

# SIMPLY *Christmas*



A 24-DAY DEVOTIONAL



# INTRODUCTION



The good news of Christmas is that even when the world seems to be spinning out of control – the message of Christmas is timeless. Yet sometimes after years of reading the story, we lose some of the wonder and awe of the greatest miracle in history. We may have heard the story dozens of times, but we forget that the characters who played a part in the birth of Jesus were ordinary people just like you and me. Simply Christmas is your invitation to step into the lives of these men and women and the part they played in the Christmas story.

You might even discover something you may have never known before about the story you've always heard. Most of all, our prayer is that you will see the most important character, Jesus Christ, and the wonder of a Savior who would leave heaven to come to Earth to save us.

DECEMBER 4



# DAY 1 - THE PROMISE

SCRIPTURE READING:  
GENESIS 3:15

Do we really need Christmas? The answer to this question doesn't begin in the Christmas stories of the gospels. It actually goes all the way back to Genesis 3. The third chapter of Genesis is the sad account of how the human race fell into sin. Adam and Eve, having been tempted by the serpent, desired to "be like God," and therefore they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The results were tragic. Adam, Eve, and the serpent were cursed and death entered the world. Despite the darkness that shrouded that day, a beam of hope broke through – and this is where we come back to the topic of Christmas.

God promised that a special child would be born, who would defeat the serpent. God promised that someone among Eve's offspring would win the ultimate victory over the serpent. The promise of this offspring is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Christmas isn't a holiday because we need extra vacation days, presents, and extra church services. Christmas exists because God the Father, whose love for us knows no bounds, intervened in our lives by sending His Son to be born of a virgin. "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son so that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16)

## *Prayer*

Heavenly Father, how thankful we are for the promise of a Savior that you made to us back in the Garden of Eden. Thank you that when the appointed time had come, you sent your Son, born of a woman to redeem us, that we might receive forgiveness of our sins and the gift of eternal life. As we enter into the Christmas season, help us not to forget the reason for the season and the greatest gift ever given.

DECEMBER 5



## DAY 2 - HISTORY IN ADVANCE

SCRIPTURE READING:  
ISAIAH 9:6-7

The events associated with the birth of Jesus fulfilled numerous Old Testament prophecies given hundreds of years before the events actually happened. Isaiah was a Hebrew prophet born in Jerusalem who lived about 700 years before the birth of Jesus. Isaiah's name means "salvation of the Lord." He was married to a prophetess (Isaiah 8:3) and they had two sons.

Isaiah prophesied a virgin birth in Isaiah 7:14, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." For thousands of years mankind waited for the coming of Christ; they longed for their King to arrive and free them from oppression. The Bible is full of prophecies pointing to the One who would save mankind from their sins. When Isaiah foretold of Christ's birth, he described His coming as an infant. But this child would grow and establish a Kingdom of righteousness forevermore. When we celebrate Christmas, we are celebrating the moment in history when the prophecy was fulfilled. God came to be with us.

Despite what many believe today, the religions and religious leaders of the world are not the same. Many people claim that Jesus was just another religious leader. We don't find any prophecies foretelling details about the birth of other religious leaders. No prophecies alerted the world to the coming of Muhammad (Islam), Joseph Smith (Mormonism), Charles Taze Russell (Jehovah's Witnesses), Siddhartha Gautama (Buddhism), or any others. Yet the Old Testament pinpointed numerous details about the birth of Jesus hundreds of years before it happened. We can praise God for fulfilling His promises.

### *Prayer*

Lord, we magnify your name. We thank you because you never fail to keep your promises. Thank you that we can have complete confidence that you will always be faithful to do what you have said you would do. Be glorified through our thoughts, words, and deeds this Christmas season.

DECEMBER 6

# DAY 3 - BETHLEHEM

SCRIPTURE READING:  
MICAH 5:2

The prophet Micah was born in a village located near the border of Israel and Philistia. It would have been considered 'in the country' during this time because it was an agricultural area not near any major cities. Micah provided one of the most significant prophecies in all of the Old Testament. His prophecy pointed some seven hundred years before Christ's birth to His birthplace in Bethlehem and to His eternal nature. "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 old, from ancient times." (Micah 5:2).

Bethlehem is also where David, king of Israel, was born and grew up tending his father's sheep in the surrounding fields. One of the best-known hymns of the Christmas season originated in the late 1800s. Phillips Brooks, a minister from Pennsylvania, was in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve in 1865. According to the story, he traveled on horseback between Jerusalem and Bethlehem on Christmas Eve and penned these words, "Before dark we rode out of town to the field where they say the shepherds saw the star. It is a fenced piece of ground with a cave in it. As we passed, shepherds were still there keeping watch over their flocks." Brooks went on to participate in the Christmas Eve service in Bethlehem that evening.

