



christmas

With Graceland

An Advent Bible Study





Tis the season!

As December begins and the busyness of the Christmas season starts, we pray this guide will be a reminder to you and your family as to why we celebrate Christmas.

This Advent study is meant for everyone. Whether you choose to use it alone in your daily devotional time, or with your connect group, or with your family gathered around, our prayer is for this Advent study to be a way for you to refocus your eyes and hearts on Jesus and draw you closer to the Savior.

Each day of the Advent study has Scripture to read, a devotional thought written specifically for our church body, questions to ask yourself or your family and discuss, and a guide for prayer.

The Advent season starts on December 1st and ends on Christmas Day, December 25th.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14





December 1

Read: Genesis 3, Isaiah 9:6-7

We know the Christmas story. Beginning about mid-October, we are inundated with the holiday scene. We live it, breathe it, hear it, smell it, and feast on it. We prepare for it, shop for it. We know the "Ho! Ho! Ho's!" and the jingle bells, and the chestnuts roasting on an open fire. We wrap the gifts and relish the joys of family. It's ingrained in our hearts and minds from the time we are small waiting for the arrival of Christmas. We're acquainted with Ebenezer Scrooge, Tiny Tim, and the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future.

We know the Christmas story. Or do we?

The story of Christmas began in the heart of God before the foundation of the world, because God knew from the beginning that man would need a Savior. It was followed by a garden and eating a piece of forbidden fruit. Separation from God, pain, toil, and death ensued, but also the promise of a Son, born to a woman, a Savior who would someday crush the head of the evil one. Adam and Eve waited. The Scriptures predicted it. The prophet Isaiah foretold that a child would be born, a son would be given, and the government would be on His shoulder. It was prophesied that he would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Such great promises.

And yet the world waited, and waited, and waited.
Now wait for it...**the wait was about to be over.**

Ask: What is your favorite part of the Christmas story? After reading Genesis 3, why would the world need a Savior, and what was the promise that was given?

Pray: Let's ask God to open our eyes and hearts to understand the real meaning of Christmas.

December 2

Read: John 1:1, Luke 1:1-4, 1 John 4:16

There are four Gospel records, and each carries a different emphasis. The major theme of Matthew is that Jesus is king, the greatest of all kings, the King of Kings in fact. The Gospel of Mark starts almost immediately with Jesus serving. The main message of this Gospel is that Jesus came as the suffering servant. Luke presents Christ as the Son of Man. It gives us fine details about His birth and the only story of His childhood. The book of Luke is filled with human interest. It shows us the very human side, the Son of Man side, of Jesus. The Gospel of John proclaims in no uncertain terms that Jesus is the Son of God. The first words are "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Jesus is the Word. Jesus is God!

Throughout the Bible, we never know when an ordinary moment will be interrupted with an extraordinary moment. As we walk into these days leading to Christmas, we will see that often it happens "suddenly" and those "suddenly" moments alter eternity.

And that is exactly what happened as the Gospel of Luke began. It was written to a man named Theophilus. Theophilus is not a name we hear often, but it is a message we hear often. The name means "loved by God". It is the message that is woven throughout the Bible. We are each loved by God!

We can learn it, love it, live it!

Ask: What are some extraordinary moments that are written in Scripture?

Talk about some ways that show us that we are loved by God.

Pray: Take a few moments to thank the Lord that we can learn about His love, and in turn, live it.



December 3



Read: Luke 1:1-10, Exodus 3:13-15

There is always something more to discover in the Scripture. It is a hunt for treasure. Today in Luke we see that the priest, Zechariah, was chosen to serve in the temple, an auspicious day to say the least. Since there were so many priests, this happened at best only once in a lifetime. Was he nervous, excited, or overwhelmed? One thing that stands out here is that all the assembled worshipers were outside praying. Did you catch that? It was not just a few, not a select group; it was ALL the assembled worshipers. So, we are reminded that we have a job at church when others are up front serving, not to observe, but to participate. Church is not a spectator sport, neither is it sitting on the bench. It is rather getting on the field, climbing into the ring, jumping into the fray. We are not called to sit. We are called to participate. What would God do if all the assembled worshipers at our church would pray for Him to move in our midst?

In one translation this passage records that Zechariah and Elizabeth were well along in years. Isn't that a lovely way to say old? How old? We don't know, but too old to have a child. So, what did Elizabeth think over the last years? Did she look at herself in the mirror and say "I'm not young enough. I'm not able to have a child. I'm not..." What is the voice we hear? "I'm not talented enough. I'm not smart enough. I'm not good looking enough. I'm not old enough. I'm not young enough. I AM NOT..."

The place of "I am not" is a very dark world to live in. Please remember that this is the Christmas story. Nearly everyone we meet in this story begins in those shadows. But where we say, "I am not", He is. It is no accident that one of His names is I AM.

Ask: What are some areas in our lives where we might feel like we "are not..."?

