

THE
GOOD NEWS
AND HOPE
OF THE CHRISTMAS STORY

A 25-Day Advent Devotional

BY PAUL FOWLER

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Forward

The story of Christmas is one of Love, Hope, and Good News throughout eternity. It is the story of a God who loves us so much that He came in the form of a man, Jesus Christ, the son of God. Although many of us know the story very well – of a census and traveling and no room at the inn – there are many important things that came before or after, that fulfill the Old Testament prophecy that Jesus is the Messiah.

Our hope is that you take time to read a devotional each day of Advent, as well as the passage of Scripture on which each devotional is based, and reflect on the incredible work of God during this season of Advent. It's easy with all the shopping, events, parties, and traveling to miss the true message of Christmas. Set aside some time this season so that the story becomes just as hopeful as the first time you heard it.

These devotionals can be for your own individual study or perhaps for a conversation around the dinner table. John 20:31 says, “these things were written that you might know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you might have eternal life.” May that be so for you and those you love.

Paul Fowler

DECEMBER 1

Read: Matthew 1:1-16a

The gospels of Matthew and Luke contain the Christmas story as we know it today. Although both books record a genealogy of Jesus, the genealogies differ at certain places. Matthew's is considered by some to be the genealogy of Joseph, Mary's husband, starting with Abraham. This indicates that Matthew was focusing on a Jewish audience because Abraham is the father of the nation of Israel.

The significance of recording the lineage is to show the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12, that God would bless all the peoples of the earth through Abraham's family. What no one knew at that time is that the blessing would be Jesus, the Son of God.

This lineage through the Abrahamic Covenant (God's promise to Abraham) shows that Jesus Christ, the Messiah (meaning *deliverer*), was God's plan from the very beginning. God knew how our story would go and knew that a deliverer would be required to save us from sin. Throughout the Old Testament, even during the exile mentioned in Matthew 1:12, the Abrahamic lineage had been protected from a war-torn, ancient, near-eastern culture. Despite the faithlessness of some listed in this genealogy (many of whom have stories in the Old Testament), God proved that He is always faithful to His promises.

This is the Good News and the Hope of Christmas.

Discussion:

- Do any of the characters in the genealogy stand out to you?
- How does the Christmas story remind you of God's faithfulness despite our shortcomings?
- In what ways have you seen God's faithfulness to your family or life?

Prayer:

Thank God for being faithful to His promises.

DECEMBER 2

Read: Luke 3:23-38

In the gospel of Luke, it is not until after the story of the birth of Christ that we read the genealogy of Jesus as He is beginning His ministry on earth. As mentioned yesterday with the reading of Matthew 1, this is the second, and differing, genealogy of Jesus. Although Joseph is included, this is considered to be the genealogy of Mary. Mary could not be the *son of* as is mentioned throughout this passage, so by ancient near-eastern tradition, Joseph is listed as *son*. The other major difference here is that Luke takes the genealogy all the way back to the beginning of human history, to Adam, as mentioned in verse 38.

In the story of Adam (Genesis 3), a curse was put on the serpent and on humanity. The offspring of Adam and Eve would overcome Satan (“crush the head of the serpent”). Paul explains this further in 1 Corinthians 15:22 to say, “for as in Adam all die but in Christ all will be made alive.” Jesus Christ is the *second Adam* who brings us the Hope of eternal life, in contrast to what we inherited from the first Adam, which was death from sin.

Through this genealogy, we see the sovereignty of God’s plan from the first sin to the ultimate sacrifice for all sin. Here again we see the faithfulness of God to send a Savior who would crush the head of the serpent. No one knew in

Genesis 3 that God was speaking of Himself; that Jesus, very God and the son of God, would be our Deliverer. Thousands of years before any of us were born, our salvation was prophesied and carried out.

This is the Good News and the Hope of Christmas.

Discussion:

- Like yesterday, do any of the characters in the genealogy stand out to you?
- How does the sovereignty of God, meaning His power, wisdom and authority, encourage you this season?
- What ways have you seen God's sovereignty in your own life?

Prayer:

Thank God for His sovereignty.

DECEMBER 3

Read: Luke 1:5-17

Before the birth of Christ was prophesied to Mary, we are introduced in Luke to Zechariah and Elizabeth. Luke describes them in v. 6 as being righteous and blameless. Although they certainly were excellent servants of God to be labeled as such, Luke gives the back story that they were old and had no children.

Zechariah is a priest, serving his term by entering the temple and burning incense. Serving as a priest was considered a great honor. We see that he was chosen for this duty by the casting of lots, which often times in the Bible was performed to divine God's will. While Zechariah is in the temple, an angel named Gabriel appears with Good News. He and Elizabeth had prayed for children in their earlier years, and apparently, that prayer had not only been heard but was finally being answered. Not only would they have a child, but this child was special in that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his birth. This child would "make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (v. 16) as prophesied by the prophet Malachi (Malachi 3:1), and would be called John the Baptist, another important part of the Messianic prophecy.

