

# ADVENT

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A FOUR-WEEK GUIDE FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP REFLECTION

HANNAH ANDERSON

TIMOTHY KELLER

KRISH KANDIAH

SANDRA MCCrackEN

MARLENA GRAVES

ESAU MCCAULLEY

WENDY ALSUP

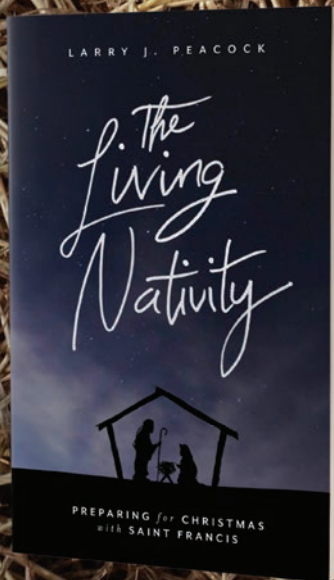
JUSTO L. GONZÁLEZ

AND OTHERS



**CT**

“The stars in the sky looked down where he lay,  
**The little Lord Jesus,  
asleep on the hay.”**



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# Introduction

**I**n this season when our days draw shorter and our nights stretch long and dark, we turn our thoughts toward light and glory. It is Advent, four weeks in which we reflect upon the arrival of Jesus, the light of the world, dawning among us who live “in the land of deep darkness” (Isa. 9:2). It is a time in which we also orient our hearts toward his promised return, when he will come in glory and his kingdom will never end.

During Advent, we observe a double longing—the yearning of God’s people for the promised Messiah and our own yearning for his kingdom to come. We draw near to the manger even as we look toward “his glorious throne” (Matt. 25:31).

This CT devotional resource will guide you through spiritual reflection upon:

- Christ’s Second Coming,
- biblical prophecies foretelling his first coming and his future reign,
- and gospel accounts of his birth.

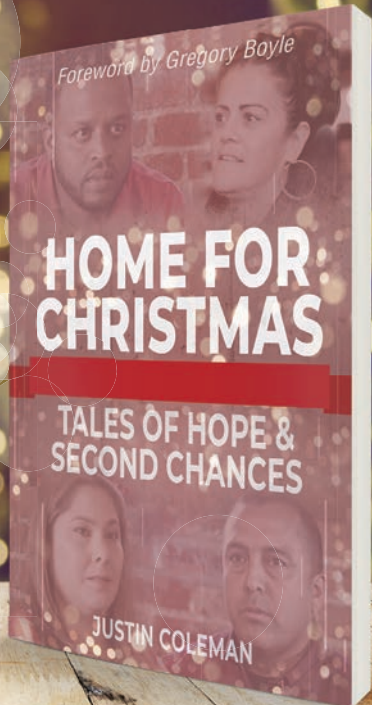
You can use these devotional readings on your own, with your family, or with a group. The Bible Reading Guide (p. 59) provides an overview of the Scriptures you’ll engage with each day, and the Ideas for Families and Ideas for Groups (pp. 54-57) offer creative activities and discussion starters to enrich your Advent observance.

This Advent and Christmas, as we join with angels singing “Glory to the newborn king!” we also affirm our confident hope that one day, as Isaac Watts’s hymn proclaims, “Jesus shall reign where’er the sun does its successive journey run, his kingdom stretch from shore to shore, till moons shall wax and wane no more.”



*Kelli*  
**Kelli B. Trujillo**  
*Editor*

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**Justin Coleman** is the Senior Pastor of University United Methodist Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. A native of Houston, he is a graduate of Southern Methodist University in Dallas, TX, and Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina. Rev. Coleman has also served as the Chief Ministry Officer for the United Methodist Publishing House in Nashville, TN, as Lead Pastor of the Gethsemane Campus of St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Houston, TX, at the SMU Wesley Foundation, and in other college and youth ministry settings.

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## ADVENT 2018

### A Four-Week Guide for Individual or Group Reflection

**EDITOR IN CHIEF:**  
Mark Galli

**PUBLISHER:**  
Jacob Walsh

**EDITORIAL DIRECTOR:**  
Ted Olsen

**CREATIVE DIRECTOR:**  
Alecia Sharp

**PROJECT EDITOR:**  
Kelli B. Trujillo

**PROJECT DESIGNER:**  
Michael Chuchvara

**COPY EDITOR:**  
Jenna DeWitt

**MARKETING:**  
Leanne Snaveley,  
Katie Bracy

**PRODUCTION:**  
Cindy Cronk

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Published by  
Christianity Today  
465 Gundersen Dr.  
Carol Stream, IL 60188

Printed in the U.S.A.

Cover photo by  
Lucian Andrei / Unsplash

Handlettered Typography  
Fred Rodriguez

For more, visit  
[ChristianityToday.com](http://ChristianityToday.com)

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DEC

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*Advent officially starts tomorrow—Sunday, December 2nd.  
Before Advent begins, use this devotional reading to prepare  
your heart for Advent and reflect on its purpose.*

# Kindling Righteous Anxiety

*For the Lord himself will come down from  
heaven . . . and the dead in Christ will rise  
first. After that, we who are still alive and are  
left will be caught up together with them in  
the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.*

1 THESSALONIANS 4:16-17

A young man in college, separated from his beloved, is one anxious fellow. His fiancée has been gone a month, and his heart aches with longing. She was unsure of her exact date of return, and, in the era before cell phones, she has no way to communicate with him. All he knows is that after about one month, she will return. Starting around day 28, his apprehension runneth over.

*That woman across the quad, is that her? She's about the right height and hair color—but, no. The phone rings and he rushes to pick it up, hoping to hear her voice—but no, it's only his brother. At least three times a day, as if praying the Liturgy of the Hours, he walks by her dorm room to see if she is back. He knocks and waits and knocks and waits. Nothing. He slouches back to his own room, disappointed to be sure, but not without hope—his beloved is returning. Soon.*

We're about to begin the season of Advent, when we rekindle our longing for our Lord's return. Yes, Advent is about recalling the wonder of his first coming, but it is no less about the glory of his second, when his kingdom will come and everything will be put right. When we will no longer have to be satisfied with hints of his presence, but "we shall see face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12).

After 2,000 years of waiting, it's understandable that we may have squelched the longing and buckled down for a tedious wait. But if we let this longing fade, we end up with a truncated faith. Our faith becomes all about *this* life and what we can accomplish now—a sure formula for despair and anxiety. On the other hand, if we have a lively hope within us, we recognize God's sovereignty over both the present and the future.

This is what characterized early believers, who so looked forward to the Second Coming that they were appalled when a brother or sister died before he returned. They were racked with existential questions: *Didn't he promise to return "soon"? Haven't we waited long enough, endured suffering, and prayed sufficiently "thy kingdom come"? When, Lord? When?* Advent is the season designed to help us remember our first hope, to rekindle that longing, to learn to pray again "thy kingdom come" with the fervency of the early church.

—Mark Galli

**Reflect** on 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11.

What does this passage reveal about the concerns and hopes of the early believers? How does it rekindle your own hope in Christ's return?

---

“Look, I am coming soon!”  
Jesus promises in  
Revelation 22:12.  
Advent invites us to orient  
our perspective toward  
Christ’s glorious return  
and eternal reign.

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ADVENT WEEK ONE

HE WILL COME AGAIN  
IN  
GLORY

*The Lord will be king over the whole earth.  
On that day there will be one Lord,  
and his name the only name.*

ZECHARIAH 14:9



DEC

2

# Rejoice with Trembling

---

*Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.*

---

**LUKE 21:36**

**T**he fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 1:7). It also is the end of wisdom—that is, the end for which wisdom strives. It is certainly something we will experience at the glorious end of history. As Luke 21:25–36 notes, it will be a scary time in broader terms, with calamities abounding. But woven in will be a healthy fear of the Lord by those who trust him.