Since church is not a spectator sport, where are places in ministry where we might serve?

Pray: Ask God to move in our midst.

December 4

Read: Luke 1:5-25

"Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse." It's a very famous line, but let's be honest, they got that wrong. Mice do stir, and it's not pretty. But what the author of that poem was trying to say was that it was quiet. There is quiet, and then there is QUIET. And so it was when Zechariah entered the temple. This may have been the biggest day of his life, but what Zechariah did not know, was that it was about to get so much bigger. That quiet stillness was broken by a message from God Himself, delivered by the angel Gabriel. Zechariah's prayer had been heard, and the answer was on the way. What a job Gabriel had, showing up, surprising ordinary folks with absolutely extraordinary, exciting, earth-shaking news. For Zechariah, it was a child born when the season had long since passed. Gabriel gave this description to Zechariah, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news." That's what Gabriel did on a regular basis. He stood near God. But on this day, he was sent to break through the silence with these words, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard." How many years had he and Elizabeth prayed for a child? How many months were their hopes dashed? Why had God not answered?

We know from verse 25 that at least Elizabeth felt the disgrace of God's supposed silence on the matter. People assumed that if you didn't have a child, it was God's disfavor on your life. But the truth from Scripture is that sometimes there is a season of waiting.

That wasn't easy. For Zechariah and Elizabeth, the wait was so long that it was no longer possible for them to have a child. And yet God's plan was right there, right then. They were to be a part of a miracle. It took an angel to deliver the news and even then, Zechariah didn't believe. And isn't that just like us? So, waiting is a part of prayer. Asking over and over is part of it too. Even the part when it is no longer possible, is part of it. Perhaps those prayers we've prayed for years will involve us in a miracle. **What we can know for sure is that we can trust God who makes the impossible, possible.**

Ask: What are some other places in Scripture where people had to wait for an answer?

What are some areas where you have had to wait?

Pray: Do you have something that seems like an impossible prayer? Pray big. Then thank the Lord that His timing is perfect.

December 5

Read: Luke 1:26-38, Matthew 1:18-25

Today we are introduced to Mary, an ordinary girl, from an ordinary town, with an ordinary life. What she didn't know was that the ordinary was about to become the extraordinary. **The mundane was about to become the miraculous.** The dusty brown streets of her village were "suddenly" illuminated by an angel visit. Gabriel delivered a message from God that would change her young life. The Christmas story began in the heart of God. But at that very moment, it began for Mary. The Messiah, the Savior, was coming. Can you imagine how she must have felt? This had never taken place. The God of the Universe would come to dwell in her. Her life was about to be transformed. And that is still the Christmas story. Jesus came to transform us. At this very moment it can begin for us. The God of the Universe wants to come and dwell in our lives.

The angel Gabriel told Mary that she was highly favored. So, what did the divine favor look like in her life? Mary experienced a miracle so great that it had never happened before on the planet. She carried the Son of God. Mary knew the truth, and she was the Lord's servant. That was enough. Mary heard this good news about the Savior. The absolutely impossible had become possible. But it also meant that people might whisper about her reputation, eyebrows could be raised when her name was mentioned. Even Joseph would need divine intervention so he could believe.

Matthew 1 shows us Joseph's struggle. His initial reaction was that Mary had been unfaithful. His pain caused him to consider divorce. But God's plan included Joseph's understanding. In his sleep he heard, "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."

Joseph heard this good news about the Savior. We too hear this good news about the Savior.

Ask: Zechariah struggled with doubts. Joseph struggled with doubts. What are some areas where you have struggled with doubts? What Scripture passages can help resolve those doubts?

Pray: Let's pray about our doubts and ask God to help our unbelief.

December 6

Read: Luke 1:39-45, Isaiah 40:3, John 1:29-31

The book of Luke is filled with miracles. Zechariah struggled to believe and was silenced. Yet, that silence spoke volumes as he exited the temple. He had had a heavenly encounter. He and Elizabeth were about to have a miracle child. She would carry the one who would be the voice of one crying in the wilderness. She was carrying the one who would one day announce, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

In Luke, two miracle babies interrupted time. Elizabeth would give birth to the one who would proclaim the coming promised Messiah. Mary's Son would be the Messiah.

Mary went to Elizabeth's home with the miracle she carried. This was a bold move. It was proof positive that they believed her. Zechariah was a priest. If he had thought she was pregnant illegitimately, he would have been duty bound to turn her over to the Sanhedrin. Both Elizabeth and Zechariah knew this was the Son of God. In fact, the moment Elizabeth laid eyes on Mary, not only did she know, so did her unborn son. He leaped within her. Elizabeth was overjoyed that she could see the mother of the Lord. What love God showed to Elizabeth. It was amazing.

But we have the privilege of seeing even more. We get to see the Lord through the pages of the Bible. What love He shows to us.

It is nothing short of amazing.

