idea of how big Jesus' universe is and how powerful he is!



Then the disciples worshiped him. "You really are the Son of God!" they exclaimed.

MATTHEW 14:33

One of the most popular titles for Jesus in Scripture is "Son of God." Jesus claimed it, the disciples believed it, the apostle Paul proclaimed it, a pagan Roman centurion at the crucifixion admitted it, demons acknowledged it, and God the Father affirmed it.

There's no denying that Jesus is the Son of God. But this presents us with what appears to be a conundrum: If Jesus is God, how can he also be the Son of God? Which is it? Is he God or God's Son?

Well, actually, he's both.

WHAT'S IT MEAN?

On the surface, this looks like a doozy of a brainteaser! But it's a question worth answering.

When Scripture refers to Jesus as "the Son of God," it's a title that is always meant to highlight Jesus' deity, not to imply that he is God's child. As discussed earlier in this book, Jesus is God. He is not a created being. He is equal to God the Father in divinity and has always existed.

Jesus is called the "Son of God" not because he is God's child, but because he is perfectly like the Father in all his attributes: holiness, power, wisdom, eternity, etc. The title "Son of God" also means that Jesus became obedient to the Father, willingly taking the role of a servant in coming to earth. There are lots of verses in the Gospel of John that discuss this, such as John 5:19; 8:28; 10:18; 12:49; 14:24; and 15:10.

Like a human son obeys and submits to his father, Jesus gladly submitted to God's ultimate plan for humanity. When we as humans sinfully rebelled against God, instead of punishing us (as he had every right to do), God sent his Son—the Second Person of the Trinity—to accomplish his great rescue plan. Jesus willingly left heaven's glory to become a man and pay the price for our wickedness. It would cost Jesus his life. But it would provide new life for us.

The Son of God is truly worthy of all our praise!

NOW WHAT?

To learn more about Jesus' divine sonship, read Hebrews 1–2.

DID YOU KNOW?

Even some of Jesus' fiercest opponents, the Jewish religious leaders, acknowledged that his claim to be God's Son was really a declaration that he was God. That's why they wanted to kill him for blasphemy, or bringing disrespect (in their minds) to God (John 5:18; 10:33; and 19:7).



While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

LUKE 2:6-7, ESV

The big day is coming! The weekend roads are as full as your family’s calendar, the local stores are buzzing, and radio stations are playing songs about reindeer, snowmen, and silver bells.

Christmas is almost here!

All the hubbub can certainly feel overwhelming, but it’s worth pausing often to focus on the incarnation of Jesus Christ and all the wonderful blessings it brings.

Look at today’s Scripture passage. Maybe this is the first time you’ve read these verses. Maybe you’ve read them a hundred times. Either way, don’t let the spiritual significance found within the manger pass you by. It can change your life!

WHAT’S IT MEAN?

During this time of the year, we are inundated with Christmas-themed messages. Retailers now start their holiday-themed songs and advertisements around Halloween. Everywhere you go, it’s Christmas, Christmas, Christmas!

If you have a church background, you’ve probably heard the story of Jesus’ birth many times. But it should never grow old. It’s too amazing! It’s too important! It’s too life-changing!

Why? Perhaps the angel who visited the shepherds outside Bethlehem that beautiful night said it best: because Jesus’ birth was “good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!” (Luke 2:10-11).

In sending his Son into the world, God’s love for us burst forth from the heavens and spilled to earth. “The armies of heaven” (Luke 2:13) erupted into song over this glorious news. God actually became man—incredible!

Why did he do this? Because we were lost in our sins. Because we desperately needed a Savior. Because God didn’t want us to spend eternity without him.

That’s why Mary marveled. That’s why the shepherds celebrated. That’s why the angels rejoiced.

That’s why we should worship anew.

Jesus’ birth is the greatest miracle in history. No matter how many times you’ve heard about it, let the wonder, majesty, and life-changing power of the Savior’s birth amaze you again this Christmas!

NOW WHAT?

Read the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke at least once before Christmas Day.

DID YOU KNOW?

Mark and John’s Gospels immediately jump into Jesus’ adult ministry, skipping his birth account.



The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine.

ISAIAH 9:2

We all know about nocturnal animals that become more active at night. But did you know there are animals who exist in total darkness? Creepy creatures such as the snipe eel, phantom anglerfish, and something aptly called the black sea devil all live in environments completely void of light. How depressing!

In the late eighth century BC, Isaiah spoke of *humans* living in this wretched condition. This was all part of a larger prophecy of God’s coming judgment through Assyria against Israel, which had abandoned the Lord and chosen to walk in spiritual darkness.

Amid Isaiah’s gloomy message of imminent destruction, however, he pronounced a message of hope—a message of light piercing through the darkness.

WHAT’S IT MEAN?

The darkness Isaiah spoke about in today’s verse, of course, was metaphorical. It’s the darkness of spiritual blindness. It refers to someone who is in willful rebellion against God, stumbling around in the morass of sin.

While some weird-looking deep-sea creatures are suited to live in total darkness, humans are not. In darkness, we stagger, fall, take wrong paths, incur injuries, and even die.

God’s image-bearers were made to walk in the light. Yet sadly, many people choose to live in the darkness. Sin blinds us to God’s truth. Millions choose to lurk in sin’s shadows rather than bask in the life-changing glory and transformative grace of the one who created them. John 3:19 says, “God’s light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil.”

All this begs the question: How would people walking in spiritual darkness see the “great light,” as Isaiah predicted? The prophet famously provides the answer a few verses later: “A child is born to us, a son is given to us” (verse 6). The “great light” that pierces sin’s darkness is the child who was born in Bethlehem—Jesus! Matthew confirmed this in his gospel (Matthew 4:12-17). Jesus testified of himself, “I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won’t have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life” (John 8:12).

This is why God sent Jesus into the world—to break the power of darkness and bring us into the light of salvation. This Christmas, worship in the light of the Son!

NOW WHAT?

Read Isaiah 9:1-7 and Matthew 4:12-17 to see Isaiah’s powerful messianic prophecy and how Jesus fulfilled it.

DID YOU KNOW?

Light and darkness is a common biblical motif, extending back to Genesis 1.



*In the beginning the Word already existed.
The Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

JOHN 1:1

Words are critical to our lives. We communicate with them thousands of times a day. We speak with them, write with them, read them, and listen to them.

God is a God of words. He *spoke* the universe into being. He personally relates and communicates to us primarily through the written words of Scripture.

