



Mark D. Williams

Dedication:

For my children-Matthew, Michaela, Luke, Gabe, KJ, Sarah, and Sol. May you come to know, love, and serve the God who was born as a baby in Bethlehem to bring salvation to the world!

Introduction:

Growing up as a child, attending church was not an important part of my family's weekly activities. In fact, we rarely went to church throughout the years. As a result, I never once heard the word Advent or had any exposure to the idea of an Advent "season" until I was a grown man serving in full-time vocational church ministry.

Honestly, how I came to celebrate both the seasons of Advent and Lent was a long process. I could just sense that there was more to my faith than the limited perspective of the denomination into which I was saved and where I served for more than a decade. Could all of the other denominations be wrong? Could 2000 years of church history truly be completely tainted by Catholic and orthodox theology? Could the Common Book of Prayer, the Lectionary, and Liturgical worship truly only be for weak Christians who can't pray original prayers, read devotions, and worship on their own?

While there were quite a few factors that led to me leaving this denomination and embracing a more ancient theology, the book "Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail" by Robert Webber had the greatest impact on my journey. With every chapter of this book, my heart longed for freedom to experience the ancient practices and seasons of the church.

Finally in 2005, I left the denomination of my training and experience and joined the staff at an interdenominational church in Tennessee. This church observed the different seasons of Liturgical Year including Advent and Lent. The first year we walked through both seasons with our church family, I knew this was something I wanted to become part of my family traditions as well.

After seven years with this church, God called me to help lead a Methodist congregation that practices the liturgical seasons of the church. Now the seasons of Advent and Lent would be an expected and anticipated part of the church worship calendar. We were at home.

However, one thing I noticed is that, regardless of the church or denomination, churches often presented details, especially of the Christmas narrative, that was more myth than manuscript. Over the years, as I have preached the Advent season each year, I have worked to clarify the Biblical record with our people.

As God grew my family seven children, He placed in my heart an urgency to make sure that my children understood the Christmas story as it is actually presented in the Bible. This is the inspiration for the Advent devotional you hold in your hand. It is my desire to provide for my children and future ancestors an Advent devotional that helps them fully understand both the significance of the history of the Advent season and the truth of the Biblical Christmas story.

This devotional is divided into four sections based on the four weeks of the Advent season.

Week 1-The Candle of Hope (The Prophet's Candle)

Week 2-The Candle of Love (The Bethlehem Candle)

Week 3-The Candle of Joy (The Shepherd's Candle)

Week 4-The Cancel of Love (The Angel's Candle)

May God richly bless your journey this Advent Season!!

Pastor Mark Williams

Week 1-Hope

The Prophecy Candle

Today, as we begin the season of Advent, we light the first candle in the Advent wreath, the candle of hope. This candle is a light that represents the anticipation of the coming of Christ. In most traditions, this first candle is purple, symbolizing God's forgiveness of the sins of all people. This candle is also known as the Prophecy candle, referring to the many promises of God's deliverance that were fulfilled in the birth of Christ.

Day 1-The World at Wait

Read Malachi 3:1-4

The concluding book of the Old Testament, Malachi, was written to the Jewish people around the year 400 BC. The message of Malachi sums up the message of the Old Testament: God's people will never be able to be faithful to God's covenant. While God will deal with their sin, He will not abandon them. God promises to redeem a remnant and send a Messiah to fulfil His promises.

"I will send My messenger, who will prepare the way before Me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to His temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. Malachi 3:1 NIV

With the conclusion of Malachi, the heavens fall silent. There are no inspired prophets appointed to Israel by God for the next 400 years. There are no more books written to guide God's people. The heavens are silent. The world waits.

Does this mean that God was not at work? Does this mean that God no longer cared or no longer desired to redeem His people? To answer these questions, we must remember two things. First, God is not constrained by time as we are, and second, God's ways are not our ways. In the course of this devotional book, we will learn that God had a specific plan to bring redemption to His people all along, and it started long before the silence was broken by a baby's cry in Bethlehem.

Prayer emphasis: Ask God to speak to your heart and draw you closer to Him during this journey through this advent season.

For Family Discussion:

As you begin this Advent journey, what are some things you are earnestly waiting for this year?

Have you ever felt like God was silent and not responding to your prayers? How did that make you feel?

Day 2-From the Beginning

Read Isaiah 29

It is easy to imagine that, by the time Jesus was born, the Heavens were in a full-blown panic. God's grand experiment that began with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden had become a complete failure. Adam and Eve were forced out of the garden thus severing the intimate relationship they had enjoyed with God. The distance between God and His people only grew wider from there as the years passed.

Through Moses, God instituted the Law, which was a set of standards intended to help people live faithfully to God and draw near to Him. There were generations of Jews who lived faithfully according to the Law, but no one could completely fulfill the Law and thus no one could once again enjoy that intimate relationship. As generations passed, God's people grew more distant. Isaiah wrote about the condition of their hearts...

The Lord says:

*“These people come near to Me with their mouth
and honor Me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from Me.*

Their worship of Me

is based on merely human rules they have been taught. Isaiah 29:13 NIV

God's people had a heart problem. They could go through the motions but couldn't make their hearts be sincere. By the time Malachi penned His final words of the Old Testament, the situation was beyond broken. Even so, God's plan for redemption was already in motion to restore what was broken and renew what has been lost.

Prayer emphasis: Ask God today to help you be sincere in your faith and to give you the desire to walk with Him faithfully.

Family Discussion:

When have you ever gone through the motions but your heart just wasn't in the activity?

In what ways could this be a description of your walk with God?

What needs to change in your life today for you to be more sincere?

Day 3-Stepping Down Read Philippians 2:5-8

The concept of the Trinity is a mystery that scholars have wrestled with for 2000 years. God is one in three persons: God the Father, Jesus the son, and the Holy Spirit. In the same way that water can exist in three states (ice, water, and steam) and still be H₂O, God exists in three states and is still God. (Got it now, right?)

I have always wondered if God had a staff meeting with Himself in order to put His divine plan in motion. In this fictitious meeting, Jesus understands that it is His time to take control and step into the History of humankind. I imagine that He stands from His throne at the right hand of God the Father, and steps down into the world He created. (John 1:3) This scene is described in Philippians 2...

...have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

*Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage;
rather, He made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
He humbled Himself.... Philippians 2:6-8 NIV*

Jesus, who was fully God, took on humanity when He was conceived in the womb of a teenage Jewish girl which was accomplished through the power of the Holy Spirit. (Amazed and confused yet?). God truly is powerful! The willingness of Jesus to step down from His throne and humble Himself as a servant to become 100% human while also being 100% God (not 50% human, 50% God) changed the future of God's people forever. While we had wandered far away from God and were lost with no hope of finding our way home, God came to us to both redeem our hearts and restore the relationship that we were created to enjoy.