What I appreciate in this story is that the angel tells Zechariah that their prayers have been answered. I'm sure that he and Elizabeth's childlessness had been a

deep personal struggle for many years. Although we don't always get the things that we pray for, what we do know is that God always knows and hears our prayers. The greatest need of all, the coming of the Messiah for whom John was to prepare the way, has been answered in Jesus Christ coming to earth.

This is the Good News and the Hope of Christmas.

Discuss:

- What things are you praying for?
- What ways have you seen God answer your prayers with a yes or no?
- Are you encouraged that God hears your prayers? Why or why not?

Pray:

Thank God that He knows and hears our prayers.

DECEMBER 4

Read: Luke 1:18-22

Even though the angel Gabriel, a supernatural being that has just appeared to Zechariah face to face and tells him that his prayers have been answered, Zechariah's response is one of doubt. He responds, "How can I be sure of this?" (v. 18). Gabriel's response is offered as a correction to Zachariah's doubt. He tells Zechariah three things: that he (Gabriel) stands in the presence of God, that he was sent by God to deliver this news, and that because of Zechariah's unbelief he will be unable to speak until the day of his son John's birth.

It's hard to imagine how Zechariah could not believe the words of an angel speaking to him. Zechariah was unable to overcome that he and Elizabeth were too old to conceive a child, even though such earthly things are easily overcome by God's power. God's corresponding lesson, making Zechariah unable to speak, likely gave Zechariah plenty of proof that God can truly do anything.

We've all had difficult times or situations in our lives that we've lived with for so long that it's hard to believe that things could ever get better. Even though Zechariah encountered an angel sent from God to tell him that his prayers had been answered, Zechariah still could not believe. So, our lesson is that no matter what we are going

through, there is always hope. Most importantly, our greatest need has already been satisfied with the birth of Christ—our reminder that God is faithful.

This is the Good News and the Hope of Christmas.

Discuss:

- Have you experienced a time when God overcame situations in your life that seemed impossible?
- What is one need in your life that you're praying for, that might seem impossible to fulfill?
- Do you believe that God will overcome that need? Why or why not?

Pray:

Pray that God would overcome the impossible in your own life.

DECEMBER 5

Read: Luke 1:23-25

Zechariah heads home still unable to speak to his wife Elizabeth. Elizabeth becomes pregnant, as prophesied by the angel Gabriel, and she waits in seclusion for 5 months. The Bible doesn't say why she waited in seclusion but perhaps she had suffered a miscarriage and wanted to be certain the child was growing strong in her womb. Her comment after this time, in v. 25, is, "The Lord has done this for me." Elizabeth had been waiting years for a child and now she not only sees God's favor, she no longer feels inferior to others in her society who often looked down on barren women.

Although Zechariah is not able to speak to her the words from the angel, Elizabeth knows that God has seen her need and heard her prayers. She acknowledges that this is not just another coincidental good thing in life but the work of God. At the same time, she brings to light the pain she had carried from feeling looked down on by others.

Perhaps you've had times in your life where you've seen God's favor in your difficult times. You have also had times where you felt looked down on by others. Maybe for some of you, the story of a childless woman hits too close to home. Or, if you've gone through a divorce, lost your job, or are unsure of where to attend university, you might

have felt societal pressure. Elizabeth had to wait many years until the right time for her prayers to be answered. Whatever you are going through in life, know that God knows your struggle and hears your prayer. The gift of the incarnational God, meaning God becoming human, is that He actually knows what your struggle feels like.

That is the Good News and the Hope of Christmas.

Discuss:

- Have you had a time in life where you felt looked down on by others?
- Have you had a time in your life where you saw things happen and realized that God had done them for you?
- What are you praying for this season that only God can do for you?

Pray:

Ask God to do only what He can do in your life.

DECEMBER 6

Read: Luke 1:26-33

The angel Gabriel, who spoke to Zechariah in the temple, now heads to Galilee to a young, engaged woman named Mary. He tells Mary that God is with her. Like what happened with Zechariah, Gabriel must reassure Mary and let her know not to be afraid. You can imagine that if you were to see an angel and hear him speak to you, that your first emotion would likely be fear. Gabriel tells Mary that she is going to have a child and instructs her to name Him *Jesus*. This Jesus, Gabriel explains, will be “Son of the Most High” and will reign on “the throne of His father David.”

