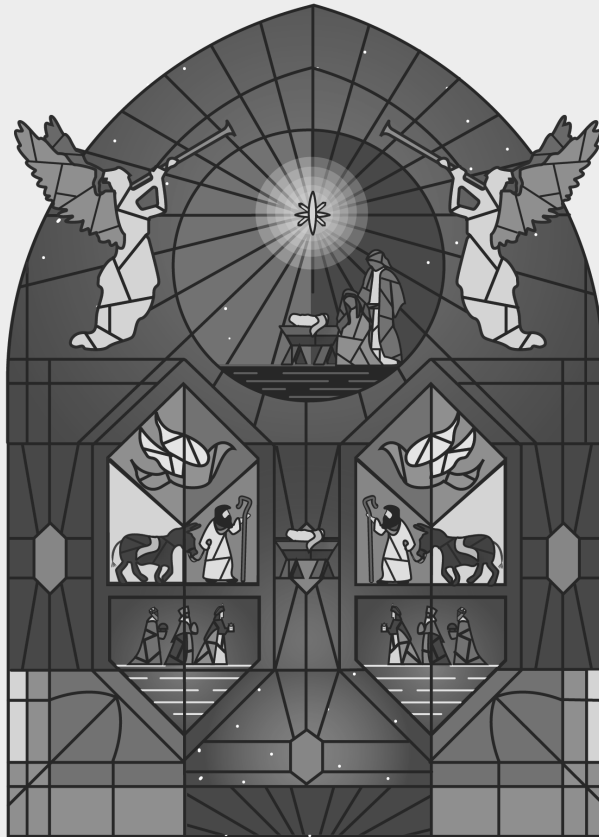




BEHOLD THE SAVIOR

A 25-DAY CHRISTMAS AND ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



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INTRODUCTION

There's nothing like the month leading up to Christmas. Sure, Christmas decorations may go up in October, but when the calendar hits December 1, it gets real. The anticipation begins. Christmas parties. Christmas movies. Christmas break. Then Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

The anticipation is definitely worth the wait. But there is another kind of Christmas anticipation as well, one that should be at the forefront of our Christmas experience.

Christmas is a time when we prepare our hearts and minds to celebrate the moment that God became human. This anticipation was a feeling so many in the Christmas story knew well. Isaiah. Mary. Joseph. John. The shepherds. The wise men. But have you ever thought that Heaven itself was anticipating Jesus' arrival? If you think about it, all of creation was waiting for the moment that the promised Messiah would burst onto the scene.

Then, all at once, He did. He showed up, but not with big parades or fanfare on the steps of the Roman emperor's palace. No, the Savior who would take away the sins of the world was born in a humble stable in an off-the-beaten-path town. Born to a teenage mom and a simple but honest dad, the Prince of Peace was suddenly among the very people He created.

And they beheld Him. His parents observed Him in wonder. The shepherds looked down at Him, recalling the angel's message of wonder. The wise men would come to do the same thing. They beheld the Savior. Thousands of years later, we do the same thing.

Christmas is a time for looking once again at the Christ child. We do this by getting our hearts in a state of anticipating the celebration of Jesus' birth. That's where these devotions come in. They're designed to help you spend the month of Christmas preparing to celebrate God's gift of His Son.

There's one devotion for each day of the month. We hope you'll find that these 25 days of Christmas devotions get you in the perfect state of mind to truly appreciate the significance of the Savior's arrival.

DAY 1: LOOK!

"The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'" – John 1:29

It's Christmas season! You can just feel it in the air. Everywhere you go, you are reminded of that magical day that comes on December 25th. Christmas trees, music on the radio, red bows, and twinkling lights, not to mention the excitement that comes along with getting out of school for Christmas break. Beyond all of the commercials, lights, songs, and shopping, there's something that quietly lies at the heart of this exciting season. It's not found in boxes or even in family gatherings around a festive table. It's the story of a young mother, a reluctant father, and a tiny baby that would change the world forever.

As we enter into this holiday season, challenge yourself to rethink your *holiday* and begin to celebrate these *holy days*. In no way am I suggesting that we shouldn't celebrate by giving presents, singing jingle bells, or drinking hot chocolate. Those are all fun and exciting ways to celebrate this wonderful time of year. But let's make sure we're not only looking for those things.

Take a second and read John 1:29. Behold may not be a word we say very much, but believe it or not, we do it all the time! It basically means to look at or see something that's impressive, remarkable, or interesting. So when you can't take your eyes off your phone or catch yourself staring at your crush as they walk down the hallway, you're beholding! When John tells the people to behold Jesus, he's saying, "Look! You don't want to miss this!" John knew that Jesus was more than impressive, remarkable, or interesting. He knew that Jesus was the long-awaited, promised Messiah that would save the world from its sins.

There are so many things to look forward to and pay attention to in this season. And rightly so! Christmas should be a time of celebration, fun, and getting together with those you care for the most. Even though all these things are worth paying attention to, we don't want to miss Jesus, the Lamb of God who has come to save the world. So, starting today, begin looking forward to December 25th by anticipating the birth of Jesus. Join this journey through the story of His birth as we move from simply celebrating a holiday to celebrating holy days.

QUESTIONS

1. What about Jesus did John want people not to miss? Why would this have been important?
2. What might it look like to "behold" Jesus as we get closer to Christmas?

