

COME THOU
LONG-EXPECTED JESUS

PROPHET · PRIEST · KING

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL GUIDE
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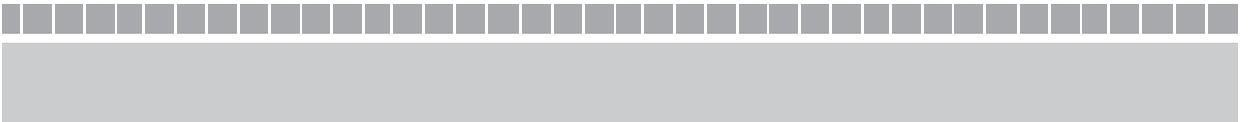
I N T R O D U C T I O N

At Christmas, our focus is often on Baby Jesus—and rightly so! Christmas celebrates the birth of Christ. But Jesus is more than just the celebrated Baby born in a manger. He is the Son of God and God the Son, who came to earth, was appointed to die on a cross, and was raised to life so that we might know the Father and have life in His name. The joy of Christmas goes hand in hand with the hope of Easter Resurrection.

His ministry fulfills what biblical scholars call the threefold office of Christ, which was foreshadowed in the Old Testament: He is our Prophet, Priest, and King. He is the true Prophet, declaring God's Word to His people once and for all. He is the faithful High Priest, who intercedes for us, not by the blood of rams or goats or sheep, but by His own blood spilled on the cross. He is the reigning King seated at the right hand of God, who declares that evil will not have the last word.

This Christmas season, my hope and prayer is that you would cherish the truth of Christ's coming and see the Bible through a new lens as we take the time to look through Scripture and examine how Christ truly was the long-expected Prophet, Priest, and King foretold in the pages of the Old Testament, born to set us—His people—free.

Amy M. Hirsch



PROPHET

What does it mean to be a prophet? We often think of prophets as people who focus their efforts on predicting the future. While the prophets of the Old Testament sometimes did speak a prophetic word revealed by God about the days to come, more often the work of the prophet was to preach the Word of God to the people of God and to remind them of their covenant with Him. Yet often, the people chose to listen to the lies of the deceiver rather than to the truths of the Father. But the prophets proclaimed that a new day would come when God would make a new covenant with His people. He would send a Prophet greater than Moses, greater than Elijah, and greater than any of the Old Testament saints. He would send the very Son of God to dwell with His people as the final declaration of His Word.

“HOPING TO HEAR A BETTER WORD”

MONDAY, DECEMBER 3 | GENESIS 3 | DOUG DORTCH



“What’s the good word?” The idea behind this conversation starter is to engage another party in a discussion of something good. After all, no one enjoys having to talk about unpleasant things.

But as the Bible reminds us, there is no good word until we first own up to the bad news that we are a people prone to choose our own way instead of God’s way—a selfish and arrogant choice that prevents us from knowing the gift of abundant life that Jesus was born to make possible.

The story of Adam and Eve’s choice to heed the serpent’s word is the core of all tragedies. Offered the possibility of paradise, the first couple fell victim to the accuser’s ploy to have them doubt God by appealing to their desire to direct their own destinies. Unfortunately for them (and for us), their wrong choice led to their expulsion from the Garden of Eden and into a life of exasperation until they might come to their senses and learn to trust their future to God.

The Advent season always finds us at a point of deep darkness, where we long for a source of light that cannot be overcome. The good news is that God does not desire us to stay separated from His mercy and grace and has sent Jesus to illumine our darkness (John 1:5). However, in order to embrace that good word, we must turn away from the ones that would turn us away from God. We may think we have come a long way since Eden, but the serpent still lurks to deceive us into believing that God doesn’t have our best interests at heart.

Jesus tells us otherwise. Listen to Him. Jesus is, after all, the Word that became flesh. Believe in what He tells you and where He guides you, and He will shed a light on your darkened path that will never lead you astray.



The Book of Deuteronomy recounts God’s expectations for His chosen people as they were bound for Canaan and the good future God had for them to know. The theology of Deuteronomy involves a simple choice: Do what God says and know blessing, or reject God’s ways and suffer the consequences. Of course, the problem lies in knowing exactly how God’s expectations translate into everyday life.

Such knowledge is where a prophet comes in handy. Because prophets “forth-tell” God’s future (which is very different from a mere prediction), their words create possibilities for obedience and favor in response to it. However, it’s when someone shows up who tells us what we want to know and not what God would have us to know that everything gets muddled. Just read passages in the Bible where false prophets did just that and the people suffered abysmally for it.

God will always have the last word. That was the message of Moses to God’s people so they would not live with uncertainty about their days to come. In His time, God would raise up a spokesperson who would speak holy truth in ways that would give confidence and assurance that immeasurable blessings were soon to come.

There is no question that such a promise came to pass in the person of Jesus. The entirety of the Gospel of Matthew shows Jesus to be a “new Moses,” fulfilling this prophecy even to the point of having Jesus escape to Egypt and then return to Nazareth so that He might be formed for the mission of bearing witness to the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 2:19-23). Little wonder that when the people heard Jesus’ teaching, they “were amazed . . . because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law” (Matthew 7:28-29 NIV).

As we move into the Advent season, know that God has truth for you to hear. It begins with the promise that in Jesus, God has drawn near as Immanuel (Matthew 1:23). It ends with the assurance that “all authority in heaven and on earth” has been given to Him (Matthew 28:18 NIV). Surely, Jesus is the first word and the last word, the Alpha and the Omega. God’s kingdom will come and His will shall be done, on earth as it is in heaven, for those who will embrace His Word (Matthew 6:10).

“THIS IS THE YEAR!”

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 5 | ISAIAH 61:1-7 | DOUG DORTCH



It won't be long before we turn the calendar page and begin another year. Even though the season of Advent is the first season in the church calendar, December brings to a close one year and allows us the chance to reflect on changes we might want to make in the coming one.

That matter of change is a most thorny one for most people. Because we are creatures of habit, we like for things to be on a manageable schedule so that any changes we contemplate are ones that are forced upon us. If something is not working or if there's some way we can experience improvement in a given area, then—and only then—will we be open to making changes.

The prophet Isaiah spoke to a people who had returned from their exile in Babylon only to find their cherished city in shambles. Jerusalem was not the place they had remembered. The years of exile had depleted the city of needed resources, and the way back would be much harder than anyone realized.

Into that despondent situation God's prophet announced that God was about to do a work that would bring unparalleled blessing to His people. God would send His Servant, who would extend help and hope to those on the margins—the poor, the brokenhearted, the captive, and the blind. Most of all, God's servant would proclaim “the year of the LORD's favor” (Isaiah 61:2 NIV), which was God's assurance of a new day in which all sadness and despair would be replaced with joy and celebration.

The Christmas season announces the same “joy to the world” because of the Lord's coming. The birth of Jesus marks the appearance of God's Messiah, whom God anointed to bring His redemptive purposes to pass. That's why when Jesus was invited to offer the Sabbath reading and commentary in the Nazareth synagogue (Luke 4:16-30), Jesus turned to the prophet Isaiah and announced to the congregation, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21 NIV). Incredibly, the Nazareth crowd rejected Jesus' message and drove Him out of town (Luke 4:28-29).

How do we receive God's promise? What evidence in our lives is there that we have embraced Jesus' offer and trusted our ways to Him?

This is a good season to contemplate the necessary changes that our following Jesus will inevitably bring about and then to submit our wills and ways to Him. Turning the page on a calendar won't make anything constructive happen on its own. But turning a page in our hearts so that we're on the same page as Jesus will secure for us the Lord's favor, which is an abundance of blessing that none of us can afford to miss.