Mary goes from being a common woman living in Galilee to being told that her son would be the Son of God. Not only that, but she is told to embrace her kingly heritage in the line of David, the greatest king of Israel. The prophet Nathan tells David in 2 Samuel 7, that David’s kingdom will be established forever through his lineage. Mary and the rest of the Jews living under Roman rule in Israel had perhaps given up on the fulfillment of this prophecy, but yet again, we see that another prophecy will be fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

God often uses ordinary people for extraordinary purposes. David was the youngest of his brothers and was

a shepherd until God called him to be King of Israel. Mary was going on about life, being engaged to Joseph, until God called her to give birth to the Messiah. Although God can do all things, He lovingly allows us to be a part of His story for His great purposes.

This is the Good News and Hope of Christmas.

Discuss:

- What ways have you seen God call you to do great things for Him?
- Is there something that you sense God might be calling you to step into?
- Will you be prepared to make time and space in your life for what God might ask of you?

Pray:

Ask God to guide you into what greater purpose He has for your life.

DECEMBER 7

Read: Luke 1:34-38

After Mary is startled by an angel and learns she is going to have a son who will be the Son of God and a King, she responds by asking, “How will this be?” The difference between Mary’s response and Zechariah’s, is that Mary wants to know how it can be. Zechariah wanted to know how he could be sure. Mary wants to know the process, whereas Zechariah wanted proof. The angel explains how the work of the Trinity will be manifested in Mary’s life through the Holy Spirit, the Most High, resulting in the birth of the Son of God. Gabriel reinforces to Mary that no word of God “will ever fail.” Mary’s response is that she “is the Lord’s servant.”

Seven days into this great story, we have seen God’s word fulfilled to Adam and Eve, Abraham, David and more. Even though these times were difficult and oppressive in Israel’s history, it didn’t mean that God could not still fulfill His word. Mary’s response is not simply that she believes in God’s word, but that she is applying it in her life by being a servant of the Lord.

Two-thousand years after the birth of Christ, we can still be certain that God’s word will never fail. The birth of Christ – the Christmas story – validates our certainty in God’s word. He gives us His word because it is through

it that we have a written record of His promises and His faithful fulfillment of them. Our response, like Mary's, should not be to simply believe, but to live as servants of God as He accomplishes His word.

This is the Good News and the Hope of Christmas.

Discuss:

- Does the birth of Christ, fulfilling the words spoken by God, give you Hope? Why or why not?
- What ways have you seen God's word fulfilled in your life?
- In light of God's fulfillment of His word, what ways can you serve Him?

Pray:

Ask God how you can serve Him.

DECEMBER 8

Read: Luke 1:39-45

Once Mary learns that she will conceive a child, and that her relative, Elizabeth, is already pregnant, she rushes to see her. Elizabeth's child, who was prophesied to have the Holy Spirit even in the womb, leaps for joy. Elizabeth is suddenly filled with the Holy Spirit and asks why the "mother of my Lord should come to me?" Before Mary can even explain that she is also pregnant and who her child will be, Elizabeth, filled with Spirit, confirms what Mary has been told by the angel Gabriel. Elizabeth tells Mary that she is blessed because Mary "believed that the Lord would fulfill His promises to her."

I'm not sure why Mary went to see Elizabeth, but it was not because Mary had doubts. Elizabeth not only validates what the angel told Mary about the child she was going to have, but she also validates that Mary already believed what the angel said.

I'm unsure what would have happened if Mary had doubted or had not believed. Perhaps God would have chosen someone else or perhaps she could have been silenced like Zechariah. Either outcome would have been an unfortunate consequence of unbelief. What would be hardest to believe: having a child in old age, having a child as a virgin, or God coming down to live among us?

The Christmas story puts before us an opportunity to also believe in God; a God who loves us enough to live among us and die for us.

This is the Good News and Hope of Christmas.

Discuss:

- Do you believe in the miraculous work of God at Christmas? Why or why not?
- How different would your life be if you did not believe in God's fulfillment of His promises?
- In what ways is God calling you to greater belief in His word this season?

Pray:

Thank God for fulfilling His promises through the birth of Christ.

DECEMBER 9

Read: Luke 1:46-56

Mary's response to Elizabeth calling her blessed among women is to first give glory to God (v. 47) and then reinforce herself as a servant (v. 48). She acknowledges that from now on, all generations will call her blessed (v. 48) but only because of what the *Mighty One* has done for her (v. 49). Her song puts the focus on what God has done and will do. The proud, the rulers, and the rich, will be humbled, while the humble and hungry, embodied in the people of Israel under Roman rule, will be helped.

It's not a sin to be a ruler nor to be rich, but it's a sin to think that your status or wealth makes you better than others (the sin of pride) (v. 51). Mary's song shows that the only one worthy of glory is God, not those with power and riches. No matter what position in society we have, or what socioeconomic class we are in, we should view ourselves like Mary, as servants.

The greatest example of being a servant is the person Mary's song is about, the *Mighty One*, God. Jesus could have been born into a rich and powerful family, but He was born into a humble family. Jesus could have come down as a fully grown human, but He came into a humble state as a child. Jesus could have claimed that He is the only one worthy of glory, but instead He came down as a

humble servant and His glory was shown through how He lived. If Jesus, who is worthy of all power and glory, uses His position to serve us, we can also use our position and gifts to serve others.