We are right to feel gratitude and joy for the life-giving work of the Cross and Resurrection, and the hope of coming glory, of seeing Christ face to face. But when people in Scripture meet the Lord, something besides joy fills the air. When Isaiah is met by God in the temple, he cries out, “Woe to me! . . . my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty” (Isa. 6:5). When, after the miracle haul of fish, Peter discerns that Jesus is nothing less than a divine figure, he falls on his knees and exclaims, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” (Luke 5:8). This is what we call the fear of the Lord.

But for those living by faith in the mercy of God, it works like the psalmist put it: “Serve the Lord with reverent fear, and rejoice with trembling” (2:11, NLT). Both joy and fear fill our breasts.

We rightly anticipate the unimaginable joy of being in Christ’s presence someday, but we should prepare

ourselves to know the fear of the Lord as well. The way we prepare ourselves is to never forget who it is we are meeting—the One through whom all creation came into being, the One returning in power and glory, the Judge and Savior of all humankind. We are wise, therefore, to even now shape our lives to meet the Holy One with a good conscience in hand—or, at least, as good a conscience as our fallen nature will allow.

Our sinfulness in the presence of his glory will tempt us to cry out “Woe is me!” but at such a moment we can stand stubbornly in faith before the Judge and declare in the words of Mary, “He shows mercy from generation to generation, to all who fear him” (Luke 1:50, NLT).

Some people wonder whether the Second Coming is something to fear or something to look forward to. The answer, of course, is yes.

*—Mark Galli*

**Read** Luke 21:25–36. What questions, reactions, or emotions does Jesus’ teaching stir up in you? Invite God to help you grow in a healthy fear of the Lord, not to make you afraid but so that you might rejoice with trembling at the wonder of his mercy.

# On That Day

---

*The Lord will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one Lord, and his name the only name.*

---

ZECHARIAH 14:9

For many of us, Advent corresponds to the busiest season of the year. The holidays approach as quarters, semesters, and the year itself all march to a close. Multiple forces grab for our attention and resources.

In the Garden of Eden, things were much simpler. There was one rule to obey and one name with authority over all. Chaos entered when Adam and Eve listened instead to a voice that should've had no power over them. But when Jesus came to earth, he began his redemption of all the chaos that followed the Fall. To oppressed people torn by multiple responsibilities to multiple authorities, he taught the simplicity of obedience in the kingdom of God. All of our obligations rest on the foundation of loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves. Our responsibilities seem simple in the kingdom of God.

Though King Jesus is now on the throne at the right hand of God, we do not yet see everything subject to him (Heb. 2:8–9). Our vision is obscured by

many other things grabbing for our time and resources as we await his return. We pray, as Jesus taught his disciples, that God's name be hallowed and his kingdom come, that we would see the fullness of his kingdom realized throughout the world. On that day, when God is fully realized as king over all the earth—as Zechariah prophesied—we won't have competing authorities vying for our time and resources. "On that day there will be one Lord, and his name the only name" (14:9). In this busy season, we can find rest by believing in the enduring simplicity and rest of that day. It is coming. It is even now breaking into our busy reality. Love God. Love neighbor. In his name, our responsibilities simplify.

—Wendy Alsup

**Reflect** on God's ultimate reign described in Zechariah 14:3–9. How does contemplating "that day" put today's worries, concerns, and responsibilities into perspective?

# Peace and Quiet

---

*On that day . . . he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love.*

---

**ZEPHANIAH 3:16–17, ESV**

**S**cripture repeatedly instructs God's children to rest, be still, and be quiet. "The Lord will fight for you, you need only to be still" (Ex. 14:14), and "make it your ambition to lead a quiet life" (1 Thess. 4:11) are classic examples. But I struggle to be still. I wrestle to not wrestle.

The paradox of the call to quiet faith and the work it takes to maintain it is real. How can we rest and be still, particularly in light of injustices in this life—both personal and corporate—that leave us longing for Jesus' return?

The prophets of God similarly wrestled to be at peace amid the turmoil of their day. Zephaniah prophesied against disobedience and injustice in Judah. But he also prophesied of a coming day when God himself would quiet his people and right all the wrongs that have been done by others—and by us.

On that day, Zephaniah tells us, we will no longer fear, and God will deal with those who oppress us. On that day, God will restore the outcasts and gather

those scattered by persecution. On that day, God will heal the lame and affirm those who have been disparaged by oppressors. On that day, God will restore all that has been lost. On that day, God "will quiet you by his love" (3:17, ESV).

It is the hope of *that* day that equips us to be still in faith on *this* day as we wait expectantly for the Lord's return. This Advent, let us affirm with Zephaniah's contemporary, the prophet Jeremiah: "It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord" (Lam. 3:26).

**—Wendy Alsup**

**Read** Zephaniah 3:14–20 alongside similar prophecies in Isaiah 2:1–5, 35:1–10. What contemporary situations of injustice, conflict, or suffering come to mind? How does faith in "that day" bring you peace and hope today?



DEC  
5

# Our Eternal Light

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*The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light.*

---

**REVELATION 21:23-24**

Christ is the center and spring of all our future hope. We pray, “Your kingdom come” and long for our captivity to sin and decay to be over, but the heart of the church’s hope is the bride’s wish to be with the Bridegroom, face to face (Rev. 22:17). Central to the great promises of God is this: “I will live with them” (see Lev. 26:12; Ezek. 37:27; 2 Cor. 6:16; Rev. 21:3). Christians are those who eagerly wait for “the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13; see also 1 Thess. 1:10). “*Maranatha!* Come, Lord Jesus,” we cry, for heaven would not be heaven without him (1 Cor. 16:22; Rev. 22:20).

He is the fountainhead and source of all the blessings of the new creation. He is the light that drives away the darkness; he is the life that defeats death; “he is the beginning and the first-born from among the dead” (Col. 1:18).

As we saw in his first coming, Christ does not judge like any other. Utterly just and good, his judgment is all about removing evil, wickedness, and injustice. Today, the creation groans under the weight of our sin, with all its piled-up death and cruelty; his judgment means liberation.

The principal image used in Scripture to show the utter goodness of Christ’s judgment is that of light

confronting night. As John would put it when he came to describe this Word: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5).

This judgment has in fact already started with those who are in Christ. Right now, the light begins the work of driving away the gloomy night of our sin: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). This is a kind judgment indeed! Our devilish darkness dispelled by the light of Christ. And it all climaxes in the eternal summer of the new Jerusalem, when the Light of the world will have driven away all darkness: “There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 22:5).

—*Michael Reeves*

**Contemplate** Revelation 21:1–4, 22–27; 22:1–5. Which aspect of John’s vision here most captures your attention? Prayerfully explore the longings in your life that this passage addresses.

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# Establish Your Heart

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*Be patient. Establish your hearts,  
for the coming of the Lord is at hand.*

---

JAMES 5:8, ESV

I recently spent the afternoon at the DMV. Draw a number. Wait in line. Then, go stand in another line to fill out a form. Go back to the start and wait some more.

After traversing several lines, the woman at the counter told me flatly that they'd call my name when they were ready. "Any estimate of how long it might be?" I asked. She explained slowly, "They push the red button. They call a name. You just have to wait." So, I sat in a tiny chair between the other people in tiny chairs.

Waiting is hardest when there's no telling how long it might take. Waiting for DMV paperwork is small stuff, no doubt. But we are also waiting for the fulfillment of our hope—for Jesus to return. Open-ended waiting is hard.

As we await Christ's return, we are also reminded that "with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day" (2 Pet. 3:8). As we come to know him more, we become more like him. God alone can increase

our capacity for patience, even as our longing for his return deepens. "Establish your hearts," James tells us. "Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord" (5:7, ESV).

God hasn't asked us to take a number. He doesn't push a red button and call a name. His patience is not slow as the DMV is slow. "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you" (2 Pet. 3:9, ESV). God's patience is intentional and measured for good.

We can establish our hearts in God's presence even when it feels like we're stuck in a waiting room chair. We can trust him in his patience. He's got this under control, and he is with us while we wait.