Prayer Emphasis: Take time today to thank God for His willingness to step down from His rightful place in heaven and come to rescue His people.

For family discussion...

How does it make you feel to understand that Jesus left His throne in heaven to come and redeem us?

If Jesus was willing to humble Himself for us, what should we be willing to do for Him?

Day 4-A Unique Conception

Read Isaiah 7:14

When Jesus made the choice to step down from heaven, one big mystery remained. How would He come to earth? God's plan of redemption for His people was not a random set of choices born from desperation. Though it is hard to wrap our minds around it, God's plan of redemption was in motion from the beginning of the foundations of the earth. When the time came for Jesus to come to earth, the details of the plan were already in place. Isaiah tells us about it 7 centuries before the birth of Christ.

Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call Him Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14 NIV

In God's plan, a young virgin would conceive and give birth to a son and this son was Jesus. This is not exactly how we would expect God to arrive! Why couldn't he just beam down from heaven as a full-grown man and carry out His ministry with His disciples? Why go through the struggle of being an infant, a toddler, a teenager on His road of bringing redemption to His people? The writer of Hebrews gives us an explanation...

Since the children have flesh and blood, He too shared in their humanity so that by His death He might break the power of him who holds the power of death...For this reason He had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that He might make atonement for the sins of the people. Hebrews 2:14,17 NIV

While being fully God, Jesus took on full humanity in order that He could identify with the suffering of His people and bring true forgiveness to all who were in need. If He had just "appeared" at a moment in time, He wouldn't have been a true Savior for all of mankind. Instead, God was born as a helpless infant and began His journey from the cradle to the cross where He would give His life as a sacrifice for all people.

Prayer emphasis: Meditate today on the idea that Jesus was willing to be born as a helpless infant, completely dependent on Mary and Joseph to care for Him. Thank Him for the life that He lived and gave for you.

For family discussion...

If Jesus had not been born as a baby to the virgin Mary but had rather just "appeared" as a grown man to call His disciples, would that change the way you viewed Him as your Savior?

How does it make you feel to know that Jesus was both fully God and fully human at the same time and came to rescue you?

Day 5-A Not So Grand Arrival
Read Micah 5:2, Luke 2:1-7

When Jesus, the King of Kings and creator of the universe, willingly chose to step down from His throne in heaven to walk among His most beloved creation here on Earth, it would not be far-fetched to assume that He would make His arrival on a grand stage with all of the eyes of the earth fixed upon Him. We can easily imagine a grand palace with royal trumpets to announce His birth with kings and queens from the vast kingdoms throughout the land lining up to get a glimpse of the baby and to shower him with expensive gifts. All spotlights would shine on Jesus.

Part of the beauty of the gospel story is that it didn't happen this way...not even in a minor detail. In fact, when God made His plan to come to save us, it was His plan all along to come to a small rural town called Bethlehem (which is famous today but was virtually unknown when Jesus was born). This was foretold by the prophet Micah...

*“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.” Micah 5:2 NIV*

Far from a palace with fanfare and luxury, Jesus was born in a stable within a cave behind an inn in Bethlehem because the small town was beyond capacity due to a Roman Census. Luke tells the story...

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped Him in cloths and placed Him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. Luke 2:1-7 NIV

Occasionally, a person will tell me that the Bible is completely fictional, made up by men who wanted to concoct a fantastical story. But in such a story, don't you think that the Messiah would be born in a royal palace with great fanfare rather than a cold stable filled with filthy animals because no one would take them in? This is part of the beauty of the birth narrative of the Messiah. God humbly came to earth to rescue His people from their sins not to rule in power from an earthly throne in a luxurious palace built for earthly kings.

Prayer emphasis: Contemplate today that God knows what you need better than you know yourself. Thank Him for coming to rescue you from your own sinfulness.

For family discussion...

Discuss why you think that Jesus wasn't born in a palace with great fanfare and celebration?

What is the significance of the Messiah being born in a stable in a small unknown town with almost no one around to witness the birth?

Day 6-A Birth Like None Other
Read Isaiah 9:6

The birth of Jesus is the single most important event in human history. History is divided into two time periods: before the birth of Christ and after the birth of Christ. While skeptics may argue whether or not Jesus was the son of God and the Savior of the world, only a fool would try to argue that Jesus was a fictional character and that no such man ever lived. Isaiah wrote about this event seven centuries earlier in Isaiah 9...

*For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on His shoulders.
And He will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:6 NIV*

The birth of Jesus changed the trajectory of the future of God's people. Before the birth of Jesus, God's people were wandering in darkness with no one to guide the way; with the birth of Jesus, the people would receive a "Wonderful Counselor" who, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, would lead and guide them. Before the birth of Jesus, God's people were defeated by sin and were helpless to rescue themselves; but with the birth of Jesus, the people would now have a "Mighty God" who would defeat death, sin and the grave and set His people free. Before the birth of Jesus, the people had lost their identity and relational connection with God; but with the birth of Jesus, the people could now become God's children and call God their "Everlasting Father" and live with Him forever in eternity. Before the birth of Jesus, the hearts of God's people were filled with unrest and chaos; but with the birth of Jesus, the people would be ruled by the "Prince of Peace" who would bring peace and rest to their hearts. The birth of Christ brings hope because with the birth of Christ everything would change. The wait is over, Jesus the King is coming!

Prayer emphasis: Thank God for fulfilling His promise that He would send a Messiah to redeem us!

For family discussion...

How do you think the birth of Jesus has changed our world?

Which of the four descriptions of the coming Messiah (Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace) speaks to your heart the most? Why?

Day 7-Before the Beginning

Read Ephesians 1:4-6

As we come to an end of this first week of Advent, let's look back on this first week and review the prophecies that were fulfilled with the birth of Jesus.

- 4 centuries before the birth of Jesus, Malachi told us that God would send a “messenger” to His people.
- 7 centuries before birth of Jesus, Isaiah tells us the Messiah would be born of a virgin and be called Immanuel.
- 7 centuries before the birth of Jesus, Isaiah also foretold that a great child who would rule the world would be sent to us to be a Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.

Clearly, the birth of Christ was not a random act of desperation by a God who had no other ideas. Rather, this was God's plan all along to redeem His people.

Consider Paul's words in Ephesians 1...