A few years later he wrote a poem reflecting on that night in Bethlehem. Brooks needed some music to go with the words. He turned to his church organist who tried for several days to come up with a suitable melody for the words but was unsuccessful. Feeling discouraged, Brooks went to bed the night before Christmas Eve. In his sleep, he seemed to hear the perfect melody. He immediately woke up, wrote the melody on paper, and "O Little Town of Bethlehem" was performed by the children on Christmas Day.

## *Prayer*

Lord, we recognize you as King and we worship you. May we never take you for granted. May we always go to great lengths and inconvenience to seek you first and to be amazed by who you are — the One True God who loves us with an everlasting love.

DECEMBER 7

# DAY 4 - GABRIEL

SCRIPTURE READING:  
LUKE 1:31-32

If you've heard the Christmas story, chances are you recognize Gabriel as the name of the angel who brought Mary the news that she would become pregnant and give birth to Jesus. The name Gabriel is of Hebrew origin and means "God Is My Strength." Each time Gabriel appears in the Bible, it is in the role of a messenger. In Luke 1:19 Gabriel stated that he is an angel who "stands in the presence of God." He was chosen by God to deliver important messages to at least three of God's faithful, including the birth and name of God's Son.

Instead of announcing the news to kings or priests, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town in Galilee named Nazareth to a young girl who had never been married. The virgin's name was Mary and she was engaged to a man named Joseph, who was a descendant of the house of David.

Gabriel came to her and told her that the Lord was with her. But when she saw him she was greatly troubled and very confused. She didn't understand what the greeting meant.

Gabriel told her not to be afraid because she had found favor with God. The message from God was that she would become pregnant, give birth to a son, and call His name Jesus. Gabriel went on to tell her that He would be great and called the Son of the Most High. After announcing Jesus' name and identity, Gabriel explained to Mary that it would be a virgin birth caused by the Holy Spirit. After this, Gabriel left. He does not appear in the Bible again, at least by name.

## *Prayer*

Lord, your arrival in the world transformed human history. For you, the Creator of the universe, to give up your power and your throne to live among sinful men, was an act of true selflessness. Thank you for your kindness and love. As we inch toward Christmas, please continuously renew our minds and help us and our families to remember that the real meaning of the season is Christ Jesus.

DECEMBER 8



# DAY 5 - CAESAR AUGUSTUS

SCRIPTURE READING:  
LUKE 2:1

Caesar Augustus was the first emperor in the ancient Roman Empire. As the grand-nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar, he used the popularity of his great uncle's name to rally the army behind him. He reigned for 45 years and was ruling at the time of Jesus' birth.

Augustus brought peace and prosperity to the Roman Empire. Its many provinces were governed with a heavy hand. In Israel, the Jews were allowed to maintain their religion and culture. Ironically, the peace and order established by Augustus and maintained by his successors actually helped in the spread of Christianity. The extensive network of Roman roads made travel easier. The Apostle Paul carried his missionary work westward over those roads. Both he and the Apostle Peter were executed in Rome, but not before they had spread the gospel there, causing the message to fan out on Roman roads to the rest of the ancient world.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that Augustus ordered a census to be taken of the entire Roman world. Little did he know that this would fulfill a biblical prophecy made hundreds of years before Jesus was born. Palestine was part of that world, so Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, took his pregnant wife, Mary, to Bethlehem to register. Joseph was from the house and line of David. There would have been no reason for Joseph and Mary to leave Nazareth for the birth of their baby except for Caesar Augustus' decree. God's plan had been set in motion. A prophecy was about to be fulfilled.

## *Prayer*

Lord, only you are the King of Kings...reigning over and working in all things, for your glory and our good. You are the ruler of all the kings of the Earth... setting them up and sitting them down according to your will. We thank you that no other kingdom, but yours, is everlasting. May we live lives that bring honor to you.

DECEMBER 9



# DAY 6 - HEROD THE GREAT

SCRIPTURE READING:  
MATTHEW 2:8

Herod the Great was the king of Judaea. His primary directive was to carry out the wishes of Rome. He was known for consolidating Roman rule and advancing the Hellenization of Judaea. He built the port city of Caesarea and rebuilt the Temple of Jerusalem.


He is mentioned in the New Testament when the Magi (also known as Wise Men) from the East came to Jerusalem looking for the one who had been born King of the Jews. Of course, this caught Herod's attention so he called the scribes and determined that, according to prophecy, the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. As the Magi left for Bethlehem to find the Messiah, Herod asked them to report back to him with the location of the newborn King "so that I too may go and worship him."

However, Herod had no such intentions to worship the newborn King. Herod the Great had a dark side that showed itself in the events of Matthew 2 and other historical events. He always feared potential rivals. When Herod realized that the Magi had not reported back to him (they had been warned by God not to return to Herod), he was furious and called for the slaughter of all the boys up to two years old in Bethlehem and the surrounding area hoping to end the life of any potential rival. God warned Joseph that he needed to flee to Egypt with Jesus and Mary. Joseph obeyed God and Jesus was not harmed; however, there was a great slaughter of the innocents in and around Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16-18). Such is Herod the Great's biblical legacy.

