



KING OF HOPE

CHRISTMAS FOR THE WEARY HEART



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WHY CHRISTMAS?

Jesus Christ existed before he was conceived in Mary's womb. You and I did not exist before conception.

So when we speak of our coming into the world, or speak of John the Baptist's being "sent from God" (John 1:6), we don't mean that he, or we, existed before we were sent. We mean our being sent was our coming into being. Not so with Jesus.

He said, "I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father" (John 16:28). The Son of God chose to be conceived in Mary's womb. Neither you nor I chose to be born as a human. He did.

"Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:6-7). As God, he considered what he would do. Upon consideration, he "counted" his equality with God something he would not grasp so tightly as to let it hinder his incarnation. He "took" the form of a slave.

WHY GOD WROTE THE CHRISTMAS STORY

All of this cries out: Why? God could have created and run the universe differently. Why did it happen like this?

One of the deepest biblical answers is that it was "fitting." I say this is one of the deepest answers, because there is no reality above or outside God that he must "fit" into in order to do right. God himself is the measure of all that is right and good and true and beautiful. So to say his ways are "fitting" means they fit with himself. They are congruent, or consistent, or harmonious with all that he is.

Hebrews 2:10 says that, in founding our faith through Christ's sufferings, God acted fittingly. "It was fitting that he . . . should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering." Christ became the perfect Savior through suffering. It was fitting that he do so.

This is no small thing. For an all-wise, all-powerful God to see something as supremely fitting is to see it as a supreme obligation. For God would never do anything

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that is not fitting, nor forget to do anything that was. This explains the shocking words seven verses later: “Therefore, Christ had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest” (Hebrews 2:17). Had to? Yes. We could translate: “Hence he is obliged.” Not obliged to anything outside God. He is obliged by the divine wisdom in seeing what is “fitting.” God “has to” do what is fitting. Not as man reckons, but as God himself reckons.

HOW IS CHRISTMAS FITTING?

Sandwiched between Hebrews 2:10 and 2:17 — between the declaration that Christ suffered because it was fitting, and Christ became like us because he was thus obliged to — is the great description of why Christ became human. Hence this is part of the picture of how the incarnation was fitting. Each line of Hebrews 2:14-15 is a different reason for the incarnation — for Christmas.

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of

death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery (Hebrews 2:14-15).

First, he became human because we are human. God’s great aim is to have a family of human children in which his eternal Son is one of them, yet supreme over them:

Those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (Romans 8:29)

He had to be made like his brothers in every respect. (Hebrews 2:17)

That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers. (Hebrews 2:11)

This is fitting — seemly, congruent, beautiful — in God’s eyes.



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Second, he became human so that he might die. “He partook of flesh and blood that through death . . .” God, by his very nature, cannot die. But the God-Man, Jesus Christ, could die. Dying was fitting. Therefore, he became human — mortal.

Third, he became human “that (by dying) he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.” Not to put the devil out of existence, but to abrogate his ability to make death damning. The devil damns with one weapon: unforgiven sin. If he can accuse us in God’s court successfully and get a guilty verdict, we are damned.

But in the death of Christ, God “canceled the record of debt that stood against us . . . nailing it to the cross. He thus disarmed the rulers and authorities” — that is, the devil (Colossians 2:14-15). He was disarmed in that the weapon of successful accusation was taken out of his hand. It was gloriously fitting, that he be destroyed in this way.

Hence, the fourth reason the Son of God became human was to “deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.” Now, when believers look into the dark face of death, they say, “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:55). No more fear. No more bondage. Now. Or ever. Such a life is fearless life fitting for the saints.

SEEING WHAT IS SEEMLY

When God pondered how to write the story of the universe, there was nothing outside of himself to guide him. He made his choices according to how all things “fit” into a design that would best reveal his fullness. He himself, and nothing else, established what is fitting — seemly, congruent, beautiful.

Our aim should be to see the fitness of all God’s ways, and approve, and rejoice, and conform. To be sure, for

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now “we see in a mirror dimly” (1 Corinthians 13:12). “We know in part” (1 Corinthians 13:9). But God has not left us to mere imaginings. “In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Hebrews 1:2). And the Son has sent the Spirit (John 15:26). And the Spirit has given the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 2:13; 2 Peter 1:21). And the church is given teachers (Ephesians 4:11; 1 Timothy 3:2).