For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He¹ predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will—to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One He loves. Ephesians 1:4-6 NIV

Don't miss the phrase, “before the creation of the world” in verse 4. God's plan of redemption was already planned in detail before creation!! This is mind-blowing and raises quite a few questions that are not easy to answer. It helps to remember that God is not constrained by our linear timeline and that He exists in all time-frames-past, present and future. He knows all of eternity already and ensured from the very beginning that we would have the opportunity to spend that eternity with Him!

Prayer emphasis: Thank God that He planned and provided for your redemption before He created the world!

For family discussion...

What parts about the prophecies concerning the birth of Jesus do you find most encouraging?

What are your thoughts about the idea that God's plan to redeem your heart was in place before He created the world?

Week 2-Love

The Bethlehem Candle

Today, we light the second Advent candle, the candle of Love. This candle is also known as the “Bethlehem Candle” as it reminds us of the experience of Mary and Joseph in the “little town of Bethlehem”. In most traditions, the candle is purple symbolizing royalty and the coming of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords to a stable in Bethlehem.

Day 8-An Unexpected Trip

Luke 2:1-4

The message spread through the town quickly. “Caesar has decreed a census and each man must return to his hometown to be counted!” Mary and Joseph must have felt great anxiety as the reality of this news sunk in. Mary, who was ready to give birth any day, would now have to travel to the remote town of Bethlehem with Joseph so he could be counted in the census.

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register. Luke 2:1-3 NIV

Surely, they were settled in waiting for God’s son to be born any day. The crib had been assembled and the nursery decorated in anticipation of the new life that would soon add to the number of their family. (Joseph is lucky he didn’t have to try to install an infant car seat for the first time!)

Travel in ancient times was slow and dangerous and childbirth was even more dangerous. Mixing the two would be unthinkable but Joseph and Mary had no choice. The two packed for the trip and set off from Nazareth hoping for the best.

If we have experienced pregnancy and childbirth in our own lives, we feel for the young couple as they begin the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Most couples would choose not to travel in the weeks and days leading up to the due date of the expected child in order to stay near the hospital and family doctors. Mary and Joseph didn’t have this option and must have experienced great anxiety over this entire situation. One can imagine each encouraging the other as they remembered God promises about this special baby as they set off for Bethlehem,

Prayer Emphasis: Thank God today that even when things seem out of your control and you feel helpless, God is there, closer than a whisper, giving you strength for each new day.

For Family Discussion...

Describe how you think Mary and Joseph felt as they began this journey to Bethlehem. Discuss each one separately.

How do you think the prophecy regarding the messiah being born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2) played into Joseph and Mary having to take this trip?

Day 9-What a week!

Luke 2:4-5

Despite Mary being nine months pregnant with Jesus, Joseph answered the call for the census and travelled with Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem. The Gospel writer Luke relays this information in just a few short verses...

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. Luke 2:4-5 NIV

This journey was not nearly as simple as Luke makes it seem.

The distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem was approximately 90 miles and most scholars believe it would have taken Mary and Joseph nearly a week to travel there. While some paintings depict Mary riding a donkey, the gospel narratives mention no mode of transportation. With swollen ankles, an aching back, and a protruding belly, Mary likely walked every step of the way.

The couple would have walked south along the flatlands of the Jordan river, and west through the hills surrounding Jerusalem and then on to Bethlehem. Travel in ancient times was painfully slow and often dangerous. The young couple could have faced wild animals, difficult weather, and possible attacks from thieves and bandits. This journey would have been strenuous for any couple, but especially for Joseph and Mary as they had the unborn baby to worry about as well.

It is interesting that the scriptures make no mention of Joseph and Mary objecting to the timing or the danger of this trip. They simply continued to trust God's leading in their lives and obediently travelled to Bethlehem.

Prayer Emphasis: Ask God today to give you the faith to trust His leading in your life even when the road ahead seems filled with uncertainty and struggle.

For Family Discussion...

Why do you think the Gospel writer Luke doesn't give any details about the journey that Joseph and Mary undertook?

How do you think Joseph and Mary had so much faith and were able to obediently travel to Bethlehem without protest?

Day 10-Passing the Time

Matthew 1:21-23

No mention is made of their conversation along the way in their journey to Bethlehem, but it isn't hard to imagine Mary and Joseph passing the time talking about their shared experiences and what the future held for them and their family to come.

Maybe they recounted the visits from the angel to convince them of the roles they each would play in the birth and parenting of the Christ child. Maybe Mary joked with Joseph that at least she was awake when she received her heavenly visit.

Maybe they spoke with awe recounting of the promises the angel told Joseph about Jesus. Joseph remembers the promises told to him in a dream...

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call Him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). Matthew 1:21-23 NIV

Maybe they talked about the anxiety and fear they had about having the son of God be in their care. Maybe they wondered if He would be like other children, what he would look like, and how will He save the world from sin?

Maybe like all couples on a trip, they spent times of silence, quietly dwelling on their own thoughts-Joseph worrying over caring for providing for His growing family and Mary treasuring every moment of this grand adventure up in her heart. Maybe. We can only wonder.

Prayer Emphasis: Spend a few moments today journaling the promises that God has made to you. Thank Him for each one, soaking in the wonder of His love and care for you.

For Family Discussion...

Brainstorm as a family what you think Joseph and Mary may have talked about on their trip. (There are no wrong answers!)

Day 11-The Best Laid Plans

Luke 2:7

Finally, after days of exhausting travel, Bethlehem appears on the horizon. Mary and Joseph pick up the pace as they hurry on towards their final destination. After cold nights under the stars, they would find a warm fire and soft bed for Mary to get some much needed rest for her tired body. In the past few days, Mary has shared with Joseph that she believes the birth of the baby may not be able to wait for their return trip to Nazareth.

As they enter the town, it is obvious that many others have arrived before them, and the town is bustling with activity. Joseph heads over to the local inn to secure a room and a hot meal only to be met with devastating news. There are no available rooms-anywhere. The entire town was full. The inn keeper could only offer a place in the stable where the animals were kept behind the inn. It is interesting that such news could be delivered in such few words by Luke in chapter 2 of his Gospel...

...there was no guest room available for them. Luke 2:7 NIV

When Joseph broke the news to Mary it's possible that she was already in labor. As she waddled to the stable trying to get comfortable, Joseph tried to make the best of a tough situation. What else could possibly go wrong? First, this unexpected trip, then, there is no place to stay in Bethlehem, and now, the son of God is going to be born in a barn? (Cue up the jokes!) Yet again, the young couple has to make the best of a difficult situation, but Luke records no complaint on their part.