—**Sandra McCracken**

**Ponder** James 5:7-10 and 2 Peter 3:8-15. How would you describe God's patience? How do patience and longing interact in your own spiritual life as you await Christ's return?

# Freed to Love

---

*May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes.*

---

## 1 THESSALONIANS 3:13

**M**y favorite thing to do on a day off is to take a long walk out in the woods. I love to go where it's quiet enough to hear the bird songs. Under a canopy of trees, I can more easily feel the presence of God.

Back in family life, faith feels less monastic and serene. I get frustrated and short-fused with my family when circumstances are stressful. For better and worse, growth in faith and maturity does not only happen in the woods.

First Thessalonians 3 describes the longing of friendship and the longing for Jesus' return. There is mutual encouragement and struggle, too. Paul encourages his friends, "May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy... when our Lord Jesus comes" (v. 13).

Our hope for Jesus' return is humming in the background of all of life. In the ache of waiting, it's sometimes easier to stay busy with all the things that seem more important. We may distract ourselves from waiting for Jesus

by superficially placing our hope in the approval of others or in our work performance. But when we deny our deep longings and look elsewhere for fulfillment, we are perpetually disappointed.

There's freedom when we allow ourselves to feel our need for his return. And there's freedom in admitting that we are actually *not* able to love one other blamelessly or live holy lives apart from his grace. Only as we look to Jesus, the source of love and generosity, we can just be ourselves. We can love as we have been loved. (1 John 4:19).

Advent is an invitation to make space for rest and relationship. Whether it's in the solitude of a walk in the woods or in the noise of family life, God provides the grace to love and be loved as we wait for him.

—**Sandra McCracken**

**Reflect** on 1 Thessalonians 3:6–13.

How is God increasing your love and strengthening your heart as you grow in holiness, awaiting Christ's return?



DEC  
8

# The Final Page

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*He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

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**PHILIPPIANS 1:6**

I have dozens of journals on the bookshelves around my house. With each, I started out in earnest. In some, I studied themes. Others are travel books marking observations or places I've been. Most of them have blank pages in the back, unfinished thoughts, and evidence of life's interruptions.

I am forgetful and easily distracted—but God does not leave things unfinished. “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6). God does not lose track of what he sets out to accomplish. He is committed to the last page. He has already written the final word, and he is bringing this story to completion.

Each week in church we recite a prayer for forgiveness, “for what we have done, and what we have left undone.” And each week, new things come to my mind. There is freedom in being called out of the shadows when we pray together. Confession is like turning the page. Each new page is a clean start, a new opportunity for wisdom (Phil. 1:9), fruitfulness (v. 11), and gratitude (v. 3).

Indeed, “The grace of God that was given you in Christ . . . will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:4, 8, ESV). In Jesus, guilt and shame can be

erased. Guilt is feeling sorry for things we have done; shame is feeling apologetic for who we are. Philippians 1:6 assures us on both counts that “he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” While sin and sickness remain, we wait with patience. And as we wait, he increases our capacity for love (v. 9). He will not leave our story unfinished.

God teaches us to number our days (Ps. 90:12). He is refining, renewing, and remaking us every day from now until the day that he returns. Under his artful hand, sometimes his writing is slow and repetitive, like a sunrise. Other times, it is swift and surprising, like a sudden U-turn in a sports car. But whatever the pace, he works with great skill and does not leave us unattended.

As I slide one of my half-written journals back on my shelf, I hold fast to the promise. He's been faithful, and he will carry us until the final page.

—*Sandra McCracken*

**Meditate** on Philippians 1:3–11 and 1 Corinthians 1:4–8. How do you desire for God to form and shape you as you “eagerly wait” for Christ’s return? What “good work” of growth and transformation is God doing in your life even now?

---

God foretold Christ's first coming through the words of his prophets. This week, contemplate Old Testament promises about the coming Savior and King.

---

ADVENT WEEK TWO

THE  
PROMISED  
ONE

*He will reign on David's throne  
and over his kingdom, establishing and  
upholding it with justice and righteousness  
from that time on and forever.*

ISAIAH 9:7



DEC

9

# A House for the Lord

---

*Your house and your kingdom will endure forever  
before me; your throne will be established forever.*

---

**2 SAMUEL 7:16**

David wanted to build a house for the Almighty. Even for a king, it was a lofty goal. Luxuriating in a palace while God's ark huddled in a tent felt unseemly, so perhaps embarrassment prompted his wish to some degree. But I suspect David's most powerful motive was longing for God's presence. A house requires commitment. It brings stability and access. If the Lord had a house, David would always know where to find him. The psalmist's desire could be his reality: to "dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple" (Ps. 27:4). Whatever the reason, David planned to prepare a place for God.

This ancient king, in other words, had Advent aspirations. Advent is a time of waiting, of watching, of making space for the presence of God. Was this not David's intent? He would make room for the Lord—by working.

But God had other plans. He was preparing a gift of his own. God inverted David's idea: "The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you" (2 Sam. 7:11). Advent desire met an unforeseen promise. Wait. Watch. Witness a work of God.

This promise did not depend on David to do his part. It was eternal—David's house would last forever. It was unconditional—human sin could not

shake it. This promise was not about what David could do—it was about what God would do.

At times in Israel's history, God's promise to David must have seemed dubious. Solomon did build for God the house of his father's dreams, but the house of David soon fell into dysfunction and decay, culminating in the eventual destruction of the temple. Both David's house and God's house, it seemed, had collapsed.

In fact, things still looked grim on that very first Christmas. There wasn't even a guest room available for Jesus, David's heir and God's Son, let alone a house of kingly splendor. But this king was to be a carpenter. He was here to build us a house. And so he did, beam by beam, nail by nail, laying down his own life as the foundation. By making his home among us, he made us a house for the Lord, a pure temple of his Holy Spirit, a royal priesthood. Now our home is his: palace and temple are one.

*—Han-luen Kantzer Komline*

**Read** 2 Samuel 7:1–16, focusing especially on verses 11–16. What do you think David wondered or felt when he heard this? What's your reaction as you contemplate these promises? Why?

# Buds in a Bleak Midwinter

---

*"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will fulfill the good promise I made. . . . I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line."*

---

JEREMIAH 33:14, 15

I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line" (Jer. 33:15). Messianic prophecies like this, especially in the context of Advent, can sound rosily predictable from our vantage point—all scent and sweetness with no thorns. Enthralled by their familiar beauty, we feel only Christmas cheer and forget the bleak circumstances that made these reassurances necessary.

When God spoke this promise to Jeremiah, the stench of siege, sword, famine, and pestilence hung thick in the air. Death and destruction had wormed their way into the holy city of peace. We read at the end of Jeremiah that the king of Babylon "burned the house of the Lord, the king's house and all the houses of Jerusalem" (52:13, NRSV). God's covenant with David seemed reduced to a literal heap of ashes.

Against this backdrop, we see the improbability, even the audacity, of the promise Jeremiah repeats. He foresees, not an organic outgrowth but a sprout springing from a shriveled stalk—or from

a stump, as we read in Isaiah 11:1. He foretells life coming forth from the tomb.

A sprout—the literal meaning of the Hebrew word behind "Branch"—is such a small, tender thing. But in this context, it is nothing short of miraculous. No resounding gongs or clanging cymbals accompany this promise. Yet God, so patiently, so kindly, says, *Trust, hope, persevere, even when things look impossible, for my Word never fails!* This Word will shoot up from the dust. It will grow with the abandon of a mustard seed. And then, one day, arms stretched out wide, crowned with thorns, there it will stand: a mighty tree of life atop Golgotha, giving shade to the nations. This is a crescendo worth waiting for.

**—Han-luen Kantzer Komline**

**Consider** Jeremiah 33:14–16 and Isaiah 11:1–10. How does the idea of hope sprouting out of bleak circumstances speak to you? How does it point toward the Messiah?