Ask: Discuss times when you have experienced or witnessed God's amazing love. Discuss some ways you can show God's love to other people during this Christmas season.

Pray: Pray for opportunities to be a blessing to others.

December 7

Read: Luke 1:46-80



Have you ever wished that you could write beautiful music? There are songs that bring us to tears, some express just how our hearts feel, some dance around in our heads for days. Mary's heart was so full, she had to express it. Luke records her worship, her praise, her song of joy. While we may not be able to write such a song, we can most certainly join our voices with hers in praise and worship of our great God. While Mary sang, Zechariah had endured months of not being able to speak. An incredible miracle had happened to him in the temple, and he couldn't even talk about it.

Then the time came. Zechariah and Elizabeth's son was born. It was tradition to name a son after a relative. Names were passed down. Children were given a family name that linked the new with the old. But this baby arrived, and his mother declared his name. It would be John.

John? That wasn't a family name. They didn't know anyone named John. The friends and family went so far as to challenge it. Why wasn't he named Zechariah? Zechariah had been silent since Gabriel appeared. Not one audible sound had come from him since that moment. But then he was asked this child's name. He wrote it down. It was written in ink but set in stone. His name was John.

When Gabriel first gave him the message, Zechariah doubted. Because of his doubts he had been in silence. But this time there were no doubts. He wrote it, and the moment he did, his tongue was loosed, his voice returned, and he spoke.

What came out of his mouth? After nine months of silence, his first words were praise to God. **He had been waiting nine months, not to tell his own story, but to praise the God who did it all.** He blessed God and all who heard it were amazed.

Ask: If you know, share why you were given your name. Go back to verses 46-55. What are some words that Mary used to praise the Lord? What are some ways you can praise the Lord?

Pray: Take some time to praise and thank the Lord for who He is and what He has done.

December 8

Read: Luke 2:1-5, Micah 5:2

"O Little Town of Bethlehem" - It really is a little town, even today. Yet this little town is well known. But this place would have very little significance except for one thing, Jesus Christ was born there. His presence has made all the difference. Mary and Joseph knew that the Messiah was coming. Then, a Roman ruler named Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. He lived in Rome, worshiped Roman gods. This ruler wanted to be called a god. But he had no idea that his decree was about to set into motion the fulfillment of a seven-hundred-year-old Scripture regarding the One True Living God. Micah 5:2 says, "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days."

This is what we can count on: **God's Word is truth no matter what anyone says.** God's Word will be fulfilled exactly the way He wants it. The little town of Bethlehem was prophesied to be the birthplace of the Messiah, but Mary and Joseph were living in Nazareth, about ninety miles away. Mary was great with child. Her due date was right around the corner. It seems likely that they wouldn't really have wanted to take a ninety-mile hike through the Judean countryside at this stage of the game. But the prophecy said the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, and the prophecy had to be fulfilled.

Don't you love how God puts all the pieces together to fulfill His Word? Augustus just "happened" to have the idea to register the people. Coincidence? Not a chance. This was God directed, and Mary and Joseph, being descendants of King David, had to go to Bethlehem to register.

Ask: Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth. How were their lives interrupted? Discuss a time when your life was interrupted, and then you saw God at work.

Pray: Thank the Lord that He is always at work, no matter what the circumstances. Ask Him to help you trust Him.

December 9

Read: Luke 2:5, Matthew 1:20-25

Mary and Joseph were pledged to be married, betrothed. But this was not a betrothal like we understand today. The actual marriage contract was done. It was both legally and spiritually binding. They were married but had not yet lived together until the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said to take her as his wife.

The order for the census had been given. They had to go to Bethlehem. So, they began their arduous journey at this late stage of her pregnancy. We can only imagine their relief when they finally arrived knowing the time for the delivery was upon them. They needed to find a place and quickly, but Bethlehem was busy. It was filled with people. Every nook and cranny and available room was taken, filled to the brim. Mary and Joseph had no reservations. They had no preset, comfortable, spotlessly clean place for Mary to give birth. They had no white starched sheets, no brightly lit delivery room. There were no nurses or doctors waiting with open arms to greet this child. There was no room. The foretold city had no place inside its walls for the King above all kings.

But God had a plan. He had made reservations and the room of choice was a station for animals.

Babies don't wait for convenient times. They don't wait for available rooms. They come when their time is accomplished. **They arrive at the appointed time.**

Ask: What is one of the worst places you've ever stayed? What is one of the best places you've ever stayed? Describe a time when you saw God's plan come together.

Pray: Thank the Lord that He has a plan for your life.



December 10

Read: Luke 2:6-7, Jeremiah 17:9

When Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, the best rooms were already full. The worst rooms were already taken. The only accommodation left was the least accommodating. It could have been a barn, a stable, a cave. We know it was a place for animals. Today we want clean, pristine. We want the scent of antiseptic. For Mary it was dirt and smells and unpleasantness.