Prayer emphasis: Ask God today to help you accept every circumstance with the grace that Joseph and Mary display when they learn there is no room for them in Bethlehem.

For Family Discussion...

What emotions did Joseph experience when he learned there wasn't a single room in all of Bethlehem? What about Mary?

Why do you think we don't hear a single complaint from Mary and Joseph in the scriptures?

Day 12-The Time Has Come

Luke 2:6-7

“Honey, it’s time!”

These words have brought both fear and joy all at once for fathers since Adam and Eve and the birth of Cain and Abel. Joseph must have bolted upright from his bed of hay. The scripture provides no details of what happened next. It is possible that Joseph hurried away to find a midwife or doctor to assist with the birth. We don’t know the details, but we know the time came for the baby Jesus to be born.

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped Him in cloths and placed Him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. Luke 2:6-7 NIV

Mary gave birth naturally there in the stable-no epidural, no monitors, no sterile environment, no safety precautions. Could people hear her childbirth pains through the surrounding neighborhood? Did they hear the first cry of the new-born baby Jesus? Did the town have any idea that God was alive in the stable behind the inn?

Once the chaos of the birth calmed, the scripture says that Mary swaddled the baby Jesus and placed him in a feeding trough which would temporarily serve as a make-shift cradle until they could get a room in Bethlehem. As they couldn’t travel with a new infant for some time, Mary and Joseph would now call Bethlehem home.

What started with startling visits an from angel of the Lord has now culminated in the infant son of God being held with wonder in the arms of a teenage girl. The wait is over-the King has come!

Prayer Emphasis: Ask God to help you believe that everything happens in His timing according to His will regardless of how crazy circumstances may get.

For Family Discussion...

Christmas carols tend to depict the birth of Christ as this quiet peaceful event with the light from the star shining down on the couple and illuminating the stable with soft light. Do you think this depiction is accurate? Describe how you think it really looked and sounded that night.

Day 13-The Angels Get Their Turn

Luke 2:9-15

Picture this: while Mary is crying out in pain giving birth to the baby Jesus, the angels are crowding around to get a front row seat to this world-changing event. The scriptures are clear that angels have a limited knowledge of the plans of God. Peter writes in his first letter when referring to the miracle of salvation...

Even angels long to look into these things. 1 Peter 1:12 NIV

Angels were created by God to serve His purposes and be messengers of His grace. The scriptures also say that human beings are more important in God's kingdom than the angels and that, when a person dies, he or she becomes a glorified saint rather than an angel with wings.

Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation? Hebrews 4:14 NIV

After the birth of Jesus, God ordered an angel to appear to some shepherds out the fields. (I like to imagine that the angels clamored in heaven to all be involved in the announcement so God sent them all!)

An uncountable number of angels descended above these shepherds with only one angel visible at first. This angel speaks first...

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Luke 2:8-12 NIV

Then, in an instant, the sky is filled with the whole host of angels speaking (not singing as so many songs portray) as one voice:

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests." Luke 2:13-14 NIV

The sound of the host of angels all speaking together must have been deafening!! Did the shepherds have to cover their ears? Could people in Bethlehem hear the angels? It must have been quite the sight because the shepherds immediately decided this was something they needed to see for themselves.

Prayer Emphasis: Meditate today on the idea that God created to angels to be His messengers and to minister to you in your times of need.

For Family Discussion...

How does it make you feel to know that you are God's most precious creation and that the angels were created to minister to you?

If you were one of the shepherds to whom the angels appeared, how would you have reacted to the entire sky being filled with angels?

Day 14-Reflections on Bethlehem

The account of Jesus being born in Bethlehem is told succinctly in just a few verses in Luke chapter 2, but the story leaves the reader with more questions than answers.

Why would God choose to come to come when the mother he chose to give birth to Jesus would have to travel in the ninth month of the pregnancy due to a census?

Why would that choice lead to Mary and Joseph being required to travel on foot more than 90 miles over a week only to find there were no rooms in Bethlehem?

Why would these choices lead to the son of God being born in a dirty stable behind a small-town inn?

Why would the first people to visit the baby Jesus be nameless unimportant shepherds?

This seems all undignified, unorganized, and generally messy and probably not the way most of us would plan the birth of our own child.

We would chose not to travel to stay near our doctor and hospital, and we would be surrounded by our closest family and friends to celebrate the birth of our child. But we are ordinary.

Jesus was no ordinary child, and His was no ordinary birth. There was a divine purpose in the birth of Jesus. He willingly chose to come to us. He came to die for us. He came to redeem us. The ancient hymn in Philippians 2:6-11 explains it perfectly.

Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

*Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, He made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
He humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place
and gave Him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:5-11 NIV*

Bethlehem, which literally means “the house of bread”, was the place where the Bread of Life was born to be a light shining for a world lost in darkness. Huddled together in the stable, Mary and Joseph could only look into His eyes and wonder what would happen next.

Prayer Emphasis: Take a moment to consider all that Mary and Joseph went through in their journey to Bethlehem and how God gave them the strength every step of the way. Ask God to give you strength today as you walk through the different difficulties and challenges of your life.

For Family Discussion...

As we wrap up the second week of Advent, how did God speak to your heart through our journey to Bethlehem with Mary and Joseph?

In what ways have you come to admire Mary and Joseph even more this week? Why?

Week 3-Joy

The Shepherd's Candle

Today, we light the third Advent candle, the candle of Joy. This candle is also known as the "Shepherd's Candle" and is meant to remind us of the joy that the world experienced at the birth of Jesus, as well as the joy that we experience having reached the midpoint of Advent.

Day 15-The World Turns Upside Down

Luke 2:8-10

The night was dark, and the sky was filled with stars. The shepherds were settled for the night watch around a small fire and small talk was giving way to silence. Lights were fading in the nearby town of Bethlehem. The flocks were safe and secure for now. All was quiet.

Then, suddenly, the sky was alive with fire! An angel beyond description with human words hovered over this group of shepherds. As the angel's powerful voice broke the silence, the shepherds were startled out of their minds! Luke describes the scene...

An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people." Luke 2:9-10 NIV

With hearts racing and minds struggling to comprehend the message from the angel, the shepherds tremble in fear of this heavenly visitor. (Let's be honest-we would have reacted in the same way!)

As with most angelic visitations in Scripture, the shepherds are encouraged to "not be afraid". (See Mary and Joseph's encounters). While the Scriptures give some detailed description of the physical appearance of the angels, we can only use our imagination to grasp what the shepherds saw that night in the sky. An angel must have been one awesome sight to behold!