However, one Word (notice the capital *W*) reigns supreme above all. This Word isn't merely a grouping of letters that forms an element of speech. This Word is a Person. This Word is whom the apostle John praised to begin his Gospel:

In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.

JOHN 1:1-5

As Christmas approaches, let's consider the glorious Incarnate Word.

WHAT'S IT MEAN?

With the first three words of his Gospel, "In the beginning," John beautifully links the Word to Genesis 1:1. And who is this Word? It's none other than Jesus Christ, the immortal Son of God who existed in eternal triune glory with the Father and the Spirit before time began.

Two thousand years ago, the Son left heaven's holiness and majesty to shine his light into the oppressive darkness of a sin-stained world. He came to offer hope to the downcast and set the captives free. He came to save lost sinners like you and me. "The Word became human and made his home among us" (John 1:14).

Jesus fulfilled every word written in Scripture and obeyed every word the Father spoke (2 Corinthians 1:20). As the Incarnate Word, Jesus revealed everything the Father wanted to convey about himself. "Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?" Jesus said in John 14:10. "The words I speak are not my own, but my Father who lives in me does his work through me."

The Word entered our world—this is the glorious message of Christmas—and spoke words of life to us. Do you believe?

NOW WHAT?

Use your words to tell someone about *the Word* today!

DID YOU KNOW?

The Bible also refers to Jesus' existence before Creation in Hebrews 1 and Colossians 1.



The Word became human and made his home among us.

JOHN 1:14

Throughout history, God has performed some astounding miracles:

- the creation of the universe
- the worldwide Flood
- the parting of the Red Sea
- the walls of Jericho falling
- Jonah surviving in the belly of the great fish

But the greatest miracle in history is captured in today's verse: "The Word became human and made his home among us." We call this the Incarnation. It literally changed the course of human history.

WHAT'S IT MEAN?

Throughout the Old Testament, God appeared to his people in many ways. He appeared to Moses in the burning bush; to the Israelites at Mount Sinai in thunder, lightning, and smoke; and to Ezekiel in a vision of a heavenly throne room so magnificent that it stretched the prophet's ability to describe it with human language.

But the Incarnation was completely different.

In the Bethlehem manger, God took on human flesh. This wasn't just a brief manifestation. The eternal Second Person of the Trinity became one of us and lived among us for more than thirty years. The Lord walked like us, talked like us, and looked like us. He got thirsty, hungry, and tired. He felt joy and pain. The human experience was his, excluding sin (Hebrews 4:15).

He was—wonderfully, miraculously, inscrutably—fully God and fully man. This is why Matthew declares in his Gospel that Jesus was "Immanuel, which means 'God is with us'" (1:23). There is beautiful mystery to Jesus' incarnate nature that we were never meant to fully understand this side of heaven.

Why on earth would God come to earth? Why would the Father send his Son to a world ravaged by sin, where his own image bearers—in the most fiendish of ironies—would reject, torture, and kill him?

That's exactly why. The answer lies within the question. He came because we needed him desperately. Because there was no other way for our sins to be atoned for. Because only the Father's love and the Son's sacrifice could restore the relationship sin had severed. He came to save us from ourselves.

Christ left heaven's glory and took on human flesh for you. What is there left to do but worship and adore the incarnated-now-glorified Savior? Praise his name!

NOW WHAT?

Read the apostle Paul's beautiful treatment of Jesus' incarnation, sacrifice, and glorification in Philippians 2:5-11.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Bible clearly states that anyone who denies that Jesus came in the flesh is a liar and a false prophet (1 John 4:2; 2 John 1:7).



DECEMBER 8

They grabbed him, dragged him out of the vineyard, and murdered him.

MATTHEW 21:39

In Matthew 21, Jesus told an interesting parable at the Temple in Jerusalem. Here's what he said:

A certain landowner planted a vineyard, built a wall around it, dug a pit for pressing out the grape juice, and built a lookout tower. Then he leased the vineyard to tenant farmers and moved to another country. At the time of the grape harvest, he sent his servants to collect his share of the crop. But the farmers grabbed his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. So the landowner sent a larger group of his servants to collect for him, but the results were the same. Finally, the owner sent his son, thinking, "Surely they will respect my son." But when the tenant farmers saw his son coming, they said to one another, "Here comes the heir to this estate. Come on, let's kill him and get the estate for ourselves!" So they grabbed him, dragged him out of the vineyard, and murdered him.

VERSES 33-39

What does this have to do with Christmas? Glad you asked! In its immediate context, Jesus spoke this parable against the hard-hearted religious leaders of first-century Palestine. But the Savior's words can help us appreciate the wonderful Christmas message even more.

WHAT'S IT MEAN?

The triune God—Father, Son, and Spirit—graciously determined a perfect plan for sinful humanity in eternity past. Then, "when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son . . . to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:4-5, *ESV*).

While Jesus' incarnation and earthly life unfolded in wondrous, mysterious real time for everyone else, nothing that happened shocked the Father or Son. When the Father (the landowner in Jesus' parable) sent his Son into the world, they knew how the story would unfold. They had written the script! (Notice also how Jesus used this parable to predict his death.)

That's what makes Jesus' incarnation so amazing. The Father willingly sent his Son to earth knowing what would happen because he had designed the plan. The Son willingly obeyed the Father knowing that the plan called for him to endure indignity, suffering, and death at the hands of wicked men.

Want to know the best part? Everything about this glorious, eternal plan was for *your* benefit.

NOW WHAT?

When you make plans this holiday season, remember your plans can change—unlike God's glorious, eternal plan of salvation in Christ.

DID YOU KNOW?

Jesus told this parable two days before his arrest.



DECEMBER 9

The Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means "God is with us").

ISAIAH 7:14

Christmas often brings to mind dazzling trees, delicious treats, gift-wrapped goodies, festive carols, and a sacred manger scene. We certainly don't associate the holidays with rampant idolatry, divination, and the horrors of child sacrifice. Yet did you know these terrible pagan evils helped birth one of our most beloved "Christmas verses"?

This begs for an explanation!

In the late eighth century BC, King Ahaz of Judah made an alliance with Assyria, the most powerful empire in the world at the time, to help stave off attacks from Syria and Israel, rather than trusting in the Lord. Ahaz was a wicked ruler, leading Judah into all the horrible sins mentioned above. Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord challenged Ahaz to put his trust in him: "Ask the LORD your God for a sign of confirmation, Ahaz. Make it as difficult as you want—as high as heaven or as deep as the place of the dead" (Isaiah 7:10-11).