A very special Lamb was about to enter the world in this very special little town of Bethlehem. Mary was in the throes of labor. We have no way of knowing how long. We have no way of knowing what concern arose in Joseph's heart as he gazed into the pain wracked face of his beloved. Labor is a difficult time, but finally came the Child of the promise, a miraculous conception, a miraculous birth.

And when He was born, Mary wrapped this most precious sacrifice in strips of cloth and laid Him in a manger, a feeding trough for animals.

Why would the God of the Universe allow His pure, clean Son to be born in a place for sheep and goats and beasts of burden? We are not told for sure, but we do know that Jesus is the Lamb of God. He is the One who would bear our burdens. And perhaps God wanted us to know that **if His pure, clean, radiant, righteous Son could be born in this dirty, unclean place, He could be born in our dirty, unclean hearts.**

Ask: Have you ever been in a situation that did not feel welcome or accommodating? What happened? At church, what are some things we can do to help people feel welcome?

Pray: Pray that we will be welcoming and accommodating. Pray for visitors in our homes and in our church to feel welcome during this Christmas season.



December 11

Read: Luke 2:8-14

A quiet night, on a quiet hillside, outside a quiet little town, a flock of sheep was grazing in the fields or sleeping or baaing at the moonlit sky, simply doing their ordinary sheep thing. Their shepherds were watching and guarding and protecting, simply doing their ordinary shepherding thing, when suddenly everything went from very ordinary to very extraordinary. Again, don't you just love the "suddenlies" in the Bible? They show up and the most beautiful events suddenly take place.

At first there was one single angel who broke into the night sky terrifying the daylights out of those shepherds. How graciously he announced that they need not be afraid and then he delivered the most amazing message: **"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."**

One angel was overwhelming, but then suddenly he was joined by a multitude. We might wonder how incredible seeing one would be. But then the one was followed by an entire host of heaven. Think about it, which heavenly messenger would have wanted to stay behind during this event? And that multitude of the heavenly host was all praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

Exactly how big is a multitude? How many angels filled the sky? We don't know, but out on that Bethlehem hillside, the night sky was no longer dark. The Light had come to the world and mankind would never be the same. It took a multitude to praise God for it.

Ask: Put yourself in the place of the shepherds. How would you feel if an angel suddenly showed up to give some news? What would you do if you saw angels fill the sky?

Pray: Thank the Lord that the Light has come to the world.



December 12

Read: Luke 2:15-18, Matthew 28:18-20

This was big. This was the biggest thing that had ever happened to those shepherds. They had a visitation from angels, and they were given the directive to find the Baby lying in a manger. They probably knew where to go. Shepherds would have known where feeding troughs were located. The shepherds said, "Let's go..." They left their sheep sleeping in the fields to go, and they went in a hurry. And just like the angel told them, they found Mary and Joseph and the Baby. And just like the angel said, there He was, wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

Can you imagine their excitement as they shared the events of that night with Mary and Joseph? But then we ask, "Why shepherds?" Why was this the group the angel appeared to? Since these were most likely the shepherds who cared for the temple flocks right outside of Jerusalem, they would have been the ones to decide if an animal could be a candidate for the sacrifice.

But still, shepherds were an unlikely group to be the first eyewitnesses to the greatest event in human history. Shepherds were not considered trustworthy...only a cut above thieves. They couldn't give testimony in a court of law. And yet, the very ones who could not, the ones who lived in the shadows and not on the main stage, were the very ones God called on to do.

They went to see, to take it all in, to become true believers, but then what happened? **They left to tell.** It is an admonition for us as well. It doesn't matter if we are on the main stage, or our lives are lived a little more in the shadows. We come to see, but then we must go and tell.

Ask: Who were some unlikely people in the Bible God called on for a specific task? What are some ways we can go and tell?

Pray: Ask the Lord for boldness to share the Gospel.

December 13

Read: Luke 2:19-20, Matthew 1:21-23, Psalm 119:11

Mary's life was totally changed. She went from being consumed with her upcoming life with Joseph, to being consumed with her role as mother to the Son of God. She had witnessed angels and shepherds' reports of angels, amazing events, and miracles, but on this night of nights she saw the biggest miracle of all. Mary beheld the face of God. In chapter 1 of Matthew, we have the account of the angel speaking to Joseph in a dream. The angel had told Joseph that he would be called Immanuel, "God with us", and when Mary looked into this beautiful Baby's face, she knew. **God had come to earth and Mary was gazing into the eyes of the Lord of lords and Savior of the World.**

Then the shepherds came with their stories and soon wise men would come from the east following the star. And Mary took all the miracles and tucked them away in her heart. There were coming days when people would speak terrible things about this Child. He was going to be hated, mistreated, mocked, spit on, beaten, and crucified. Those horrible events were going to pierce her heart over and over. But during those awful moments she would be able to pull out of her treasure house the truth that she had hidden away. She would hold an arsenal of defense with the loveliness of these moments.