# Out of Bethlehem

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*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

God has a habit of using the small and inconsequential to confound the large and powerful. From the little town of Bethlehem, God chose the littlest son of Jesse (1 Sam. 16). His own father deemed him so insignificant he didn't even bother mentioning him to the prophet Samuel. Goliath dismissed him as "a boy," a mere "stick," a laughable Israelite champion (1 Sam. 17). But God chose this unlikely lad to be a mighty warrior and a king.

Hundreds of years later, God chose another unlikely man from the rural lowlands of Judah to confront the powerful landowners in Jerusalem. Just as they were mistreating the poor, so they too would be mistreated, Micah prophesied. They would be overrun by a foreign power, and this time there would be no shepherd boy with a sling full of stones to ward off the invasion. But, the minor prophet said, there *would* be a major turnaround of events. God would raise up another rescuer from Bethlehem. Of lowly origin, this new shepherd-king

would reign with God's strength and his kingdom would reach all nations.

Hundreds of years later, at the whim of the mighty Caesar, a pregnant Jewish couple is forced to travel to Bethlehem. Matthew makes it clear, as he describes a series of unlikely events, that God is beginning to fulfill Micah's prophecy (Matt. 2:6). A king will be born in a forgotten nowhere town, but this true son of Bethlehem, this anointed Messiah, will one day rule the world.

This Advent, as we consider Bethlehem, we can take heart that however insignificant we feel or however minor our work for God seems to be, God notices us, and, in his grace, weaves us into his grand scheme of history.

**—Krish Kandiah**

**Reflect** on how Micah 5:2–5a describes the promised Messiah. What words or phrases draw your attention? What is significant about God's choice of "small," inconsequential Bethlehem?



DEC  
12

# A Messianic Manifesto

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*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,  
because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good  
news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the  
brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives  
and release from darkness for the prisoners.*

---

ISAIAH 61:1

Anyone seeking a chapter of Scripture to serve as the manifesto for their lives is unlikely to pick Isaiah 61. It's one of the closing chapters of Isaiah's epic prophecy God revealed around 700 years before the birth of Christ. The opening chapters of Isaiah promise judgment on God's people for their neglect of the poor and their lack of compassion toward the widow and the orphan (see Isa. 1:11–17); in chapter 61, the prophecy now draws near its close with the promise that one day, a new Spirit-anointed king will come to do the very things that Israel neglected to do: attend to the poor and needy.

When Jesus stands up in the synagogue of his hometown about 700 years later and gives his first public address, it is, in a sense, the defining speech of his ministry. He declares that this unlikely chapter of Isaiah is going to be the manifesto for his life. “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21), he says, claiming to be the Spirit-anointed king, the Messiah who has come to proclaim the gospel of God to the poor. Jesus promises freedom to prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed.

Anyone seeking to launch a global influence movement tends to target opinion formers, celebrities, and major donors. But Jesus focuses his attention on the insignificant and the poor. Luke,

on every page of his gospel, gives example after example of Jesus' deliberate alternative strategy. Even the Christmas story itself begins with nomadic shepherds and two parents who can only offer the poor man's offering of two doves at a dedication ceremony.

In Luke 4, Jesus proclaims that his ministry is going to be directed toward the poor—and he delivers on his promise. It is the underprivileged and the marginalized, the disabled and the disregarded, who flock to him. Jesus spends a lot of his teaching defending his focus on the least, the last, and the lost saying, “it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick” (5:31).

Jesus' citation of the prophecy of Isaiah 61 helps us to understand not only Jesus' ultimate mission but the very reason for Christmas, the rationale of the Incarnation, and the role of all of us who claim to follow in Christ's footsteps. We all must ask ourselves: How do we demonstrate and speak good news to the poor?

**—Krish Kandiah**

**Read** Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11 alongside Luke 4:14–21. What do you find most striking in this description of the Messiah's purpose? What do you find most challenging as you seek to follow in Jesus' footsteps?

# Raise the Banner

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*Raise a banner for the nations. The Lord has made proclamation to the ends of the earth: "Say to Daughter Zion, 'See, your Savior comes!'"*

---

ISAIAH 62:10-11

A tiny side street in Sarajevo became the epicenter for an event that impacted the entire world. When Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated by a Serbian teenager, it resulted in the First World War that left 23 million injured and 18 million dead. This is one of many examples of pivotal local events that, for good or for ill, have had global consequences.

Isaiah 61–62 prophesies one such event: the coming of a new king to the tiny nation of Israel. Isaiah promises that the coming of a Spirit-anointed king will lead to worship resounding around the world and righteousness sprouting up throughout the nations. The birth of the Messiah will have significance not just for his town and his country but will raise a banner for every nation on the planet. In fact, because of the Messiah's coming, the vindication of God's people will be stellar, outshining the sun itself in its global impact. The renewed and revived people of God will resonate in praise to the four corners of the globe.

In the New Testament, Matthew emphasizes God's carefully orchestrated international welcome for his son. East and Middle East collide when a celestial sign guides Magi to be VIP witnesses of the arrival of the Messiah. And when Matthew later closes his gospel, he reminds us that the command of the risen Jesus is for his church to go and make disciples of all nations (28:18–20).

Advent and Christmas can often be a season in which we especially focus on ourselves and our family—but beating at the heart of the Christmas story is a call to make sure the nations know the Messiah. This Advent, how will you play your part in God's international mission and raise the banner of Christ for the nations?

—*Krish Kandiah*

**Contemplate** Isaiah 61:10–62:12.

What does the global nature of the Messiah's mission reveal about God?

How can you bring a global perspective to your observance of Advent?

# Advent Amid Chaos

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*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign:  
The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son,  
and will call him Immanuel.*

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## ISAIAH 7:14

**T**hese are dark times. News of war, rumors of war, violence, and corruption abound. The powerful trample upon the weak; the earth is poisoned and polluted. Tragically, we see corruption and abuse in the church, too, as high-profile Christian leaders tumble into disgrace, taking down innocent victims with them. At times, it is enough to make me wonder if all hell has broken loose on earth. As I read the news, sometimes all I can manage is a faint, “Lord, have mercy!”

In Isaiah 7, wicked King Ahaz is deathly afraid. Syria and Israel are allied against him and are about to lay siege to Judah. For all intents and purposes, it looks like the end of his life and kingdom are at hand. It is under these frightening conditions that God shows up through the prophet Isaiah with the good news of rescue: They would not die; God would save them. Isaiah offered Ahaz a messianic sign as confirmation of his prophecy: A virgin would give birth to a baby and name him “Immanuel,” which means “God with us” (v. 14). In a

beautiful twist that only God could pull off, ages later, we discover that Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, the sign of God’s presence among us—our salvation (Matt. 1:22–23).

When it seems like all hell is breaking loose around us, if it appears we are nearing our end, God wants us to know he will appear. He will rescue us. He will save us. For he is Immanuel, God with us. Not even our worst imaginable nightmares can separate us from his loving presence (Rom. 8:38–39). Because God is with us, we are safe in his presence no matter what happens, whether we live or die. We can be sure our God will come and is always coming for us, even in utter chaos. This is Advent.

—*Marlena Graves*

**Consider** Isaiah 7:10–16. How do the original circumstances of this prophecy add to your understanding of its meaning? How does knowing Jesus as Immanuel—God with us—give you hope and comfort today?



DEC  
15

## Peace Is Possible

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*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. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.*

---

ISAIAH 9:6-7

One of the texts we regularly hear during the Advent season is Isaiah 9:6–7: “And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.” This prophecy speaks poignantly about the nature and character of Jesus the Messiah. However, given the current state of our world, we might be tempted toward disbelief about this prophecy—not disbelief about Jesus being the “Prince of Peace,” mind you, but disbelief over whether there really is any sort of peace on earth or goodwill toward humankind as was proclaimed in the first Advent announcement to the shepherds (Luke 2:14).