DAY 2: WHAT DO YOU EXPECT?

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

– Isaiah 9:6

Sometimes, the best surprises are the ones you know are coming...you just don't know when. Sure, it can be fun and exciting to be surprised by something completely unexpected (unless you're like me, which, in that case, sounds like your absolute worst nightmare). But when you're expecting something big to come at some point in the future, the anticipation becomes almost unbearable! Especially around this time of year when we ask for the exact gifts we want, our expectations can make it feel like Christmas Day will never get here.

The Christmas season brings a lot of expectations with it. We expect things like certain gifts, an incredible Christmas dinner, or even a little bit of snow. But imagine waiting hundreds of years for something you knew was coming. On top of that, what you're expecting is much more valuable than anything you would ever dream of asking for. And to really seal the deal, God Himself promised to give it to you. Can you feel the anticipation, suspense, and excitement?

Read Isaiah 9:6 and take a moment to rework what you're expecting this Christmas. This verse was a prophecy made hundreds of years before Jesus was born. Through Isaiah, God showed His people what to expect when His Son would one day come to live among them. This expectation is a huge part of what Christmas is all about.

So what are you expecting this year? If you could make a list of the things you're expecting this Christmas, what would it look like? Where on your list would you find the aspects of our faith that are so important to this time of year – things like hope, joy, peace, and, most of all, a Savior? As we get closer and closer to Christmas Day, let the expectation of our Savior's impending arrival create a different kind of excitement in your heart. An excitement that goes beyond gifts and instead awaits the One who will make all things right.

QUESTIONS

1. Imagine if today, someone promised to give you something spectacular, but years and years go by, and you still don't have it. How would you start to feel? What would you do?
2. How has God come through on His promises in your life before? Does this affect what you expect Him to do in the future?

DAY 3: THE ANGEL

"In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!'"

– Luke 1:26–28

Take a moment and read Luke 1:26–28. Can you even imagine what Mary must have been thinking at this moment? An angel just up and appeared to her! It's not like she got a text from the angel asking if it was okay to drop in. One second, there wasn't an angel in her living room, and the next second, there was. Talk about a surprise visitor!

Throughout the rest of the Bible, whenever we see an angel appear to someone, the first thing they say is usually, "Do not be afraid." However, in the case of the angel that appeared to Mary, it wasn't "do not be afraid," but that the Lord favored her and was with her. This radical truth would be a source of encouragement, hope, and joy in Mary's life.

We all have "angels" in our lives, those people who come into our lives at just the right moment with a message from God. They don't have halos and wings; they're people like you and me whom God chooses to speak through. Who have been those people in your life who help you re-center and know that you're not alone? Who has been a source of encouragement and joy? And more importantly, who have you been an angel to?

Some of you might know the answer to that question, but I bet there are also people to whom you've been an angel without knowing it. I think that's one of the coolest parts of how our spiritual lives play out. God does things through us without us even realizing it. During this season, pray that God will use you as a voice of truth to speak hope and joy into a life that needs an encouraging word.

QUESTIONS

1. If an angel suddenly showed up in your living room, what do you think it would have to say to you?
2. Why do you think the angel called Mary "favored one?" What does that mean?
3. Who are some people in your life who have encouraged you and pointed you to God? How might you do the same for others?

DAY 4: FEAR NOT

"But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.'"

– Luke 1:29–30

Read Luke 1:29–30. Here, we see Mary reacting to the angel's message that the Lord is with her. Mary was greatly troubled by his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God."

It may seem unusual to begin such an exciting and festive season with the topic of fear, but so much of the beginning of Jesus' life was a story of fear. Mary is tasked with carrying the Savior of the world in her womb, Jesus was born into a scary time and place, and His life was threatened soon after His birth. Let's be honest: this isn't how most of us would plan on bringing the Savior of humanity into the world! If it were up to us, we would've made it a lot safer instead of being clouded by danger and fear.

As we enter into this holiday season, fear is one of the things that can begin to creep into our lives. As school begins to wind down, there's a fear of finals and grades coming in. For some of you, there's stress or fear about time with family over the holidays, as distance, divorce, or some other factor can make things difficult. Fear of unhealthy family dynamics, fear of not making Christmas "big" or meaningful enough, fear or anxiety about how busy Christmas is, and so on. There are aspects of the Christmas season that can cause significant stress on families and can turn these holy days into busy days.

As we enter into this holy time of year, commit to keeping it holy, less busy, and less fearful. Seek to find joy in this season. Find comfort in the fact that while there can be many things to fear, Jesus' coming is a reminder that we should "Fear not."

QUESTIONS

1. What's something you fear, dread, or stress about this time of year? Why?
2. What do you think it would look like to find joy amid all of the busyness of Christmas?

DAY 5: THE ETERNAL KING

“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.” – Luke 1:31–33

All good things must come to an end, right? Our team will eventually lose their winning streak, school will eventually start back up, friendships will come and go, and Christmas Day is only as long as every other day. The world just keeps on spinning. We’re well aware of this routine. We know this is how the world works. Good things can’t last forever. But unfortunately, that awareness can sometimes leave us waiting for the other shoe to drop, for the inevitable end to whatever we’re enjoying. So much so that we don’t truly and fully enjoy what we have while we have it.