“ C O M E T O L I F E ”

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 6 | EZEKIEL 37:1-14 | DOUG DORTCH



Norman Cousins said the greatest tragedy in life is not that we die; it's that something inside of us dies while we are still alive. I think we have all come across people who are, for all intents and purposes, “walking dead.” They have nothing inside of them that animates their souls. They have surrendered to the cynicism of this prevailing culture and have given up hope of anything ever getting better.

Perhaps that's why Ezekiel's story of the valley of dry bones is such a favorite. We love the imagery of God's prophet going out to the local cemetery and preaching to the boneyard, only to see the Spirit of the Lord entering into those bones and transforming them into a vast army.

Again, context is important. Ezekiel was a prophet whom God had commanded to go to the exiles in Babylon and sit among them (Ezekiel 3:15). When Ezekiel did this, the despair was overwhelming. Everyone had given up hope. Ezekiel himself sensed their resignation.

But the places of despair are where God often does His best work. In obedience to God's message, Ezekiel proclaimed God's Word, which energized the house of Israel as nothing else could have done. God was not through with His people; He still had much for them to accomplish. Of course, none of it would take place without God's doing. The best thing the people could do would be to wait upon God and trust in His timing.

This season involves a lot of waiting, does it not? Sometimes it seems that Christmas will never come. But it will eventually. It will come in “the fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4 ESV). And when it does, the Spirit of Jesus promises to enter into all who receive Him with the light of life (John 1:4, 8:12).

Don't give into the despair that others think inevitable. There is still so very much to live for with Jesus, and even more life to know when our time on earth is done.

“KNOWING GOD’S PROMISES IN OUR HEARTS” FRIDAY, DECEMBER 7 | JEREMIAH 31:31-40 | DOUG DORTCH



I love the language of learning the Bible “by heart.” It’s the perfect way to describe the value we place on Scripture by understanding the importance of centering our lives on God’s promises. As we move into the Christmas season, think of the many verses in the Christmas story that you’ve committed to memory and how each of those verses adds immense value to your Christmas celebrations.

This is the sort of day the prophet Jeremiah envisioned when he offered God’s people a vision of the coming time when their lives would be completely aligned with God’s covenant. However, at the time Jeremiah spoke these words, the people could hardly hold up their heads because of the shame and embarrassment of their exile in Babylon. By this time it was evident why such calamity had come upon the people. They had not hidden God’s law “in their hearts.” They had not kept God’s commandments. They had not lived into God’s expectations. Consequently, the trials and tribulations they began experiencing were the results of their own rebellion against God.

But the good news is that God would not hold their sins against them forever. Because of their realization of how they had brought their suffering upon themselves, Jeremiah pointed the people to a new day that was around the corner. This new day involved a “new covenant” (Jeremiah 31:31 NIV) that would be written not on tablets of stones but “on their hearts” (Jeremiah 31:33 NIV), where they could not forget it. It would be a covenant that would result in God working to “forgive their wickedness” (Jeremiah 31:34 NIV) so that the people could live in lasting peace in which their city would “never again be uprooted or demolished” (Jeremiah 31:40 NIV).

This new covenant came to pass in Jesus. Jesus, whose name means “God is our Salvation” (Matthew 1:21), came to fulfill God’s redemptive promises and to provide those who trust in Him with confidence and security. This covenant was universal in scope, providing “good news of great joy that will be for all the people” (Luke 2:10 ESV). Jesus’ coming was not intended to abolish the Law; instead His ministry was to work toward its fulfillment (Matthew 5:17).

As we move nearer to Christmas, this would be a good time to reflect upon those special verses that comprise the Christmas story. Pick out one or two that you might commit to heart. Allow those verses to move you closer to God and inspire you to be more committed to His purposes. Then, you will know the confidence God desires you to have as you go through everyday life and the hope, peace, love, and joy that this special season holds for all who would receive Jesus as their Savior and Lord.

“TABERNACLE AMONG US”
MONDAY, DECEMBER 10 | JOHN 1:1-18 | ALLISON MCSWAIN

The prologue to the Gospel of John may be a passage you memorized as a young believer. It’s a very familiar set of verses for me, albeit a slightly confusing one. Who or what is this “Word” that was in the beginning with God? Is John talking about an utterance of speech? If so, what “Word” is it?

One benefit of my Master of Divinity studies at Beeson is the blessing of learning to read the Bible in the languages in which it was originally written. In the original Greek text of John, “logos” stands in for “Word.” A logos is an expression of a thought; it embodies an idea. This logos in John 1 is divine—it is Jesus Himself. Through this Word, everything was created; therefore, the Word is clearly not a created being. He is eternal. The Word, Christ, is light and life. As the Word, or logos, Jesus is therefore an expression of God, the embodiment of Him.

John 1 beautifully recounts that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, which is exactly what we celebrate now in the seasons of Advent and Nativity. The divinity of God took on human skin and all the challenges that come with it—the ability to feel hunger, sickness, pain, sadness . . . and the ability to die. Jesus Christ was fully human and fully God, and came to dwell with man; the Creator came to live with His creation. Perhaps “dwelt” in verse 14 would be better rendered as “tabernacled,” according to the Greek text. Even though it isn’t proper English grammar (we’re turning a noun into a verb, after all!), I prefer this translation. We remember that the Tabernacle was the earthly habitation of God for Israel as they journeyed to the Promised Land, as recorded in the Old Testament. God, in Christ, did this again in the New Testament: He took up an earthly habitation in human form.

A dictionary definition of a prophet is “a person who speaks by divine inspiration or as the interpreter through whom the will of God is expressed.” As John 1 reveals, Jesus is the greatest Prophet. Not only does He speak by divine inspiration, He is divine. Not only does He interpret God’s will, He is God’s will. He reveals God’s character, as He is God. *Thank You, Lord Christ, for taking on flesh and living among us, those so undeserving of Your presence.*

“THE YEAR OF THE LORD’S FAVOR”

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 11 | LUKE 4:16-30 | ALLISON MCSWAIN

My students at MBBC would tell you that I love the Old Testament. I’m passionate about seeing it preached in the church today during a time when I believe it is often neglected. I love drawing parallels between the Old and New Testaments. The God of each Testament is the same God telling the same story, and I am thrilled when I see Old Testament connections arise in a New Testament passage. Today’s text is one of those places where God’s grand plan from the beginning was exposed and fulfilled.

Jesus read Isaiah 61:1-2 before the congregation and revealed that He was indeed the anointed Messiah foretold in Holy Scripture—He was (and is) the One who binds up the brokenhearted and sets the captives free. Along with Isaiah, Jesus claimed to be the One God chose to “proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:19 ESV). This year was an allusion to the year of jubilee discussed in Leviticus 25. During the year of jubilee, anyone who was serving as a slave gained freedom. It was also a year of rest both for the land and the people; Israel was to refrain from planting seed and working the land.

Jesus ushered in a year of the Lord’s favor that is still continuing to this day—an eternal year of jubilee. In this time, those who accept Christ are released from slavery to sin and experience true liberty and life in the Spirit. Jesus also allows us to enter into true rest. In Christ, we are free to rest from striving, as our good works cannot save us. We accept the free gift of saving grace and have peace with God. Praise be to our Savior, that Prophet, Priest, and King Jesus Christ who sets the captives free from eternal separation from God!