That night on the hillside would forever change the lives of the shepherds who were watching over the flocks. That God would choose them of all people to whom the birth of the son of God would be announced must have been particularly shocking for them. But there they were blinded by the light of an angelic messenger bringing them "good news that will bring great joy" to all people for all time. They couldn't even begin to truly comprehend what this meant and how this would change the world.

Prayer Emphasis: Journal a list of blessings in your life that were completely unexpected. Thank God today for each one.

For Family Discussion...

Tell about something completely unexpected that happened in your life. How did this change your life in big or small ways?

Try and put yourself in the shoes of the shepherds, what emotions do you think they experienced?

Day 16-Some Good News!!

Luke 2:11-14

Once the shepherds were able to take a deep breath and get their bearings, they were able to concentrate on the message the angel was delivering to them here in the fields.

Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Luke 2:11-12 NIV

The shepherds must have understood this to be very important news, but perhaps they were also a bit confused as to why it was being shared with them. This was big news! Important news! These shepherds were unimportant people who weren't trained in big theological matters. Surely, this was news for the priests and religious leaders at the temple in Jerusalem, not for shepherds like them. (More on this tomorrow).

Then, in an instant, the night got even wilder as the entire sky filled with an uncountable number of angels. The myriad of angels who had remained invisible to this point exploded into the view around these shepherds and spoke in unison...

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests.” Luke 2:13-14 NIV*

In Christmas carols and worship songs, these angels are often depicted as singing but the Gospel writer Luke is specific that these angels were speaking in unison. Did the shepherds have to cover their ears? Could the nearby town of Bethlehem hear these angels? We will never know but this final crescendo to the message must have left these shepherds breathless-and as quickly as they appeared, the angels vanished and the night sky was dark once again and silence descended upon the hills-except-could these shepherds hear the faint cry of a baby?

Prayer Emphasis: Take a few moments to consider the true implications of this “good news” and how it has changed your life. Thank God today for each transformation He brings to mind.

For Family Discussion...

Talk a about a time recently that you received “good news”. What was this news? Why was it so good?

Like the shepherds, how did you respond to this news?

Day 17-An Unlikely Choice

Luke 2:15-16

Before we journey to the manger with the shepherds, we need to pause for a day to consider who these shepherds really were. While over the centuries, these men have been presented as humble, dirty, social outcasts, is it possible that they were something more?

By Jewish regulations found in the Mishnah (a collection of Jewish oral laws), sheep were only allowed to be grazed in the “wilderness” ((Bab K.7:7; 80a) unless they are sheep set aside to be used in temple worship. Since the shepherds were grazing their flocks in the fields near Bethlehem, it is probable that these were shepherd priests who watched over special flocks reserved for the temple. It was their responsibility to take special care of the sheep in order to present lambs spotless and without blemish for sacrifice in the temple.

The Mishnah also states that the Messiah would be revealed from the Migdal Elder (which means “tower of the flock”). This tower is mentioned in Genesis 35:21 in the context of the death of Jacob’s wife Rachel. The Biblical record locates this tower near-you guessed it-the town of Bethlehem. This was an actual lookout tower in the fields outside of Bethlehem from which the lead shepherd priest would “watch over the flocks by night” while the other shepherds watched over the flocks from the ground. Clearly, these men weren’t quite as insignificant as we might have first imagined. Once they were able to comprehend the message of the angels, it is likely that they understood the significance of this birth at a deeply profound level. No wonder Luke records that they went running to find the baby!

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” So they hurried off... Luke 2:15-16a NIV

With all of this in mind, it is still hard to believe that God chose, from all of the people who could be chosen, to announce the birth of the Messiah to these men. Even though they were most likely not ordinary shepherds, they were still dirty, smelly shepherds who were not even important enough to be mentioned by name. The angel had announced that this “good news” would bring joy to “all” people (not just the wealthy and educated religious elites) and this truth immediately came to life out on a hillside outside Bethlehem.

Prayer Emphasis: Ask God to give you an urgency about reading His word and growing deep in your walk with Him.

For Family Discussion:

When is the last time you were so excited about something that you were in a hurry to get there? Why were you so excited?

Understanding more about who these shepherds really were, why do you think they might have been so excited to see the baby?

Day 18-Meanwhile...

Matthew 2:1-10

Meanwhile...on the other side of the world, a group of astrologers called “Magi” were perplexed and excited about a new bright star that had recently appeared in the eastern night sky. For them, this new star was a sign that something important had taken place-possibly the birth of a new king. The appearance of this new star was significant enough to prompt a group of these men to travel many miles to follow this star to Israel and worship the new-born king to whom this great sign pointed. Matthew tells us...

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him.” Matthew 2:1-2 NIV

Many nativities often depict these Magi worshipping at the manger, but this simply couldn't have been the case. This was a journey of hundreds of miles, and they were being led by the star in the sky day by day. In ancient Israel, “east” could have referred to an area near ancient Babylon. If so, this would be a trip of at least 400 miles. Scholars believe this trip would have taken the Magi three or four weeks by camel, and being led by the star, possibly as many as 40 days. By the time these Magi arrived in Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph would have been living in a more permanent situation. Matthew states that the Magi came “to the house” where Joseph and Mary were living with Jesus and worshipped Him there.

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Matthew 2:11 NIV

Over the years, it has been assumed that there were three Magi possibly because they brought three gifts, but the scripture isn't specific about their number. Regardless of how many there were, their visit must have been yet another wondrous event in the life of Mary and Joseph. As these strangely-dressed foreign men (who weren't of Jewish faith!) bowed down in worship before the baby Jesus and showered Him with expensive gifts, it was becoming clear that Jesus was not only the Messiah for the nation of Israel but also for all the peoples of the world.

Prayer Emphasis: Thank God that Jesus came to save not only the nation of Israel, but all of different peoples of the world.

For Family Discussion...

When the Magi came into Bethlehem, what kind of scene do you think they likely caused among the people there?

Mary and Joseph must have been quite surprised when foreign men came to worship Jesus. Tell of a time that God surprised you with the way He chose to work in your life.

Day 19-Collective Wonder

Luke 2:15-16

As these shepherds slipped into Bethlehem searching for the new-born child wrapped in swaddling cloths, the few who were awake may have given sidelong glances in their direction. These shepherds rarely visited Bethlehem and when they did, it wasn't usually in the middle of the night. They had a few clues to go on, but "lying in a manger" had them searching in the nearby stables for the young couple and the baby. We don't know how long the search took, but Luke tells us they found the place.