Read Luke 1:31–33. The wonder of the angel’s message to Mary doesn’t stop at the fact that she has found favor with God or even that the Lord is with her. The angel continues by revealing to her that she will not only carry the Son of God in her womb but that He will be given an eternal throne and His Kingdom will never end. Unlike every other kingdom, Jesus’ reign will last forever. And as the Son of God, He will be better than any other king to ever live. Whereas all good things on this earth must come to an end, Jesus’ great Kingdom will last forever.

So, as you get closer to Christmas break and Christmas Day, try to take everything in. Sit in the moment and enjoy what you have. Let the truth of Jesus’ eternal reign change the way you approach this Christmas season. Because even though the good things we have in this life will end, they’re a small taste of what we will experience forever through faith in Jesus. If you can see the joy and love you feel now as glimpses into eternity, you’ll realize that not all good things have to come to an end.

QUESTIONS

1. What about Jesus do you think makes Him such a great King?
2. What would it look like for you to enjoy every moment this Christmas season?

DAY 6: LIMITLESS POSSIBILITIES

"And Mary said to the angel, 'How will this be, since I am a virgin?'" – Luke 1:34

There are things you want that you can't have. Some may be relatively fun, like wanting to be a TV star or a famous athlete. Some may be more serious, like wanting your parents to get back together or wanting someone's health to improve. Whatever the case may be, there are plenty of things in life that are simply impossible to have, achieve, or grasp. And while this is a major bummer, it's just the way it is. Some things just aren't possible.

Except when they are. Except when God gets involved.

Have you ever prayed for something you thought could never happen, only to see it happen? Have you ever seen God "open a door" you thought was closed? Have you ever watched God blow away your understanding with something only He could do? Mary did. Mary watched God do the impossible. She watched Him defy the laws of nature. But before she saw the miracle, she questioned the Miracle Maker.

Read Luke 1:34. "How can this happen?" Mary knew how babies were made, and she knew for a fact she wasn't a candidate! But Mary forgot one thing. She forgot that God Himself set in place the very rules she thought governed the creation of life. God created the process! So He can work outside the process when He chooses. As the Creator of all things, He has power and control over all things.

It sounds a little oversimplified, but it's true: Nothing is impossible with God. As you prepare your heart to celebrate Jesus' arrival, remember that God is still in the business of doing more than we could ever expect. It was true in the Christmas story. And it's true in your life.

QUESTIONS

1. Is it hard for you to believe that God can do the impossible in your life? Why or why not?
2. Do you think you would still have faith in God's power even when He chooses not to do the impossible? Why or why not?

DAY 7: IT'S A MIRACLE

“And the angel answered her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.’” – Luke 1:35–37

Miracles are things that we rarely talk about outside of the Bible. While it’s a common word in our language, we don’t usually speak of them literally but figuratively. “It’s a miracle we got to school on time after you took an hour-long shower,” or “It’s a miracle that our team is still in the playoffs after that loss.” We use the word with no real meaning other than something that happened against the odds. So, what do we do with the concept of miracles?

First, we have to believe that God has the power to work miracles when and where He chooses simply because He is God. Second, we have to believe that God still works miracles even though we may not see them. How can we know what God is or isn’t doing worldwide right now? Third, we may need to reframe how we define miracles. I don’t think all miracles are only the sensational miracles we see in Scripture. When I think of a miracle, I think of how God chooses to work in our world in unexpected and beautiful ways. Reconciliation between races, love resurrected from betrayal, and someone coming out of depression and into health are all miraculous. It doesn’t have to be flashy to be a miracle.

Read Luke 1:35–37. This is as miraculous a miracle as you could hope to find. God’s very Spirit would be the source of the baby in Mary’s womb. And her cousin Elizabeth, who was, by human standards, too old to be able to have a baby, was pregnant as well. These two miracles are at the very heart of the Christmas story. Start looking for the miraculous in your world, and I promise you’ll find they’re happening all around you. You may have just never noticed.

QUESTIONS

1. With this new definition of miracles, where have you seen miracles in your life?
2. How does this perspective change the way you see God working in the world?

DAY 8: FAITHFUL FOLLOWER

“And Mary said, ‘Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.’ And the angel departed from her.” – Luke 1:38

Read Luke 1:38. We see Mary have her own “Don’t miss this” statement in today’s verse. But first, we need to understand that this news brought a lot of unknowns into Mary’s life. How would people react to her pregnancy? How would she and Joseph provide for this baby? What would being the Son of God mean for her child’s life? Needless to say, there was a lot that Mary didn’t know, but I think we can safely say that she knew this wouldn’t be easy.

However, in response to this historic and weighty news she’s just received, Mary is quick to respond with obedience and submission. She’s not hesitant or reluctant, and she doesn’t react like this is something she’s being forced to do. She doesn’t argue. She doesn’t ask if this can happen later or if someone else can do it. She responds to God with immediate, willing obedience, trusting that His word is good enough.

Can you say that you do the same? Sometimes, God’s commands may not make a lot of sense. They may sound too difficult or inconvenient to you. But being a faithful follower of Christ requires us to respond with immediate obedience and trust. Mary had many more questions than the one she asked, but she had faith in God, His goodness, and His faithfulness. She knew He wouldn’t lead her astray or do her wrong, so she put her “yes” on the table, believing that God knew what He was doing.

Think about how you can live more like this. Yes, with your parents, teachers, and coaches, but especially with God. Evaluate whether or not you trust God enough to put your “yes” on the table and believe that He will not leave you hanging or misguide you. This Christmas season, cultivate a heart that says, “I am a servant of the Lord.”