Jesus was a Prophet greater than Isaiah and the very fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy; yet the people did not believe Him. They were filled with anger at the thought of Joseph’s son claiming to be the Lord’s anointed. Jesus’ prophecy came true—He was a Prophet not accepted in His hometown. Are you truly accepting that Jesus is who He says He is? Take some time today to meditate on the identity of Christ. He claims to be our Shepherd, our Living Water, and our Bread of Life. Thank Christ for who He has been to you and trust that He will continue to free you in this year of the Lord’s favor.

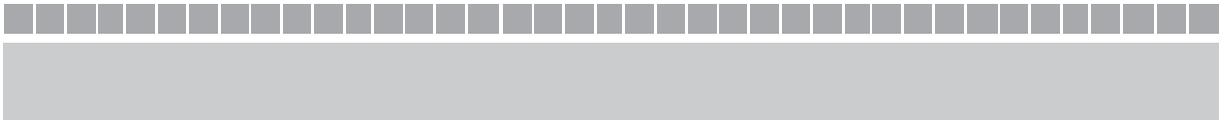


“ LIKE MOSES, YET GREATER ”
WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 12 | MARK 9:2-13 | ALLISON MCSWAIN

I have an art print depicting the Transfiguration on my wall at home. It's a beautiful Greek icon showing a radiant, shining Jesus Christ at the top of the mountain. At the bottom of the mountain, three disciples lay on the ground, shielding their eyes from the streams of Christ's glory. There are two other figures in this painting, but they are on their own, smaller mountain peaks next to Christ. These two men are identified by the Greek versions of the names Elijah and Moses. They are bowing slightly toward the glorified Christ.

The story of the Transfiguration is one we have most likely heard a million times, but I believe we fail to grasp how beautiful this event really was, as it was a unifying bridge between the Old and New Testaments. On this mountain, Jesus Christ stood next to the prophets of old. He was like them—He spoke by divine inspiration and enacted the will of God. He stood in solidarity next to the ones God had chosen to do His work. Yet, Christ was also unlike Moses and Elijah. He was God incarnate, and that was evidenced on this mountain by His dazzling glory and the voice of the Father claiming Him as His Son. He was the image of the invisible God, the only one in my painting deserving of radiant light. That's why Moses and Elijah bow before Him in that image; they acknowledge that He is God's chosen instrument of salvation for the nations. As the Father commanded Israel to listen to His Word through the prophets, He here commanded all of us to listen to His Son.

Thank the Lord Christ today for being more than mere man. A solely human prophet could never save us! Thanks be to God that we have a Mediator who is not only human and able to understand our condition, but who is also fully divine and able to redeem us! *Jesus, You are a Prophet like Moses, yet You are greater than Moses. You did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. Thank You for establishing Your law of faith by bestowing Your grace upon us. Help us to listen to You this day.*



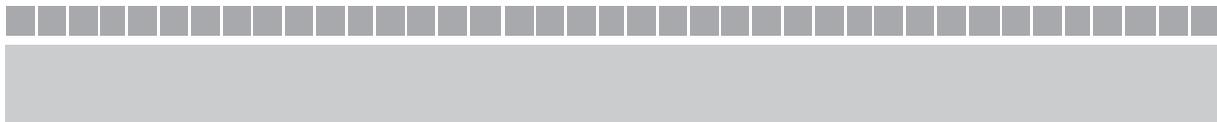
“ J E S U S I S B E T T E R ”

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 13 | HEBREWS 1:1-4 | ALLISON MCSWAIN

I was once told that the Book of Hebrews can be summarized in this small sentence: “Jesus is better.” The author of Hebrews shows how Jesus is better than angels, better than Moses, and better than the priest Melchizedek. In our reading today, we see that God previously used the prophets to deliver His divine message, but we now have something—someone—better. Today, God speaks through His Son. In language similar to that of John 1, the author tells us that everything was created through Christ the Son. The Son is the “exact imprint” of God’s nature. He is clearly superior to all other prophets in this way.

The author of Hebrews continues to assert Christ’s superiority by describing His radiance of glory and His ability to uphold the universe. Then, the author reminds the readers of Christ’s atoning sacrifice: He made purification for our sins and is still alive today at the right hand of the Father. I believe it is impossible to go through the season of Advent without reflecting on Easter. We celebrate the arrival of God’s Son on earth while knowing the purpose for which He came. Thoughts of Jesus’ birth should lead us to thoughts of His death, and we know that thoughts of His death necessitate thoughts of His glorious Resurrection.

Austin Stone’s worship song “Jesus Is Better” has profound lyrics I feel are appropriate to share in light of this passage. “In all my sorrows, Jesus is better. Make my heart believe. In all my victories, Jesus is better. Make my heart believe.” The next two lines declare that Jesus is better than any comfort and all riches. Are you believing this fact today? In your heart of hearts, can you say Jesus is better than your possessions, your human relationships, your accomplishments and dreams? If your answer is no, pray along with Austin Stone that God will make your heart believe in the supremacy of Christ over all things. Reflect on the goodness of Christ this day.



“ L O N G - E X P E C T E D ”
FRIDAY, DECEMBER 14 | REVELATION 1:1-8 | ALLISON MCSWAIN

One of my favorite songs of this season is “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus”:

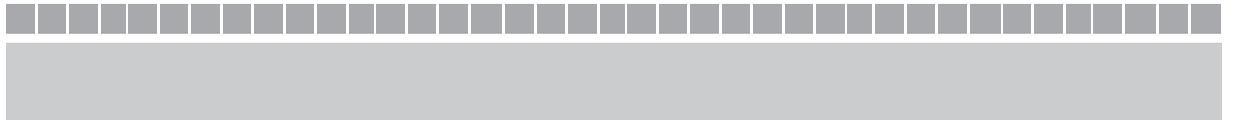
“Come, Thou long-expected Jesus
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel’s strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.”

This hymn popped in my head while reading Revelation 1:1-8. Just as the people of God once eagerly awaited the arrival of their Messiah, we now await the same Messiah’s return as it is discussed in the Book of Revelation. At the opening of this book, John gives a great list of Christ’s identifiers: He is the faithful witness to God’s truth, much like a Prophet. He is the Priest who frees us from our sins by His blood. He is the King of all other kings who establishes a kingdom for His beloved.

In a way, Christ the Prophet is also the prophecy—He is the long-awaited hope. Christ’s arrival as a baby was foretold centuries before, even as His Second Coming is foretold here. This prophecy reveals that Christ will come from the clouds, and all will see Him. He is the one “who is, and who was, and who is to come” (Revelation 1:8 ESV).

In the season of Advent, we are not limited to looking solely backward into history. The Lord who came is coming again. Join me today in looking forward to the return of our hope—our Prophet, Priest, and King!

“Born Thy people to deliver,
Born a child and yet a king,
Born to reign in us forever,
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.
By Thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By Thine all sufficient merit,
Raise us to Thy glorious throne.”



PRIEST

Sacrifices litter the pages of the Old Testament. In fact, the first sacrifice in Scripture takes place only three chapters into Genesis—the first book of the Old Testament—when God Himself provided garments from animal skins to clothe Adam and Eve after they chose to listen to the voice of the serpent and eat the forbidden fruit. Their sin made them aware of their nakedness, and the shedding of blood was required to clothe them. Just a chapter later in Genesis 4, we meet their sons, Cain and Abel, as they bring their own offerings to the Lord. Eventually, God would give proper instruction for offering sacrifices in the Tabernacle and Temple, which would be officiated by priests. Leviticus outlines rituals for presenting all kinds of offerings, including burnt offerings, grain offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings, and guilt offerings. These offerings of worship pleased the Lord and brought restitution for the people's sins. Yet it wasn't the blood of bulls or lambs that cleansed their iniquity; every sacrifice pointed forward to the day when the final sacrifice for sin would die on the cross, when the Great High Priest Himself would be an offering for sin and the veil would be torn, allowing all people access to God through the perfect Lamb who mediates by the shedding of His own blood.