When hard-hearted Ahaz refused, God responded through Isaiah in today's verse: "All right then, the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means 'God is with us')." Isaiah then predicted that before the child grew up, Assyria would destroy Syria and Israel and turn on Judah.

WHAT'S IT MEAN?

Some Bible interpreters believe that Isaiah's words were a "single fulfillment" prophecy, meaning it was fulfilled exclusively in Jesus. Other interpreters believe it was a "double fulfillment" prophecy, meaning it was fulfilled partially in Isaiah's day and completely in Christ. Either way, Jesus provided the ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, and Matthew pointed to this in his Gospel (Matthew 1:18-25).

Jesus' incarnation and virgin birth was the greatest miracle in history. Because he was not born by normal human procreation, Jesus did not inherit a sinful nature like the rest of us. He was "God with us"—fully God, fully man—and therefore could represent us perfectly as our sinless Savior.

Who could have conceived this? Who could have injected messianic hope into the corrupt reign of a depraved king? Who could have performed such wonders?

Only the God who loves you.

NOW WHAT?

Read about King Ahaz in 2 Kings 16 and 2 Chronicles 28, and the context of Isaiah's related messianic prophecies in Isaiah chapters 7–11.

DID YOU KNOW?

Ahaz's son, Hezekiah, was faithful to the Lord and one of Judah's greatest kings.



DECEMBER 10

The passionate commitment of the LORD of Heaven's Armies will make this happen!

ISAIAH 9:7

In the eighth century BC, the prophet Isaiah was a busy man. The northern kingdom of Israel was mired in idolatry and utterly corrupt. The looming Assyrian Empire would soon destroy it.

Isaiah constantly warned the nation of coming judgment if they did not repent. But in Isaiah 9, the prophet inserted a glorious message of hope, promising a coming Savior in one of the most beloved messianic prophecies in Scripture:

A child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His government and its peace will never end. He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David for all eternity. The passionate commitment of the LORD of Heaven's Armies will make this happen.

ISAIAH 9:6-7

WHAT'S IT MEAN?

When Isaiah wrote this prophecy, Israel's rulers were exceedingly wicked, leading the nation toward destruction. But the prophecy looked forward to a time when God's anointed one would usher in an eternal Kingdom of peace and prosperity.

How will all this be accomplished? By "the passionate commitment of the LORD of Heaven's Armies" (today's verse). Who are "Heaven's Armies"? They are the angelic warriors who filled a mountainside, vastly outnumbering the Aramean army in 2 Kings 6. They are the seraphim in Isaiah's Temple throne room vision in Isaiah 6. They are the cherubim of Ezekiel's Babylonian exile vision in Ezekiel 1. They are the mighty princes whose cosmic battles against demonic forces are briefly described in Daniel 10:13. They are the "thousands and millions of angels" who surround God's heavenly throne in Revelation 5:11. They are the "vast host" (Luke 2:13) who serenaded the Savior's birth and lit up the nighttime sky above Bethlehem.

"Heaven's Armies" are awesome indeed. Yet they all bow their knee to the Lord God Almighty.

This is the God who created you, not angels, in his image. This is the God who answered your sins with mercy and grace instead of just wrath and fiery retribution. This is the God who sent his Son to be your Prince of Peace.

The Lord of Heaven's Armies, who owns all authority and power, is passionately committed to your salvation!

NOW WHAT?

The next time you read a Bible story or sing a Christmas carol involving angels, remember who they worship.

DID YOU KNOW?

Anytime someone tried to worship an angel in Scripture, these celestial beings quickly redirected that adoration to God (Revelation 19:10; 22:8-9).



DECEMBER 11

You have wearied him by asking, "Where is the God of justice?"

MALACHI 2:17

When was the last time you were in a really long line? Perhaps it was during holiday shopping at the mall, or at your local supermarket, or in an endless row of cars during rush-hour traffic.

Inevitably, when forced to wait, some people start to complain. Kids start to get fidgety. Babies begin to cry. It's basically the end of the world. As humans, we hate waiting. We want to get to our destination. Not in five minutes. Not in thirty seconds. NOW.

The book of Malachi—the Old Testament's final book—is about waiting. Malachi was a prophet who probably lived in the mid-fifth century BC. At that time, the Jews had been back in Palestine for nearly a century after their Babylonian exile.

God had promised to restore Jerusalem and the Temple to great glory (Haggai 2:9; Zechariah 8:1-23), punish his people's tormentors (Zechariah 9), and send the Messiah (Zechariah 9:9-10). But none of that had transpired by Malachi's lifetime. The Temple was a shell of its former self, and so was Jerusalem. The people were Persian subjects—a conquered nation, without a Davidic king on the throne—and morale was low.

This affected many people's spiritual lives. Their love of God had grown cold. Their present reality was hindering their faith, and their struggles had warped their theology. "Where," they asked, "is the God of justice?" (today's verse).

Malachi called them to repent and trust in God as they waited for his promises to be fulfilled.

WHAT'S IT MEAN?

The Jews from Malachi's day until Christ's birth approximately four hundred years later had to live by faith, not by sight. For those who considered only what their eyes could see, it's no wonder they easily became discouraged and spiritually derailed.

Today is no different. We live in troubling times. We will face many hardships. We must rely on more than what we see and physically experience in this difficult life. We must live by faith as we wait for Jesus' return.

Many fell away in Malachi's day. But the waiting wasn't for naught. It was all part of God's sovereign plan to introduce his Son, the Redeemer, at the perfect time (Galatians 4:4-5).

One day, Jesus will return again once and for all, as God has promised. Don't lose faith! Don't fall away! The wait can be challenging. But live by faith, even when it's hard not to live by sight.

The God of justice will be faithful to his promises.

NOW WHAT?

Read the book of Malachi for a fascinating look at God's last prophetic word in Old Testament times until the coming of Christ.

DID YOU KNOW?

In Hebrew, Malachi means "my messenger."



You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:9

Imagine for a moment that you are the most powerful emperor in the world. You rule over a perfect kingdom where nothing bad ever happens. You are rich beyond description. You eat the most delicious foods at every meal. You have servants who exist to do your bidding. And you can do whatever pleases you.

Sounds like a pretty amazing life, right?