Christmas happened because it was fitting. Now we get to spend eternity growing in our ability to see what God sees. The more you have the mind of Christ, the more you see the beauty of it all. Make this your aim in the new year — by every means possible, to see the seemliness of God’s way of salvation, and rejoice — and reflect.

Article by Dr. John Piper

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THE HISTORY OF ADVENT

Liturgy. Ritual. These words have deep meaning, feel heavy, and often seem distant. They seem descriptive of activities that are occasional, formal and apart from everyday life.

Yet we are a people of daily liturgy and ritual — of repetitive actions and behaviors. From the first groggy cup of coffee each morning to the droning news anchor who serenades our evening rest and everything that happens in the middle, we all have a rhythm. The morning jog, the nightly walk, the Saturday morning shopping, the blowing out of birthday candles — all of these are rituals and together they make up the liturgy of our day, our week, our year, our life.

In fact, if we took time to examine these rituals, this liturgy, we would find within them our values — those things most important — things that consume time, resources, and finances. We would discover as James Smith states, in his book, *Desiring the Kingdom*, “Our ultimate love or desire is shaped by practices, not ideas...”

In other words, our practices reveal the very things we love, precisely because these practices focus our attention and affections on them. Life is liturgy, and as we grow in our understanding of this reality, we begin to understand the importance of embracing intentional liturgy — purposeful practices that mold our desires and affections toward the things of Christ.

The observance of Advent creates opportunity to reshape and reorient our way of thinking as we approach Christmas. In fact, this is how the season came to be celebrated in the first place. The English word advent (derived from the Latin *adventus*) simply means “coming” and speaks to the expectation and longing the Jewish nation experienced as they waited for their Messiah (J. Piper). Christians in the first Centuries began to recreate the feeling of anticipation with purposeful prayer, fasting, and repentance as they focused attention not on the birth of Jesus, but on His Second coming. They used the season to prepare them for Epiphany, a Christian celebration in early January, commemorating the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles/Magi (Armstrong).

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Just as generations of Jews waited with delayed hope, these Christians wanted to remind themselves that life is short, this world is temporal and the Savior, the Messiah would one day return. By the Middle Ages, Christians had begun using Advent to prepare to celebrate Christ's birth, and yet it retained the longing for the Second Coming as well. Thus, worshippers mingled the penitential preparation for the Christ's return with the joyous anticipation of Jesus' birthday.^[4]

And so we continue in this tradition today. Excitement. Joy. Celebration. The Savior has come and with Him, our salvation. Anticipation. Longing. Hope. And the Savior will come again, and with Him, the restoration of all things. As the popular Christmas carol, *Joy to the World*, reminds us:

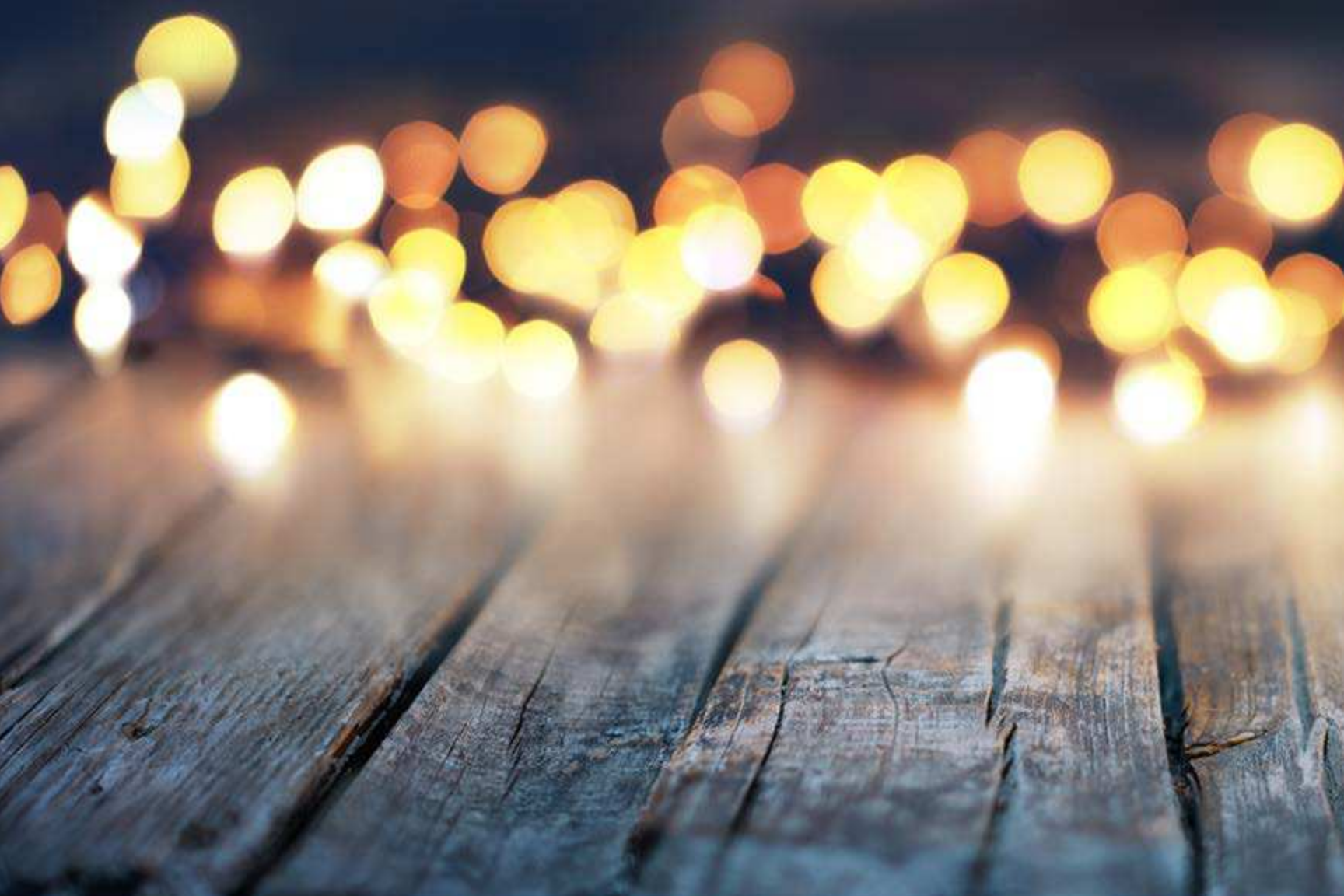
*No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow,
Far as the curse is found.*

This is truth worthy of celebration, of ritual, and of liturgy. "Christians throughout the world have their different ways of celebrating Advent. Some light candles. Some sing songs. Some eat candies. Some give gifts. Some hang wreaths. Many do all of the above" (J. Piper). Yet the goal of each celebration is to create the liturgy that will turn our hearts attention and affection toward Christ. That we might be a people who remember the meaning and thus experience the joy of the Christmas season.

Pastor Rick Garrett

WHEN IS ADVENT?

Advent begins the fourth Sunday before Christmas and ends Christmas Eve. This means the earliest it begins, depending on where that Sunday falls, is November 27, and the latest it starts is December 3. Whereas Lent (the preparation for Easter) is always 40 days, Advent ranges in length from 22 to 29 days.



THE THEOLOGY OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH

The birth of Jesus Christ is unlike any other in history — He was born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23).

Christ's unique birth speaks to His uniqueness as a person: He is fully God and fully man. To be God, His birth would have to be different, and to understand the virgin birth, we have to understand the necessity of a Savior that is both God and man together.

The scripture speaks of the great fall of humanity in Genesis. Satan has cast a vision before Adam and Eve, and it consists of a lie that God is holding out on them, and that they would be better off finding their happiness outside of God. There's just one thing left to do to get that happiness: eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, an act which God has forbidden. But that's what they do:

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate (Genesis 3:6).

Both Adam and Eve violate God's command and eat from the prohibited tree. And let's be clear: the fall is not at all about eating fruit. It's about breaking a relationship with God. It's about trust. It's about love. It's about identity. Never again would Adam and Eve be like God as they were in their obedient state. Now the effects of sin would ripple through time with a debilitating force, literally destroying our capacity for fellowship with God.

This is what happened next:

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" (Genesis 3:8-10).

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When God went looking for Adam and Eve in the Garden, they were hiding. The effects of sin have already quickly taken root — the relationship between God and man has been fractured. But interestingly, God doesn't look for Eve, but for Adam.

Shouldn't Eve be more accountable? After all, it seems that she is the one deceived. She is the first to eat of the forbidden fruit and leave fellowship with God. Why isn't God looking for her?

The answer is that Adam bears the heavier weight and responsibility of sin. The garden and everything in it was given to him to manage and protect (Genesis 2:15). But Adam quietly watches as Eve commits spiritual suicide. This is lovelessness at its worst. Perhaps the first sin was actually Adam's carelessness over God's creation, including his wife.