And yet, as Jesus lived and loved among the disciples, he worked peace into their lives through the Holy Spirit. Even after Jesus ascended into heaven, their profound experience of Jesus the Messiah as the “Wonderful Counselor,” “Mighty God,” “Prince of Peace” and son of the “Everlasting Father” propelled them to resolutely face crucifixion, beheading, and all sorts of torture. Nothing compared to the glory of knowing Jesus. *Nothing*. Knowing Jesus the Messiah was more important than their very lives.

Today, Jesus continues to act in the world and in us. He tells us he is making all things new (Rev. 21:5). One day, when

he appears again, he will bring *shalom* to all things, righting all wrongs.

As I contemplate the peace of Christ, I am reminded of a precious bit of wisdom from Seraphim of Sarov, an 18th-century Russian saint in the Orthodox church: “Acquire the Spirit of peace and thousands around you will be saved.” Jesus is working peace into us which then flows out of us and into the lives of others and all of creation. Yet we must be open to receiving it. We must do our part by seeking the Holy Spirit of peace and praying for peace so that we might acquire it. As we pray, seek, and trust, we can be confident God will gradually grant us the good gift of peace. As we allow God to put to death the violence within, peace can reign.

As Saint Seraphim knew, we acquire the peace of Christ as the Spirit bears fruit in our lives. As we do, we can trust our peace will affect others, institutions, and creation for generations—thousands until Jesus the Messiah, the Prince of Peace, permanently ushers it in at the Second Advent.

—*Marlena Graves*

**Meditate** on Isaiah 9:2–7. Consider: How has Christ brought light and peace to the world? How is God bringing peace and light to you and through you to others?

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Before Jesus was born, God prepared the way. This week, consider how God worked in and through the lives of John the Baptist, Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary.

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ADVENT WEEK THREE

PREPARE  
THE WAY FOR THE  
LORD

*You will go on before the Lord to prepare the way  
for him, to give his people the knowledge of  
salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.*

LUKE 1:76-77



DEC  
16

# The Word of God Came

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*The word of God came to John son of Zechariah. . . . As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”*

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**LUKE 3:2, 4**

If we were to create a list of important first-century figures, most would highlight biblical characters. We might begin with Jesus, before making our way to the Twelve, Paul, and Mary. Had we been alive at the time, however, the list would have been quite different. It would have been similar to the names in Luke 3 that serve as the backdrop to John the Baptist's ministry: Tiberius Caesar, the second emperor of Rome; Pontius Pilate, a middling man who seems to have come from a family of Roman politicians; Herod and Philip, brothers in a ruling family that held sway over Judea; and finally Annas and Caiaphas, members of a family that kept a tight grip on the high priesthood for a generation. These are the seemingly important people with political, religious, and military power to shape first-century life.

Luke lists them, perhaps, to dismiss such notions. When God acted to save his people, he did not turn to Tiberius or Annas or Herod to accomplish his purposes. Instead, "the word of God came to John son of Zechariah" (v. 2). God had chosen the son of a lowly but faithful priest and his previously barren wife to spread God's message.

God is not limited by our perceptions of power to accomplish his purposes. He can use whomever he chooses to accomplish his will. Therefore, our

hope is never limited to what we think is possible. It is often precisely when all options seem to be exhausted that God reveals himself as the one mighty to save. This is exactly why Isaiah 40 serves as a framework for John's ministry. Isaiah 40:1–11 declared God's action to end Israel's exile and estrangement from God. It opens with the words "Comfort, comfort my people." They could be comforted because God was on the way, and their sin would be paid for (v. 2).

In the same way, John the Baptist declared that Israel's—and the world's—comfort arose from the truth that Jesus, the Son of God and Messiah, had come to save the world from its sins and usher in the kingdom. Further, there was only one thing for people to do: Repent of their sins and prepare their hearts for the advent of God. As it was then, it is now. We who have seen him come once are reminded of the continual need to repent and prepare our hearts for the Second Advent of our king who will come to judge and to save.

*—Esau McCauley*

**Read** Luke 3:1–6 as well as Isaiah 40:1–11. What's your reaction to Luke setting John the Baptist's ministry against this backdrop of powerful leaders? How does Isaiah's prophecy enrich your understanding of John's ministry?

# Hearts Made Ready

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*John answered them all, "I baptize you with water.  
But one who is more powerful than I will come."*

---

LUKE 3:16

It can be easy for those raised in the church to assume that participating in church rituals and services conveys certain privileges. But while it can be good for children to look upon the faith of their parents and view their community's faith as their own, there is also a danger of placing one's hope in their ancestors' faithfulness and not in God himself.

John the Baptist warned his audience, "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham" (Luke 3:8). John challenged their understanding of faith. What does faith look like? How can we know that we're not merely mimicking the words of our ancestors without the substance? This insecurity lies behind the question the crowd posed to John, "What should we do?"

John instructed the crowd to repent (v. 3) and to live compassionate lives. He told the tax collectors and soldiers to do their work with integrity and not exploit the weak. True repentance is a turning

toward God that manifests itself in a changed attitude toward our neighbors in a way that gives hope to those mired in hopelessness. To be clear, John is not calling us to care for the weak in order to earn a place in the kingdom. No, this compassion is necessary because the Messiah himself is compassionate. "One who is more powerful than I will come," John said, and he is the one who truly cares for those society has rejected.

If we cannot care for the weak, how can we claim to follow the God whose very nature is manifested in compassionate forgiveness of sinners? Our own repentance and compassion serve as individual reenactments of the great act of compassion and grace: the coming of the Son, the very embodiment of God's grace, compassion, and forgiveness.

—**Esau McCauley**

**Ponder** Luke 3:7-18. How does John prepare the way for Jesus here? How is the call to repentance "good news"?

# The Same God

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*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.*

---

LUKE 1:13

**Z**echariah had been born into an early first-century Jewish priestly family. Serving as a priest was a great honor, but there were over 10,000 of them by this time. Priests did not minister in local synagogues, only in the temple. And there was only one temple—in Jerusalem. Only a select number, therefore, got to officiate at the altar in the temple's holy place. Imagine the thrill when Zechariah, now an old man, had the chance. But then something very strange happened. An angel appeared to him and promised that he and his wife, well past child-bearing years, would have a son who would be a great prophet like Elijah to help the Israelites return to the Lord. What kind of message was this? Could Zechariah believe it? He asks the most natural question in the world: “How can I be sure of this?”

Gabriel, however, shows no empathy. Zechariah is struck mute until the child—John, whom we considered in yesterday's devotional—is born. He says Zechariah did not exhibit proper belief.

How so? Priests studied the Hebrew Scriptures in great detail. Zechariah knew similar miraculous births had occurred in centuries past with Abraham and Sarah and with Elkanah and Hannah. The same God who miraculously enabled those two infertile couples to have children was working again in the same way.

Is there something you are having trouble trusting God for, even though you know from his Word that he has done it before? Do you need your marriage put back together, your kids to come to Christ, or a dramatic change in the workplace? Do you need healing physically or emotionally? We dare not presume we *know* something extraordinary is God's will for us, but we dare not *doubt* that he has the same miracle-working power today that he has disclosed in the past.

—**Craig L. Blomberg**

**Reflect** on Luke 1:5–25. Can you relate to Zechariah's response? How might God be inviting you to trust him more fully?



DEC  
19

# Faith in the Unprecedented

---

*"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered.  
"May your word to me be fulfilled."*

---

LUKE 1:38

**I**t doesn't seem fair. The angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah and promises him and his wife, Elizabeth, a miracle baby, and he asks how he can be sure such a thing will happen. As a result, he is left unable to speak for over nine months. Mary, on the other hand, has the same angel appear to her. Again, he promises a miracle baby, and again Mary asks a very understandable question: "How will this be since I am a virgin?" But instead of being rebuked for her lack of faith, as Zechariah was, the angel grants her an explanation of sorts. Gabriel replies that "the Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."