“GOD WILL PROVIDE”

MONDAY, DECEMBER 17 | GENESIS 22:1-19 | AMY HIRSCH



The story of the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22:1-19 is a rarity in some ways. It's not the first story of sacrifice in the Old Testament, but it's unique because God called Abraham to bring a specific sacrifice for worship—not an offering from the field or from his flocks, but from his very household: the son God had long ago promised the barren patriarch (Genesis 12, 15).

Although we know this story as the sacrifice of Isaac, from reading the narrative, clearly this was also a sacrifice of Abraham. Can you sense the angst that must have been in Abraham's heart as he rose in the morning and traveled up the mountain with his son, his only son Isaac, the son he loved so dearly? And yet, while Abraham must have been processing all kinds of emotions as he made that fateful journey up Mount Moriah, we see his resolve. Abraham was certain that God would provide the sacrifice and sure that God would provide for him a lineage—so certain that he built the altar and placed his son there, ready to offer him to the Lord. Abraham was willing to follow God wherever He would lead, even to the heights of a mountain where he might sacrifice his beloved son.

While this story shows us Abraham's character, it also gives us a glimpse into God's heart. Several times in the narrative, Abraham declares that his God provides (Genesis 22:8, 22:14). Abraham didn't know how provision would come, but he had faith that God knew best—faith that led him to obedience. At just the right time, God provided by sending a ram caught in the thicket, a substitution for Isaac. The story of Scripture reminds us that God continued to provide for His people in this way through the Temple sacrifices. Centuries later, the Israelites would offer sacrifices on the same mount where Abraham held the knife to sacrifice Isaac, to the same God who promised He would provide.

Romans 8 reminds us that this story isn't really an anomaly. Like Abraham, another character in Scripture would sacrifice His Son, His only Son, His beloved Son. On Calvary, God the Father “did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all” (Romans 8:32 ESV). Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac pointed forward to the day when God indeed would provide—once and for all—the atoning sacrifice for our sin, at great personal cost to Himself: His Son's life.

“BOUGHT WITH A PRICE” TUESDAY, DECEMBER 18 | EXODUS 12 | AMY HIRSCH



Because we're a week away from Christmas Eve, chances are you're probably finalizing your Christmas gift purchases. (If you haven't bought any gifts yet, now might be the time to start if you plan on giving gifts this year!) One of the things I've realized since entering adulthood is that all gifts are bought with a price. Whether you are making a gift for a loved one or purchasing something at the store, there's a cost associated with that gift—the gift of your time, your money, your resources, etc.

In our reading today, we are reminded that there was a cost to Israel's redemption from slavery in Egypt. In Exodus 11, God unveiled the final plague He would bring upon Egypt: the death of the firstborn. In some ways, the plague was a picture of God's divine retribution. Pharaoh ordered the death of every Hebrew son; the destroyer, sent by God, would take the life of every firstborn in the land of Egypt. But God's judgment would pass over those who belonged to the Lord, who marked their households with the blood of a year-old male lamb born without blemish, marking the observance of what we know today as Passover.

The blood on the doorposts served as a sign that these people considered themselves subject to God alone. He alone could protect them from the destroyer He would send through the streets of Egypt. He alone could deliver them from the shackles of slavery. On that night, God would bring death to every firstborn Egyptian son; but for His firstborn son Israel, who trusted in His name, He would bring life through death, through the slaughter of a perfect, spotless lamb.

The Israelites were commanded to observe Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread each year to “pass on” to their children the tale of how God delivered them from slavery in Egypt and how they were bought with a price. Year after year, the story was recounted to successive generations, until that fateful night in the upper room when Jesus, “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29 ESV), broke the bread and drank the cup as the final Passover Lamb. Take heart, believer, for you, too, were bought with a price—the very blood of Christ.

“A FEAST WITH THE LORD”

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 19 | EXODUS 24 | AMY HIRSCH



Holiday celebrations often center around meals. When I think back to celebrating Christmas morning with my grandparents, I can't help but remember the breakfast spread we would share, complete with bacon, biscuits, gravy, and the fine breakfast delicacy (of the western North Carolina/upstate South Carolina region) known as livermush.

The context for Exodus 24 is crucial: After the Israelites were delivered from Egypt, the Lord revealed His covenant to His children, Israel, promising that if they kept the covenant, they would be His “treasured possession among all peoples...a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5-6 ESV). The words of the Lord (Exodus 20:1-17) and all His rules (Exodus 20:22-23:19) had been given. God Himself was the instigator of this covenant, and it's important to remember that relationship preceded obedience. Because He was the Lord, who delivered them from Egypt and set His love on them, they could have no other gods before Him (Exodus 20:1-3). Exodus 24 is the confirmation of this covenant. Imagine the scene: Picture the burnt offerings for sin and peace offerings given, the blood being poured into basins and spread on the altar. And then, Moses taking a bit of the blood and sprinkling it on the Israelites, a symbolic sign of cleansing; for “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Hebrews 9:22 ESV).

Following the confirmation, Moses, Aaron, and other chief Israelite leaders entered into the very presence of God, where they ate and drank, enjoying a meal and ratifying the covenant together. And yet these men weren't allowed to see the full glory of God; they only caught a glimpse of the sapphire stone under His feet. Moses alone was invited to enter into the glory of God on the mountain, foreshadowing the Tabernacle and Temple to come. The people could not simply enter God's presence, and even the priests and elders would only behold God at a distance. The High Priest alone would be invited to access the Holy of Holies, under certain circumstances set forth in Leviticus.

But the hope we celebrate at Christmas is that, because Christ came, we can know God; to behold the face of Jesus is to see the glory of God. There is coming a day when we, too, will join with all the saints to share a feast with the Lord as we celebrate His defeat over death (Isaiah 25:6-12, Revelation 19:6-10).

“THE CHRISTMAS SCAPEGOAT”

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 20 | LEVITICUS 16 | AMY HIRSCH



If we're honest, goats may not remind us of Christmas. For that matter, Leviticus may not be our typical Advent reading. It's easy to feel overwhelmed with all of the bloody sacrifices and to get lost in the weeds of the details! Yet, as I was reading about the goats in Leviticus 16, I couldn't help but remember being a shepherd in the Living Nativity, sitting in the field among sheep and goats, gazing at the heavenly host announcing Christ's birth.

The details are complex and a lot is happening in Leviticus 16, but the basic idea is this: sin requires sacrifice. And so, on this high holy day known as the Day of Atonement (also called Yom Kippur), God provided a way for Israel's sins to be forgiven so that His people could enjoy communion with Him. At the end of the year, the High Priest would offer up for himself a bull as a purification for a sin offering and a ram as a burnt offering. Then, he would offer up two goats for a sin offering and one ram for a burnt offering for the forgiveness of the people's sins. Through the shedding of blood, the people were made right with a holy and perfect God.

The two goats of Leviticus 16 have always fascinated me. The High Priest would draw lots and choose one to be sacrificed, and that goat's blood would be sprinkled on the mercy seat and the altar. The other goat would be "sent away into the wilderness to Azazel" (Leviticus 16:10 ESV). Scholars disagree over what "Azazel" means, but the symbolism is clear: Aaron would place his hands on this goat, confessing the sin of Israel, and the goat would be sent out into the wilderness to "bear all their iniquities on itself" (Leviticus 16:22). This image is probably where the term "scapegoat" comes from.