QUESTIONS

1. If you were Mary, how would you have responded to the angel’s message?
2. How can you be quicker to respond with willing obedience in your life?

DAY 9: THANKS A LOT!

“And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has looked on the humble estate of His servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed...’” – Luke 1:46–48

What brings you joy? This isn’t “church answer” time. It’s okay to say something like “my car,” “my friends,” or even “cheerleading,” “football,” or “my guitar.” Many things in our lives make us happy. Some of them we think about often, and others we may kind of take for granted (like food or our health).

Read Luke 1:46–48. Mary wasn’t about to take anything for granted. Again, she had just had a pretty amazing interaction. She had just been told by an angel that she was going to become miraculously pregnant with the Son of God. But there was more: her cousin was pregnant, too! So, she headed over to see Elizabeth, who would give birth to John the Baptist. And when Mary and Elizabeth saw each other and shared their news, Mary burst into a meaningful song of thankfulness.

One of the truths about our relationship with God is that He is our Provider. He is the Giver of good things. He is the source of all your blessings: your health, your life, your shelter, your food, and so on. Sure, God might not literally pay your family’s mortgage each month or put gas in your car. But the money your family earns? The job your mom or dad has? Maybe even the job you have? It’s by and through God’s grace. All good things come from God.

Mary seemed to have a firm grasp on this. Do you? Are you in the habit of realizing what God has given you and then making sure He hears your thankfulness? It starts with stepping back and seeing that God has given you more than you could ever imagine. When you really understand this, praise and thankfulness come naturally.

QUESTIONS

1. What in your life are you most thankful for? Why does it mean so much to you?
2. How can you and your family practice thankfulness to God this Christmas season?

DAY 10: SHAME

“And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.” – Matthew 1:19

Read Matthew 1:19. Can you imagine Mary, a teenage girl, pregnant and alone? Maybe you can. Maybe you’ve been in a place where you felt abandoned, scared, and without hope. But as an unmarried, pregnant woman, I imagine Mary felt a lot of shame. While she had done no wrong, it was still a shameful position if you didn’t know the situation. You might know this feeling as well. Maybe your shame is because of something you did, something that someone else did to you, or a life situation where no one is at fault, but you still feel ashamed.

There are a couple of things that are important to know about shame. If someone has done something to you that caused you to feel shame, you need to talk to an adult about it. Especially if it’s something they shouldn’t have done or something that has hurt you. If it’s something you’ve done, you need to know that our God is a God that forgives.

Many of us feel shame around this time of year for other reasons, though. We feel shame because we might not have as much money as other families, not get as many presents, deal with separated or dysfunctional families, or are dealing with seasonal depression.

These things and many others can consume our thoughts and define our actions and moods. When we experience shame, it’s important to remember that the mother of our Lord experienced the same thing. But she didn’t let it rule her or define her. She knew what God had told her and found comfort and confidence in the fact that He was with her. Our God is not a God who delights in shame. So when it creeps up on you this Christmas season, don’t let it consume you. Know that God is with you.

QUESTIONS

1. When you begin to feel shame, what do you currently do to avoid it?
2. What do you think it would take to not be consumed or defined by shame?

DAY 11: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

"But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel' (which means, God with us)." – Matthew 1:20-23

People today have lots of different reasons for what name they choose for their kids. Your name could be one that's been passed down in your family. You could be named after someone famous. Your name could've been picked because someone liked the way it sounded. Or you could've gotten your name because of what it means. Think of people with names like Hope, Grace, or Victor. There can be a lot that goes into a name.

Read Matthew 1:20-23. Just as Joseph is preparing to quietly divorce Mary, an angel comes to him in a dream to tell him what Mary has already been told. The angel tells Joseph that Mary will conceive a Son by the power of the Holy Spirit, His name will be Jesus, and He will save His people from their sins. But take a look at this last part. A prophecy from Isaiah is quoted where Isaiah foretells the coming Messiah and what He will be called. He says that the Messiah will be born of a virgin and called Immanuel, which means "God with us."

One of the most wonderful aspects of Jesus coming to earth is that He's fully God and fully man. He is truly God with us. And He didn't just come to be God with us for the people way back then. He came to be God with us even now, and when we have a relationship with Him, His Spirit lives within us and is with us every day. No matter what we walk through, we can take comfort that Jesus is still Immanuel, God with us. Find joy in that today.

QUESTIONS

1. Does your name have any special meaning?
2. What do you think it means that God is with you in your daily life?

DAY 12: CHOOSING TRUST

“When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.” – Matthew 1:24-25

Think of a time when someone told you something you didn't believe. They swore it was true, but for whatever reason, you couldn't bring yourself to believe them. Maybe you were on the other end. Have you ever told someone something only to not be believed?

Think about Joseph. Joseph and Mary were to be married, but Mary “was found to be with child.” But as we’ve already seen, Joseph was going to break off the marriage. Mary probably told Joseph about the angel, but for whatever reason, Joseph didn't seem willing to believe her.

Thankfully, God wasn't done with Joseph. Read Matthew 1:24–25. God sent an angel to tell Joseph that Mary was telling the truth. It must have been bittersweet for Joseph. He must have felt excited to learn what was happening, but maybe a twinge of shame that he didn't stick with Mary in the first place. But the coolest thing about Joseph? His willingness to trust that God would make it all work out. Joseph heard the angel's message and immediately said, “Okay. I'm in. I don't understand this, but I trust God.”