We can hide truth in our hearts also. We read, study, memorize, and place God's Word in our hearts and minds. Because there are so often trials and tribulations, we too need an arsenal of defense at the ready.

Ask: What are some favorite Bible verses that you rely on? What are some ways you've used to help you memorize Scripture?

Pray: Read Psalm 119:11. Ask the Lord to help you hide His word in your heart.



December 14

Read: Matthew 1:18-25, Isaiah 7:14

We sing the now famous song "Mary Did You Know?" and we ponder what Mary experienced. But what of Joseph? He doubted at first how all of this could even happen. After he first heard that Mary was expecting a child, Joseph struggled. After all, it was completely out of the natural. When he rested his head that first night after hearing the news of an upcoming child, he may have experienced some of the greatest pain and challenges he had ever known. Then the dream came, and an angel of the Lord appeared to him and spoke words of assurance. "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."

But then on this night, as he stared down into the weary face of Mary and beheld the Child, what did he feel? Did he remember back? The angel had told him Mary would give birth to a son. And here He was. Joseph was to give Him a name. The name was Jesus.

But there was more. **He was told that this child would be called Immanuel, God with us.** The reference was from the prophet Isaiah. It would have been well known to Joseph. In his schooling, he would have studied it, memorized it, prayed for it. So again, did this come flooding over Joseph as he beheld this most solemn, yet most joyous occasion? He was staring down into the fulfillment of "God with us".

Ask: Joseph saw the fulfillment of God's word. What are some ways we see God's word fulfilled? The name Jesus means Savior. Why is that important to us? How else is Jesus referred to in the Bible?

Pray: In the Bible, Jesus is referred to in many ways. Thank Him for who He is.

December 15

Read: Luke 2:21-26, 1 Corinthians 2:9

We wait. Christmas seems so far away in January. Special events that are off in the distance help us learn patience, and as we've seen, waiting is part of life's process.

And so it was in the life of a devout, righteous man named Simeon. Waiting, praying, watching, every day, would this be the day? Every time someone came into the temple, would this be the One? The Bible doesn't tell us his age. Was he at that age, when instead of death being a faraway someday reality, it was a close, perhaps today, reality? We don't know. We do know God had spoken to Simeon and had given him an amazing promise. He would not see death until he saw the Lord's Christ.

When surveys are taken asking people what they most fear, death often tops the list. But for the believer, death is not something to be feared, it is a transition. It is the ahh moment when we finally reach home after a long journey. It's the joy of seeing our family again after a long separation. It's the amazing wonder of being in a place we have never experienced and yet knowing it's home. It is glory, joy, peace, love, and a host of words we do not know because mere words are not big enough to describe the wonders that God has prepared for those who love Him.

Simeon was not afraid to die, but he didn't want to miss the miraculous. He knew it was close. He had studied the Scriptures. He may have looked closely at the book of Daniel and realized the time. He may have poured over the Psalms and read the prophet Isaiah and had that deep awareness that the Messiah would soon make His appearance. Luke tells us he was waiting for the consolation of Israel. He was looking forward to that day. Simeon had heard from God and God said he would live to see it. No, death would not come for Simeon until the Lord came.

Ask: What was Simeon looking forward to? What are some things you look forward to in the Christmas season?

Pray: Simeon was looking forward to the coming of Christ. We can thank the Lord this Christmas season that He has already come.

December 16

Read: Luke 2:27-35

The day dawned, and the Holy Spirit urged Simeon to head to the temple. It might have looked like an ordinary day to everyone else. But this was no ordinary day. Jesus was coming.

Simeon saw a mother, a father, and a Baby. They had come to fulfill the law of Moses to present Jesus at the temple. Simeon knew. Because he saw with eyes that went beyond just seeing, he knew he was SEEING straight into the face of God. Imagine the joy, the awe as he reached out and took this Child in his arms. "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."

Simeon, in just a few short words, was declaring that this One, this Child, this Savior had come, and He came for everyone! Salvation, revelation, and glory had come for Israel and for the Gentiles. Salvation had come and it was going to be for all who were living then, for all who were living afterward, and for all who are living today, offered for all of us and our children and grandchildren.

But just like Simeon, we must reach out and take hold of the Savior.

Ask: How did an ordinary day become extraordinary for Simeon? Simeon experienced great joy as he looked at Jesus, the fulfillment of the Scripture. What have you experienced as you've looked at the Scripture?

Pray: Thank the Lord that salvation is for everyone who will receive the Savior.