Now imagine thinking to yourself one day, *I'm going to leave my kingdom and go to a poor, dark, wicked country. I'm going to surrender many of my royal privileges and live like a peasant in this foreign land. I'll invite others to return with me to my own kingdom, where they, too, can enjoy eternal blessings. A few will say yes, but I know most will hate me. They'll insult me, reject me, torture me, and eventually kill me. But I'm still going to go.*

That sounds crazy! Who in the world would do that?

Jesus would. In fact, that's what he did when he came to earth.

WHAT'S IT MEAN?

We are really good at taking care of ourselves. Think about it: When was the last time you grabbed a hammer and started smashing your fingers? Or jumped into a water tank with great white sharks? Or ate a rock sandwich?

That's ridiculous. We'd never do that. Most people don't do things that they know will cause them harm.

But Jesus did.

As the omniscient (all-knowing) Son of God, Jesus knew exactly what awaited him before coming to earth. Jesus traded heaven's glory for a smelly manger. He left his exalted position as Creator and Ruler of the universe for life as a poor carpenter. He gave up perfect fellowship with God the Father to stand before a bloodthirsty mob who shouted, "Crucify him!"

Jesus knew he'd experience all this beforehand. And yet he came anyway, all because he loved us. All because we desperately needed forgiveness for our sins. As today's verse says, "For your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich" in salvation.

What a Savior!

NOW WHAT?

Is there anyone you know whom you can "become poor" for? Consider befriending an unpopular classmate at school or giving some money to an organization that helps underprivileged kids.

DID YOU KNOW?

Often in his earthly life, Jesus didn't even have a place to sleep (Luke 9:58)! He gave up so much glory and privilege to be your Savior.



Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true."

LUKE 1:38

Today's devotion is about one angel, two special birth announcements, and two completely different reactions.

One day, about two thousand years ago, the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah while he was performing his Jewish priestly duties and announced that he and his wife, Elizabeth, would soon have a special baby boy. This child, John the Baptist, would eventually herald the coming of the long-awaited Messiah.

Zechariah couldn't believe it.

"How can I be sure this will happen?" he asked. "I'm an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years" (LUKE 1:18).

For his faithless response, Zechariah's speech was removed until shortly after John was born.

Six months after visiting Zechariah, Gabriel appeared to a young, unmarried girl named Mary to deliver another birth announcement—this one even more miraculous. When Gabriel told Mary that she would give birth to the Savior of the world, she, too, had questions. Unlike Zechariah's questions, though, hers seemed to stem from curiosity and wonder rather than disbelief.

"But how can this happen?" she said. "I am a virgin" (LUKE 1:34).

"The angel replied, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God'" (VERSE 35).

That was good enough for Mary!

"I am the Lord's servant," she replied. "May everything you have said about me come true" (VERSE 38).

WHAT'S IT MEAN?

Two incredible announcements. Two different responses. One sprung from a heart of skepticism. The other sprung from a heart of faith and willing submission to God's purposes.

This Christmas season, as you consider that the Most High sent his Son into the world to be the Savior of mankind through a Holy Spirit-empowered Virgin Birth that defies all human reason, what is your response? Is it skepticism? Like Zechariah, are you asking, "How can I be sure?" Or like Mary, are you displaying a faith and submission to God's purposes that will be rewarded?

Mary and Elizabeth were relatives, and when Mary visited Elizabeth after her angelic visit, Elizabeth joyfully prophesied, "You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said" (Luke 1:45).

May the same be said of you this Christmas season.

NOW WHAT?

If skepticism about Jesus has ruled your life until now, believe on his name in repentance and faith today! (See Mark 1:15; Acts 4:12; and Romans 10:9-10.)

DID YOU KNOW?

Zechariah regained his speech when he obediently named his son John (Luke 1:57-66).



DECEMBER 14

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

LUKE 1:28, NIV

Mary was speechless. Was she dreaming? Was her imagination running wild? Did she need to find the best neurologist in Nazareth to see if she was having hallucinations?

No, the dazzling angel standing before her was real.

Gabriel, the angelic messenger, sensed Mary's fear. So he reassured her: "Don't be afraid, Mary . . . for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus" (Luke 1:30-31).

After thousands of years, God's plan of salvation was nearing its climax. The eternal Son of God was about to arrive on earth in human form and die for humanity's sins. And he was going to do it with the help of a young, very ordinary Jewish girl.

WHAT'S IT MEAN?

Mary had found God's favor. But how?

She wasn't rich, famous, or powerful—God isn't impressed with those things anyway. And even though she was a humble, godly young woman (Luke 1:46-48), she was also a sinner. The Bible is clear that everyone sins (Romans 3:23), and that sin separates us from God (Isaiah 59:2). So why did God bless Mary with the incredible honor of giving birth to the Savior of the world?

Ultimately, it was God's grace.

Grace, by definition, is unmerited favor. It's getting something good that you don't deserve. As sinners, we deserve punishment and death (Romans 6:23). Any good gift we receive otherwise is because God delights in showering us with love and grace.

Mary knew this. After Gabriel's departure, she celebrated God's grace with a song (Luke 1:46-55). "For the Mighty One has done great things for me," she sang. "Holy is his name!" (verse 49, NIV). Notice her emphasis on God's grace, not her credentials.

Like Mary, you have received God's amazing grace. It's the reason, in fact, he has led you to read a devotional about his Son. But that's only one example. Do you have a Bible? Do you go to a gospel-centered church? Has anyone shared the Good News of Jesus with you before? Are spiritual questions stirring in your heart? All of this is God's grace to you!

God could have left you to die in your sins. Instead, he is revealing to you his Son, who can give you new life!

NOW WHAT?

Read the Magnificat, Mary's famous song of praise to God, in Luke 1:46-55. May we respond to God's grace in similar ways!

DID YOU KNOW?

The angel Gabriel also spoke to Daniel, the Old Testament hero, more than six hundred years before Gabriel appeared to Mary (Daniel 8-9)!



DECEMBER 15

She will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

MATTHEW 1:21

Do you know what your name means? Have you ever wondered why your parents gave you your name? You probably have, especially if your first name is Humperdinck or Hortense.

Names were really important in biblical times. People often named their children to commemorate big events in their lives or praise God for something.

When Isaac's wife, Rebekah, gave birth to twins, she named the younger twin Jacob (meaning "he takes by the heel") after he came out of the womb clutching his older brother Esau's foot (Genesis 25:26). When Pharaoh's daughter lifted a Hebrew baby out of a basket floating on the Nile River, she named him Moses, which means "draw out" (Exodus 2:10). And when God gave Hannah a son after she had endured many childless years, she named him Samuel, which means "name of God," to honor the Lord (1 Samuel 1:20).