This isn't much of an answer, but it's apparently all Mary needs to know. It's not that, though she is a virgin, she will have sexual relations with a man in the near future. Rather, it will be an entirely supernatural event; God's Spirit and power will envelop her and she will conceive. Mary accepts the explanation, such as it is, and accepts God's will for her life, which will be forever changed. But her acceptance comes only *after* Gabriel answers her question about how this can be.

Why was Mary not rebuked like Zechariah was? The obvious answer is that there were no parallels in human history for an actual virginal

conception. Mary had no precedent on which to fall back like Zechariah did. But it's interesting how commentators over the centuries have rarely been content with the obvious answer and have often tried to make Mary out to be more virtuous than Luke ever says she was. True, Gabriel calls her "highly favored," but he also explains why: The Lord is with her.

The more we exalt Mary, the less we can relate to her as an ordinary teenage girl. On the other hand, the more we recognize that God, for reasons unknown to us, selected a simple, humble Jewish adolescent to bear his divine Son, the more we might believe that he can also use us to accomplish his perfect purposes. We need no special training or privileges to tell our good friends who need Jesus about how he has changed our lives or to commit to honoring our baptismal or marriage vows. We just have to echo Mary's prayer that her life be according to God's word and live consistently with that prayer.

*—Craig L. Blomberg*

**Consider** Luke 1:26–38. How does Mary's response challenge or inspire you? How does focusing on Mary as an ordinary teenage girl speak to your own faith and calling?

# Our Focus

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*As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears,  
the baby in my womb leaped for joy.*

---

LUKE 1:44

**A**fter Zechariah and Mary each receive amazing news from Gabriel, Mary goes to visit Zechariah's wife (and her relative), Elizabeth. What will the two women have to say to each other? Elizabeth takes the lead and praises Mary effusively. Mary may have been an ordinary Jewish adolescent, but her response of contentment with God's life-upending plans is remarkable. She "believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!" (1:45).

As I noted yesterday, Christians through the ages have often put Mary on a pedestal above anything Luke's account warrants. Yes, Elizabeth calls Mary blessed among women, but it is due to God's provision for her in bearing the Christ child. True, Elizabeth calls Mary, "the mother of my Lord" (1:43), but her focus is much more on the surprise that her unborn child, John, leaps in her womb in response to the presence of another special child in Mary's body.

Mary acknowledges as much in her response to Elizabeth (vv. 46–56), by

focusing on God's coming salvation that her divine child will make possible. In other words, the real focus is on the two babies, not the two mothers. And just as John in his lifetime will bear witness to his much greater cousin, Jesus, already here *in utero* John jumps for joy in his presence.

It can be so easy during the Christmas season to inadvertently focus on just about anything other than Jesus—vacation time, gifts, food, time with family, even special church services. The closer someone or something is to Jesus, the easier it is to focus on them and *think* we're attending to Christ himself. Let's be sure this year that we are not too distracted by Elizabeth, Mary, John the Baptist, our pastors, our church musicians, or even our spouse, children, or parents. We need quality and quantity time worshipping Jesus.

—**Craig L. Blomberg**

**Ponder** Luke 1:39–45, considering Mary and Elizabeth's faith. How is God prompting you to focus on and worship Jesus?

# The Great Reversal

---

*His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
from generation to generation.*

---

LUKE 1:50

One of the central themes in the Gospel of Luke is what interpreters have often called “the great reversal”—or perhaps in today’s more common language we should call it “the world upside down.” This theme appears in the very beginning of the gospel, in the song of Mary that is usually known by the first word of its Latin translation, *Magnificat*. The canticle begins this way: *Magnificat anima me Dominum*—“My soul magnifies the Lord.” But in truth, the theme is not just praise of God but rather the praise of the God who is the Lord of great upheavals.

Mary praises God because “he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant” and because God “has done great things for me.” And then she places her own exaltation in the context of great upheaval: “He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away

empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy” (Luke 1:51–54, NRSV).

This hymn echoes Hannah’s canticle in 1 Samuel. Both the song of Hannah and the song of Mary begin with the exaltation of the one who sings, but then move on to a more general praise of God who not only does mighty things but also turns the world upside down, exalting the humble and bringing down the mighty from their thrones, feeding the hungry and making those who are overfed work for their bread, breaking the bows of the strong and giving strength to the weak.

—**Justo L. González**

**Compare** Mary’s song in Luke 1:46–56 with Hannah’s in 1 Samuel 2:1–10. Which descriptions of reversal stand out to you? How do these “upside down” ideas point toward the actions and teachings of Jesus?

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DEC  
22

# The Dayspring Will Come

---

*You will go before the Lord to prepare the way for him,  
to give his people the knowledge of salvation through  
the forgiveness of their sins.*

---

LUKE 1:76-77

John's father, Zechariah, glorified the mission of the coming Messiah in these words: "The dayspring from on high hath visited us, To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (Luke 1:78–79, KJV throughout).

Now, this doesn't mean "darkness and the shadow of death" in the general sense that "everybody has to die sooner or later." The images are much more textured than that. Darkness and the shadow of death are poetic images for our tragic, fallen human condition. "Dayspring" is also a poetic image, another name for the Messiah. (One of the verses of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" begins "O come, thou Dayspring from on high.") "Dayspring" means something far more than just "dawn." It means the primordial source of day, God himself—the One who in the beginning said, "Let there be light." So when we read that the light dawns for those who suffer darkness and death (and that means all of us), it means that God is going to restore his original creation—but this time without the temptation of the serpent.

The meaning of the Advent season is understanding why and how we sit in darkness and recognizing that we need to repent of our sinful nature. Advent teaches us to recognize God's grace, to

turn aside from our own devices, and to wait in the darkness with patience for the promised time of fulfillment.

The Dayspring has come; the Dayspring will come. Whatever your own personal darkness, it has been and will be overcome. If you are not patient, God will yet grant you patience. If you are not charitable, the Savior will create charity in you. If you are not forgiving, the Lord will work a wonder of forgiveness in you. The darkness has been overcome and will be overcome.

There is always an element, in Advent, of "not yet." Not yet, but it will come. It will come because he will come. That is the promise given to us by God himself. The One who comes to be our Judge is the One who is the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. The Dayspring has come and will come "to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (Luke 1:79).

—*Fleming Rutledge*

**Read** Luke 1:57–80, then focus on verses 68–79. Which words in Zechariah's song draw your attention as you consider your own relationship with God? How might Zechariah's song prompt your own prayer of praise?

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The promised Messiah—  
the light illuminating our  
darkness—was born! God  
made flesh, he dwelt among  
us. This week, celebrate the  
birth of the Savior who will  
one day come again.

---

ADVENT WEEK FOUR

OUR  
SAVIOR  
IS  
BORN

*Today in the town of David a Savior has been  
born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.*

LUKE 2:11



DEC  
23

# Time Came

---

*While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.*

---

**LUKE 2:6-7**

I remember waiting for my first child to be born. It wasn't the nine months that I found difficult; it was the week *after* my due date, the week *after* she was supposed to be here. Those days were almost unbearable. I'd lie awake in the quiet of the night while my husband slept next to me, his breathing rhythmic and in time. My body ached and my stomach was swollen past its capacity. All the signs pointed to being ready, but the time had come and gone and there was no baby yet.

They say babies come when they are ready and my experience tells me this is true. The baby is not born when the mother is ready. The baby is not born when things are settled. The baby is not born when the doctor says it's time. The baby is born when the baby is born. So I'm not at all surprised by the wording of Luke 2:6–7: “The time came for the baby to be born, and [Mary] gave birth to her firstborn, a son.”

It seems that even babies who count a thousand years and a day alike come when they, and not the rest of us, are ready. Because Mary wasn't the only one waiting for this child to be born. The entire world had been waiting for this baby, this promised seed of the woman who would crush the serpent's head and set his people free (Gen. 3:15). The

entire world had been waiting for the Son of God to be delivered.