## *Prayer*

Lord, thank you that your sovereign rule lasts and lasts. Your Kingdom is one that never declines and falls. Thank you that your heavenly army keeps everything going and we can rest in the fact that no one can interrupt your work and no one can call your rule into question. Just as you sent your Son at the appointed time and according to your sovereign plan, we can trust that you will work out your plan for our lives as well.



DECEMBER 10  
 DAY 7 - MARY

SCRIPTURE READING:  
LUKE 1:26-27

Mary was a teenager living in Nazareth during the reign of Herod the Great when the angel Gabriel appeared to her and announced she was chosen by God to give birth to the Messiah.

Because of the time and area in which Mary lived, we can make some pretty good guesses about what her life was like. Mary was probably a peasant. Life in a rural village of the Middle East such as Nazareth would have been filled with hard work. Typical family homes consisted of three or four houses of one or two rooms each built around an open courtyard, in which relatives shared an oven, a cistern, and a millstone for grinding grain, and where domestic animals also lived. Most women and many men were illiterate. Mary would have spent most of her time doing household work including strenuous physical chores. As a Jew, she would have been taught to expect the Messiah her entire life. She became part of the fulfillment of God's ultimate plan when the angel Gabriel declared, "You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be the Son of the Most High" and "will reign over Jacob's descendants forever."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her. Despite being greatly troubled by the words of this angel, Mary demonstrated the power of pure faith. She chose to believe. She stands as one of the most loved women of all time! In her book, *All the Women of the Bible*, Edith Deen wrote of Mary, "Though she never traveled any farther than from Palestine to Egypt, and then by donkey, her story still travels to the farthest corners of the Earth."

Sometimes the most profound thing we can do with our lives is to wholeheartedly say, "Lord, I am your servant."

### *Prayer*

Lord, thank you for the example Mary set for us. Help us to be a servant, not by compulsion, but rather because we are honored to do so. Throughout this Christmas season and for the rest of our lives, may we be your servants and willingly surrender to what you have called us to do.

DECEMBER 11

# DAY 8 - JOSEPH

SCRIPTURE READING:  
LUKE 1:5-6

Joseph was a carpenter, an artisan either in wood or stone. Not only was he a descendant of King David, but he was also the earthly father of Jesus. Although the Bible does not give many specifics about Joseph—and the Bible records no actual words that Joseph spoke—we know that he was a humble man who faithfully obeyed God, honored others, took responsibility, and worked hard to provide for his family.

Joseph was pledged to be married to Mary. The Bible tells us that Mary became pregnant through the Holy Spirit and not through Joseph, which is why he is referred to as the earthly father of Jesus. An angel appeared to Joseph assuring him that the baby in Mary's womb was conceived miraculously by the Holy Spirit. She had been chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus.

We don't know how this made Joseph feel. Did he remember the Scriptures he had heard read so many times in the temple that described the future Messiah coming from a young virgin? Did he understand that the fulfillment of the long-awaited prophecy was on the doorstep of his life?

Though he had a legal right to divorce Mary when he found out she was pregnant, he intended to do so quietly because he did not want to bring any public shame or disgrace on her or her family. But after the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and encouraged him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, Joseph immediately obeyed. Throughout his life, he displayed a pattern of obedience even when it didn't make sense. Joseph didn't let his confusion disrupt his obedience. We also have a choice: to obey or disobey. Because Joseph obeyed, God used him to change the world. God can do the same for us.

## *Prayer*

Lord, grant us a spirit of unquestioning obedience to your will. Help us choose to obey and be willing to set out on a journey to wherever you may lead us. We want to be world changers and shine as bright lights of hope pointing others to you. Give us a willing heart to do whatever you ask us to do.

DECEMBER 12



# DAY 9 - ZECHARIAH

SCRIPTURE READING:  
LUKE 1:5-6

Zechariah was a Jewish high priest and prophet who lived an exemplary life dedicated to God. He was responsible for the incense in the temple where God's people brought their offerings. He was also a descendant of King David, having been born into the house of Judah. He and his wife were righteous before God, but they had no children.

One year, during his priestly duties, Zechariah was approached by the angel Gabriel who told him that God had heard his prayer and his wife, Elizabeth, would get pregnant and give birth to a boy. This seemed crazy because both of them were old. Zechariah was so taken back by this announcement that he questioned whether the angel had made a mistake. So he asked the angel to give him a sign to validate whether the message he had received was in fact received correctly. Gabriel rebuked Zechariah for his unbelief and the angel Gabriel struck him with dumbness. Gabriel told him that he would no longer be able to speak a word until the child was born and the prophecy was fulfilled.

True to Gabriel's words, Zechariah could not utter a single word and was not able to perform his temple duties any longer. Elizabeth gave birth to a baby boy and her neighbors and relatives assumed that he would be named after his father. Elizabeth, however, insisted that his name was to be John. The family then questioned her husband. As soon as Zechariah had written on a writing tablet: "His name is John," he regained his speech and hearing.