As Christ-followers, we're called to have the same trust in God. We might not always understand where God is leading us, but we can trust that God is in control. He knows where He's taking us. And that's all that matters.

QUESTIONS

1. Imagine you're put in Joseph's shoes in this situation. What do you think you would've done?
2. What makes it hard for you to trust God when you don't understand what's going on?

DAY 13: JOURNEY TOGETHER

“And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.” – Luke 2:4-5

Read Luke 2:4-5. You may not think anything about traveling to another town being difficult. You probably do it fairly often. But Mary and Joseph’s journey was much more difficult and uncertain than you think. They had to ride an animal the whole way, endure the weather, worry about bandits on the road, and find somewhere to stay the night. And then Jesus came. Suddenly, Mary and Joseph were put in an even tougher spot on their journey. They had to improvise and do it quickly.

That’s the way life is sometimes; you don’t know what the journey will hold. Sometimes, it will be full of excitement and promise — other times, full of fear and uncertainty. The first Christmas may very well have been nothing like we imagine it to be. I bet a lot of your Christmases are similar in that way. It just doesn’t look like the television shows and Christmas cards portray it. It’s messy, rarely goes as planned, and can be pretty tough to deal with sometimes. We can become disappointed because we subscribe to expectations that are not based on realities but on ideals.

No matter where you are in your journey or what your Christmas looks like, be encouraged that God is with you. That doesn’t mean the journey will be any easier or go as planned. It just means that no matter what happens, you will never journey alone. So this Christmas, let’s lower the expectations and instead have grace, peace, and hope for imperfect people and families.

QUESTIONS

1. What’s the one thing you expect to happen every year around Christmas time?
2. How can you have grace and joy even when Christmas doesn’t meet your expectations?

DAY 14: PAY ATTENTION

"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law..." – Galatians 4:4

There's shopping, and then there's Christmas shopping. Everything gets ramped up: the decorations, the number of workers, the displays, and, of course, the sales. When you walk through any store at Christmas, everyone is pulling at you to get your attention and get you to buy something. It's a constant sensory overload of people wanting things from you. It's a lot like being a teenager nowadays.

There are always things competing for your attention: good things, bad things, and things that don't even matter. Each one is pulling, wanting you to pay attention to what it has to say. Friends, enemies, frenemies, teachers, coaches, band directors, dance teachers, grades, clubs, and everything in between pulls for your attention and your time. It's exhausting. You live a life today where more is wanted from you than any other generation before you. You have so many more opportunities and distractions, and because of that, you have to learn how to handle your time differently.

Read Galatians 4:4 and think about the concept of time. God's timing is perfect. He knew the exact time to send Jesus into the world. He wasn't a moment too early or a second too late. We don't have God's sense of time. For us, time is fleeting. We're always fighting for more, especially this time of year.

Although there are tons of things wanting your attention, you only have so much time that you can give them. There are only so many hours in a day. So spend your time well. Only spend it on things that really matter and make sense in your life. Remember, not everything that wants your attention is something that you should give it to.

QUESTIONS

1. What takes up the most of your time during the Christmas season?
2. When you want to escape, what do you spend your time doing? Do you think that's a worthwhile use of your time?

DAY 15: AWAY IN A MANGER

“And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn Son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths and laid Him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” – Luke 2:6-7

Read Luke 2:6-7. If I'm honest, I probably wouldn't have chosen to bring the Savior into the world the way God chose to. Let's just think about it for a second.

First, Jesus wasn't born to a royal family. No, He was born to a teenage mom and a carpenter dad from Nazareth. Then, a census dragged them away from friends and family. The people they cared for the most weren't able to be a part of this monumental event. Also, Bethlehem? Why couldn't God have waited until they were a little further down the road in a bigger place like Jerusalem? Then we have the shepherds and wise men. Not exactly the press or dignitaries I would've brought to the table. Finally, we have the stable and manger. The Savior of the world is born and immediately has to compete with barn animals for sleeping quarters.

I say all of this to make a point: the Son of God, the One who would change everything, broke out of heaven and into this earth to a hay trough borrowed from feeding animals. Instead of showing up with flashing lights and splendor, Jesus humbles Himself by being born in a seemingly unimportant, unwanted way. Some of you may feel this way during the holiday season—unimportant, unwanted, unseen.

God knew exactly what He was doing when He sent His Son to be born to regular people in a small town's stable. By coming onto the scene in this way, Jesus is telling us all that we are seen, wanted, and important. We may not get that from the world or the people around us, but we will always receive this from our Savior. Celebrate this truth today.

QUESTIONS

1. If you could change one part of the Christmas story, what would it be and why?
2. What makes you feel seen and valued? Is there anyone you can ask to do this for you?

DAY 16: THE SHEPHERDS: PART 1

“And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.’” – Luke 2:8-12

Have you ever been in a situation where suddenly your assumptions or thoughts about a specific person or thing were pretty much blown off the map? Maybe it was the moment you realized the “little” test you “studied” for was really an overwhelming obstacle you had no chance of passing. Or the moment you realized that he or she really does like you a lot! Or how about the moment you realized your team was completely overmatched? Or...well, you get the point.