Adam is credited with sin entering the world through him. The Apostle Paul writes, "Through Adam, ...sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin,

and so death spread to all men because all sinned..." (Romans 5:12) So through Adam sin is spread to all of humanity. The only way to fix this story is to have a new Adam who would be morally unaffected by sin and yet still somehow know what it's like to be tempted in every way that we are. This is how the Bible describes Jesus.

He is fully God. But how? The virgin birth is more than just an idea or theology. It's a description of Jesus' birth. While Jesus has an earthly mother, his father wasn't Joseph. The Bible describes an angelic encounter that Joseph has early in Mary's pregnancy.

...an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:20-21)

Much to Joseph's surprise, Mary was pregnant. Having never slept with her husband, you can imagine what

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a shock that must have been. The angel announces that this child in Mary is no ordinary child. He is the product of the Holy Spirit's conception — that in some impossible, miraculous way, God has united Himself with her flesh. What follows will be a Child that will save God's people from their sins.

This Child is a new kind of man. Adam was the first man. He failed, and through his failure we have all been tainted. But Jesus, fully God and fully man, the product of Mary and God Himself, would not fail. He would succeed, and He would save. He would be a second Adam.

So Jesus' nature, like His birth, is different than ours. In theology, we call this the Hypostatic Union of Christ. He has two natures: one God, one man. The Chalcedonian Creed (451 AD) says His two natures are “without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation.” He is the perfect man.

None of this would be possible if the virgin birth isn't true. Since sin comes through Adam, and not through Eve, God's union with Mary prepared the way for a sinless sacrifice that would save God's people from their sins.

Through this second Adam, God then extends salvation to all who ask for it. So, through one man named Adam all men fell, but through a virgin birth and a unique second Adam, all men who seek Him will be saved.

Pastor Mike Adkins



LINE OF DAVID: THE FAMILY OF JESUS

Ancestry in the Bible was of great importance, especially among the Jews. So when Matthew begins his Gospel with a genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:1-17), we should not consider this as strange. Jesus' genealogies also tell us far more than just the names of His earthly ancestors.

First, the genealogy reveals Jesus' purpose. It tells us that Jesus is from the line of Abraham and of David, the tribe of Judah (Isaiah 11:1). Matthew's desire is to show that Jesus is the legal heir of both of these Old Testament figures, and, therefore, the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant promises that God made to them.

In 2 Samuel 7:15-16, God promised David, "But my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever." Through the genealogy, Jesus is shown as the fulfillment of this

promise, becoming the Son of David who would forever serve as King of Glory.

Second, we see the importance of Joseph, Jesus' earthly father, in His lineage. Although Joseph was not Jesus' biological father, when he married Mary, he in effect legally adopted the son she would bear. Most scholars believe that Mary was a descendant of the tribe of Levi, because she was a cousin to Elizabeth and John the Baptist, who were descendants of Aaron. Joseph, however, was a descendant of David, from the tribe of Judah. Matthew's genealogy reflects this understanding of their relationship and the virgin birth. "Joseph, the husband of Mary . . . the mother of Jesus." Later in Matthew's gospel we also find that Jesus was known as Joseph's Son when the people of Nazareth ask, "Is this the carpenter's son?" (Matthew 13:55). Joseph's role cannot be overlooked — without his lineage, Jesus is unable to fulfill the prophecy as the Messiah.

THE LINE OF DAVID

And third, we see the inclusion of unlikely people — Gentiles and sinners — into the line of Christ. It is unusual to see the names of women in a genealogy. However, in Matthew's account four are listed: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. Most scholars believe all four of these women are Gentiles, and three of the women have a morally dubious reputation. By including these women, Matthew is making a bold statement: he is making it clear that Jesus did not come solely for the Jews, because he did not come only from Jews. He is also making it clear that Jesus did not come solely for the righteous, because all of his ancestors were not righteous people. Jesus brings good news of great joy for all people, which includes unlikely people — sinners like you and me.

Pastor Brian Allen

FORESHADOWING, PROPHECIES, AND PREDICTIONS

Christmas is the season of generosity and gift giving, and God sent the greatest gift in history to His people by sending His Son. The birth of Jesus was not a last-minute decision by God. We trace this gift all the way back to the third chapter of Genesis. In the midst of a terrible fall and the loss of fellowship with God, He plants the seed for our return. The theological term for this is the *Protoevangelium*.