The baby, John, was none other than John the Baptist. He would be God's messenger sent to prepare the way for Jesus. He was also the one to baptize Jesus at the beginning of his ministry.

## *Prayer*

Lord, Zechariah reminds us that you answer our prayers. Remind us to keep trusting you even in the waiting. Help us not let delays and disappointments distract us from the bigger plan that you have for our lives. Thank you that you promise to stay close to us now and even until the end of the age.

DECEMBER 13

# DAY 10 - ELIZABETH

SCRIPTURE READING:  
LUKE 1:36-37

The Bible is full of fascinating stories about human relationships, including friendships. In fact, there are many stories of friendships throughout the Old and New Testaments. God wants us to have relationships — not just of the marital and familial kind but deep and abiding friendships as well. True friendship provides us with support, love, and enjoyment and is nothing short of a gift from God. The story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth as told in Luke 1, portrays a deep friendship that serves as an example to us even today. Both Mary and Elizabeth were exceptionally God-fearing women. Both had found favor with God, and both were chosen by Him for special tasks.

Elizabeth was married to Zechariah. God had chosen her to be the mother of John the Baptist who had been prophesied about generations before. She was also Mary's cousin. After the angel Gabriel had visited Mary and told her she would be giving birth to the son of God, Mary went to visit Elizabeth. The Bible tells us that when Mary approached Elizabeth with the news, Elizabeth was so excited that the baby inside her womb actually jumped for joy and she exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women!"

Mary stayed with Elizabeth in her home for about three months. Going by the words they exchanged that first day, that must have been some visit! It must have been full of rejoicing, love, and true fellowship. At some point in our lives, we all have experienced what it's like to be in need of a genuine friend, someone we can share life with. "A friend loves at all times." (Proverbs 17:17) Genuine, biblical friendships will transform your life and ignite your faith.

## *Prayer*

Lord, thank you for the gift of friendship. I praise you for the people you have blessed me with, the ones who have come alongside me to love, encourage, support, and uplift me through all the twists and turns of life. I pray that you would be present in my friendships, and that you would be drawing us together in deeper community with one another toward greater unity with you. Thank you for the ways they build me up and remind me of your goodness and faithfulness.

DECEMBER 14



# DAY 11 - THE INNKEEPER

SCRIPTURE READING:  
LUKE 2:7

The small village of Bethlehem was bulging with people who had come to be counted for the census. When Joseph and a very pregnant Mary arrived in Bethlehem, they began looking for a place to stay but there were no vacancies. They finally found an innkeeper who offered them space in a stable. Given Mary's delicate condition, they chose to settle in with the animals and it was there that Jesus was born. Have you ever noticed that the innkeeper is never really mentioned in the Bible? He is "assumed." All we really know is - "there was no room for them in the inn." Have you ever wondered if the innkeeper made any kind of effort to find space for Mary inside the inn? Did he ask for a volunteer who would be willing to give up his or her space for a pregnant woman?

Maybe he saw an opportunity to make just a little more money by renting the stable. Or maybe he was distracted just trying to keep the guests in his overcrowded inn comfortable. Whatever the reason for his preoccupation, the innkeeper missed the most significant birth in human history. Even after Jesus was born we have no record that the innkeeper, or any of the inn's guests, came to check on the newborn. You would think someone would wander out and see how the new mother and baby were doing out in the stable. Sometimes our own lives quickly fill up with things - possessions, activities, responsibilities, etc. until we feel we have "no room" left for God. Busyness can be deceiving. It makes us feel like our life is too full, when actually our life may have become empty. That's why Jesus continually invites us to seek Him...to seek His face...to seek His presence. This Christmas season may we slow down and become more aware of His presence. May we make room for Jesus first so that we don't miss celebrating the most significant birth in human history.

## *Prayer*

Dear Lord, Don't let us miss you this Christmas season. Help us to simplify our activities and traditions so we can focus our celebration on your birth. Thank you for being the Prince of Peace, and we ask you for that supernatural peace to reign in our hearts. Thank You for the simple but life-changing message of Your love for us.

DECEMBER 15



# DAY 12 - THE DONKEY

SCRIPTURE READING:  
LUKE 2:4-5

The journey was about 80 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Most people tended to travel together in groups to provide more protection against robbers, bandits, and wild animals. Aside from walking, other common modes of transportation would have included horses, camels, or donkeys. However, Joseph was not a rich man which means he did not have the means to purchase horses or camels. Although the Bible never states that Mary rode on a donkey, it is likely Joseph had his own donkey or may have even borrowed a donkey for Mary to ride upon. Author Max Lucado gives us a unique perspective about the part the donkey might have played in the story.