Read Luke 2:8-12. The shepherds experienced one of those moments in a big, big way. It’s safe to say that the shepherds knew God. Or they knew of Him as well as they could. They were Israelites, so they were, after all, God’s people. But everything they thought they knew about God and His ways was blown out of the water that night. Look at the description in verse 9: “the glory of the Lord shone around them.” Can you imagine? God was no longer an idea to them; He was real. He had broken into this world, and it’s entirely safe to say the world was never the same.

The power behind this simple truth is life-changing. If you let God break into your world, you’ll realize that what you thought you knew about Him was nothing compared to who He really is. He’s far more loving, gracious, merciful, powerful, sovereign, and righteous than we could ever imagine. Christmas is all about God exceeding our expectations, so let that truth change the way you live your life today.

QUESTIONS

1. Imagine you’re minding your business, doing your job, and all of a sudden, the glory of the Lord is shining around you. How do you respond? What do you think?
2. What assumptions do you have about God and who He is? What would it look like for Him to exceed that?

DAY 17: THE SHEPHERDS: PART 2

“When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.’ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.” – Luke 2:15-18

Read Luke 2:15-18. Once the angels leave, the shepherds actually put action to what they’ve heard. They left their fields, and they saw what God had promised them. Then, after seeing Jesus, they began to spread the word about what they’d seen. It didn’t say that they saw Jesus, memorized a lot of facts about Him, decided a good strategy to talk about what they knew, and then went and spread the word. It just says that they went.

I love their enthusiasm. If you noticed, it doesn’t say that they went and tried to convince people to come and worship this baby, nor does it say that they had it all figured out before they went. It just says that they went and told what they had experienced and what had been told to them about this baby. So let’s think about a few things.

First, think about your relationship with God. How has He made Himself known to you? How has He changed you? Secondly, what have other people told you about their experience with God? Lastly, who was the last person you told about your experience? I don’t mean who’s the last person you invited to church. Inviting people to church is a great thing, but Jesus never tells us that the sum of sharing our faith should be inviting someone to join us at church. Jesus DOES tell us repeatedly that we should go and share the truth we’ve heard about Him and what we’ve experienced through Him.

QUESTIONS

1. What has God done in your life that you could share with others? How would you tell them about it?
2. What stops you from telling more people about God and your faith? Why?

DAY 18: THE WISE MEN: PART 1

"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him.'" – Matthew 2:1-2

Read Matthew 2:1-2. The Gospel of Matthew tells us about a group of wise men who came to visit Jesus, worship Him, and give Him gifts. Sometimes, these men are referred to as kings, but most scholars believe that they were priests or wise men of another religion who came to Jesus because they "read" the stars. There's something about Christmas that attracts all sorts of people, not just people who call themselves Christians.

At Christmas, especially in the US, it doesn't matter if you haven't been to church the whole year. You'll probably find yourself at some sort of church around Christmas. Just like the wise men, people come. My question is, "What will they find when they come?" Sometimes, we do everything we can to make people interested in coming to church, but when they finally come, our walk doesn't match our talk. Is other people's salvation up to us? Absolutely not, but when all they see is hypocrisy or lackluster faith, we run the risk of bringing them to a stable with an empty manger.

Who are the wise men in your life? Who are those people who are interested but not yet convinced? I bet you have friends like that at school, on your teams, at your job, or maybe even in your youth group. So, what kind of faith will you show them? Is it a faith that actually changes the way you live your life? Or will it be a faith that's not strong enough to make an impact? They're seeking. What will be there when they arrive?

QUESTIONS

1. If someone were to follow you around all day, every day, would they know whether or not you have faith in Jesus by the way you live? Why or why not?
2. You were the one who was interested and seeking at one point. What did you see believers doing that made you want to have a relationship with Jesus?

DAY 19: FOLLOWING THE STAR

“After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.” – Matthew 2:9-10

A star. There are millions of them in the sky. I remember one night in Central America when there were no artificial lights for miles and miles, and the night was crystal clear. I was blown away by the incredible number of stars I could see that night, but for some reason, one star stood out from the others. It made me think of the star in the Christmas story.

Read Matthew 2:9-10. There was something about that one star guiding the wise men to where Jesus was born. What do you think it looked like? Was it a different shape? Was it brighter than the rest? Something was different. Something made it stand out among millions of others. I like to think that this star stood out because God had given it a purpose. Its purpose was to be different. And it was different enough to grab the wise men’s attention and direct them to Jesus.

There are over 8 billion people in our world. Sometimes, I’m very aware that I’m just one among those billions. I bet you feel that, too. The difference is that we have been given a purpose. We have a reason to shine brighter and be bolder than many others because Jesus told us to be salt and light. We’re called to stand out, be different, and guide others through the darkness to where Jesus is.

Some people shine bright and only bring attention to themselves, but we have the opportunity to be a light that points others to God. The world can be a dark, cold place, but God has given you the purpose of leading people through that darkness and to His Son, Jesus.

QUESTIONS

1. What about the star’s appearance do you think made it stick out from the others?
2. What unique qualities has God given you that you could use to point people toward Jesus?

DAY 20: THE WISE MEN: PART 2

“And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary His mother, and they fell down and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered Him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.”