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. Luke 2:15-16 NIV

The shepherds found the whole scene exactly as the angels had described. Here was a young couple gazing in wonder at God incarnate who was swaddled in cloths and lying in a manger. The shepherds knelt in quiet worship of this special baby. Most people in the world have a nativity depicting this very moment as part of their family Christmas decorations.

This scene has been recounted, re-enacted, painted, relived more times than anyone will ever know over the past 2000 years, but only those precious few who were there know the true wonder of the moment. As these temple shepherds who have been caring for the lambs in the field come and kneel down to wonder at the Lamb of God who is alive in the arms of a teenage girl, the world is seemingly unaware that God is with them-that Immanuel is now more than a promise. Immanuel is here.

Prayer Emphasis: Thank God today that, just as the shepherds discovered, His word is always true and His promises never fail.

For Family Discussion...

For fun and if your family is adventurous, re-enact the nativity with your family. Try to capture the emotions of each person involved.

Since we are told that shepherds found everything just as the angels described, is it possible that they were still doubtful as they were searching for the child? Describe their reaction when they found Jesus exactly as described by the angels.

Day 20-Sharing the Good News!!

Luke 2:17-18, 20

When my wife found out she was pregnant with our first child, she and I were so excited! We simply couldn't wait to tell our friends and family. After keeping the secret to ourselves for a short while, we shared this big news on Christmas day with the family all gathered around. There were shouts and tears and hugs all around as we all celebrated together this new life that would soon join our family. As the days passed, our parents told everyone they knew that a new grandbaby was on the way!

After the shepherds left Mary and Joseph there in the stable, Luke shares that these men began to share the news that the Messiah had been born there in Bethlehem and that they had seen Him with their own eyes. They recounted the amazing story of the visit of the angels and finding the baby time and time again.

When they had seen Him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them...The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. Luke 2:17-18, 20 NIV

It is possible that this news was met with some amazement and also some disbelief.

“Why would the angels tell the likes of you?”

“The Messiah born in a stable!! We doubt it!”

These shepherds were undaunted by any disbelief and returned to their flocks in the fields with hearts full of praise that they had been chosen to find and worship the Messiah the Lamb of God.

The season of Advent, and especially Christmas eve, is a time when most people are more open to hearing the stories about our faith and to attending Christmas worship services as our guest. Take some time today as we are just over a week away from Christmas to consider who in your life needs to hear the true Christmas story and who may be willing to come along to one of our Christmas services. Reach out and invite them to lunch or coffee today. Invite them to come and hear about a God who came to redeem us.

Prayer emphasis: Ask God today to give you the courage to share the hope you have found in the baby Jesus who died for your redemption and to invite others to come to worship this Christmas eve and Christmas day.

For Family Discussion...

Who in your life needs to hear the good news about the birth of Christ? Who can you invite to come to Christmas Eve and/or Christmas Day worship? Stop and invite them right now.

Day 21-Reflections on the Nativity

Luke 2:19

We have journeyed a good distance in nearly three full weeks to arrive with these shepherds at the manger. From the first news of the census, to packing up and departing for Bethlehem, to making the grueling 90 mile trip, to coming to Bethlehem only to find there is no guest room for them, the whole ordeal has been a great challenge. Mary and Joseph are exhausted, and the time comes for Jesus to be born. Jesus comes as all babies do, and Mary and Joseph give praise to God that all is well with both Mary and the baby.

When we finally arrive (exhausted as well) at the manger, the scene is not what we are expecting. It is not a “silent night” and the baby is not “sleeping in heavenly peace.”

Andrew Peterson in his song “Labor of Love” describes it this way...

It was not a silent night
There was blood on the ground
You could hear a woman cry
In the alleyways that night
On the streets of David's town

And the stable was not clean
And the cobblestones were cold
And little Mary full of grace
With the tears upon her face
Had no mother's hand to hold

It was a labor of pain
It was a cold sky above
But for the girl on the ground in the dark
With every beat of her beautiful heart
It was a labor of love

Noble Joseph by her side
Callused hands and weary eyes
There were no midwives to be found
On the streets of David's town
In the middle of the night

So he held her and he prayed
Shafts of moonlight on his face
But the baby in her womb
He was the maker of the moon
He was the Author of the faith
That could make the mountains move

It was a labor of pain
It was a cold sky above

But for the girl on the ground in the dark
With every beat of her beautiful heart
It was a labor of love

For little Mary full of grace
With the tears upon her face
It was a labor of love

Listen to this song here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQZmni-oeg4>

While it comforts our hearts to picture the Nativity in such a serene way, the reality was simply a different story. The stable was dirty and smelly, the animals were loud (and very smelly), and Mary and Joseph were likely very stressed about the whole situation.

Joseph worried, angels shouted, shepherds hurried, animals paced, and Mary...pondered.

If there is one thing I have learned from my beautiful wife, women are uniquely gifted with the ability to slow down and treasure the moments of life while everything and everyone is striving around them. It's recorded in just one small verse hidden in the narrative, but Luke shares...

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. Luke 2:19 NIV

We would do well amidst the chaos of our holiday season to slow down and treasure the baby in the manger whose life and death redeems our hearts from the brokenness of sin. After all, here at the manger is where we find the true celebration of Christmas.

Prayer Emphasis: Simply take time today to worship at the manger while those who are there gathered around. Thank God for His unfailing love!

For Family Discussion:

Take time today to reread Luke 2:1-20 slowly finding the wonder in every detail. Make a family list of all of the amazing parts of this Advent narrative.

In what ways do our modern depictions of the Nativity differ from the account in Luke 2?

Week 4-Peace

The Angel's Candle

Today, we light the fourth Advent candle, the next purple candle, the candle of Peace. This candle is also known as the "Angel's Candle" and is meant to remind us of the angels that announced that Jesus came to bring peace and that He came to bring people close to God and to each other again.

Day 22-Peace on Earth?

Luke 2:14

As we enter into this fourth and last week of Advent, we light the fourth candle on the Advent wreath. This purple candle, which represents Peace, is also known as the Angel's candle as it serves to remind us of the message of the angels that Jesus would bring peace on earth. The angels spoke to the shepherds...

*Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." Luke 2:14 NIV*

That the last week of Advent would be focused on peace is quite ironic since this week leading up to Christmas Day is anything but peaceful. With the last-minute shopping and wrapping of gifts, cooking for family, traveling, school Christmas performances, holiday parties, and more, each day is a whirlwind of busyness that leaves us exhausted and frazzled.