It might be a stretch to connect the two, but I wonder if, on that first Christmas night, there really were goats out in the fields and if they gazed upon the manger where the True Scapegoat—the One who would bear our sins once and for all—lay asleep on the hay? Christ's death on the cross was the final fulfillment of the Day of Atonement as He entered into the heavenly place by His own blood, offering forgiveness for all who would believe.

“ TO OUR WEAKNESS NO STRANGER ”

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 21 | ISAIAH 52:13-53:12 | AMY HIRSCH



One could argue that this week’s reading has been a bit gory; after all, we’ve been reading about the blood of lambs, goats, and rams. But in Isaiah 52:13-53:12, we see something new altogether: Isaiah’s fourth Servant Song declares that the Servant who is coming to rescue God’s people (sent from the lineage of David to be a light to the nations) will take on an unusual role. Old Testament priests offered animal sacrifices on behalf of the people for the forgiveness of their sins. But this Servant wouldn’t bring a sacrifice; rather, He Himself would be the sacrifice.

Human sacrifices weren’t unusual in this culture; foreign nations worshipped in this way frequently (and while we saw that Abraham was called to sacrifice Isaac, recall that the Lord intervened before the sacrifice could occur, and it also wasn’t a sacrifice connected with sin). Yet in this passage, it wasn’t a ram caught in the thicket or a goat sent into the wilderness that bore the sins of the people; it was the innocent Servant Himself! He would bear our griefs and our sorrows even unto a divinely-appointed death, to be “cut off out of the land of the living” (Isaiah 53:8 ESV) for our sakes. Thematically, Isaiah looked forward to a day when priests wouldn’t simply bring the offering for sin; this priestly Servant would make “an offering for guilt” (Isaiah 53:10 ESV).

I take comfort reading this passage because of the reminders that this Servant would not just bear our burdens; He would know them. Though innocent, He would know the ways of mankind, familiar with even our sorrows and grief—a Servant like His people, yet without sin. It isn’t surprising that the gospel writers and Paul attributed this prophetic word to the ministry of Christ, to the Word who became flesh, who put on skin and walked around with us. As the beloved Christmas carol puts it, “The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger; in all our trials born to be our friend. He knows our needs, to our weakness no stranger!” Take comfort today that we have an advocate in Christ Jesus the Suffering Servant, the High Priest who not only suffered for the sake of our sin, but who is intimately acquainted with all of our ways, with every pain, every fear, every grief, and every sorrow.

“PROCLAIMING
THE LORD’S DEATH
UNTIL HE COMES”
MONDAY, DECEMBER 24
LUKE 22:7-23 | WAYNE SPLAWN

During the Advent season, we take time to carefully think about the First and Second Coming of Jesus Christ into the world. The Lord’s Supper is one ordinance we observe in the Baptist tradition that also has this twofold emphasis. In 1 Corinthians 11:26, Paul taught this understanding of the meaning of the Lord’s Supper when he wrote, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (ESV). The Lord’s Supper helps us look back to Jesus’ death and forward to His Second Coming.

In Luke 22:7-23, we read Luke’s record of Jesus instituting this most meaningful meal with His disciples. One of the things I find so powerful in these verses is how Jesus showed that He is the fulfillment toward which the Passover meal once pointed. Where the Passover meal reminded God’s people of the salvation they experienced when God passed over the homes of those who had put the death of a firstborn lamb over their doors, the Lord’s Supper reminded God’s people of the salvation they experienced through the death and Resurrection of Jesus. Rather than being a priest who would offer sacrifices necessary to celebrate the Passover, Jesus is our Great High Priest who shed His own blood so that we might experience God’s salvation.

“ P E A C E W I T H G O D ”
TUESDAY, DECEMBER 25
COLOSSIANS 1:15-23 | WAYNE SPLAWN

In the past couple of years, political discourse has deteriorated into hateful rhetoric, and our country feels as divided as I can remember. Most people I speak to about this issue acknowledge there must be a better way forward. We long to be reconciled to one another, that we might experience true and lasting peace with others. But given our current political climate, it seems that this is a longing that will never be fulfilled in this world.

Many people also feel as if they are in a perpetual state of conflict when it comes to their relationships with God. Rather than experiencing the full measure of God’s forgiveness, they live with a low-level guilt and a sneaking suspicion that they can never measure up to God’s standards. How do they respond to this situation? They try harder to do good works that will somehow qualify them to experience the peace with God they long to know. However, such attempts always fall short, and the vicious cycle of guilt and works begins again.

Colossians 1:15-23 helps us see the error to this approach to a relationship with God. In these verses, Paul describes the work of salvation God has accomplished through the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. In verse 19, Paul writes that in Jesus, “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (ESV). That is, when Jesus came into the world and took on flesh, He did not cease to be divine. Instead, in the incarnation, Jesus was fully God and fully man, and this uniquely qualified Him to reconcile sinful man to a holy God. On this Christmas Day, we celebrate the truth that Jesus has reconciled us to Himself so that we can now be at peace with God.



“ IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD ON OUR BEHALF ”

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 26

HEBREWS 9 | WAYNE SPLAWN

I am not a huge fan of golf, but there are a few professional tournaments that I find to be must-watch television. One of those tournaments is The Masters, which is held at Augusta National Golf Club in Augusta, Georgia. One reason I find the tournament so interesting is that Augusta National Golf Club is a very exclusive club. For most of the year, only members and their guests are allowed on the premises. But during Masters week, members of the public who are lucky enough to snag tickets are granted entry to the beautiful golf course.

The stipulations that regulated worship under the old covenant barred anyone from entering the Holy of Holies, except for the High Priest once a year. On this most holy day, the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies to offer sacrifices for the unintentional sins he and the people of Israel had committed in the past year. Apart from this one day of the year, no one could enter the very presence of God to make intercession for the people.

In Hebrews 9, the writer contrasts the stipulations that governed worship under the old covenant with the access to God that new covenant believers enjoyed because of the work of Jesus Christ. Whereas the High Priest could only enter the very presence of God once a year by offering sacrifices for his sins and for the sins of the people, Jesus entered the presence of God by means of His eternal blood that He shed for our redemption. And now, Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest, is continually in the presence of God the Father, interceding on our behalf.

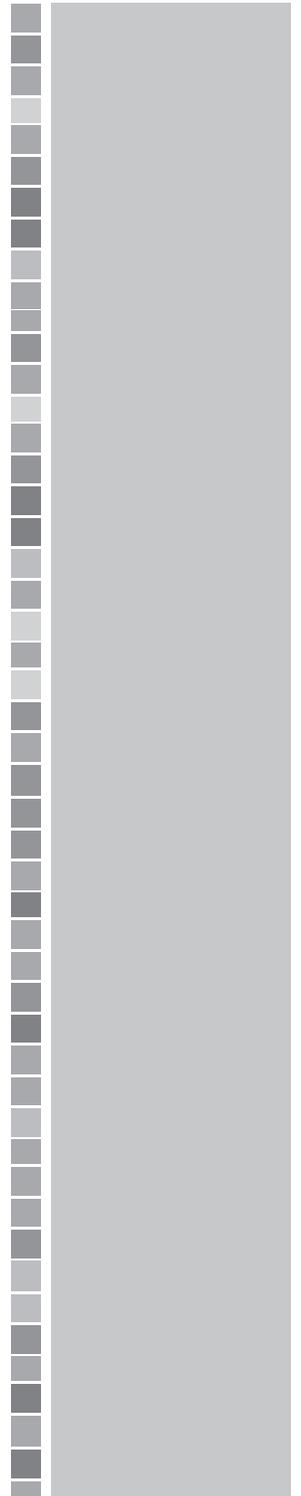
Because Jesus has paid for our sins once and for all, we can now have a pure conscience that allows us to serve our living God—not to earn our salvation, but in gratitude of the great salvation He has graciously given to us. In this life, we cannot know exactly what it is like to be fully in God’s presence, face to face before Him as we will one day be in heaven. But we can take great hope and comfort in the truth that, even now, Jesus Christ appears in the Father’s presence on our behalf and ever lives to make intercession for us!