– Matthew 2:11

Read Matthew 2:11. I think that it’s such a cool part of the story that the wise men brought gifts to this baby. I picture them laying these really expensive gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh around His little manger. Interestingly, those gifts are not really for a baby; they’re for other times in a person’s life. They most likely didn’t know what Jesus would do with them, but they brought them anyway. We’re called to do the same thing.

We’re called to bring our gifts to Jesus, no matter what they are or what we think Jesus will do with them. Our call is to bring them and commit them to God. Sometimes, we make the mistake of valuing certain gifts over others. In churches, we often over-value gifts like leadership, singing, and speaking, to name a few, but that’s wrong. Just because you don’t do the things our world deems “better” doesn’t mean that God can’t do just as much (if not more) with your gifts. Many times, when we wrongly value some gifts over others, people without those gifts shy away from using the gifts God has given them, and that’s a loss for everybody.

So, whether you’re an incredible writer, able to fix a car, or strong enough to kick a soccer ball the length of the field, God wants you to bring those gifts and offer them to Him. No matter what you do, believe that God wants to do incredible things for the world and His Kingdom through you and your gifts. This doesn’t mean that every time you write a fantastic poem you need to kneel and pray before you submit it to the teacher. It just means that when you do these things, you understand them as an act of worship to the One who gave you that gift.

QUESTIONS

1. If you were one of the wise men, what gift would you have brought to Jesus?
2. Make a list of the things God has gifted you with. How do you think He could use those for His Kingdom?

DAY 21: TIMELY DETOUR

"Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Rise, take the child and His mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy Him.' And he rose and took the child and His mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I called my Son.'" – Matthew 2:13-15

Have you ever been on a long road trip and had to take a detour? Or have your maps ever taken you on the longest possible route to avoid some construction on the roads? It's not ideal. It can be frustrating. It can feel like a waste of time. Sure, you eventually got to your destination, but it took SO much longer than it should have. Sometimes, there's nothing worse than having to take the long way around.

Read Matthew 2:13-15. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus are still in Bethlehem when an angel tells Joseph to flee with his family to Egypt because King Herod wants to kill Jesus. Herod was the king of Judea, and when he heard from the wise men that the "King of the Jews" had been born, he felt that his throne was threatened and wanted to eliminate that threat. So Joseph, Mary, and Jesus have to take a massive detour – all the way to another country. Talk about taking the long way around!

Here's the thing about detours, though. While they are super inconvenient, they do serve a purpose. It's to protect us from something that would otherwise cause us harm. Sometimes, it's something going on behind the scenes that we aren't even aware of. Joseph knew the reason for the detour in his case, but it's not the same for us a lot of the time. We just have to trust that God is always at work, even if we can't see it. There will probably be some inconveniences on your path this Christmas season. Instead of letting them frustrate you, let them be an opportunity to increase your faith and believe that God is doing something awesome.

QUESTIONS

1. What makes it hard for you to be thankful for inconveniences?
2. Looking back, how have you seen God work behind the scenes in your life?

DAY 22: GOOD GIFTS

"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone."
– 1 Corinthians 12:4-6

For some, maybe many, presents or gifts are the main focus of Christmas. I mean, do you blame them? Who doesn't want to receive a gift out of nowhere for no reason? You didn't earn it, do anything to deserve it, and may not have even asked for it. It's not only a surprise but a gesture of kindness and love. For many people, the giving of gifts is equally as enjoyable. We love to see people excited about a gift we've chosen JUST for them. But this Christmas, I want you to think about another kind of gift.

Each of us has gifts we're called to give, but they're a little different than the ones at Christmas. You can't wrap them up and put a bow on them, and you can't find them at a store in the mall. They are gifts that live in you.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-6. God has given every one of us different gifts that are meant to be shared with the world. Think about it: What are you good at? What are the things you really have a passion for? And they don't have to be things that we label as "spiritual." When we think of "our gifts," we usually immediately go to things like praying, interpreting the Bible, telling others about Jesus, and so on. And these are definitely gifts from God! But there are other gifts, too. Being really good at math, being an excellent artist, or having a knack for working with animals are all gifts God has given you. Whatever God has gifted you with, live into it, and know that all gifts can be given to others and the world in God's Name.

Christmas is a time for gifts. So go and give your gift to the world.

QUESTIONS

1. Which one of your gifts do you find it hard to believe that God would use? Why?
2. How can you use your passions and skills to tell others about Jesus?

DAY 23: STOCKINGS

"Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever." – Psalm 136:1

Read Psalm 136:1. So, to go ahead and get this out of the way, stockings are definitely not in the Bible. But that's okay! Not all traditions have to be. The original story behind hanging stockings was that the socks (aka stockings) were hung by the fireplace to dry out after being soaked from walking around outside in the snow. Then, when Santa Claus came, he filled the stockings with fruit, nuts, and a small toy if someone was really lucky. There were no stacks of presents around a tree, no boxes on top of boxes of lavish gifts, just some fruit, nuts, and maybe a trinket.

When I look at our stockings, I can't help but be reminded that no matter what we "get" for Christmas, we should be so thankful. Sometimes, people get wrapped up in trying to get the perfect presents or making sure that a certain dollar amount is spent. Some people will even become depressed or upset when they don't get what they want. Stockings remind me that most of us already have everything we need. It's incredible just how much some of us have and how much we don't need.

This isn't to make you feel bad about what you have but to help you feel grateful and content. So, as you hang your stockings by the chimney with care, make sure you also hang them with gratitude and thanksgiving for what you have.