If the birth of Jesus tells us anything, it's not simply that babies come when they are ready but that they *do* come. It's that God fulfills his promises despite the wait. Even when we think things are past due, even when our hopes and expectations weigh heavy on us, God will bring new life when the time is *right*.

Today, we do not wait on a baby but on a coming king; but like Mary, we do wait as Christ is formed within us (Gal. 4:19). Like Mary, we wait for him to make his entrance into the world. And as we wait, we trust that he *will* come. We remember that “the Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish” (2 Pet. 3:9).

And so we wait in patience for the coming of the Son who will save us—finally and fully—from our sins.

—Hannah Anderson

**Contemplate** the account of Jesus' birth in Luke 2:1–20, reflecting on these events from Mary's perspective. How does knowing that God acts when the time is right help you wait patiently on him?



DEC  
24

# The Right Thing

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*Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife. . . . 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**

He just wanted to do the right thing. He didn't want to shame or hurt anyone. And he didn't really have a lot of options. You don't in these situations. She was pregnant, but the baby wasn't his. He "did not want to expose her to public disgrace" (Matt. 1:19). The kindest thing he could think to do was to end things quietly. No one would need to know. He would do right by her.

But then he had a dream that turned righteousness upside down.

In the dream, the angel 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."

The dilemma for Joseph was that these words would be for him alone. Even if he found a way to believe them—heaven knows he desperately wanted to believe them—who else would? No one. Who would believe this child wasn't his? If he married her and a baby was born too soon after, everyone would think that he was the father—that *he* had been unrighteous. And he just wanted to do the right thing.

So he did. He believed the angel's message. He married this pregnant girl.

And then he waited for her to give birth to someone else's—to *God's*—son.

As the birth grew near, I wonder if Joseph ever regretted his decision. When Mary went into labor, did he doubt? When the baby finally came and he held him in his arms, was he tempted to change his mind?

Whatever he might have felt, he *didn't* change his mind. He didn't back down from his decision. He named the infant Jesus, effectively claiming him as his own. He took on the weight of judgment, willing to be seen as unrighteous precisely because he was righteous.

And in shouldering public shame, Joseph prepared the child in his arms to eventually do the same for us. In caring for his mother, he taught him how to care for his own bride, the church. And through this unconventional righteousness, he paved the way for a greater righteousness—a righteousness that would one day save us all.

—Hannah Anderson

**Reflect** on Jesus' birth described in Matthew 1:18–25, contemplating these events from Joseph's perspective. In what ways is God's righteousness "unconventional"? How does Jesus' birth help us understand true righteousness?

DEC  
25

CHRISTMAS DAY

# Seeing God



---

*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

When we think about Christmas, we generally turn to passages in the Bible that give us accounts of Jesus' birth. We want to hear about the angels, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, and the wise men. The beginning of the First Epistle of John doesn't immediately strike us as a Christmas text, because it is not describing Jesus' birth. However, though John is not recounting these events, he is giving us a wonderfully concise explanation of what the Nativity means.

In chapter 1 of the Gospel of John, Jesus is called "the Word"; "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). In 1 John 1:1, he is called "the Word of life," and then Jesus is called "eternal life" in verse 2. When John says, "Eternal life . . . was with the Father and has appeared to us," he is referring to Jesus Christ himself. This is a startling statement, but the point is clear. We are not being told merely that Jesus Christ has eternal life or even that he gives it. This verse says he *is* eternal life, salvation itself.

In every other religion, the founder points to eternal life, but because Jesus is God come in the flesh, he *is* eternal life. To unite with him by faith, to know him in love, is to have this life.

For other world faiths, God is personal but too removed to be said to

have intimate, loving communion with believers. I've become convinced that what makes the difference for Christianity is the Incarnation. No other faith says God became flesh. Think about the great phrase from Charles Wesley's Christmas hymn—"veiled in flesh, the Godhead see."

When Moses asked to see God's glory, he was told it would kill him, yet in John 1 we are told that, through Jesus, "we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father . . . full of grace and truth" (John 1:14, KJV). Charles Wesley did not write, "veiled in flesh, the Godhead hidden" but "veiled in flesh, the Godhead *see*." Science teachers instruct their classes to look through filters in order to see the sun and its features without damaging their eyes. In a similar way, it is through the person of Christ that we see the glory of God.

—*Timothy Keller*

**Meditate** upon John 1:1–18 as well as 12:44–46 and 1 John 1:1–2. This Christmas Day, as you contemplate the infant Christ, how do you see the glory of God? Praise him, the very Word of life.

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# Contributors



**WENDY ALSUP** is a teacher and the author of *Is the Bible Good for Women? Seeking Clarity and Confidence Through a Jesus-Centered Understanding of Scripture* (Multnomah).

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**HANNAH ANDERSON** is the author of *All That's Good and Humble Roots* (Moody). She works beside her husband in rural ministry in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia.

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**CRAIG L. BLOMBERG** is distinguished professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary in Littleton, Colorado, and the author or editor of 25 books, with a special focus on the reliability of Scripture.

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**MARK GALLI** is editor in chief of Christianity Today. He is the author of several books; his most recent title is *Karl Barth: An Introductory Biography for Evangelicals* (Eerdmans).

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**JUSTO L. GONZÁLEZ** is a theologian and church historian. His books include *The Story of Christianity* (HarperOne), *A Brief History of Sunday* (Eerdmans), and the forthcoming *Knowing Our Faith* (Eerdmans).

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**MARLENA GRAVES** is the author of *A Beautiful Disaster: Finding Hope in the Midst of Brokenness* (Brazos Press). Her next book with InterVarsity Press will be published in 2020.

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**KRISH KANDIAH** is a theologian, speaker, and activist. He is founding director of the UK-based charity Home for Good and the author of *Paradoxology* and *God Is Stranger* (InterVarsity Press).

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**TIMOTHY KELLER**, founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, is chairman of Redeemer City to City, which focuses on ministry in an urban environment. His latest book is *The Prodigal Prophet* (Viking).

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**HAN-LUEN KANTZER KOMLINE** teaches church history and theology at Western Theological Seminary. Her first book, *Augustine on the Will*, is forthcoming in 2019 (Oxford University Press).

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**ESAU MCCAULLEY** is assistant professor of New Testament at Northeastern Seminary and the author of an upcoming book on the New Testament and African American biblical interpretation (InterVarsity Press).

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**SANDRA MCCRACKEN** is a Nashville-based singer-songwriter and hymn writer as well as a columnist for CT. Her albums include *Psalms*, *God's Highway*, and *Songs from the Valley*.

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**MICHAEL REEVES** is president and professor of theology at Union School of Theology in the UK. His books include *Delighting in the Trinity* and *Rejoicing in Christ* (InterVarsity Press).

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**FLEMING RUTLEDGE**, an Episcopal priest, spent 21 years in parish ministry before becoming a lecturer, writer, and teacher of other preachers. Her books include *The Crucifixion* and *Advent* (Eerdmans).

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# Ideas for Families

*Select some of these ideas to enrich your family's journey through Advent.*

## THROUGHOUT ADVENT

- Gather weekly as a family and use the text on pages 8, 20, 32, and 44 to prompt a time of discussion and prayer. If you have teens or older kids, also consider discussing the daily devotions together.
- Create a “stained-glass window” throughout Advent. Use dry-erase markers or colored self-adhesive notes to add words, ideas, images, symbols, or Bible verses from each week's discussion on a window in your home.
- Use some of the hymns listed on page 57 for family worship time.

### WEEK ONE

- Have fun using a joke book to tell each other silly knock-knock jokes. Afterward, talk about the idea that Jesus will one day arrive—he will come again!
- Ask, “What are some things in life that really upset you, are unfair, or make you angry?” Record on a poster board some of the evils, injustices, and painful realities of life, like abuse, cancer, poverty, racism, and so on. Then tear up the poster together as you talk about Christ’s future reign described in Revelation 21:4–5.