Beneath a suspended star a baby will be born, the angels will sing, the wise men will kneel and children of all ages will go home telling their parents that next year they want a part in the nativity play. Little boys want to be Joseph. Little girls want to be Mary. Some want to wear the angel wings or bear gifts from a distant land. A few might even offer to be the hard-hearted Herod or the hassled innkeeper. But no one, ever, as far as I know, volunteers to be the donkey. Which is odd because what greater honor could exist than to do what the donkey did? He carried Jesus. Wise men get the cool hats and angels have the hallelujahs. And the donkey? He just stands to the side and chews on hay. But look at him. Do you not see contentment in those big, brown eyes? A look of satisfaction on his face? He just delivered history's greatest gift! Before Santa had a sleigh or UPS had trucks, God had a donkey.

The Christmas donkey did his work. He delivered Jesus so Jesus could be delivered. He plodded along doing what donkeys do. And, upon arrival, he stepped to the side. He demanded no recognition, expected no compensation. He isn't even mentioned in the Bible. He was happy to do his job and let Jesus have all the attention. Perhaps we could learn a lesson from the Christmas donkey. There is always a place in the nativity story for the person who will plod along expecting no applause, bearing up under the weight of the long haul, and carrying the One who will carry us all. So here's to the donkeys of the story. May your ride be faithful and your rest be fruitful. And we will do our best to follow your example.

## *Prayer*

Lord, we worship you during this Christmas season. You are our wonderful Counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. We choose to put you at the center of our lives as we celebrate your birth. Keep us from distractions. Teach us to pray and help us to glorify and worship you during this busy time of year.

DECEMBER 16



# DAY 13 - THE SHEPHERDS

SCRIPTURE READING:  
LUKE 2:8

On the edge of the town of Bethlehem, on the road to Jerusalem, stood a special place of protection for the shepherds and the sheep. The Migdal Eder, or Tower of the Flock, as it was called, served as a watchtower as well as a stall. The shepherds, who spent day and night with their sheep, never leaving their side, would use the Migdal Eder as a place of protection when the lambs were born to ensure they remained perfect.

Immediately following their birth, the shepherds would inspect the lambs making sure they were flawless and without fault. The shepherds would then wrap the perfect lambs in swaddling clothes, certifying their birth was a “holy birth.” This outward, physical display of cloths wrapped securely around the lambs meant they were deemed an acceptable sacrifice. It is not a coincidence that Jesus, the Lamb of God, was also born in the same town as the sacrificial lambs. Luke 2:7 says “She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” The Perfect Lamb, born to save the world, was swaddled in the exact manner the Temple lambs were swaddled. The significance of this act spoke volumes to those who understood what the swaddling represented: the certification of a holy birth.

In ancient Israel, shepherds were generally considered “unclean” in the community of God’s people because of the work they did. They were in daily contact with dirty smelly sheep, manure, blood from cuts and scrapes, and the insects that buzzed around them. All of this meant that shepherds were rarely clean enough to worship with God’s people in God’s presence. So they were generally treated as outsiders. How fitting that God chose to associate the birth of Christ with people who may have been ignored or ostracized by the community. In fact, not only was there room for shepherds in the presence of the Lord, but they were the first ones notified and invited to come and see the Savior who had been born!

## *Prayer*

Lord, thank you that you were willing to associate with those who were ignored and didn't fit in. Thank you for welcoming all of us into your presence, no matter where we come from or where we've been. Thank you that you notice each one of us and long to have a relationship with us. Help us show grace and love to others, as you have shown to us.

DECEMBER 17

# DAY 14 - SILENT NIGHT

SCRIPTURE READING:  
ISAIAH 9:2

Was it really a 'Silent Night' in Bethlehem? The streets were overcrowded with those who had come to register for the census. Noisy (and smelly) animals were gathered around the manger. Angels were singing and proclaiming good news to the shepherds in the field. Most likely, all was not calm around the virgin mother and the holy infant. In fact, that night may have been one of the noisiest, most chaotic nights in Judaea that year.

It seems like no matter how much effort we put into simplifying and focusing on what matters, the holidays continue to be filled with rampant consumerism, overindulging, a ton of extra work, and a lot of emotional and family complexity. Maybe you, too, have felt the chaos of the Christmas season. So did a young Austrian priest named Joseph Mohr. In 1818, he was trying to get ready for Christmas services in between all of his other duties. He hadn't had time to prepare the music for the Christmas Eve services. The church organ was out of commission. Whether it was damaged by flooding or hungry church mice is unknown, but he was in charge of making sure there was special music. And Christmas was only two days away.

On the day before Christmas Eve, he was called to administer the last rites to a dying woman. By the time he returned to town, the hour was late. The valley and the village lay in darkness. He paused on a hill overlooking the town. The events had left him feeling sad, overwhelmed, and exhausted: the useless organ, the death of a parishioner, the cold night, and a long journey.

His heart, like the valley, was lost in shadows. But then he saw a faint light of a distant home. Against the black curtain of night, it shone even brighter. He recalled Isaiah's prophecy, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone." The priest pondered the light, then thought to himself, "It must have been something like this—that silent, holy night in Bethlehem when the Light of the world descended upon planet Earth." Suddenly inspired, he hurried home, sat down at his desk, and wrote the words to 'Silent Night,' which has become one of the most frequently recorded Christmas carols of all time.