It shows up in Genesis 3:15, as God is talking with Satan.

*And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel.*

In this passage, God speaks of an offspring. This offspring will crush the head of the serpent. As we understand this verse, the serpent is Satan, and the offspring is Jesus. God promises a Child will be born who will put an end to Satan and death and sin. Even in

the midst of the fall, God is not satisfied with allowing His people to stay separated from Him forever. So He begins a plan to restore what had been lost, by promising to send His son Jesus into the world.

No one knew when or where Jesus would be born. So God started his plan by choosing a family. He chose Abraham; then Abraham's son, Isaac; then Isaac's son, Jacob. Then, it would be Jacob's son, Joseph, who would lead this family into Egypt and 430 years of captivity. At the end of the 430 years of captivity, the Israelites would emerge 2.5 million strong — no longer a family, but a nation.

With Moses as their leader, and the Promised Land as their destination, the Israelites were headed for home. But they would soon find that many who came with them wanted to return to Egypt instead of embracing God's promises. Even though God raised up Moses to lead the Israelites, they rebelled against him. God considered this to be rebellion against Him, too.

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As a consequence, the Israelites would wander the desert for the next 40 years. It would be two young men named Caleb and Joshua who would finally lead God's people into the Promised Land.

What was God doing by allowing the Israelites to wander the desert for so long? He was showing the Israelites during this time that their true home wasn't a place, but was really His presence.

God wanted His people to know that He was their home.

The greatest gift that we can receive is not a gift from God, but the gift *of* God. So to ensure that we receive the gift of Himself, God continued to unfold His plan of sending Jesus through this specific family line.

He would leave clues along the way. As history unfolded, God revealed pieces of the puzzle to people of faith who were waiting for the Messiah. These clues represent an impressive array of evidence to the divine origins of Christ's birth and life.

Here are just some of these prophecies fulfilled by Jesus:

In Isaiah 7:14 the prophet Isaiah reveals that Jesus will be born to a virgin almost 700 years before His birth:

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Regarding the birthplace of Jesus, Micah 5:2 tells us a specific birthplace and the family from which Jesus was to be born: *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 old, from ancient days.*

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem riding on the back of a donkey was foretold in Zechariah 9:9: *Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

FORESHADOWING, PROPHECIES & PREDICTIONS

For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet — I can count all my bones — they stare and gloat over me; they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.

The entire chapter of Isaiah 53 is considered by most to be one of the most prophetic chapters of the Bible regarding the coming Messiah. Isaiah 53:3-7:

*He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.
Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.*

*We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;*

*and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.*

These words in Isaiah are a perfect description of the life of Christ. Although Jesus was God's greatest gift, we did not value Him as such. He stood in our place and was punished for our sins. He came to save us: "The punishment that brought us peace was on Him."

Long before Jesus came into this world, God established this plan that would free us from our sin by placing our sins on Jesus. He willingly assumed this role out of love for us and a desire to see us restored to Him. God did not leave us in the dark. Throughout history, He laid clues about the character and nature of the coming Messiah so that we could know Him and His love, He is still revealing Himself to us through His Word.

Pastor Mike Adkins



THE DARKNESS OF CHRISTMAS

Christmas season has always been my favorite time of year. I love the food, the carols, the parties, and the giving of gifts. I love the focus on the incarnation of Christ. I love the bright lights and hues of green, silver, and red. And I will even admit that I love a good, cheesy Hallmark movie. Christmas makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

Until one year, when it didn't.

I had been married a little more than a year when my first dark Christmas hit. I had every reason to think I would be bursting out of my normal clothes and growing a little baby. But I wasn't. There were no food aversions, no bouts of nausea, and no need for stretchy pants. The baby inside me had stopped growing weeks before. I was devastated. I felt little Christmas joy that year; there was only Christmas ache and a longing for what might have been. It wasn't my last sad Christmas, as we waited for God to provide us with children. What was once such a happy family time for me, suddenly became a stinging reminder of the very thing I wanted most but still lacked — a family filled with children of my own.