“ONCE AND FOR ALL”
THURSDAY, DECEMBER 27
HEBREWS 10 | WAYNE SPLAWN

One of the things I find frustrating about cleaning something is how quickly it gets dirty again. Driving a freshly-washed car through rain-soaked streets makes the car dirty again, and children with dirty hands making their way through the backdoor put smudges on glass panes that were once crystal clear. When it comes to cleaning, the job is never fully completed.

In Hebrews 10, the writer describes the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. In verses 1-4, we learn that the sacrifices that were offered year after year were a stark reminder that the blood of bulls and goats could not take away sins forever. It was impossible to be made perfect through the annual sacrifices. In verse 5, the focus shifts to the work God has completed through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Whereas the animal sacrifices had to be offered repeatedly, Jesus Christ offered Himself as a single sacrifice once and for all for sin. Therefore, according to Hebrews 10:14, those who are in Christ have been perfected for all time.

This season offers us a great opportunity to remember that we can now draw near with full assurance to the God who drew near to us that first Christmas in Jesus Christ. Though we still struggle with sin and are in the process of being sanctified, we can rest assured that we have been justified once and for all through the blood of Jesus Christ.





“ W O R T H Y
O F O U R W O R S H I P ”
FRIDAY, DECEMBER 28
REVELATION 5 | WAYNE SPLAWN

When Jesus entered our world that first Christmas morning, it would have been nearly impossible for anyone to fully grasp Jesus’ identity. After all, apart from the fact that Mary was a virgin, there was nothing extraordinary about Jesus’ birth. He was born into a humble family in an out-of-the-way place. In fact, there was much about Jesus’ life that would have made it difficult to discern the fact that Jesus was and is the Son of God and Savior of the world.

As we celebrate Christmas, we must be careful that we do not forget the identity of this Baby who was born into our world. While we marvel at the fact that Jesus humbled Himself by taking on flesh and becoming like us in every respect (yet without sin), we must be careful to remember that the next time Jesus comes into our world, it will be impossible to mistake who He is. In Revelation 5, we read of the worship Jesus receives even now in heaven. There, Jesus is rightly seen as the One who sits on the throne, ever receiving blessing and glory and might, forever and ever.

Ask God to give you a renewed vision of the majesty of Jesus as we continue to celebrate His birth and as we fix our eyes on the hope that will be revealed to us when He one day returns. Bow your knee and your heart to Him now and offer Him your worship, so that you will be ready to receive your King when He once again enters our world.



K I N G

People are always looking for someone to lead them, aren't they? Although the people often ignored Moses, God used him to deliver the Hebrews from the harsh hand of Pharaoh. God raised up the judges to govern His people in their time of need. And when the people cried out for a king so they could be like all the other nations, God gave them their wishes despite Samuel's warning. Though Saul proved to be a poor leader, the Lord anointed David as the king of the Israelites, promising that, through his lineage, God Himself would raise up a King to reign forever over His people. These words must have been a consolation to the Israelites as they waited in exile under the authority of foreign kings. God would keep His covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David. He would deliver them and send them a new King, who would rule in perfect justice and whose reign would bring peace. Imagine Mary's shock when Gabriel came to visit her and shared that she would be the mother of this King, who would first come not as a conquering military leader but as a baby, born of such humble means. The Son of the Most High—who would be given the throne of David to reign over the house of Jacob forever—would be born in that Bethlehem manger. But He didn't stay a child; He came to conquer sin, death, and the grave. He reigns at the right hand of God, and one day, He will come again in glory, and every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that He is Lord!



“A FOREVER HOME”

MONDAY, DECEMBER 31 | 2 SAMUEL 7:1-17 | MARY SPLAWN

The real estate agent’s sign reads, “Let me help you find your forever home.” While her marketing strategy has good intentions, we all know that the agent cannot uphold her end of the bargain. Things happen. Circumstances change. Eventually, the residents will leave their homes.

This passage reveals that David had similar good intentions for building God a home. While David was in a wonderful palace, he saw that God’s presence was residing in a temporary tent (the Tabernacle). He wanted more for God: a permanent, grand house of cedar (the Temple). He wanted to find God a forever home.

But God had other plans. In what seems to be a play on words, God communicated to David that David wasn’t going to build God a home; instead, God would build David a house that would last forever! God was not referring to an enduring, personal dwelling that would meet all of David’s needs until he was old. No, His plans were much grander than this! In fact, God promised that the royal dynasty of David would continue for all future time. Verse 16 says it this way: “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before Me; your throne will be established forever” (NIV).

Indeed, God was establishing David’s throne as a forever home for our Lord Jesus, the Messiah who would be born many years later in the line of David. And while palaces and earthly temples come and go, Jesus’ seat on the throne is forever. Because we have an eternal King, we rest secure as His followers, knowing that our forever home is with Him.

“SOMETHING TO SING ABOUT” TUESDAY, JANUARY 1 | ISAIAH 9:1-7 | MARY SPLAWN

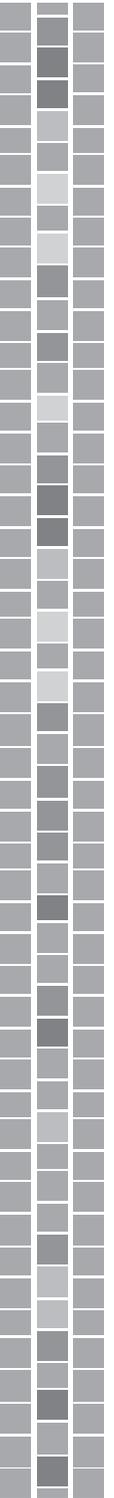
I start listening to Christmas music in mid-August. This began in the year 2000 when I was living in Mexico and was very sad about the fact that I wasn't going home for Christmas. At that time, I only owned one Christmas CD—a disc entitled *Merry Christmas* by Mariah Carey.

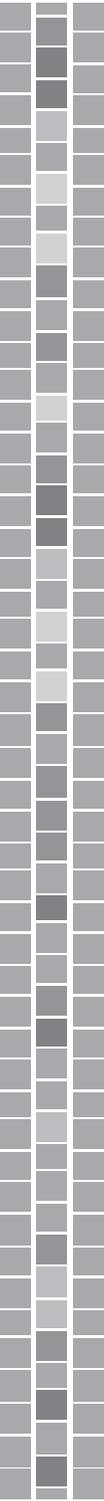
I listened to it over and over and memorized the lines of each song. Later, I shared my love of this album with my husband, Wayne, and he and I have become particularly attached to one song: “Jesus, Oh What a Wonderful Child.” The song features a soloist and a choir, and we each take our part as we lip sync the song together on long car rides to South Carolina on Christmas morning. He is Mariah, and I am the backup vocals! On a serious note, the chorus reminds us of some wonderful truths of Jesus. “New life, new hope, new joy He brings, won't you listen to the angels sing, glory, glory, glory to the newborn King!”