That is the Good News and Hope of Christmas —for poor and rich alike.

Discuss:

- What ways have you seen God’s mighty power in your own life?
- How does the Christmas story of the God of the universe coming as a child encourage you?
- How can you use your position and power to serve others in society?

Pray:

Thank God that He is all powerful and for sending Jesus to come and serve us.

Bonus:

Listen to Bach’s Magnificat.

DECEMBER 10

Read: Luke 1:57-80

For Zechariah and Elizabeth, the time for the birth of their first and only son had come. Elizabeth names him John as God had instructed Zechariah through the angel Gabriel. Although there was disagreement about that name, Zechariah confirms that the name should be John, and is immediately able to speak again because he obeyed God's instruction. His first words are to praise God through song.

Zechariah's song praises God for salvation, which is mentioned numerous times throughout these 13 verses. Zechariah mentions everything we have seen fulfilled in Jesus Christ as told by Abraham, David, and the prophets. He turns to bless his own son, John, and says that John will prepare the way for Jesus so that people will have salvation.

Luke wants us to understand the importance of this main message, so he repeats it over and over throughout this first chapter: the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. This is no ordinary birth, this is no ordinary child, this is not a change in plan but has been The Plan. The greatest news for us in this story is salvation. Our greatest need based on our greatest struggle is found, now that salvation has come through the birth of Jesus Christ.

This is the Good News and the Hope of Christmas.

Discuss:

- When you think of Christmas, does salvation come into your mind? Why or why not?
- Do you believe that your salvation is found in Jesus Christ?
- How does your salvation affect the way you live your every-day life?

Pray:

Thank God for the birth of Jesus Christ, which means salvation for us.

DECEMBER 11

Read: Matthew 1:18-21

At this point in the story, we see the future husband of the woman who is now pregnant. I'm unsure if Mary told Joseph that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit, but either way, as someone who was faithful to the law as well as gracious, he was planning to end their engagement quietly. However, an angel appears again, but this time to Joseph, and explains what is taking place here. Joseph learns that this is no ordinary child.

Mary is told that her son will be the Son of God and a King, and Joseph is told that the child will be called Jesus. Jesus is the Greek translation of the name *Joshua*, which means *the Lord saves*. So, like His name means, Jesus will save people from their sins. Salvation has come through Jesus.

The story of a birth outside of marriage was one of scandal and of shame. Joseph, although doing so quietly, followed the law in divorcing Mary. This is just the beginning of a story of grace covering all things. Jesus is faithful to the law, not by punishing us quietly for our sins, but by taking the punishment for us.

The Good News and Hope of Christmas is how our sin, which should bring us great shame, is forgiven by God's grace through salvation.

Discuss:

- How does it strike you that Jesus name means *the Lord saves*?
- As you reflect on times when you have fallen short, does your salvation bring greater joy?
- What ways can God's salvation give us strength in our struggle with sin?

Pray:

Thank God that His Son turns our shame into salvation.

DECEMBER 12

Read: Matthew 1:22-25

When Joseph wakes up from this dream with the angel, he doesn't end his engagement to Mary, and he gives the child the name Jesus. Matthew explains that this is yet another fulfilled prophecy about the Messiah. Isaiah 7-12 is full of prophecies that find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. This prophesy of the virgin birth is found early in chapter 7 as it commences Isaiah's treatise on Immanuel.

Immanuel means *God with us*. After all the strife and difficulty that the people of Israel were facing due to their lack of obedience, Isaiah brings a message of Hope, that God would be with His people. Isaiah 9 talks about a people walking in darkness, now seeing a great light. This light is Immanuel, who would be born and called *Wonderful, Counselor and the Almighty God* and more. That one day, as it says in Isaiah 11, when the lion would lay down with the lamb—this is Immanuel. The response in Isaiah 12 is praise for salvation; this is not only what Jesus does on the cross, but it is what His name means.

There is no requirement for God to be *God with us*. Other religions believe in humans who transcend life itself to become gods, but this the story of God who descends from the heavens to become human. *God with us* demonstrates His love for us that surpasses human understanding.

This is the Good News and the Hope of Christmas.

Discuss:

- What does it mean to you that God is Immanuel, God with us, through Jesus Christ?
- What does it say about God's character and nature that He would become one of us?
- How does His example of incarnation affect how we love and serve others?

Pray:

Thank God for being Immanuel, God with us.