December 17

Read: Luke 2:36-40

A bride, a wife for only seven years, she undoubtedly loved her husband, because after his death, Anna wanted no other. She was left with no children. She could have grieved herself to death. She could have grieved herself to bitterness. She could have grieved herself into obscurity. But she did not. She prayed and fasted and where we find Anna is in the pages of the New Testament, Luke's account of Mary and Joseph taking Jesus to the temple for the dedication. Anna had been there ever since her husband died decades before, knowing that her mission was prayer and fasting. It might have been a shadow ministry, because women were not in the forefront of the temple's on-goings, but Anna was not in the shadows with God. She spent her time talking, communing with Him.

Then one day she knew. It was the time. Anna came and she saw a young family, father, mother, and this tiny Baby in their arms. She had spent so much time with the Lord that, of course, she recognized Him. He was there, right there in the temple. She could now see the Promised One with her own eyes.

Anna waited, prayed, and fasted for all the years past those seven lovely years of marriage. Her life was about prayer, but at this time, her ministry was about to become a little more public. On this day, the Bible says she gave thanks to God and began to speak of Him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. Anna was telling everyone who would listen. She was boldly proclaiming Christ. Can't you just see her? This elderly little woman perhaps even running excitedly up to people sharing, "He's here! The One we've been praying for is here!"

Sometimes our ministries change, but God always calls us to share our faith. At the age of eighty-four, or twenty-four, or one hundred and four, what is God calling us to do? Who is that person God is bringing across our path to share with today?

Ask: During this Christmas season, what are some ways we can share our faith? Anna's ministry was a prayer ministry. Discuss some ministries that you could be a part of.

Pray: Let's ask the Lord to bring people across our paths to share with.

December 18

Read: Matthew 2:1-2

And the news went out. We aren't quite sure how they knew, but the Magi from the east heard. We don't know how much they knew, but the information compelled them to travel to Jerusalem. They knew the King of the Jews had been born, and they wanted to find Him. On our Christmas cards and in holiday movies, we see three of them, riding majestically atop well-behaved camels. Their robes are lovely, and their head-dresses are grand. They have jewel encrusted boxes in their hands and some stories have even awarded them names. But if we do a fact check, what we actually know about them is very little. These Magi or wise men traveled from the east to find Jesus. We are not told how many there were, what they looked like, any names, how old they were, how far they traveled, or even if they rode camels, but we can tell from the text that these were men who were on a quest to find the King.

Finding the King. What a fascinating thought. These men from the east wanted to meet Him, worship Him, and present Him with gifts. So, this Christmas time, it is a good challenge for us. Do we want to meet the King? Are we on the quest to meet Him, worship Him, and present Him with gifts?

We don't have to travel to Jerusalem. He is only a prayer away. We can worship Him any time, any place with our praise, thanksgiving, prayers, songs.

And the gifts we give can be the very things He has equipped us to do, teaching, helping, singing, giving, sharing our faith, spending time in His Word. They were called Magi or wise men. They were seeking Him. **And people who are wise today still seek Him.**

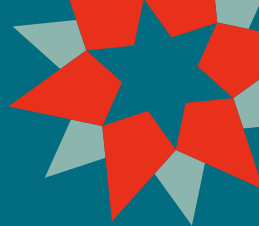
Ask: What are gifts that you can bring to Jesus? What are some ways you know God has equipped you? How can you use those gifts?

Pray: Take some time to praise, thank, and worship our Savior.



December 19

Read: Daniel 1, Numbers 24:17



Here's a question: How did the Magi know to seek the King? Hmm, good question. And here is the simple answer: We don't know. But could we take a walk down the lane of possibilities and simply wonder?

Let's start in the book of Daniel. We know from that text that Daniel and his three friends were among those who were captured and taken to Babylon as slaves. They lost everything. It would have been heartbreaking. But in spite of their dire circumstances, they determined to honor the Lord. In time, everyone in the kingdom recognized them for their faith and dedication to God. Everyone in the kingdom also recognized that they had distinguished themselves as the wisest men in the land. We do not know the extent of their legacy of faith and wisdom, but we know it would have been marked by the Word of God. It is who they were. And Daniel stood above them all. He was made the chief of the wise men.

Were there things that over the course of his life he taught to the others coming behind him? Did he teach them how to fast, how to stand, how to pray, how to kneel, how to worship the one true living God? Did he introduce them to the One who closed the jaws of the lions? Did he explore each book of Scripture with them? Did he point out the prophecies that would be fulfilled at the birth of the Savior? Is it possible that Daniel taught from the book of Numbers about a star that one day would appear? "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel..." Then, had this Word been passed down from generation to generation of all these wise men assuring them that one day a special star would appear? And when it did, did these wise men feel compelled to follow it and seek the King of the Jews because for generations they had been looking?

Could it be that Daniel, who had distinguished himself as the best and the brightest among the wise men, left this legacy of faith and prophecy for those who would one day be searching the skies and "suddenly" they would see the star that compelled them to follow? Hmm, good question. But here is another question: What is the legacy we will leave behind?

Ask: What is the legacy you hope to leave behind?
What are things you can do to build that legacy?