QUESTIONS

1. What are some things you're most grateful for this Christmas season?
2. Now that we're a couple of days away from Christmas, how can you prepare yourself to be thankful even if you don't get what you want?

DAY 24: CHRISTMAS EVE

"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town." – Luke 2:1-3

If you have a younger brother or sister, you might remember some excitement and anxiety as your parents waited for this new baby to come into the world. As a parent, I can't describe to you how nerve-racking it is leading up to your child being born. In a day with modern medicine, technology, and hospitals, we have it pretty easy when it comes to having babies.

Read Luke 2:1–3. In the days of Mary and Joseph, it wasn't anywhere near as easy. It was also not too pleasant that they were on the road, away from home, with nowhere to stay. I can't imagine just how anxious and afraid they were as they waited for Jesus to be born.

Sometimes, we find ourselves waiting for God to come into our situations. We wait nervously, trusting that God has a plan and will do what He needs to do. But it can be so nerve-racking and full of fear and anxiety. As believers, we have faith that God will not leave us out to dry. But sometimes, waiting drives us crazy. When I'm in these situations, I can't help but think of Mary and Joseph on that night so long ago. Waiting. Waiting. And waiting some more. They just had to wait for what God was going to do.

Amid a very scary time in history and a very scary part of the world, all they could do was wait for the miracle that God was going to perform in their lives. On this Christmas Eve, I encourage you, even as you wait for the fun day that tomorrow will bring, to think about how Mary and Joseph waited and trusted that God would work in their world.

QUESTIONS

1. What makes waiting on and trusting God to work in your life so hard?
2. If you were Mary or Joseph, what would you have been thinking in that moment?

DAY 25: CHRISTMAS DAY

"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!'" – Luke 2:11-14

Merry Christmas!! Today is a beautiful day. It's a day to celebrate, spend time with family and friends, and, most importantly, behold the day that our Savior was born into this world.

Take a second and read Luke 2:11-14. Read it slowly and really focus on the last sentence. Imagine that scene. Upon Jesus' arrival to our world, a multitude of angels begin praising God and giving Him glory. Their praises are a reflection of the miraculously wonderful thing that has just occurred. The moment the whole world has been waiting for has finally come.

It's because Jesus has come that there can be peace among those with whom God is pleased. And who is that? Everyone who has repented of their sin and put their faith in Him. If that's you, have peace today, knowing that the work Jesus came to do is finished and complete. If that's not you, take a second and ask for God's forgiveness for your sin, put your life in His hands, and place your faith in Him.

This is why Jesus came. To bring salvation to all humanity and peace to all creation. And He's still doing it. Celebrate that today. Praise God for that today. Go, live in peace, and have a great Christmas.

QUESTIONS

1. What are you most excited about today?
2. How can you be intentional to live in peace today?

HOW TO KNOW JESUS

Maybe you've turned to this page, having never entered into a saving relationship with Jesus. Maybe you already have a saving relationship with Jesus and need to be more committed to making Him known. No matter where you find yourself, this page is for you. If you need to know Jesus, this page is an excellent place to start. If you need to make Jesus known, this page can help you think about how to go about sharing His story with others.

TO ENTER INTO A SAVING RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS, YOU FIRST HAVE TO UNDERSTAND WHO GOD IS.

First, God is the Creator (Gen 1:1). He created everything, even you. Second, God is perfect in all His ways (Ps. 18:30). So, combined, that makes God the perfect creator of all things. He rules over everything, and His rule is 100% right.

NEXT, YOU HAVE TO ACCEPT THAT YOUR SIN IS A PROBLEM (ONE THAT YOU CAN'T SOLVE ON YOUR OWN).

Because God is the perfect King, when we do something that goes against His ways, it's called sin. And because God is who He is, all sin is rebellion against Him (Ps. 51:3-4). The only right penalty for our rebellion? It's death (Rom. 6:23). Both spiritual and physical. The worst part is that we're completely unable to save ourselves.

THEN, YOU HAVE TO GRASP THE TRUTH THAT JESUS IS THE ONLY ANSWER TO YOUR SIN PROBLEM.

Jesus was God's Son, sent to earth to live a perfect life that He might serve as the once-and-for-all perfect sacrifice in our place (Matt. 1:18-21). Jesus died on the cross to satisfy God's sense of justice and save from their sins all who will believe in Him (Jn 3:16). Only Jesus could do this.

FINALLY, YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE IN YOUR HEART THAT JESUS IS WHO HE SAYS HE IS AND THAT HIS DEATH ACCOMPLISHED WHAT HE SAID IT ACCOMPLISHED.

The only way to save ourselves from sin is to believe that Jesus is who He says He is. When we put our faith in Jesus as our Savior, we're saved from the penalty of our sin. We're saved from death. This is only possible by God's grace through faith in Jesus. We can't do anything to earn our salvation.

Here's the coolest part: When you come to salvation in Christ, your life is completely renewed, freed from the effects of sin (2 Cor. 5:17). You are a new creation!

IF YOU NEED TO COME TO FAITH IN JESUS, LET THESE WORDS GUIDE YOU. AND IF YOU KNOW SOMEONE THAT NEEDS CHRIST, USE THIS TO HELP YOU SHARE THE GOSPEL WITH THEM.



FBC Vidalia

To Know God and to Make Him Known