DECEMBER 13

Read: Luke 2:1-5

Based on historical records outside of the Bible, the census during Caesar Augustus' time was a common occurrence and its historicity is easily validated. However, the fact that Joseph went from Nazareth to Bethlehem during Quirinius' rule as governor of Syria, doesn't line up well with Matthew's gospel, which indicates that Herod was still alive and ruling in Jerusalem. This discrepancy reflects changes that historical calendars have undergone over the ages. Thus, the exact date of Jesus' birth-year cannot be accurately determined; only that it occurred within a 4- to 8-year window of 1 A.D., which is the year He would most logically have been born.

No matter how the journey to Bethlehem came about, Jesus' birth in Bethlehem was an important part of biblical prophecy. Micah 5:2 says that a ruler from old and from ancient days would come out of Bethlehem—another part of this incredible story that shows that this was no ordinary birth of just another human, but the incredible birth of a King.

How an ordinary census helps fulfil prophecy is a testament to the sovereignty of God. No matter what ordinary people, or even rulers, in this world do, God will still accomplish His purposes. I'm sure that it was no easy

task to move back home to be counted, especially when Mary was very pregnant with child. It would have been a long difficult journey. In the midst of this difficulty we see that God was validating the birth of this child who is King and our Savior.

This is the Good News and the Hope of Christmas.

Discuss:

- What would your response be to a requirement to move back home to be counted with your family?
- Have you seen God use the ordinary everyday things in life to move you into His purposes? How?
- Are there ways that you see God using ordinary things in your life today for your good?

Pray:

Thank God that He accomplishes His will amid everyday occurrences.

DECEMBER 14

Read: Luke 2:6-7

It's on this day in our devotional – Luke 2: 6-7 –that the birth of Jesus is recorded, even though it is still many days before we will celebrate Christmas. We are talking about the birth now because there is a lot that leads up to His birth and a lot that comes afterwards. To grasp the details of this story, we've been reading small parts of the story and acknowledging God's hand behind it and the many prophecies that have been fulfilled through it. However, there is no prophecy that Jesus was to be born in a manger.

What we don't see as this point is some lavish spectacular event where Jesus is born into a magnificent family, in a beautiful home, with a renaissance-style halo around Him and His mother. We see King Jesus being born into very humble standings and lying in a manger—an animal feeding trough. This is not some birth folklore with delusions of grandeur. This is the story of a less than common family who gave birth, likely in a barn, and laid the baby in what they could find.

There is perhaps some helpful strategy behind everything taking place under humble circumstances. If Jesus is the Immanuel, the God with us, and had been born into privilege, it would be hard for us to relate to Him, and it

would be easy for us to doubt that He understands our human condition and needs. Creating a narrative of a religion based on such a humble birth, however, is not seen in other religions and highlights the validity of who was born. Jesus arrives to save the world in a humble state yet is still the King of Kings.

This is the Good News and the Hope of Christmas.

Discuss:

- Why do you think God chose to have His son, Jesus Christ, born into such humble standing?
- Does this humble birth give you more or less appreciation for Jesus being Immanuel, God with us? Why?
- In what ways does this birth help you see that God knows your human experience?

Pray:

Thank God that He is the God with us.

DECEMBER 15

Read: Luke 2:8-12

If the story of the Son of God being born as a human being and laid in a manger isn't humble enough, the choice of revealing Himself to shepherds continues this common birth. At the same time, to whom else should the birth of the Great Shepherd be told than to actual shepherds? At first, a single angel appears and announces Good News of great joy for all the people. In typical fashion, the angel starts by telling the shepherds not to be afraid. The shepherds learn that this child is the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. They will know for sure who this baby is because, as the angel says, "you will find a baby lying in a manger."

Perhaps the reason Jesus needed to be laid in a manger was that it was the only sign identifying and validating Him as the Savior. There were no other signs – halos, fine clothes, an angelic guard – to distinguish Him from any other normal baby born in Bethlehem that day.

Here again, we see a small detail in this great story that plays an important part. Although no prophecy required a baby in a manger, it does help signify to the shepherds that this is the child they were told about. I'm sure Mary and Joseph were likely frustrated or embarrassed that this special child had to rest in such a humble place. They

didn't realize that this manger was not a setback but a sign of the child who was the Savior, Messiah, and Lord.

This is the Good News and the Hope of Christmas.

Discuss:

- How do you think Joseph and Mary felt having to lay their child in such a humble place after birth?
- In what ways have you seen God use common things or setbacks to show His power?
- Do you think there are difficulties that God has put into your life for His good purpose even though they are difficult?

Pray:

Thank God for using setbacks in our lives as a display of His power and faithfulness.

DECEMBER 16

Read: Luke 2:13-14

Unlike all the events found in the Christmas story before this, a single angel turns into a multitude of angels. The angels give praise to God by saying, “Glory to God in the heaven and peace to those, for whom His favor rests, on earth.” This very much is a moment to give glory to God as His Word has been fulfilled in numerous ways from Adam & Eve, to Abraham, and throughout the psalms and prophets. The benefit that is being given to those on earth is peace.