Whenever we talk about Christmas we think about happy, joyous times, and that is most certainly the case for many. In the years since our first loss, we've had Christmases of joy and Christmases of sorrow. We know the feelings of both. But for others, Christmas can carry a dark cloud of sadness, a sadness that never seems to let up and is only exacerbated by the happiness swirling around you. For some, Christmas is a reminder of the darkness of painful circumstances. It carries no tidings of great joy. Maybe you are facing your first Christmas without your spouse or parents. Maybe you are reminded every Christmas season of your longings for a spouse. The loneliness can make celebrating the holidays too much to bear. Maybe your table is missing a beloved child who is wayward, and things never seem the same without him. Maybe your parents are divorced and you shuffle between two houses on Christmas day, while your friends spend family time together. Christmas feels isolating and meaningless when all is not as it should be.

Whatever darkness you are facing this Christmas, know this: with all of the songs and festivities that point to

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good cheer and great joy, Christmas recalls darkness unlike any we will ever experience, but a darkness that brought light into a fallen world.

MARY'S SOUL-PIERCING PAIN

While Christmas is about the dawning of great joy in the coming of our Savior, it also foreshadows the darkness of his crucifixion. Simeon told Mary of her son's purpose, that a sword would pierce her own soul (Luke 2:35). Mary, the woman whose heart warmed for her son with every kick in the womb. Mary, the woman who nursed and diapered the very Son of God. Mary, the woman who loved and raised her son like any other mother would do. And while he was no ordinary son, he was still her son. Bearing the Son of God did not make her numb to the often painful realities of motherhood, and her pain would be excruciating. No earthly person felt the weight of Christ's purpose like she did. While many were rejoicing at his coming, she would one day face the agonizing grief of watching her son suffer on the cross for her sins and our sins.

It's easy to idolize Mary as a super-human vessel, ready to do whatever was asked of her. While she was certainly godly, she was still human. She was still a mother. This is what Simeon is getting at in his prophecy. With the atonement for our sins came the motherly pain of Mary. As she stared at that little baby in the manger, she may not have fully understood all that was going to take place, but God the Father did. The birth of our Savior carried an ominous shadow of the darkness to come.

GOD'S CHOSEN PAIN

Mary may not have fully understood what Jesus was sent to do, but God the Father knew of this imminent grief and ordained it to be (Isaiah. 53:10). Jesus knew what was expected of him, and he agonized over the grief and suffering waiting for him at Calvary (Luke 22:39-46). With every shepherd's praise and magi's gift, the Father knew that the perfect fellowship would soon be momentarily broken for sin. In her book *When God Weeps: Why Our Sufferings Matter to the Almighty*, Joni Eareckson Tada wrote of the Father and the Son's grief at the cross:

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The Father watches as his heart's treasure, the mirror-image of himself, sinks drowning into raw, liquid sin. Jehovah's stored rage against humankind from every century explodes in a single direction. "Father! Father! Why have you forsaken me?!" But heaven stops its ears. The Son stares up at the One who cannot, who will not, reach down in reply. The Trinity had planned it. The Son endured it. The Spirit enabled him. The Father rejected the Son whom he loved. Jesus, the God-man from Nazareth, perished. The Father accepted his sacrifice for sin and was satisfied. The Rescue was accomplished. God set down his saw. This is who asks us to trust him when he calls on us to suffer.

With the joy over this little baby in the manger came the promised reality that the joy would soon turn to momentary grief. We have a perfect heavenly Father who knows what it means to grieve over loss. The darkness of our Christmas is not foreign to this God. He is not aloof. He is present with us, because he knows us deeply and walks with us in our pain. He has endured deep pain, too.

When we think about Christmas and are heartbroken to face another holiday with tears, we have hope. While Mary faced heart-piercing grief as she birthed her son, this grief was for the good of us all. While God the Son suffered at the crucifixion, by this suffering we are healed (Isa. 53:5), and he is a great high priest who can sympathize with our sufferings (Heb. 4:15).

Whatever darkness you face this Christmas, it is not the final word in your life. It may be lifelong. It may feel like it will never let up. It may threaten to undo you at times. And it is real. But we can grieve this holiday with hope that one day the baby who came in a manger will wipe every tear from our eyes and make his blessings flow for us forever (Rev. 21:4). The darkness that hovered over his cradle did not win. And it won't win over us either.

Article by Courtney Reissig

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THE BIRTH ACCOUNT

It was government policy — a census — that brought Joseph and his pregnant wife, Mary, 80 miles south from Nazareth to the City of David. The emperor at the time, Caesar Augustus, was used sovereignly by God to ensure the birth of the Prince of Peace in the city of Bethlehem (Micah 5:2).