So when the angel Gabriel visited Mary and told her to call her future child Jesus, Mary knew something amazing was about to happen. *Jesus*, the Greek form of the Hebrew *Joshua* or *Yeshua*, means "the Lord saves."

WHAT'S IT MEAN?

Jesus has dozens of names in the Bible. He is called Son of Man, Son of David, Son of God, Lamb of God, Lord, Messiah, Savior, Prince of Peace, the Good Shepherd, the Word, the Alpha and the Omega, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, and many more.

Each name tells us something about Jesus. Together, his names show us that there is no one like Jesus in all creation. That's why the apostle Paul writes in Philippians 2:9-11, "Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

The name of Jesus is worthy of all our praise!

NOW WHAT?

Ask your parents what your name means and why they gave it to you.

DID YOU KNOW?

Jesus is often referred to as Jesus Christ. The word *Christ* is not Jesus' last name. It's a title describing who Jesus is. *Christ* is a Greek word meaning "anointed" and is equivalent to the Hebrew title *Messiah*. When you read the name *Jesus Christ* in the New Testament, it's acknowledging that Jesus is the one whom God anointed to be the Savior of the world.



DECEMBER 16

All of God's promises have been fulfilled in Christ with a resounding "Yes!" And through Christ, our "Amen" (which means "Yes") ascends to God for his glory.

2 CORINTHIANS 1:20

Zechariah could barely contain his excitement. It had been almost a year since words had last come out of his mouth. But now his tongue was loosened, and he had plenty to say!

Nearly a year earlier, the angel Gabriel had visited Zechariah to announce that Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, would have a child, John (who grew up to be John the Baptist). But the couple was old and past childbearing years, so Zechariah doubted God's promise. Because of Zechariah's disbelief, Gabriel said Zechariah would be mute (unable to speak) until their son was born.

Nine months later, after Elizabeth miraculously gave birth, Zechariah suddenly regained his speech. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he prophesied about his son and the coming birth of Jesus, who was born about six months later.

Zechariah praised God for sending "a mighty Savior from the royal line of his servant David, just as he promised through his holy prophets long ago" and being "merciful to our ancestors by remembering his sacred covenant" (Luke 1:69-70, 72).

As Zechariah powerfully discovered, God always keeps his promises.

WHAT'S IT MEAN?

The Old Testament is littered with prophecies about Jesus. The first one is found in Genesis 3:15, right after the Fall. Moses predicted Jesus' coming (Deuteronomy 18:15). So did David, Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Malachi, Micah, and many others. All told, these prophecies spanned thousands of years. And amazingly, every single one of them came true.

In fact, as today's verse says, "all of God's promises have been fulfilled in Christ." Jesus is the culmination of all Scripture. Whatever promises God made—whether it was to bring his people into the Promised Land of Canaan, to bless David's kingly line forever, or to return the Jews from Babylonian exile—they all ultimately point to Jesus. That's because if history is the story of humankind, Jesus' saving work on the cross is the climax.

Jesus is the greatest example—among countless others—that God is faithful to his word. He is 100 percent trustworthy. As Titus 1:2 affirms, God "does not lie."

In a world filled with confusion, deceit, and sin, you can always trust God. You can believe in his Word. He created you, he loves you, and he will never fail you. Zechariah learned it, and Jesus proved it!

NOW WHAT?

Ask God to help you tell the truth and keep your promises, just like he does.

DID YOU KNOW?

The name *Zechariah* means "God has remembered." God always remembers and fulfills his promises!



DECEMBER 17

He redeems me from death and crowns me with love and tender mercies.

PSALM 103:4

What comes to mind when you think of God?

Do you think of a grandfatherly figure with a long, white beard, resting on a heavenly throne? Or a mysterious, impersonal power that governs the universe from afar? Or an angry deity perched on high, just waiting to zap us with lightning bolts when we mess up?

God is none of those things. But it's easy to pick up wrong impressions of God if we don't allow Scripture to properly inform us.

When you think of God, do you think of mercy? The story of John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, highlights this fascinating, yet sometimes overlooked, characteristic of God. When John was born, Zechariah spoke a beautiful prophecy about Jesus: "Because of God's tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace" (Luke 1:78-79).

We would be wise to understand God's "tender mercy."

WHAT'S IT MEAN?

Mercy is when God withholds the punishment we deserve (his wrath against sin). God's mercy is often misunderstood because people don't realize they need it. They don't understand that their sins separate them from their Creator.

Because of our sinful nature, we deserve eternal separation from God in hell, not salvation through Jesus. God would have been perfectly within his rights to give us what we deserve, yet he chose to extend tender mercy through his Son, "the morning light from heaven."

God is loving, personal, and relational. As Scripture says, "The Lord is near" (Philippians 4:5, *NIV*) and "he cares about you" (1 Peter 5:7). His mercy flows from a heart that loves us dearly.

Jesus embodies the mercy of God. He is the great mercy provider. Much like a power cord carries electricity and brings appliances to life, Jesus carries God's mercy and brings life to lost sinners. That's why Zechariah spoke his prophecy before Jesus' birth.

Praise God for his "tender mercy" in Christ!

NOW WHAT?

Because God showed tender mercy to us, we should treat others the same way. In fact, Colossians 3:12 says, "Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience."

DID YOU KNOW?

In the Old Testament, the cover of the Ark of the Covenant was called "the mercy seat." It was a visual symbol of God's loving, forgiving presence with his people. See Exodus 25:17-22 (*ESV*) for more details.



DECEMBER 18

At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

PHILIPPIANS 2:10-11, ESV

Have you ever noticed how much emphasis we put on baby Jesus during this time of year? With our carols, greeting cards, church plays, and other seasonal hallmarks, we sometimes fawn over him as if he were still a cute, chubby newborn cooing in his mother’s arms.

There’s nothing wrong with these Christmas traditions, as long as they are a worshipful means to an end, not the end itself. Too often, however, we tend to leave Jesus in the manger. But the eternal, incarnate Son of God didn’t stay in a Bethlehem feeding trough any more than he remained nailed to a Roman cross or entombed in a Jewish grave.

In Philippians 2:6-11, the apostle Paul details Christ’s progression of glory:

Through he was in the form of God, [he] 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. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (ESV).

WHAT’S IT MEAN?