Things weren't that different 2000 years ago with Joseph and Mary. While they obviously weren't celebrating Christmas, their lives were turned upside down by the visit of the angel with the news that Mary would soon be having a baby and that baby conceived by the Holy Spirit was the long-awaited Messiah. What a shock this must have been!!!

This baby who was born to bring peace would upend the future plans of this young, engaged couple and throw their lives into chaos. For Joseph, the beautiful young girl who would soon be his wife was pregnant, and the baby wasn't His!!! Would this bring scorn and shame on His family? Would they ever live a normal life? For Mary, she most likely wasn't planning to be pregnant this quickly in the marriage. Now her life would be consumed with the duties of motherhood, and she would be caring for the son of God! Would they ever live a normal life?

As we enter into this final crazy chaotic week of Advent, let's take time to slow down and experience a little of the peace that God offers through His son Jesus. Let's take time to consider how the lives of Joseph and Mary were affected by being chosen by God for such an important undertaking as parenting the son of God, the Messiah.

Prayer Emphasis: As you enter into this final busy week of Advent, ask God to help you slow down this week and experience peace that Jesus came to bring to your heart.

For Family Discussion...

Think about your busy week ahead. How can you low down this week in order to experience more of the peace that God desires for your heart?

Day 23-Answered Prayers Luke 1:5-22

In Chapter 1 of his Gospel, Luke tells us that the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were an older couple who were very faithful and obedient to God but whose lives were filled with sadness because they had never been able to have a child of their own. How many nights had Elizabeth sat up praying for a child? How many times had Zechariah whispered this prayer at the altar while he served in the temple? As year led onto year, the couple finally came to grips with the reality that they were simply too old to have a child.

Then one day, seemingly out of the blue, God decides to answer this prayer. He sends the angel Gabriel to visit Zechariah in the temple to share the good news...

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John... He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. Luke 1:11-13,16 NIV

Could any of us blame him if he found this hard to believe? He was an old man, and his wife Elizabeth was an old woman, well beyond child-bearing age. To have a child now would take a miracle. Luke records that Zechariah questioned the angel...

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." Luke 1:18 NIV

Why this didn't go over well with the angel Gabriel is an interesting question. (Mary also questioned the angel but was not punished.) Was it because this visit occurred in the temple? Was it because the angel commanded such authority? Was it his tone of voice?

Because of his doubt, Zechariah loses his ability to speak until the baby is born.

And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time." Luke 1:20 NIV

Without question, Zechariah's peaceful, if not incomplete life, was about to be disrupted by the birth of this baby who we know would be the predecessor to the Messiah and would help prepare the people for the coming ministry of Jesus. Now, how would he tell Elizabeth the good news?

Prayer Emphasis: What is something you have prayed for over the years with no answer? Pray for this again today believing that, in God's timing, your prayer will be answered.

For Family Discussion...

If you put yourself in the place of Zechariah, do you think you would doubt the message of the angel? Why or why not?

What have you prayed for over a period of many months or years? Are you still waiting for an answer? How does it feel to wait so long for answer to prayer without an answer?

Day 24-A Heart Restored

Luke 1:23-25

Over the years, Elizabeth had grown accustomed to her husband being away for periods of time to serve in the temple. Without any children to occupy her days, she had learned to fill her days with busyness waiting for his return.

But when Zechariah returned home from his latest shift in temple, she could immediately tell that something was different. For one, he had lost his ability to speak. All he could do was make signs to her with his hands in an attempt to communicate what had happened to him in the temple. He couldn't communicate with his words, but she could see there was a light and excitement in his eyes over what he had experienced. She could feel it in the way he kissed her and held her close at night like when they were young.

Then the unthinkable happened!! She, at her advanced age, was pregnant!!!

When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people." Luke 1:23-25 NIV

After all those years, God had finally answered her prayers and honored her. In ancient Israel, for a woman to be unable to bear a child was not only a cause for sadness, but it was also considered a sign that she was not favored by God. To many, a woman who could not bear a child would be considered a second-class citizen. She would bear this disgrace her entire life.

As Elizabeth began to feel this baby move, she was filled with anticipation for the birth of this special child. Her broken heart was healed, and her hopes for the future were restored. Little did she know she would soon receive an unexpected visitor whose pregnancy would bring even more excitement!

Prayer Emphasis: Think of a time that God brought much-needed healing into your life. Thank Him today for His love and compassion for you in every season of your life.

For Family Discussion...

When have you ever faced a seemingly hopeless situation only to have God come through and answer your prayer? Talk about it.

What seemingly hopeless situation are you facing today? Pray today with faith like that of Zechariah and Elizabeth that God will intercede.

Day 25-A Beautiful Response

Luke 1:26-45

A few months after Elizabeth discovers that she is pregnant, God once again sends the angel Gabriel to deliver an even more important message, this time to a young teenage girl named Mary. Luke shares the details that she is a virgin and that she is engaged to a man named Joseph a descendent of King David (which is an important detail as we will see on Friday). As Mary is a simple peasant girl, the angel shocks her with his greeting...

The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. Luke 2:28-29 NIV

To be visited by an angel would be terrifying enough, but to be called "high favored" must have been overwhelming. The angel shared his message with a wide-eyed Mary...

But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a Son, and you are to call Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; His kingdom will never end." Luke 1:31-33 NIV

Though she was young, she understood the implications of this message. Her question for the angel is a simple one.

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" Luke 1:34 NIV

Unlike with Zechariah who was punished for questioning Gabriel, Mary receives a gentle encouraging response.

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail." Luke 1:35-37 NIV

While Mary carries the Messiah in her womb, she won't have to walk this journey alone. Elizabeth, who is also pregnant with a miraculous child, will be an encouragement for her. Mary's response shows the simplicity of her beautiful faith...

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her. Luke 1:38 NIV

Mary must have quietly sat in shock as the words of the angel lingered in the air. While her mind must have been racing with concerns and questions, perhaps she simply sat for a while and pondered the beautiful message from the angel and dreamed of what this all would mean.

Prayer Emphasis: Ask God to help you have beautiful obedient faith like Mary who is willing to surrender her life to be the mother of Jesus.

For Family Discussion...

Why do you think that Mary didn't object to being chosen to be the mother Jesus? After all, she was engaged and most likely had her future with Joseph already planned out. Being the mother of Jesus would change everything.

Day 26-A Crucial Decision

Matthew 1:18-25

Once Mary comes to grips with the reality of the angel's message, she knows she must find a way to share this news with Joseph. She does so with the hope that he will believe her about the details of the visit from the angel and the message that he delivered. Luke then tells us she traveled to visit Elizabeth...