As millions of women throughout history would attest, this long trip to Bethlehem was not ideal for a young woman in the late stages of pregnancy. This return to Joseph's village of origin, however, was just another hard step of faith made by a young couple who, only a few months prior, were face to face with an angel from the Lord.

Mary, engaged to her fiancé Joseph, was in the midst of her daily activities when Gabriel, an angel of the Lord, appeared to her. It was a startling experience to say the least.

Mary was obviously scared, because Gabriel felt the need to calm her. “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in

your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus” (Luke 1:30-31). If that wasn't shocking enough, Gabriel adds that this child will be called the “Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:32).

Mary must have had thousands of thoughts rushing through her head. The first one she gives voice to deals with reality: “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:34). Gabriel assured her that the Holy Spirit would cause her to be with child. Her next thought was probably about how she was going to break this unbelievable news to her soon-to-be husband. But in the midst of confusion and awe and fear, she humbly submits: “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

Mary's conversation with Joseph happened behind closed doors, as most sensitive dialogues do. Joseph was shocked to find out his fiancé was pregnant, but he was also determined not to put her to shame, so he planned on quietly ending their relationship before it went any further (Matthew 1:18-19). Divorce was certainly demanded by both religion and society — engagement

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was a much more permanent commitment in their culture — but this time, Joseph gets his own visit from an angel.

And Joseph was now the one in awe. The angel tells him in a dream that this Son, born of Mary, will be called Jesus, “for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). Scripture doesn’t address how Joseph felt — simply that he was immediately obedient. But his heart must have been filled with astonishment, anticipation, and even relief that Mary’s story was true and that they would be together after all. This was going to be an excursion with his love — a journey with a thousand unknowns — but one guided by a deep knowledge that God was with them.

Meanwhile, Mary, filled with excitement, traveled to a town in Judah to visit her cousins Elizabeth and Zechariah, who were celebrating a miraculous conception of their own. As soon as Mary walked into the house, the unborn John the Baptist leapt in Elizabeth’s womb (Luke 1:39-41).

Suddenly filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth exclaimed with a loud voice,

Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (Luke 1:42-45).

What an incredible, solidifying moment for Mary! The sovereign Lord was confirming for her all that had taken place before she had spoken a word of her story.

This was no mistake — she was carrying a true gift to the world — God’s only Son. Mary’s response to Elizabeth’s prayer that she breaks out in song — one of the most beautiful songs in all of Scripture, known as the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-56):

THE BIRTH ACCOUNT

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me
blessed for he who is mighty has done great things
for me, and holy is his name.
And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered
the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”*

The faith that pours out in the words of these two women is remarkable. What’s most impressive is the lowliness and cheerful humility of both Elizabeth and Mary.

The only people whose soul can truly magnify the Lord are people like Elizabeth and Mary – people who acknowledge their lowly estate and are overwhelmed by the condescension of the magnificent God.

From beginning to end, God’s sovereign plan was at work. After the long journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem was completed, it was time for God’s Word to come to pass. “And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger” (Luke 2:6-7a).

God the Son had entered into space, time, and history to rescue his people from their sin, and it was orchestrated all through the faithfulness of a young couple who allowed God to do a work in and through their lives.

Pastor Bobby Raulerson

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WEEKLY MESSAGE NOTES & QUESTIONS

WEEK 1: NOVEMBER 27
OUR NEED FOR A KING | ISAIAH 6:1-8A

Message Notes:

WEEK 1: OUR NEED FOR A KING | ISAIAH 6:1-8A
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND
DISCUSSION

As we enter the Advent season, we have the chance to refocus our thinking around Christmas. What are you excited about during Advent? Do you have any concerns?

Do you see any significance to the way this passage starts? Why would Isaiah start by telling us the vision happened in the year Uzziah died?

As the seraphim are singing the praises of God, you can almost feel them grasping at language, trying to find words that could do our King justice. How would you explain their song in your own words?

Upon seeing the Lord, Isaiah immediately responds by acknowledging his own sinfulness and feeling unworthy to do His will. Have you ever felt unworthy to do the Lord's will? What can we learn from this passage?

Why is it good to know that our God is King over all nations?

WEEK 2: DECEMBER 4
WHO WILL THIS KING BE? | ISAIAH 9:6-7

Message Notes:

WEEK 2: WHO WILL THIS KING BE?
ISAIAH 9:6-7
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND
DISCUSSION

As Americans, it can be hard to relate to the idea of monarchies and the power that a king has in his kingdom. How is a king different than a president?