This notion of peace was an important part of what Jesus, the Son of God, had come to bring to earth. Jesus is called the Prince of Peace in Isaiah 9. But why was this blessing restricted to those “on whom God’s favor” rested?

Throughout Acts and the Epistles, we will learn that Jesus secures peace with God for those who believe, and God’s favor rests on those who believe. Salvation – being forgiven for our sins – comes only through Jesus Christ who takes on the penalty of sin. Since Jesus takes on this penalty, we now have peace with God.

It is important to understand our need for peace with God. We aren’t able to experience true peace because we are sinful; we also don’t have the power to save ourselves from our sin—we need a savior, and that Savior is Jesus.

Jesus didn't come down to earth so that as God, He could see what the human experience was like. He came to establish peace between God and us because of our sin.

That is the Good News and Hope of Christmas that the angels sang about.

Discuss:

- Does that part of the Christmas story – that we need peace with God – stand out most to you? Why or why not?
- Do you believe that we need peace with God and that Jesus secures it for us? Why or why not?
- Have you prayed that God would give you peace with Him by accepting Jesus as your Savior?

Pray:

Thank God that we have peace with Him through Jesus Christ.

DECEMBER 17

Read: Luke 2:15 & 20

The shepherds respond to the angels and to the birth of Jesus Christ in two separate and important ways. First, they go to Bethlehem to see what happened. The angels don't tell them to go, but the shepherds do their due diligence by investigating the news. Second, they glorify and praise God for everything they saw and heard about the birth of Christ. They did so because everything they saw and heard was exactly as it was told by the angels.

The shepherds could have gone back to their business of watching the sheep after they heard from the angels, but they chose to leave their work to investigate these claims. The shepherds could have conversed among themselves after everything they saw, but they choose to glorify God. Their response is a great model for us.

You likely haven't had a company of angels come and announce this story to you, but you can still choose your response. Will you investigate the claims in this story; that perhaps Jesus is the Savior, Messiah, and Lord? After all the things you've read and seen come true in the biblical prophecies, are you compelled to give glory to God like the shepherds did? These are big claims that are worth investigating and upon investigation, worthy of giving glory to God.

This is the Good News and the Hope of Christmas.

Discuss:

- In what ways are you investigating the claims of the Christmas story?
- In what ways can you commit to reading this story and the rest of the Bible?
- What ways do you give God glory for the things you've learned through the Christmas story?

Pray:

Give glory to God for the Good News of the Christmas story.

DECEMBER 18

Read: Luke 2:16-18

Today, the shepherds again take center stage by spreading the Good News about Jesus. They don't just investigate the claims and find them to be true, they share this Good News with others. In response, all who heard the Good News were amazed. Without the shepherds sharing about Jesus, others would not have known.

The shepherds are not told by the angels to investigate the claims, nor to go and tell others, but they don't need to be told to do these things, they *want* to do them. The angels had chosen just the right people for the job, as the shepherds do all the right things of their own choosing.

The story of Christmas doesn't find itself in the hands of shepherds today, but in the hands of you and me. What will our response be to this great story? Will we keep this Good News to ourselves or will we, like the shepherds, go share everything we've seen and heard? If others had kept this story to themselves, how would it be possible for us to know?

This is the Good News and the Hope of Christmas, and it is meant to be shared because it is meant for everyone.

Discuss:

- Do you remember the first time someone shared the Good News of the Christmas story?
- What names come to mind when you think about those who don't know about the Christmas story?
- What ways can you share this news with others in your life who don't know the Good News of the Christmas story?

Pray:

Pray for those in your life who don't know the Good News of the Christmas story.

DECEMBER 19

Read: Luke 2:19

Mary has been through a lot at this point. She was a young unmarried woman who had been told by an angel that she was to give birth to the son of God. She had to take a miles-long journey to Bethlehem to satisfy the census requirement. There was no room at the inn, so she not only had to give birth away from home, but in an area for animals where she had to use a manger for a crib. Now, while the child sleeps and she recovers from giving birth, a bunch of strange shepherds walk in saying they had heard from angels about this birth. How will she respond?

Mary does two things in her response to everything that has just taken place. She treasures all the things she is going through, meaning that she counts everything as special and valuable. Then she takes time to ponder them in her heart. I'm sure Mary had not envisioned this long journey and this humble setting when she was told that her child would be the Son of God. Yet, despite that her experience is far from what she most likely imagined it would be, she treasures it and ponders its significance.

Many times, things happen in our life that are far from what we've expected. We can respond in frustration or we can treasure them as part of God's sovereign plan. We can also take time to ponder (stop to reflect on)

them in our hearts. When we don't take time to stop and reflect on what God is doing in our lives, we can miss the significance and value of our experiences.

God's sovereign plan is the Good News and Hope of Christmas.