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!... Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home." Luke 2:41-45, 56 NIV

Meanwhile, Joseph stays behind in Nazareth to wrestle with the news Mary has shared. She is pregnant and supposedly the baby is conceived from God. He wants to believe her, but he suspects the truth is less honorable. She has been unfaithful to him and has concocted a wild story to cover up her sin. He makes up his mind to end the engagement. Matthew shares Joseph's struggle...

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. Matthew 1:18-19 NIV

Once again, God sends an angel to deliver a message that will help Joseph come to grips with this situation. The angel comes to Joseph in a dream...

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins." Matthew 1:20-21 NIV

When Joseph awakes from this dream, he understands that Mary was telling the truth all along. He has an amazing opportunity to be the earthly father of the son of God. Luke describes his response...

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave Him the name Jesus. Matthew 1:24-25 NIV

Although his response may not have been as eloquent as Mary's, it is equally as powerful in its own right for its quiet obedience. Together, Mary and Joseph would take on the unexpected but thrilling adventure of raising the Messiah, the son of God.

Prayer Emphasis: Thank God that you aren't on our own when you face a tough decision. Thank Him for His word and Holy Spirit that guides you every day.

For Family Discussion...

Please yourself in Joseph's sandals. Do you fault him for being skeptical? How would you react to Mary's big news?

When has someone shared something important with you that you found difficult to believe? What did you do?

Day 27-Detailed Proof

Matthew 1:1-17

Throughout this devotional book, I have asserted that the birth of Christ was not a random act by a desperate God who had run out of ideas, but rather the execution of a plan which was formulated before the universe was created. Recall the words of Ephesians 1...

For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love, He predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will... Ephesians 1:4-5 NIV

Today, I want to offer you further evidence that this was a precise plan with countless intricate details that perfectly fell into place in the person of Jesus. Consider the genealogy recorded in Mathew 1:1-17. Grab your Bible and take a few minutes to read through this genealogy.

Matthew intentionally starts his gospel with a tracing of the lineage of Jesus from Abraham to David to Mary and Joseph and finally to Jesus. Verse 1 states...

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham... Matthew 1:23 NIV

Matthew divides this genealogy into three time periods of 14 generations each. The first time-period traces from Abraham to David; the second time period traces from David to the Babylonian Exile; the third time period traces from the Babylonian exile to the birth of Jesus.

Now, remember that small detail that Luke includes...

God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. Luke 1:26 NIV

Looking closely at this genealogy, we see that the father of Jesus had to be a descendant of David. We see in this verse that Joseph was indeed a descendant of David, and that the young girl engaged to him was a virgin who was pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

Let's also recall this small detail from Luke 2...

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. Luke 2:4 NIV

By choosing Joseph, a descendant of David, to be the earthly father of Jesus, the young couple was forced to travel to Bethlehem due to the Roman census during the time that Mary would give birth which ultimately fulfilled the prophecy in Micah 5:2 that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

Thus, it is obvious that Joseph was not a random choice to be the earthly father of Jesus, but part of an intricate plan of God to bring forth the Messiah who would save their people from their sins.

When thinking about how all of these ideas are interconnected, I am reminded of 1 Corinthians 1:25 which states

...for the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

I would surmise that our feeble brains would not be able to fully comprehend the breadth and depth of God's plan to redeem us. It is enough to know that God loves us and would go to such incredible lengths to restore His relationship with us.

Prayer emphasis: Ask God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to help you understand His Word more deeply and to comprehend the depth of His love for you more clearly.

For Family Discussion...

Before you went on the Advent journey in this devotional book, in what ways were you aware of the plan of God to redeem His people?

**What have you learned about this plan as you have read through this devotional book?
How does this make you feel?**

Christmas Eve

Day 28-The Wait is Over

Luke 2:22-40

On the 40th day after the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph traveled to Jerusalem to present Jesus for the ritual of the Redemption of the Firstborn Son, and for Mary to complete her purification after childbirth. Luke shares that they brought an offering of “a pair of doves or two young pigeons” which was an alternative poor couples could bring if they couldn’t afford to offer a lamb.

While in the temple, Mary and Joseph encounter an elderly man named Simeon who had been waiting his whole life to see the Messiah. Luke shares that Simeon had been moved by the Holy Spirit to come to the temple this day...

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for Him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took Him in his arms... Luke 2:25-28 NIV

As we discovered on day 1 of this devotional, from the end of the Old Testament book of Malachi to the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew was 400 years of silence. There were no prophets called or sent to God’s people. The entire nation had been waiting and longing for God to speak again, and He breaks the silence with a baby’s cry in a manger in Bethlehem.

Simeon takes the baby in his arms, thanks God that the wait is over, and has a special, if not disturbing, message for the young couple...

*“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel.”*

Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Mary and Joseph, who thought they would live quiet lives together, have experienced one incredible sight after another after the visits from the angel. This encounter with Simeon was no exception. Luke records their reaction...

The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about Him. Luke 2:33 NIV

Prayer Emphasis: Thank God that He answers prayers and that He is always working, even in the silence.

For Family Discussion...

**For what have been waiting a long time? Are you still waiting or have you given up hope?
How does the Christmas story encourage you to never give up hope?**

Christmas Day

Day 29-God is With Us

John 1:1-4, 14

Today, the journey of Advent comes to an end as we have arrived at Christmas day. All the Advent candles have been lit and we are ready to light the white Christ candle in the center of our wreath. This Christ candle represents the life of Christ, and the white color of the candle represents purity because Christ is our sinless, pure Savior.

Today, we also gather at the manger in the little town of Bethlehem to worship the newborn babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. We remember the prophecy written by Isaiah 700 years before the birth of Christ.

Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call Him Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14 NIV

In his Gospel, Matthew quotes this verse adding a note of explanation...

“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call Him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). Matthew 1:23 NIV

Here we discover the true meaning of the Advent season-that God loves us so much that He willingly became “Immanuel” for us.

In the gospel of John, Jesus is described as the word of God who was with God in the beginning. John describes Immanuel in this way...

The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14 NIV

As we gaze upon this child who will grow to be a man who will give His life for us on an old rugged cross, let us remember that in Jesus we see God’s love personified. Let’s surrender to that love today.

Prayer Emphasis: Thank God for the gift of His son Jesus and for salvation we have that is found in Him.

For Family Discussion...

How is the gift of Jesus better than any gift you will receive today?

What is holding you back from receiving this gift?