Pray: Pray this from Hebrews 12: "And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith."

December 20

Read: Matthew 2:3, Philipians 2:6-11

The wise men arrived in Jerusalem. When Herod heard the question from the Magi, he was troubled, disturbed. And no wonder, Magi from the east had traveled a great distance to find a new King. They hadn't come to visit Herod. They had come all that way to find a different King. What would that mean for Herod's throne?

History tells us that Herod lived a very disturbed lifestyle. The slightest threat to his kingdom was met with prison or violence. Enemies, even family, didn't have a chance if he suspected they were a threat. It was said that it was safer to be a pig in his household, than it was to be one of his sons. He was determined that no one would take his crown. Suddenly, he was being faced with a new King. And this King even had a star announcing His presence. There had been no such announcement when Herod was born or rose to the throne. Disturbed? Absolutely!

We can't enter the recesses of his heart and mind, but we do know that as he heard this, a plan was hatched to put an end to anyone who would be announced as a king of the Jews. He didn't couch it that way initially. He would make it sound as if his plan was to worship. But there would be no such agenda. From the moment he heard, his troubled heart was bringing darkness to the table. He wanted to rid the world of this new King. **What Herod didn't understand is that it is impossible to stop God's plan.** This King that had been born was not just the King of the Jews. He was King of kings and Lord of lords. The star announcing His birth was just the beginning.

Ask: Why was Herod so disturbed when the wise men showed up in Jerusalem?

What are some ways you've seen people react today to the Christmas story?

Pray: Pray that people will have eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to receive the real meaning of Christmas.

December 21

Read: Matthew 2:4-6, Micah 5:2

Herod didn't like it one bit that these strangers came from a distant land seeking a different King. Then they asked the question, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" Herod didn't have an answer. For years he believed that he was the king of the Jews. This was unnerving. He needed clarification.

It's fascinating where Herod went for counsel to get the answer. He didn't ask his advisors. He didn't go to his cabinet or top officials. He went to the religious leaders. He believed they would give him the correct information based on the Word of God. And they came back with the answer found in the pages of the prophet Micah. That's curious, don't you think? He trusted that the Scripture would have the answer as to where the King would be born but had no interest in following the King. It's evident that through the years Herod paid little attention to what the ancient prophets said. If he had, he would have known the answer to the wise men's question. He didn't.

Often people struggle believing what the Bible says. They might think it is archaic, or too rigid, too restrictive, only partially true, you know, believing only the parts we like.

But here's the thing: the truth of God's Word is not contingent on our belief. Whether we believe it or not, God's Word is His Word. It will happen. He means what He says from beginning to end. And the proof of that was standing in front of Herod. He was told that from little Bethlehem would come the ruler of Israel. The wise men got their answer and prepared to leave. Outwardly, Herod feigned interest. Inwardly, he seethed, and his decisions would cost him eternity.

Ask: Herod needed an answer to a question. What questions do you have about the Bible? Where can you go to find answers?

Pray: Pray that God will give you greater understanding of His Word.

December 22

Read: Matthew 2:7-8, Hebrews 10:23-25

That star...they saw it. It was there. Perhaps at first just a glimmer, but then as it grew brighter, they knew, it was a brand-new shining light in the night sky. Nothing like this had ever happened before. This wasn't just any star. This star pointed to a promise about to be fulfilled.

They were called Magi, astrologers, star gazers, some of royal birth, the wisest men in the realm. They were the ones used to interpret dreams and read the secrets in the sky. But this new star couldn't just be read; this star had to be followed. And men who were wise made the long trek to find the King. For these wise men, how many months was it? How many miles was it? How did they count the cost of the trip? For them, the distance, the time, the cost didn't enter the equation. They followed.

But for Herod, it did matter. We don't have many details about the timeline. But we can make some assumptions based on Herod's response after he realized the Magi had not returned. He chose the number of years as two to try to rid himself of the chance for the newborn King to survive. What he hadn't counted on was the God of the Universe telling Joseph to escape. Again, God's plan would not be thwarted.

No, the Bible doesn't give us many details about these wise men, but it does tell us why they came. **They saw His star in the east and came for one reason...to worship the King.** So, let's ask ourselves this question: does time, distance, cost enter the equation for us when it comes to worshiping the King?

Ask: What are some hinderances to people worshiping the King? What are some promises from the Bible that were fulfilled in the birth of Christ? What are some promises you've relied on in your walk with the Lord?

Pray: Ask the Lord to help you become more committed to worshiping Him.



December 23

Read: Matthew 2:9-11, Hosea 11:1

Baby showers are sweet celebrations. Plush toys, delicately crocheted blankets, tiny shoes, frilly dresses, soft pastel sleepers, almost collectively everyone takes a deep breath followed by “oohs” and “aahs” and “isn’t that cute”.