What does it mean for the government to rest upon his shoulders?

When you think of Jesus, what image comes to mind? Is he a friend, a servant, a king, a conqueror? Do you gravitate to one image and ignore others?

Isaiah foretells that the Messiah will be a wonderful counselor. What implications can you draw from this phrase, and where do you see that displayed in Jesus' life?

What do you think God is teaching you through this passage? How are you being challenged or changed?

WEEK 3: DECEMBER 11
HOW THIS KING WILL SUFFER | ISAIAH 53

Message Notes:

WEEK 3: HOW THIS KING WILL SUFFER |
ISAIAH 53
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND
DISCUSSION

Take some time to either write out, or discuss the imagery used in the passage Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12. What thoughts and emotions come to mind as you read over these verses?

What does Isaiah 53:4-6 tell us about our relationship with Christ?

Why must God the Father put Jesus, His Son, to death?

Does your life reflect the King you serve? Are you striving for honor, power, or influence, or are you sacrificing for others?

If you could ask Isaiah anything at this point in the series, what would you ask him, and why?

WEEK 4: DECEMBER 18
HOW THIS KING WILL CONQUER | ISAIAH 61:1-4

Message Notes:

WEEK 4: HOW THIS KING WILL CONQUER |
ISAIAH 61:1-4
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND
DISCUSSION

In Luke 4, Jesus launches his public ministry with a sermon on this passage of Isaiah. He tells them that what God promised in Isaiah is now being fulfilled in Him. Why do you think he did that? How did they respond? How should we respond?

What do you imagine Heaven and eternal life to look like?

As you read through these four verses, which traits do you most relate to? Are you the broken hearted who needs binding? The captive who needs liberty? The mourner who needs comfort?

How should the truth about resurrection affect our attitude toward difficulties in life?

How has your view of Jesus changed during this Advent season? If your friend asked you, “who is this Jesus you worship?”, how would you answer?

ABOUT GRACE

Grace is one large church in many smaller communities, with a mission to help people take their next step toward Christ.

Our local, neighborhood campuses worship in Orlando, Oviedo, Winter Garden, Clermont, Lake Nona, and at Edgewood Children's Ranch. Each of our campuses shares a central vision and organizational structure under the leadership of Senior Pastor Mike Adkins, but each campus also has its own pastor-teacher and leadership team. We believe this is the best way we can keep church feeling like family and also reach the vastly diverse neighborhoods of Central Florida.

Our teaching pastors and our worship pastors work together week by week, bringing many voices into unity to plan our ministry and our worship services. They take common scriptures and ideas for each weekend and bring them to life around songs, challenges and themes that reach our unique communities.

Our teaching and worship pastors also trade campuses every so often, too, allowing our people to hear from a plurality of elders and keeping Grace from being built up around one central person.

WHAT WE'RE ABOUT

Expository, gospel-centered teaching, both in Sunday worship and in regular classes and workshops.

Modern worship woven with liturgy and creedal confession, focusing on the work of Christ and not ourselves.

Corporate communion, personal confession and prayer every week.

Spiritual friendship and connection through sacrificial service and Grace Communities.

Gospel-focused family ministry that centers around what God has done for your kids through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Celebration of ancient seasons like Advent and Lent to prepare for holy days.

CAMPUS LOCATIONS

GRACE ORLANDO

Meets at Edgewater High School
3100 Edgewater Drive, Orlando
Services Sundays at 9:15 & 10:45a
Senior Pastor Mike Adkins

GRACE OVIEDO

Meets at Indian Trails Middle School
415 Tuskawilla Road, Winter Springs
Services Sundays at 9:15 & 10:45a
Pastor Bobby Raulerson

GRACE WINTER GARDEN

Meets at Whispering Oak Elementary
15300 Stoneybrook W Winter Garden
Services Sundays at 10a
Pastor Brian Allen

GRACE LAKE NONA

Meets at Eagle Creek Elementary
10025 Eagle Creek Sanctuary Blvd, Orlando
Service Sundays at 5p
Pastor Dr. Ben Bailie

GRACE CLERMONT

Meets at South Lake Presbyterian Church
131 Chestnut Street, Clermont
Service Sundays at 5:45p
Pastor Caleb Brasher

GRACE EDGEWOOD

Serves Edgewood Children's Ranch
1451 Edgewood Ranch Road, Orlando
Service Sundays at 3p



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