This chorus is reminiscent of the message in Isaiah 9, which is both joyful and theologically rich. This prophecy proclaims new joy and gladness where there was once gloom and anguish. This joy comes because of the birth of a newborn King! But this King would not be just any old king: He would be the same King that Nathan prophesied about to King David in 2 Samuel 7 (yesterday's reading). This King, whom we now know to be Jesus, would sit on David's throne and rule with justice and righteousness forever.

Listen to the vivid, hopeful language spoken about our great King some 700 years before His birth: “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. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over His kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this” (Isaiah 9:6-7 ESV).

May these truths be ever etched in our minds as we navigate a world that often seems polarized, hopeless, and unjust. Jesus reigns as King, and His promises are sure. He has come to bring new life, joy, peace, justice, and righteousness, and His kingdom is forever! Now, that is something to sing about!





“ THE KING TO COME ”

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 2 | PSALM 110 | BEN WINDER

The Psalm we read today is one of the most popular Old Testament passages for the authors of the New Testament. Psalm 110:1 is directly quoted in the Gospel of Matthew, the Book of Acts, and the Book of Hebrews. “The LORD says to my lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet’” (NIV). Beyond these direct quotations, countless other times New Testament writers borrow the imagery of sitting at the right hand of the Lord as they ponder who Jesus is and what it means for us. It is no wonder this Psalm would be compelling to them, and it should be compelling to us!

We would do well to be reminded of this Psalm’s original purpose for its original audience. As one in the collection of “Royal Psalms,” it served as royal propaganda, reminding the reader of God’s divine action in appointing the Davidic line and exalting the monarchy’s role in bringing God’s purposes to bear in the world.

For us, this Psalm builds on that legacy and serves an even greater purpose. It points toward an even better King that is to come. It points toward an even better thing God is doing in the world. It asks us to long for the One who will be the King and the Prophet and the Priest of God’s people.

During this Christmas season, as we celebrate the Messiah’s first coming and await His return, this Psalm gives us a foretaste of the One that is to come and encourages us that the wait will be worth it. The One at the right hand of the Lord will put our enemies underfoot, as the kings of old put their feet on the throats of their conquered enemies. Our King will ultimately and completely conquer all that oppresses us to make us finally and fully free.

During this journey, as we wait together, as you look around at our fallen and broken world, and as you encounter the brokenness within yourself, be encouraged. The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind! Even when you find yourself in the midst of your enemies, you can be assured that the Messiah is coming and bringing with Him God’s true justice. While we wait, let us pray, “Come, Lord Jesus, come.” *Lord, lift up Your head, for we are ready to crown You King of this world and King of our lives!*

“BAD SHEPHERDS, GOOD SHEPHERD” THURSDAY, JANUARY 3 | EZEKIEL 34:1-24 | BEN WINDER

I've never raised sheep, but even I know this passage is talking about some bad shepherds. They're doing everything wrong! They take and take and take from the sheep all while doing none of what shepherds are supposed to do to care for the sheep. They are seriously bad shepherds.

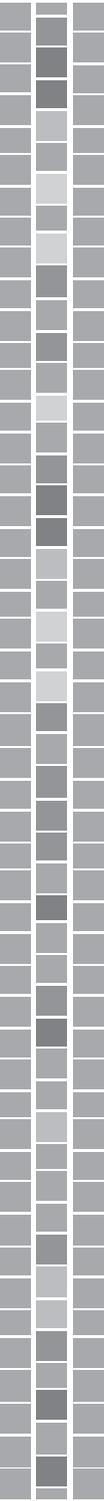
And so, God says He Himself shall become the Shepherd of His flock.

This passage, of course, isn't about sheep and shepherds at all. It is about the leaders of the people, the ones with authority and power who used their positions not for the benefit of those they were called to serve, but instead to enrich and engorge themselves.

Far removed as we are from the agrarian society to which Ezekiel spoke, and distant as the shepherding life might seem for us, we are surely all-too-easily able to identify with this passage. We too often find ourselves with leaders who do not live up to the high ideals of sacrificial, servant leadership. To hear that God will be coming to kick all those scoundrels with whom we disagree out of office and placing Himself on the throne might, at first, be thrilling to our souls. Come, Lord Jesus, come! But should we hesitate at least a little in our excitement?

God is a Good Shepherd and a Just King for all people. God is a Good Shepherd who not only gets rid of the bad shepherds who harm the sheep, but also brings justice among the sheep themselves. When the new, Good Shepherd comes, proper order will be restored, not just at the top, but all the way through the flock. As we prepare for the arrival of our new Good Shepherd, we should ponder how we measure up. How are you treating God's other sheep? Are their lives made more treacherous by your decisions? Are you made a fat sheep by the way you mistreat the lean ones? If we ask these difficult questions of ourselves even now while bad shepherds rule the day and while we await the arrival of the Good Shepherd, we might just—by God's grace—live as the kind of sheep worthy of the coming Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd is coming to bring justice and judgment to the flock. Are you ready?





“OUR KING SINGS OVER US”

FRIDAY, JANUARY 4 | ZEPHANIAH 3:14–20 | BEN WINDER

Advent and Christmas are seasons that remind us to have hope in our coming King, even while we find ourselves in seemingly hopeless situations. In Zephaniah’s short book, prior to our passage, he takes the reader on a journey to the coming day of the Lord. We are reminded it will not be pretty. We are reminded we have much for which we should repent and beg forgiveness. We are reminded that the King is coming, and all will be set right, even if it is a painful process. Frankly, the coming day of the Lord does not seem like altogether good news for God’s people or anyone else!

Finally, as his prophecy concludes, Zephaniah turns the corner, and this final passage brims with hopeful expectation and gleeful joy. The King’s coming is VERY good news! We should sing and shout, be glad and rejoice with all our hearts! The Lord—the King of Israel—is with us. When God is “God with Us,” Zephaniah reminds us, our punishment is taken away. When God is “God with Us,” our enemies are turned aside. When God is “God with Us,” our fear vanishes. When our King comes, Zephaniah tells us, the oppressed shall be set free, the lame rescued, the scattered gathered home, and the shamed restored. “On that day they will say to Jerusalem, ‘Do not fear, Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing’” (Zephaniah 3:16–17 NIV).

What should this hope do in us? Even now, because of our hope of what is to come, let us not have limp hands. Let us lift our hands in praise! Let us roll up our sleeves and get to work! For the Lord our God is with us, rejoicing over us with singing!

This Christmas, may our coming King sing over you a song of hope, and may you hear it! May the sweet melody of God’s song sung over you give you hope and call you to action. May you celebrate Emmanuel as you never have before. May you be not a person of limp, weak hands, but a person who even now, even while we wait, works to make God’s kingdom show up here on earth, even as it is in heaven.

“STEP ASIDE FOR THE KING”
MONDAY, JANUARY 7 | LUKE 1:26-38 | TIM SANDERLIN

The Gospel writer, Luke, likes to give us much more than just the ministry of Jesus; he gives a detailed account of how Christ came to earth. As much as we should always look to the teachings of Jesus, we have so much to learn from those God chose to use in the coming of Christ.

You may know the story: Joseph and Mary were engaged and both virgins, and then Mary was told she would bear a son, The Son, so that salvation could come to the Jews and the Gentiles (the Immaculate Conception). When Gabriel told Mary this news in Luke 1, she found peace in some difficult circumstances. How? How could she be so willing to endure the scrutiny of strangers, her friends, and her family? Because she knew she was sacrificing all those fleeting things for something eternal. We oftentimes throw our integrity away for things that are fleeting—money, reputation, relationships, authority, etc. Mary chose to deny herself what she may have believed she had “earned” (respect and rapport) and stepped aside so the Prince of Peace could come to set the captives free.