But let’s step back and examine one from Matthew 2. The Magi were headed with gifts for a special Baby. They had no GPS, no road signs, no billboards with neon arrows blinking, “This way”. But they did have a special light that broke through the dark night sky and illuminated the way. The star they had followed to Jerusalem then lead them to the very place where the Child resided. And they brought presents. The gifts that were showered on Jesus were gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The Magi traveled quite a distance for this shower. They came carrying their gifts. But why these? Why gold, frankincense, and myrrh? Gold is useful; it would have been a monetary exchange. God placed it into the hearts of the wise men to bring it. When Joseph and Mary had to flee with Jesus to Egypt to avoid Herod, this may very well have supported them. But gold hints at something beyond its usefulness. Gold is the gift of kings. It is for palaces and royalty. Frankincense was a fragrant spice, part of the incense used in the temple by the priests. Frankincense spoke of the priesthood. But then there was myrrh. This especially was not a gift that one would normally bring for an infant. This aromatic resin was used in preparing a body for burial. Myrrh was a death spice that for its scent to be released had to be crushed.

Gold for a King. Frankincense for a priest. Myrrh for a death that was already woven into the fabric of God’s grand plan. Three very special gifts. How fitting.

Ask: Looking back, what has been a gift that has been especially memorable for you? What made it memorable? If you had been with the wise men, what gift would you have wanted to bring?

Pray: Thank the Lord that He is the King. Thank the Lord that He is our Great High Priest who makes intercession for us. Thank the Lord that He came as the ultimate sacrifice and gave His life for us.

December 24

Read: Matthew 2:12-15

Have you noticed that when confronted with greatness, we react? At a sports event, during an incredible play, people respond with yells and screams and cheers. When someone famous walks into a room, the crowd often stands to their feet. When beautiful inspiring music is played, the audience erupts with outbursts of applause. Why? Because it is in us. We were made to express our awe and amazement.

When the wise men saw Jesus, they were overjoyed. They were overcome with a desire to express their exuberant gladness. But they didn't rise to their feet; they knelt at His. They didn't yell and scream; they worshiped.

They came looking for the King of the Jews; they met the King of kings. They presented their gifts; they received a greater gift.

The Bible says God warned them to return home by a different route because Herod did not want to worship Jesus, he wanted to kill Him. So, the Magi obeyed God and went home a different way. What is interesting is that the phrase, "a different route", can also mean a different manner of life. In other words, they went home different. They were changed men. They had worshiped at the feet of Immanuel, God with us, and they would never be the same again. Yes, when we respond to the greatness of men, it might be exciting. But when we respond to the greatness of God, we are changed. True worship changes us. We go home different.

Ask: How has worshiping the Lord made a difference in your life? What are some ways you can increase your worship of the Lord in your everyday life?

Pray: List some of the character qualities of Jesus. Give Him praise and worship for each of those.



December 25

Read: John 3:16, Romans 3:23, 6:23, 10:9-10

It's Christmas! The day, that for the last 364 days, we've been anticipating. December 25th is a time of wonder and excitement. It's a day of celebration with family and friends. It can be strewn with the wrappings of opened presents and inundated with the scents and exquisite tastes of the season.

But what it can also be, and actually should be, is a day of remembrance. A day to not only reflect on gifts, but to reflect on The Gift. **Christmas exists because of the greatest Gift ever given.** Before God spoke the first word that set creation into motion, the plan was in His heart. Man would need a Savior. Sin entered, and because of that, each of our hearts has been tainted and stained. Romans 3:23 tells us, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." And all means all.

So then, if we are all sinners, what does that mean for us? Romans 6:23 makes it very clear. "For the wages of sin is death..." Wait, it's Christmas, we can't be talking about something so morbid as death, because death is sobering and scary. But God's word is true, and that's what it says, we deserve death.

So, it's a very good thing that Romans 6:23 doesn't end there with death. It keeps going to talk about a gift. The verse continues with this. "...but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

We deserve death and what is offered is NOT death, but rather a gift, the gift of life, eternal life. And it's FREE!

Here's the thing about gifts: when one is offered to us, we must receive it. If it sits under the tree, never opened, never used, what good is it?

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This gift of eternal life is offered. John 3:16 says it like this, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." And whoever means each of us.

Romans 10:9-10 tells us how we can have this amazing gift. "... if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved."

Wow! What a gift! And every man, woman, boy, and girl can have it. We just need to receive it. That can happen this very day. And how's that for Merry Christmas!

Ask: Have you received the gift of eternal life? If the answer is "Yes", then thank the Lord for the amazing gift of salvation. If you're not sure, then you can receive that gift by simply asking in a prayer something like this:

Pray: Dear Jesus, I realize I am a sinner. I believe you died on the cross to pay for my sin and that you rose from the dead. Please forgive me for my sin. I receive your gift of eternal life. Thank you for forgiving me and washing away my sin. Thank you for dying for me. Help me to live for you. I pray in your name, Jesus, Amen.







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