Discuss:

- Is the Good News of the Christmas story a treasure in your heart? Why or why not?
- As you take time to ponder or reflect on this Christmas story, what comes to mind?
- What else is happening in your life – a difficulty or the unexpected – that you need to treasure and ponder how God is at work?

Pray:

Ask God to reveal how He is at work through the unexpected things in your life.

DECEMBER 20

Read: Luke 2:21-24

Two things happen here that according to Mosaic Law, are required for those having a child. The first is that 7 days after childbirth, during which a mother was considered to be unclean, the parents would take the child to be circumcised. This appears to be the day when they would also give the child its official name. Mary and Joseph followed this law and named their child *Jesus* as they had been instructed. Secondly, 33 days after a time of purification for the mother, the parents would consecrate their first-born male child. The consecration required that a sacrifice be made to God as a lasting reminder that during the Passover, God spared the firstborn of His people who had been enslaved in Egypt, through the atonement of a sacrificial lamb.

According to Mosaic law, if a family didn't have enough money for a lamb and a dove or pigeon, they could offer two doves or pigeons. Since Luke does not mention the sacrifice of a lamb, it's likely that Joseph and Mary selected the less expensive sacrifice.

How fascinating it must have been for the firstborn of all creation, Jesus Christ, to be consecrated by an atoning sacrifice. From the time of Exodus until Jesus birth, this sacrifice in place of the firstborn son was a reminder that

atonement was required and necessary. Yet, this child would be the atoning sacrifice for all peoples of the earth. This concept of atonement is harder to understand in our current culture as most of us don't celebrate the Passover, an event which is meant to remind us of our need for a sacrifice.

The Good News and Hope of Christmas is that the One-time Sacrifice for all people has come and our salvation has been secured.

Discuss:

- As you go through the Christmas season, does the problem of sin come to mind? Why or why not?
- What ways during the year serve as reminders of the necessary atonement for our sins?
- In what ways do you need to confess and thank God for the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ?

Pray:

Take a time for confession and reflection on how Jesus' sacrifice makes atonement for you.

DECEMBER 21

Read: Luke 2:25-35

Most stories of Christmas stop before we get to Simeon who was a prophet and a righteous and devout man living in Jerusalem. Although he also plays a part in the story, there has yet to be some traditional Christmas song written about him. Simeon had been told that he would not die before the Messiah would come. As he senses the Holy Spirit guiding him to the temple, he arrives at the exact moment of Jesus' consecration. This was no meeting of chance but a movement of God in validating for the parents and for us, just who this child was.

Simeon begins a prophecy with a note of thanks allowing him to see Salvation before his death. In addition, Simeon repeats the prophecy in Isaiah that Jesus will also be a "light of revelation" for the Gentiles. The Son of God, Jesus and Savior did not come to save Israel alone, but the entire world.

It's important to understand that the salvation of *all* people was established from the time of Jesus' birth. It would take the disciples until after Jesus' death to understand that the Messiah would bring salvation not only to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles. That the Messiah would bring salvation to the Gentiles would have been shocking to those waiting for Him, let alone the Pharisees

who had a hard time understanding who Jesus was, and the crowds who didn't understand how He could be a king. Here we see that through Jesus Christ, salvation is now open to all, and Simeon is the first to acknowledge this at Jesus' consecration.

This is the Good News and Hope of Christmas—that Jesus' birth brings salvation for us all.

Discuss:

- Have you considered that Jesus' birth gives us access to salvation that we didn't have before?
- How should we respond to the fact that Jesus' birth opens salvation to all people?
- What names come to mind when you think of this Good News of salvation for all people?

Pray:

Thank God for salvation, and pray that those who you know, find Jesus this season.

DECEMBER 22

Read: Luke 2:36-38

Anna, a prophetess who meets baby Jesus, is also lacking a modern-day catchy Christmas tune or Christmas movie but is another part of this great story. She had been a widow into her old age and never left the temple, where she worshiped day and night and would fast and pray. Like Simeon, she serves as a validation of who Jesus was based on her devout faith. Scriptures don't record her actual words but say that she gave thanks to God, and she spoke to all those waiting for redemption.

Here again we see the story of someone who witnesses this child and without prodding, goes on to share the Good News. It's as if her joy of what she has witnessed overflows into telling others this great news.

As we embrace this Christmas story and the incredible things that have happened, Anna serves as a great example of how to respond. She doesn't need anyone to instruct her to share this Good News—she can't help but do so.

As we near Christmas, use this opportunity to share the Good News and the Hope of Christmas with those in your life. Jesus has come and brought Hope and salvation for all.

Discuss:

- Why do you think Anna starts speaking to others about Jesus?
- With what people in your life can you share Jesus?
- What ways can you make that possible?

Pray:

Pray that God allows you opportunities to share the Good News about Jesus this season.