In these verses, Paul masterfully takes us from Jesus’ preexistent state, to his incarnation, his humiliation, and his glorification. The Savior is certainly not still wrapped in swaddling cloths, trapped in perpetual infancy!

At the height of Jesus’ messianic exaltation, there’s a handoff. Did you notice it? It’s the glory of God the Father!

Having achieved supreme victory, Jesus willingly gives all glory back to God. What an example of humble submission!

The Christmas story is about so much more than a cuddly baby in a manger. It’s about the sinless Son of God becoming an atoning sacrifice for human sins—something no one else in history could or *would* do—then returning all his fame, honor, and praise back to the Father.

Now *that* is something to sing about!

NOW WHAT?

When you sing carols about Jesus’ birth, remember the full purpose of his incarnation!

DID YOU KNOW?

“Silent Night” is the most popular Christmas carol ever, with 733 copyrighted recordings from 1978 through 2014, according to *Time*.



DECEMBER 19

After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child.

LUKE 2:17

Have you ever wondered what would’ve happened if Jesus’ birth was a little more grandiose—something more befitting the King of kings and Lord of lords?

For instance, what if Joseph and Mary were a regal couple and Jesus’ birthplace was an ornate palace nursery? What if the shepherds were a company of royal courtiers trumpeting the news from the castle ramparts and official couriers on white steeds delivering the news through neighboring towns and villages with great fanfare? What if the wise men were visiting monarchs from allied nations coming to pay their respects?

Just imagine if Jesus’ birth had played out this way!

But of course, it didn’t. That’s not the way God works, and it’s certainly not how the eternally ordained incarnation of his Son transpired. Not at all.

WHAT’S IT MEAN?

God sovereignly chose people and places that were much less ostentatious—a poor carpenter as Jesus’ earthly father; a nondescript girl as his mother; and a dirty manger as his crib.

And what about the two groups who visited the Christ-child? One was a grubby group of Jewish field workers. The other was a cohort of pagan Gentile astrologers, likely from Persia. Neither group was whom you might expect Scripture to highlight as the long-awaited Messiah’s first worshipers. Don’t think the biblical spotlight on the shepherds and wise men is coincidental. God loves flipping the traditional human script (1 Corinthians 1:27-28).

Meanwhile, Israel’s leaders were largely oblivious to the Savior’s arrival. It’s telling that God didn’t send his angels to announce Jesus’ birth to the Jewish priests, Pharisees, or other members of the Sanhedrin. God’s people had been waiting, literally, millennia for the Messiah, and when he came, the religious establishment was too blinded by its religiosity to notice.

Look around you. In many ways, today’s world is no different. Some people are ignorant to the Messiah.

Elsewhere, religiosity abounds as people desperately try to earn God’s favor while ignoring his Son. Ironic, eh?

Neither apathy nor religiosity pleases God. Rather, take a cue from the people whom Scripture highlights: those who rushed to worship the Savior, then hurried to tell others the good news. This Christmas, may we be like the shepherds and the wise men, who bore no pretense of piety, yet humbly worshiped the Messiah and joyfully told others.

NOW WHAT?

Tell an unbelieving friend or family member today about the Savior who came to save them!

DID YOU KNOW?

Israel’s leaders identified Bethlehem as the Messiah’s birthplace (Matthew 2:1-6) but apparently didn’t connect it to Jesus!



Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.

LUKE 2:14

.....

Think of the biggest, brightest Fourth of July spectacle you've ever seen. Well, that was nothing compared to what the shepherds witnessed outside Bethlehem on the night of Jesus' birth.

The sky was still black and quiet, just like every night. Being a shepherd had to be pretty boring, honestly, unless a thief or a predator was prowling nearby.

Suddenly, an angel appeared to the shepherds, piercing the dark tranquility with heaven's brilliance and sending them cowering in fear. After the angel announced the Savior's birth, the sky exploded into a dazzling display of God's glory as an army of countless angels appeared, singing, "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased!"

The angels' song was a beautiful chorus of praise to God. But it also poses a fascinating question: How do you please God?

WHAT'S IT MEAN?

It doesn't take much to please us. Look what happens every Christmas morning: we get *stuff* and we are pleased—very pleased!

That doesn't work with God. What can we give God that he doesn't already own? As the apostle Paul said in Acts 17:24-25, "He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn't live in man-made temples, and human hands can't serve his needs—for he has no needs."

Besides, God is holy—highly exalted above his creation, completely set apart from sin, and perfectly righteous in all his ways. Left to ourselves, sinners like us cannot please him.

Yet today's verse says there are people who have peace with God because he is pleased with them. How is that possible?

Because of Jesus!

He didn't stay "a baby . . . lying in a manger" (Luke 2:12). He lived a sinless life and died an atoning sacrifice on our behalf. His death made propitiation for us, turning God's wrath toward us into favor. "Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us" (Romans 5:1).

We can't please God on our own. But Jesus pleased God on our behalf through his finished work on the cross. When we submit to Christ in repentance and faith, we please God and experience the peace the angels sang about more than two thousand years ago!

NOW WHAT?

Memorize Romans 5:1.

DID YOU KNOW?

The angels' song connects Jesus to Isaiah's prophecy about the "Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).



The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people."

LUKE 2:10 NIV

.....

"Joy to the World" is one of the most popular and beloved Christmas carols of all time. During the holiday season, you can hear it everywhere—in churches, on the radio, in shopping malls, from carolers, and more. You probably know the lyrics by heart.

But did you know that Isaac Watts, the song's writer, never intended it to be a Christmas carol? It's true! In fact, the original lyrics don't mention anything about Bethlehem, the manger, angels, shepherds, wise men, or anything else specifically about Jesus' birth. Watts's inspiration for his classic hymn was Psalm 98, an Old Testament song of praise celebrating the kindness and power God showed to Israel.

But hey, "Joy to the World" still works great as a Christmas carol, because both the song and Christmas are all about—you guessed it—joy! John the Baptist "jumped for joy" in the womb of Elizabeth, Mary's relative, when pregnant Mary came to visit her (Luke 1:44). When the angel announced Jesus' birth to the shepherds in Bethlehem, he said, "I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people" (today's verse).

When Joseph and Mary took baby Jesus to Jerusalem shortly after his birth, a prophet named Simeon said, "This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, and many others to rise" (Luke 2:34). And when the wise men saw the star over young Jesus' home, "they were filled with joy" (Matthew 2:10).