## *Prayer*

Lord, in a season when every heart should be happy and light, we sometimes struggle with the heaviness of life—burdens that steal our joy. That's when we hear you speak to our hearts, "Don't be afraid." Thank you that even when there is chaos all around, you promise to give us a peace that passes all understanding.



DECEMBER 18

# DAY 15 - THE ANGELS

SCRIPTURE READING:  
LUKE 2:13-14

In the book of Luke, we read that a heavenly host of angels appeared to shepherds who were “living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.” God chose angels to break the silence. The people of Israel in those days had not heard a prophetic voice for hundreds of years. They had become dull of hearing; their hearts were calloused. Their interest in the things of God was at an all-time low.

Significantly, the angels did not visit the most prestigious people in society. Instead this important announcement was made to humble shepherds: there had been a holy birth. The first words the angel spoke were words of comfort, almost like a transition, breaking God’s silence in a world weary of its sin and fearful that God had abandoned them.

The angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.”

We have no idea how many more angels appeared, but as if the appearance of a single angel wasn’t enough to grab their attention, suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on Earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

This was enough to spark the shepherds into action. When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, they headed straight to Bethlehem to find baby Jesus. Heaven had spoken at last!

The message to the shepherds was personal. The angels declared this baby was for them.... their Savior, their King, their Christ, their gift – straight from God. Just for them. God wanted them to see the incredibly personal nature of this Christmas gift. And He wants us to see it too. The same message that was given to the shepherds on that night so long ago is still given to us today. Unspeakable joy!

## *Prayer*

Lord, we thank you and praise you today for the miracle of your Son’s birth. Thank you for bringing great joy to the whole world! Thank you for giving us the assurance that because you came to us in the form of a human, those of us who have accepted Jesus can know with absolute certainty that we’ll spend eternity with you.

DECEMBER 19



# DAY 16 - AWAY IN A MANGER

SCRIPTURE READING:  
GALATIANS 4:4

As Mary looked into the face of her baby, do you ever wonder what she was thinking? Did she remember the words of the angel when he said: "His Kingdom will never end?" To be honest, the baby looked like anything but a King. His cry, though strong and healthy, was still the helpless cry of a baby. It just didn't seem fitting for the story of a king to begin in a manger. At first, we might think it was a miscalculation, but God had centuries to get ready and plan the details of the arrival of his Son in the right place, at the right time, and in the right way.

For example, he could have easily arranged that a faithful virgin and a just man, in the lineage of David, be found in Bethlehem to fulfill Micah's prophecy. But instead, he chooses Mary and Joseph, who lived in Nazareth, not Bethlehem. And then He plans for Mary to get pregnant far from the prophesied town. Then God arranged that the most powerful leader in the world would order everyone in the entire empire to go to the town of their origin to register. It seems totally ridiculous to think that a God who would wield an entire empire to move one woman from Nazareth to Bethlehem can't arrange for there to be an available guest room. Planning a bed for his Son would have been much easier than planning a census. There's no doubt about it, Jesus was lying in exactly the place God had planned - a manger.

In the late 1800s, "Away In A Manger" was written by an unknown composer. The song reminds us of the humble beginnings of Jesus. The lyrics take us back to the manger and the birth of the Savior when God became flesh and dwelt among us. It was a humble beginning for the King of kings.

"Away in a manger no crib for a bed  
The little Lord Jesus lay down His sweet head  
The stars in the sky look down where He lay  
The little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay"

"But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His son, born of a woman." - Galatians 4:4

## *Prayer*

Lord, thank you for the manger and the reminder that you chose to humble yourself and become one of us so that we might one day live with you forever. During this season, as we reflect on the manger, let us remember that your timing and your plan are always perfect...even in our world today.

DECEMBER 20



# DAY 17 - THE STAR

SCRIPTURE READING:  
MATTHEW 2:10

What exactly was the star of Bethlehem? The Greek word translated “star” in the text is the word aster which is the normal word for a star or celestial body. Many Bible scholars suggest a natural explanation for the star of Bethlehem. Their theories range from a supernova to a comet to an alignment of the planets. Others believe that the star of Bethlehem was not a natural stellar phenomenon, but something unexplained by science. Since the star of Bethlehem seemed to appear only to the Magi, it indicates that it was no ordinary star. The star not only led the Magi from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, but it led them directly to the place where Joseph and Mary were staying, stopping overhead. No natural stellar phenomenon could do that.

When the Magi saw the star in the heavens, it alerted them to the fact that the Jewish Messiah was born. They do not call the star of Bethlehem by that name. In Matthew 2:2, they refer to it as being “his star,” since it was a sign to them that a king was born.

In 2020, new research was released regarding the origins of the star of Bethlehem that appears to confirm that a celestial body of great brightness did indeed exist at the time of Jesus’ birth which guided the Magi to Jesus. According to the leader of the research, Liberato De Caro, Ph.D., of the Institute of Crystallography in Bari, Italy, the star not only existed but was most probably exceptionally rare and shone 200 times more brightly than the brightest star ever seen from Earth.