### WEEK TWO

- Play a game of 20 questions in which family members ask questions to guess another’s identity. Afterward, talk about how the Old Testament provided many hints and clues about the identity of Jesus. Discuss some of the prophecies highlighted in week two’s devotions.
- Make yeast bread together; use the time waiting for the bread to rise to discuss the idea of God’s people in the Old Testament waiting for the Messiah to come.

### WEEK THREE

- Have an “upside-down dinner” as a family. Consider sitting under the table, wearing clothing backward, eating food in reverse order, and so on. Use this silly experience to talk about how Mary and Zechariah’s songs pointed toward the upside-down nature of the kingdom. Discuss some of Jesus’ teachings and actions that turned things upside down (the first shall be last, love your enemy, and so on).
- Play a “quiet game” to see who can be silent the longest. (Or challenge everyone to be silent for a set period of time.) Use this experience to discuss what Zechariah might have thought and felt during his long period of muteness—even as he knew the Messiah would soon be coming.

### WEEK FOUR

- Pause to read Luke 2:1–20 together. If you’ve created a family stained-glass window, gather around it to add more words and images as you celebrate Jesus’ birth. Discuss all you’ve recorded there, praising Christ for his first Advent and looking ahead to his Second Coming.



# Ideas for Groups

*You can use this guide with your congregation, Sunday school class, or small group. Select some of the ideas below to guide your group discussions.*

## WHEN YOU MEET:

- Encourage group members to spend time throughout each week reading the daily devotions, studying the suggested Scripture passages, and praying in response to the reflection questions. Suggest that participants take notes throughout the week about ways God has spoken to them through his Word.
- Each time you gather as a group, select three to six of the week's Scripture passages and reflection questions to guide your discussion. (For your reference, all of the Scripture passages are listed in the Bible Reading Guide on p. 59.) In addition, consider also using some of the discussion starters, activity ideas, and worship suggestions outlined on the next page.

#### ACTIVITY IDEAS:

- Use a pair of binoculars as a hands-on illustration. Take turns looking at distant objects, then use the experience to discuss how we can orient our perspective toward the future hope of Christ's return.
- Listen to and discuss selections from Handel's *Messiah*.
- Create a "banner for the nations" together, celebrating the global and multiethnic nature of God's kingdom (Isa. 11:12; 62:10). Use any creative approach you'd like, such as making a colorful map, a collage representing different countries and cultures, or drawing various national flags.

#### WORSHIP SUGGESTIONS:

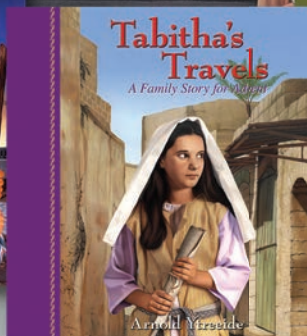
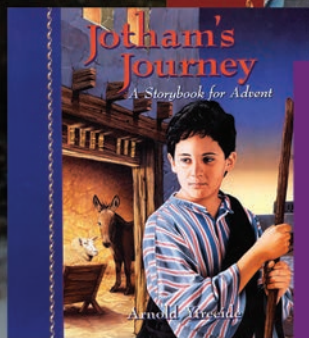
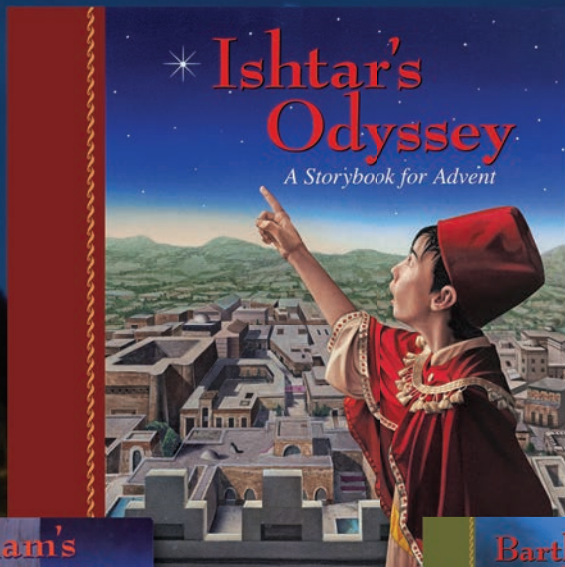
Sing some of the following hymns, which celebrate theological themes related to Christ's first coming and to his future, eternal reign:

- "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus"
- "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"
- "Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun"
- "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence"
- "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling"
- "O Come O Come Emmanuel"
- "Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne"

#### DISCUSSION STARTER IDEAS:

- What is one of your favorite Advent or Christmas memories? Or what is a favorite Advent or Christmas tradition you like to observe? Why?
- People tend to think of Advent as "pre-Christmas," though, in church tradition, it is actually more about Christ's Second Coming. How do these two ideas interact in your own faith?
- Early on in your Christian life, did you hear about or think about Christ's return often? Or was it a distant idea, rarely addressed? How about today: Do you tend to think about Christ's return frequently or infrequently? Why do you think that is?
- What do you most look forward to when you think of Christ's return? Explore.
- Consider the people who played important parts in Jesus' arrival: Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and Joseph. Who do you most relate to? Who do you relate to least? Why?
- Reflect on the birth of Jesus afresh: What stands out to you? Why?

Bring your family together this Advent season with these beloved books by the author of *Jotham's Journey*



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# Bible Reading Guide

	December 1	1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11
1	December 2	Luke 21:25–36
	December 3	Zechariah 14:3–9
	December 4	Zephaniah 3:14–20; Isaiah 2:1–5, 35:1–10
	December 5	Revelation 21:1–4, 22–27, 22:1–5
	December 6	James 5:7–10; 2 Peter 3:8–15
	December 7	1 Thessalonians 3:6–13
	December 8	Philippians 1:3–11; 1 Corinthians 1:4–8
2	December 9	2 Samuel 7:1–16
	December 10	Jeremiah 33:14–16; Isaiah 11:1–10
	December 11	Micah 5:2–5a
	December 12	Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11; Luke 4:14–21
	December 13	Isaiah 61:10–62:12
	December 14	Isaiah 7:10–16
	December 15	Isaiah 9:2–7
3	December 16	Luke 3:1–6; Isaiah 40:1–11
	December 17	Luke 3:7–18
	December 18	Luke 1:5–25
	December 19	Luke 1:26–38
	December 20	Luke 1:39–45
	December 21	Luke 1:46–56; 1 Samuel 2:1–10
	December 22	Luke 1:57–80
4	December 23	Luke 2:1–20
	December 24	Matthew 1:18–25
	December 25	John 1:1–18, 12:44–46; 1 John 1:1–2

# Draw closer to Christ this Christmas by exploring this holiday classic.

“The Nutcracker” is a delightful and whimsical Christmas classic that children and adults look forward to every year. First performed in 1892, the music, dance, and story of this classic hold a special place in our cultural Christmas celebrations.

In *The Gift of the Nutcracker*, Matt Rawle, author of *The Redemption of Scrooge*, explores the story to help us understand God’s greatest gift of the Christ child, and the kingdom Christ came to establish.

Additional components for a four-week study include a comprehensive Leader Guide, a DVD featuring Matt Rawle, a Worship Resources Flash Drive, and youth and children’s resources.



**Matt Rawle** is Lead Pastor at Asbury United Methodist Church in Bossier City, Louisiana. Matt is an international speaker who loves to tell an old story in a new way, especially at the intersection of pop culture and the church. He is the author of a new series of books titled *The Pop in Culture Series*. The series includes *The Faith of a Mockingbird*, *Hollywood Jesus*, *The Salvation of Doctor Who* and *The Redemption of Scrooge*.



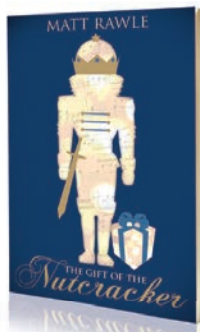
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