Jesus' birth is all about joy!

WHAT'S IT MEAN?

Joy is an unwavering state of delight, peace, and satisfaction in a person's heart. It's deep, meaningful happiness that doesn't fade away. Jesus' birth makes never-ending joy possible!

How? Because the little baby in the manger was the fulfillment of heaven's great salvation plan. Mary's infant son was the eternal Son of God made flesh, come to rescue humanity. The child born in Bethlehem that night would grow up to become the Savior of the world.

Jesus' birth and all the blessings he'd bring to the world were enough to make angels sing, shepherds come running, old men prophesy, and wise men travel great distances. Because of Jesus, we can experience freedom from sin, peace with God, a hope-filled existence, and everlasting life.

Jesus most certainly brings joy to the world!

NOW WHAT?

Read Psalm 98, the inspiration for "Joy to the World."

DID YOU KNOW?

Isaac Watts was an eighteenth-century preacher and theologian in England who wrote more than five hundred hymns.



Wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.”

MATTHEW 2:1-2

Do you love mysteries? If so, you’ll love today’s devotion! It’s all about a famous group of individuals whose brief but fascinating appearance in Matthew 2 has captivated our imaginations and spawned a whole cottage industry of Christmas related songs and paraphernalia.

Yep, we’re talking about the wise men.

The Bible doesn’t give us many specifics about these mysterious travelers, but we can make some educated guesses based on a couple of scriptural clues. Today’s passage describes them as “wise men from eastern lands.” They were probably from Persia (modern-day Iraq or Iran). Our English phrase “wise men” comes from *magoi* in the New Testament’s original Greek language. Magoi, or Magi, refer to magicians and astrologers—experts in ancient pagan religious rituals of sorcery, spells, incantations, astrology, etc. The wise men were stargazers, looking for cosmic signs to interpret the times. This was a big part of ancient near-Eastern religion (Daniel 2:2; 4:7; 5:5-8).

How did these faraway magicians know about a promised “king of the Jews” and connect him to “his star as it rose” (Matthew 2:2)? It’s a mystery! Perhaps they knew about messianic prophecies, such as Numbers 24:17, from Old Testament scrolls that exiled Jews brought with them to Babylon after they were conquered and deported by King Nebuchadnezzar six hundred years earlier.

Did the wise men truly have saving faith in the Christ-child, or did they travel hundreds of miles to only satisfy mystic curiosities and superstitious fascinations?

Another mystery!

WHAT’S IT MEAN?

While so many questions surround the wise men, there is no mystery about God’s love for you. He sent his Son to a dark, fallen world to redeem sinners like you to himself. Amazing love and mercy!

There’s also no mystery about the child that the wise men worshiped. Jesus is God’s promised Savior who came to save us.

Where is your faith right now? It’s no mystery to God. He knows your heart. Bow down in humble adoration before the Savior. Present to him the gifts of your time and God-given talents.

Mysteries are for novels and movies. Your love for the Lord should be unmistakable!

NOW WHAT?

Read about the wise men in Matthew 2:1-12.

DID YOU KNOW?

The wise men didn’t visit Jesus at the manger. That’s a man-made tradition. They came “after Jesus was born” (Matthew 2:1 ESV), and their trip likely took weeks. When they arrived in Bethlehem, they “entered the house” (verse 11, emphasis added) to see the Savior.



The hearts of these people are hardened, and their ears cannot hear, and they have closed their eyes—so their eyes cannot see, and their ears cannot hear, and their hearts cannot understand, and they cannot turn to me and let me heal them.

MATTHEW 13:15

Nobody likes a party pooper.

A party pooper is someone who ruins a good time. He’s the guy who sits in a corner mumbling about how sugar rots your teeth while everyone else is eating Christmas cookies. She’s the girl who wants to stay home and do homework while everyone else goes caroling. They don’t recognize a good thing when it comes along.

The Jewish religious leaders of Jesus’ day were big-time party poopers. While plenty of people rejoiced at the Savior’s birth, the priests, scribes, and Pharisees did not. In fact, when King Herod, the wicked, Roman-appointed ruler of Judea, heard rumors about a “newborn king of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2) and asked the religious leaders where the child was to be born, they casually quoted the Micah 5:2 prophecy about Bethlehem . . . and that’s it. The Bible says nothing about them sending someone to investigate Jesus’ birth—or doing anything about it, for that matter.

God’s people had been waiting thousands of years for the promised Messiah. Why didn’t the religious leaders do something about it?

Their hearts were hardened.

WHAT’S IT MEAN?

Having a hard heart means you are unreceptive and defiant toward God. It means you don’t want to listen to him or obey him.

Sadly, the next generation of Israel’s religious leaders that came to power during Jesus’ adulthood was no different than the one during the time of Jesus’ birth. They fought and argued with Jesus constantly. They dismissed his miracles and denied his deity. Not even Lazarus’s resurrection softened their hearts toward the Messiah.

So in today’s verse, Jesus quoted Isaiah 6:9-10—a long-ago condemnation of Old Testament Israel’s unbelief—to describe the Jewish leaders of the first century AD. They were no different than the faithless people of Isaiah’s era.

May we never be party poopers when it comes to Jesus! May we never have hard hearts that reject God’s Son. Instead, let’s rejoice like the angels, shepherds, and wise men at our Savior’s coming and worship him!

NOW WHAT?

Say a prayer of praise to Jesus for coming to save you from your sins.

DID YOU KNOW?

Although the Romans ruled Israel in Jesus’ day, Rome still allowed the Jews to practice Judaism and gave positions of authority to certain individuals. That’s why the Jewish religious leaders had enough influence to eventually convince Pilate to crucify Jesus.



They opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

MATTHEW 2:11

The long wait is almost over. The moment you've anticipated all year comes tomorrow.

Christmas Day!

You've no doubt made your wish list. Maybe you even ranked the gifts you want in order—you know, just to make sure everyone is aware. Your top three gift ideas are certainly gold, frankincense, and myrrh, right?

Probably not.

Two thousand years ago, when the wise men finally reached the young Jesus' home, they "entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh" (today's verse).

Maybe the Magi's gifts to Jesus don't mean much to you. But these costly items speak a great deal about the special child who received them.

WHAT'S IT MEAN?

Whether or not the wise men realized it, their expensive gifts symbolized Jesus' unique roles as King (gold), High Priest (frankincense), and Savior (myrrh).

Let's take a closer look . . .