I think one more thing that strikes me in this passage is that God would even ask Mary to throw her image into the garbage! Often, I would choose to believe that I have built up such notoriety I can leverage for God that He would never ask me to give that up. But here, we see God ask Mary to turn in her worldly influence for the sake of the kingdom.

God works in mysterious ways and asks that we live with open hands—open to receiving His good and perfect gifts, but also open to offering them right back to Him for His purposes. When He asks us to return those blessings, may our answer be as Mary’s: “Behold, I am a servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38 ESV).



“WHAT IS TRUTH?”

TUESDAY, JANUARY 8 | JOHN 18:33-40 | TIM SANDERLIN

We see here a dark day in history—the day Jesus was sentenced to hang on a cross. We also see a deeply troubled man named Pilate, whom Christ spent some of His final hours talking with. As we know, Jesus never wasted a breath He took on this earth; every word spoken, miracle performed, or meal shared was on mission to bring the kingdom of heaven to this earth. This conversation He shared with Pilate was no exception.

Pilate and Jesus first had a witty word-joust over whether Jesus was “a king” or crazy, wrongly accused or rightly convicted. Within this banter, Jesus gave us some insight into what we, as His kingdom members, should do. We do not fight for Christ to be freed from death (spoiler: Jesus has that one covered), but to fight for the world to be freed by His death and Resurrection (John 18:36)! We need not make ourselves judges; we have a Perfect Judge! Being freed in Christ, we are those who bring joy and unconditional love to sinners like ourselves. If we are to be about the Lord’s business, we are to focus on bringing His heavenly kingdom here. That is the only thing that can right wrongs and resurrect the dead.

Toward the end of this text, we see a question posed by Pilate that humankind often dwells on: What is truth (John 18:38)? We live in a world that wants to believe that truth is relative; everyone has their own truth. That way, no one is wrong. But I would also plead that no one is right, either. Pilate may have been asking this as a rhetorical question or even posing it sarcastically, but little did he know that he was speaking to The Way, The Truth, and The Life. In this world, we believe only one thing to be certain: Jesus is Lord. Every day, may we be more certain of this truth than the last.



“FROM GLORY, BACK TO GLORY”

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 9

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11 | HAYDEN WALKER

There is perhaps no greater passage of Scripture which describes the glory of Christ our King as the One who was and is and is to come than Philippians 2. In verses 6-11, Paul recorded the Christ Hymn, which traces the narrative arc of Jesus' glory with the Father before the incarnation (Philippians 2:6), His humility during His life on earth which culminated upon the cross (Philippians 2:7-8), and His return to glory which will endure forever (Philippians 2:9-11). In Christ, we see the pattern of what it truly means to love others: considering their interests above our own (Philippians 2:4).

In contrast to the fleshly desire of humanity to strive toward our own glorification, God emptied Himself of His glory to become a human. It was the greatest role reversal in history. The King of all kings left His heavenly throne to become an inhabitant in His kingdom. What happened in Bethlehem is only as astounding as it should be when we recall what Christ left behind and that to which He returned after His Resurrection. Jesus is the second person of the Trinity, equal with God the Father from eternity past. Many babies have been laid in mangers, but this Baby breathed life into the trees from which the manger was crafted and saw to it that seeds would grow into the hay in which He rested.

From the manger to the cross, Christ lived a life of humility. The lowly Jesus is the One whom is often on our minds. However, that is an incomplete picture of our King. Jesus is now exalted at the right hand of the Father (Philippians 2:9), and all will bow before this glorious King one day. We have the opportunity to begin worshipping Him now. The Magi who visited Baby Jesus got it right: “They saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him” (Matthew 2:11a NIV). Let us bow before our King, and while we're on our knees, let us humbly serve others as Christ did.



“ O U R G R E A T H E R O ”
THURSDAY, JANUARY 10
1 CORINTHIANS 15:12-28 | HAYDEN WALKER

In every good story, there is an enemy to be conquered by a hero: Aslan and the White Witch, Simba and Scar, Batman and the Joker, and Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort to name just a few. I’ve even heard it said, “Weak villain, weak story.” It could be argued that every good story is only pointing to the one true story of our great King coming to rescue His people from the most wicked of enemies: death. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says that Jesus defeats the enemies of humanity and “delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power” (1 Corinthians 15:24 ESV). And yet there is one enemy left to be conquered; the most bitter and final enemy is death itself (1 Corinthians 15:26).

Christ’s death on the cross made atonement for our sins, but it was His Resurrection from death which secured our eternal hope of life. At Christmas, we marvel over the incarnation. We would do well, however, to simultaneously fixate upon the end of the story. Charles Wesley’s great Advent Hymn, “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” captures this pairing with the memorable lyric, “Mild He lays His glory by, born that man no more may die; born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.” These three reasons for Jesus’ birth can all be found in 1 Corinthians 15. Christ was born so that people might no longer die (1 Corinthians 15:22), He was born to extend resurrection to us (1 Corinthians 15:52), and thus He was born to make a way for us to live eternally (1 Corinthians 15:49).

It is Jesus’ Resurrection that gives us hope that this life is not the end for us. Perhaps this Christmas you are grieving the absence of a loved one who has died or you are watching the painful decay of illness that leads to death. Life may seem hopeless and dark in stark contrast to the cheerfulness of the season. Take comfort, brothers and sisters, in the promises of this passage. Your King has come, and He has defeated the final enemy on your behalf. And though death may sting for a moment, one day at Christ’s return this will be our song: “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:54b-55 ESV). Thanks be to God!



“THE CONQUERING KING”
FRIDAY, JANUARY 11
REVELATION 19:11-16 | HAYDEN WALKER

The Book of Revelation gives us a window into the great and glorious future which awaits all of creation. The central figure of the letter is Jesus Christ, the One who was and is and is to come (Revelation 1:8). We often think about Jesus as the One who was and the One who is, but we rarely pause to consider Him as the One who is to come. We know the humility of Jesus upon the cross as the One who was, and we acknowledge the supremacy of the resurrected Christ as the One who is. But what is Jesus’ character forevermore? Meek and lowly? Revelation 19 gives us a different picture, which we may see most clearly as we examine the contrasts between Christ at His first and second advents.

At His first coming, Jesus was meek and humble. Born in a manger, He lived three decades with “no place to lay his head” (Luke 9:58 NIV) and finally was mocked and ridiculed upon the cross. As they raised Him to His dying place on Golgotha, the Romans posted above Him an inscription that read “This is the King of the Jews” (Luke 23:38 ESV). The soldiers could never have imagined their jest toward Jesus had any truth. He hung upon the cross with a crown of thorns and the worship of no one. However, when Christ returns at the second advent, there will be no mistaking His kingship. There will be no question, no mockery, no ridicule of His authority.

Revelation 19:11-16 gives us a glimpse of our victorious King at His second advent. He is not riding a lowly donkey; instead, He’s upon a white horse (Revelation 19:11). Gone is the crown of thorns, replaced by many diadems (Revelation 19:12). Though He was abandoned by the masses on Good Friday, He will return with the armies of heaven at His side (Revelation 19:14). And though upon the cross we see Jesus’ great mercy displayed, He is also a God of justice (Revelation 19:15). The character of God, as He revealed Himself in Exodus 34:6-7, contains both of these elements. He is certainly slow to anger, but He will by no means clear the guilty. This news should strike wonder in our souls. It is this King—this King of all kings—who gave Himself for us. The only appropriate response is that of the psalmist: “Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!” (Psalm 95:6 ESV)