The star reminds us that Jesus’ birth wasn’t announced to those we would have expected. It didn’t appear to the Jewish scholars and scribes of Jerusalem. Instead, it was shown to the Gentile Magi who would have been considered outsiders. It reminds us that the gospel is for everyone.

## *Prayer*

Lord, in this holy season, we praise you for the great gifts you have given us. Thank you for the angel's song, the lowly manger, and the shining star. As we look into the night sky during this Christmas season, may we be reminded of that amazing star so long ago when you announced the birth of your Son. Thank you that the gospel is for everyone.

DECEMBER 21

# DAY 18 - THE MAGI

SCRIPTURE READING:  
MATTHEW 2:11

The wise men, also known as Magi, were from "the East," most likely Persia, or modern-day Iran. This means they traveled 800 to 900 miles to see the Christ child. This knowledge combined with the signs the Magi saw in the heavens led them from the east to the little town of Bethlehem. According to tradition, there were three wise men. However, the Bible never indicates how many there were.

The idea that important events or people were heralded by signs in the heavens was a common part of most religions at the time. So it isn't surprising that the Magi were looking to the sky. It also makes sense that God would announce the birth of His Son in a way the Magi would understand.

On the night of Christ's birth, a mysterious light appeared in the sky. The Magi went to King Herod in Jerusalem asking, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

After they had talked with King Herod, they went on their way, and the star they had seen went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. The Magi brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to Jesus. Gold was a gift worthy of Christ's royalty, frankincense was a gift to honor His deity and the bitter myrrh marked His humanity. God had warned the Magi in a dream against returning to Herod, so, in defiance of the king, they left Judaea by another route.

The Magi were true Jesus seekers. They were serious about searching for God and didn't let anything get in their way. When we are diligent in our search, God will reveal Himself to us, regardless of where we're coming from.

## *Prayer*

Lord and Giver of all good things, the Magi traveled for miles to bring the Christ child the first Christmas presents. So may we, too, remember with thankful hearts the love that comes with each present we open. Most of all, we thank you for the love you have for each of us, and we thank you for the many gifts that you give us, especially the gift of your Son, Jesus.

DECEMBER 22

# DAY 19 - IMMANUEL

SCRIPTURE READING:  
MATTHEW 1:22-23

It's a word written on countless Christmas cards throughout the centuries and sung in some of our most-loved carols. In Scripture, it first appears in Isaiah 7:14, which says, "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign; The virgin will conceive, and give birth to a Son, and will call Him Immanuel." The birth of Christ was God-ordained. God gave us this child, named Immanuel, which literally means, "with us is God," or "God with us." God promised this Child would be entirely different than all the others born before or after Him. While others ultimately chose wrong, though they knew what was right, Christ would not. He would be and was sinless, without fault.

The New Testament makes it clear that Jesus was the long-promised Immanuel sent by God to save His people. He came as the mediator between God and man, as our Redeemer, Savior, and Friend. Two thousand years ago, God looked upon our messed up world, saw our hopelessness and our worthless attempts to get right with Him, and He did what we could never do—He came to us. When Christ came to Earth, He quite literally became "God with us." His coming to Earth changed everything. He came on that Christmas night with a plan for our redemption. Because of Jesus, our Immanuel, we never have to be alone. We never have to wonder or worry if we're good enough. We can simply rest knowing He is with us, in us, loves us, and will never leave us.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning... 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 1:1-2,14)

These opening verses of John's Gospel may not seem related to Christmas at first. But they tell us something incredible. The eternal God who was before all things determined to leave eternity, take upon Himself our humanity and be born as a baby. Perhaps the greater miracle is not so much a baby born of a virgin, but the awesome identity of that baby...Immanuel—God with us.

## *Prayer*

Lord, in a world where worry, not peace, prevails, stir up that good news again. This Christmas, make it real in our hearts. Never have we needed your joy and peace more than now. Thank you for Jesus, our Immanuel, the Word made flesh. Forgive us for forgetting—that your love never changes, never fades, and that you never abandon the purpose for which you came which was to save us from our sin.

DECEMBER 23



# DAY 20 - THE INVITATION

SCRIPTURE READING:  
MARK 6:30-31

This is the time of year when it seems like every day there is another Christmas activity. Christmas concerts and parties, shopping trips and family gatherings, and on and on. Perhaps you love it all. Or maybe you'd rather just stay home in front of the fire and not have to make conversation at one more get-together. No matter how you feel about the holiday hustle and bustle, you need to know that you have been invited to a very important celebration this Christmas that you don't want to miss.

There's an invitation waiting for you this season but it's not to a party or a concert. Nothing will make it easy for you to accept this invitation. In fact, you'll have to be absolutely determined to do it - Jesus is inviting you to rest.