Gold is the obvious one. In ancient times, gold was often a symbol of royalty and the measure of a kingdom's greatness. King Solomon, for instance, was renowned for his wealth and gold (1 Kings 10:14-23). The Magi's gift of gold symbolized Jesus' kingship, because he is the "King of all kings and Lord of all lords" (Revelation 19:16) who will one day return to earth to destroy all evil and establish his eternal kingdom.

Frankincense was a type of incense made from tree resin that the Israelites used in Tabernacle ceremonies (and later, at the Temple). Priests would burn this sweet-smelling substance on an altar in the Holy Place as an offering to God (Exodus 30:34-35). The gift of frankincense symbolized Jesus' role as our High Priest who became the ultimate sin-sacrifice to God on our behalf. As Hebrews 10:12 says, Christ is "our High Priest [who] offered himself to God as a single sacrifice for sins, good for all time."

Myrrh was used as a fragrant spice to embalm dead bodies before they were entombed. John 19:39-40 describes how Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea covered Jesus' body with myrrh-laced ointment after taking him off the cross. The gift of myrrh foreshadowed Jesus' death and resurrection as our loving Savior!

This Christmas, follow the example of the wise men and worship Jesus as your King, High Priest, and Savior!

NOW WHAT?

Worship Jesus today with the sacrifices of prayer and singing.

DID YOU KNOW?

Apparently, myrrh could be used in drinks. During his crucifixion, Jesus was offered wine mixed with myrrh to dull his pain, but he refused to drink it (Mark 15:23).



Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

LUKE 2:11, ESV

Merry Christmas!

Today is the big day—the day that everyone has been waiting for all year! No matter who you are, how old you are, or where you're from, Christmas is special.

There is no other annual holiday when so many people across the world gather together to celebrate with family and friends. Some celebrations are sacred; others are secular. Regardless, Christmas brings people together and creates traditions in ways that few other things can.

Speaking of traditions, have you dashed down to see what's under the tree and yanked your stocking off the mantle yet? If we're completely honest, one thing we love most about Christmas is the gifts! Who doesn't love getting stuff?

A gift is a wonderful thing. It's something willingly given to someone without expectation of payment. This, of course, is a beautiful description of God's love toward us.

WHAT'S IT MEAN?

God's love toward us is hard to describe because it's so big. You can't wrap it up and put a holiday bow on it. But it's real, it's amazing . . . and it's completely free.

You did nothing to earn God's love. You can't work for it like a paycheck, merit it like a Boy Scouts badge, or win it like a sports championship. God gives it to you as a free gift of his grace through faith in his Son, Jesus Christ.

God doesn't expect you to pay for the gift of his love. You can't! That's why Jesus came. You were utterly helpless to earn righteousness before God on your own. So Jesus did it for you through the Cross.

When you trust in Jesus, God lovingly showers you with gifts from his storehouse of heavenly riches:

- unending supplies of his mercy and grace (Hebrews 4:16)
- the indwelling of his Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16)
- freedom from sin's bondage (Romans 6:6)
- access to spiritual peace that "exceeds anything we can understand" (Philippians 4:7)
- eternal life in his presence (John 3:16)
- and so much more!

God's love is like opening a gift of spiritual treasures that never ends. It's truly the gift that keeps on giving!

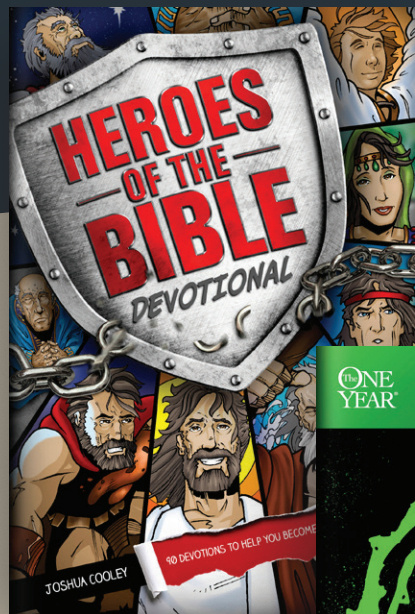
On this very special day, as you give and receive gifts, remember the supreme demonstration of God's love toward you, expressed through "a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (today's verse). He is our greatest gift!

NOW WHAT?

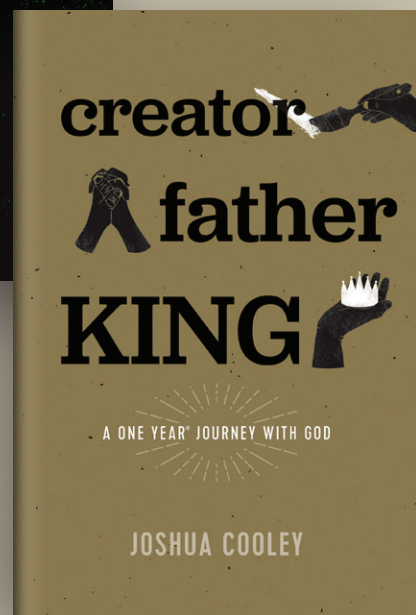
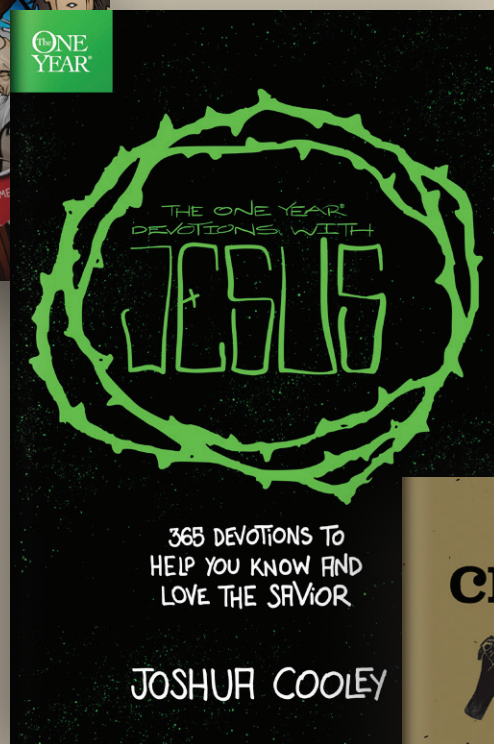
Prayerfully meditate on the verses listed above about God's gifts to us.

DID YOU KNOW?

God's love for us is so great, biblical writers strained to adequately describe it. See Psalm 103:11 for an example.



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