DECEMBER 23

Read: Matthew 2:1-6

At some point after Jesus was born, three wise men arrive in Jerusalem in search of the King of the Jews. They had seen a star rise and were compelled to come and worship this king. The Bible doesn't record a specific prophecy requiring a special star to appear after Jesus' birth, but these were truly wise men who knew about the skies and that something special was happening in the universe. Unfortunately, the wise men first stop at the palace to ask the current king of Israel, Herod, where to find the child. King Herod is disturbed to hear about a child who will eventually become the king of the Jews, as is the entire city of Jerusalem.

Herod sends his own wise men – the chief priests and teachers of the law – to search the scriptures for where the Messiah was to be born. Their research confirms that there is a prophecy in Micah 5:2 that the Messiah, ruler over Israel, was to be born in Bethlehem. This prophecy is the one that was fulfilled when Joseph had to travel to his hometown of Bethlehem to participate in the census by Caesar Augustus.

There are many things converging all at once that validate that this is the birth of the Messiah. A star is shining in the sky signifying that this is a special occurrence in

the universe. Wise men who had no knowledge of the scriptures had come to Israel looking for a Jewish king. Herod's chief priests agreed that Micah 5:2 was indeed about the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem.

All these occurrences converging at once, emphasize that Jesus truly is the incredible Good News and the Hope of Christmas.

Discuss:

- Does the convergence of all these things give you confidence in the Christmas story? Why or why not?
- Why do you think God allowed the wise men to tell Herod about what they saw?
- Have you seen God use ordinary things in this world to give unbelievers a knowledge of Him?

Pray:

Pray that God uses this season to allow others to believe in Him.

DECEMBER 24

Read: Matthew 2:7-10

Herod sends the wise men to Bethlehem with false intentions; he tells them that he plans to go and worship the newborn King, but really intends to kill Him. As they head on their way, night falls and they are overjoyed at the star in the sky that guides their way exactly to where Jesus lay.

Herod could go to Bethlehem and follow the star himself, but instead, he relies on the wise men to report back to him about Jesus' exact location. Unfortunately for Herod, the wise men are warned in a dream not to return to him. We see God working here to reveal Himself to the world and at the same time, protect Jesus from Herod's evil intentions.

As we celebrate Christmas Eve tonight, the imagery of a dark night with a rising star is helpful. It is on this night that we look forward to the Good News of Jesus' birth celebrated on Christmas day. The joy that the wise men felt in finally finding Jesus is the joy that you and I can have today. Everything we have been searching for, all the long ways we've traveled, every difficulty we've been through, have now found their Hope in the birth of Jesus Christ.

That is the Good News and the Hope of Christmas.

Discuss:

- Have you ever been on a journey in life that comes to a joyful resolution?
- In what ways does the birth of Jesus Christ become the star guiding your journey?
- How can you help others who don't know Jesus, find Him this season?

Pray:

Thank God for revealing His Son to you and pray that others will come to know Him this season.

DECEMBER 25

Read: Matthew 2:11

Merry Christmas to you! I hope this journey through the Good News of the Christmas story has been beneficial to you. We've seen God fulfill His promise of salvation through Jesus Christ and numerous prophecies that have validated this Good News. Although the exact time that today's story about the Magi isn't mentioned (in Matthew 2:1, the Magi enter town "after Jesus was born"), the story helps show us the proper response to Jesus' birth.

The wise men come into the home where Mary and Joseph are staying, and they bow down and worship Jesus. Not only do they bow down, but they give His family some very expensive gifts. These are the first Christmas presents.

There is no better way to respond to the Christmas story than to worship Jesus Christ. He is the King of Kings, He is the Lord of our salvation, He is God with us. Although we see the wise men's generosity, their gifts pale in comparison to the greatest gift ever given—Jesus Christ. There is great joy on this day that we give and receive gifts to each other. However, it is important that we pause, reflect and understand the greatest gift given to each one of us: that Jesus lived among us, forgave us, died for us, rose to life for us, sent His Holy Spirit to us, and lives in

heaven eternally where one day those of us who believe in Him will also be. There is no better gift that you will ever give and no better gift that you will ever receive.

That is the Good News and the Hope of Christmas.

Discuss:

- Do you believe that Jesus is the greatest gift of salvation for you?
- What ways do you worship God for this great gift?
- Who are others that you need to tell about this gift that is also for them?

Pray:

Worship God for the greatest gift of Jesus Christ and pray that others will receive this gift this Christmas.

About the Author:

Paul Fowler serves as the Executive Pastor of Ministries for Christ Church, a large multi-site, non-denominational church in the northern suburbs of Chicago. Paul has served in a number of capacities for churches and non-profit organizations including as controller, campus pastor and finance director.

He graduated from the Moody Bible Institute and went on to earn both MBA and M.Div degrees. He and his family reside in Lake Bluff, Illinois.