Jesus knew about being busy-everyone wanted to see Him, for healing or out of sheer curiosity. In the book of Mark, the apostles had been so busy they hadn't even had time to eat! That's when Jesus issued the invitation to them that He has for you today: "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest for awhile."

Jesus wasn't just telling his followers to take it easy for awhile. He was inviting them to spend time with Him. If there is one thing you can do to counter-culturally celebrate Jesus's birth, it's to accept His invitation to rest. This invitation is not inviting you to come to a place or a party but to a Person. Jesus is inviting you to come to Him. He wants your full attention. He will not be in a rush.

Protect some time this week to read a Scripture that He has used in your life and spend a few moments to write it down, listen to beautiful Christmas music that exalts Him, and invite His Spirit to refresh you. As we slow down enough to think about the wonder of this season and fix our eyes on Jesus, our souls will find rest.

## *Prayer*

Lord, we confess that our hearts are too often filled with wonder of a different kind: wondering when the bills will be paid, when the terror will stop, when rest will come. Will it ever? Is the message still true? In this moment we choose to set our hearts on you. You are trustworthy, faithful, and the Giver of the gift of peace. Please help us to accept your invitation to break away with you so we can find rest.

DECEMBER 24



# DAY 21 - THE CURTAIN CALL

SCRIPTURE READING:  
2 CORINTHIANS 9:15

A curtain call occurs at the end of a performance when the characters return to the stage to be recognized by the audience. And so we recognize the characters of Christmas as they return to the stage and we pause and pay attention to what God is teaching us through their stories.

Reflecting on the birth of Jesus we are reminded of the prophets who foretold His birth hundreds of years before it happened. Our hearts are heavy as we think of those who were in places of authority that refused to acknowledge who Jesus was - even to the point of wanting to kill the Christ child. We recall the faithfulness of Zechariah who had been looking for the long awaited Messiah and the friendship between Mary and Elizabeth.

We remember Joseph's willingness to obey even when he didn't understand and the ordinary shepherds who were surprised by an angelic choir in the middle of the night. And there was the innkeeper who had no room in the inn but offered his stable to the young woman who was great with child. The diligence of the Magi who traveled so far and wouldn't give up until they found Jesus reminds us that if we're diligent in our search for God, He will reveal Himself to us.

As we prepare for Christmas Day we are reminded that Christmas is a time for giving. The prophets gave their promises. Zechariah gave his prayers. Elizabeth gave her praise. Mary gave her body. Joseph gave his reputation. The innkeeper gave his stable. The shepherds gave their time. The Magi gave their gifts. And God gave His Son.

One more question begs answering. What will our gift be this Christmas? We can give to Jesus what no angel or anyone else can give Him. We can simply give Him our hearts and lives. That's as simple as it gets. Sometimes "simple" is simply the best.

## *Prayer*

Lord, we believe you sent your Son into the world to bring glorious gifts of joy and meaning to our lives. You are a God of unbounded resources and unshakable plans. And so, Lord Jesus, we give you our hearts and our lives more than ever before. May the fullness of the real meaning of Christmas transform us into the people you have designed us to be.

DECEMBER 25



## DAY 22 - THE FIRST CHRISTMAS MORNING

SCRIPTURE READING:  
LUKE 2:11

Have you ever imagined what that first Christmas morning might have looked like? Shepherds with sleepy eyes and maybe still a bit confused from the explosion of light and choir of angels that had interrupted what was just an ordinary night of keeping watch over their flocks. What about the noise of the animals who were munching on their breakfast of hay? Weary from the long journey and too tired to think about any more details, Joseph was just relieved that Mary and the baby were safe. Then there is Mary. Exhausted no doubt - both physically and emotionally - she looks into the face of her baby boy. How could this tiny baby really be the Son of God? So much had happened over the past few months. So much she didn't understand. But she knew one thing. Her world would never be the same again. God had chosen to reveal himself through a human body, He came as a human being in order to redeem His creation from the curse of sin because of our rebellion against Him. And Bethlehem was just the beginning.

Immanuel. God with us. Not just God made us, not just God thinks about us, not just God above us. But God with us. He breathed our air and walked this Earth.

As Immanuel, God is with us in the midst of all the chaos and crisis. He is with us in the midst of the joy and sorrow. And, most importantly, God is with us in the midst of the ordinary. On this Christmas morning, take a deep breath. Realign your heart with what matters most in this moment. Hope is here. Jesus has come to save. That truth is just as real as it was over 2,000 years ago in a Bethlehem stable.

The greatest gift of all came that first Christmas. It wasn't wrapped in a beautiful package and set under a decorated tree. The greatest gift came wrapped in the flesh of baby Jesus and laid in a manger. May the cast of characters in the Christmas story remind you of the good news of this season: God left Heaven and moved into our neighborhood. May we never tire of the awe and wonder the Christmas season brings and may we share the Good News with everyone we meet!

### *Prayer*

Lord, you are still our Joy. You are still our Peace. You are no longer a babe in the manger. You are Lord of lords and King of kings. And we still celebrate you as Lord—this Christmas and always.











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