

THE
CHRISTMAS
CAROLS

Past, Present, & Future Hope

30 Day Christmas Devotional
by Pastor Mark Robinson

INTRODUCTION

In recent days much has been made about the separation of church and state. Prayer is often discouraged in schools and the workplace, curriculums are scrubbed clean of faith-based answers to fact-based questions, and people often prefer religion to be practiced privately, not shared publicly. This point of view wins the day much of the time in many people's lives . . . with one notable exception. At Christmas time, people still allow the Sacred to invade the secular – even INVITE IT onto the public stage in many ways. What do I mean?

Our culture still celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ every December through music. Places where God is not welcome eleven months of the year are often platforms of praise from Black Friday to Christmas Day. All up and down the FM dial all Advent season, we hear deep theology being sung by today's top artists. Every trip to the store during the holidays plays out underneath the soundtrack of the Savior. Rather than focusing on the irony of this reality, let's enjoy it . . . and use it as a prompt for worship and evangelism during this busy season.

As we listen to this Christmas music, however, I wonder if we really know what we are singing. After all, most of these songs are very familiar to us . . . we sing them every year . . . but do we really understand what they are talking about? To say it another way, when we look at "The Christmas Carols" do we know the hope of Christmas past, present, and future?

This thirty day devotional will take one Christmas song each day for thirty days and provide a reflection on how that song helps us understand more about Jesus and what it looks like for us to follow Him.

In Christ,
Pastor Mark Robinson

Day 1
O COME, O COME EMMANUEL

Read: Romans 8:19-25; Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23

Some songs are old, having been sung for decades. Then there is “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” This song has a history that dates all the way back to the eighth century - over 1,300 years ago! The words were originally written as a poem and not arranged to music as a Christmas carol until the twelfth century.

What causes a song to endure that long? Why do we still sing it? Though the music is beautiful, there are many beautiful songs. I think the enduring nature of this song is found in its message of hope.

The song is really a beautiful expectation. In fact, the poem on which it was based is arranged as an acrostic that spells the phrase “ero cras” which translates to “I will be with you tomorrow.” The underlying theme of the song is that the world is not yet what it will be. Drawing its imagery from the nation of Israel in the Old Testament days waiting for the arrival of the promised Savior, these lyrics speak of the arrival of God the Son (Jesus – “Emmanuel” means God with us), who began to make good on a number of promises God had made to His people.

As we sing this song, we still have a sense of expectation. The world still is not yet what it will be. We still live in a world of sin, pain, violence, illness, etc. We long to see this world changed . . . to be redeemed and restored (Romans 8:19-25).

So as we listen to “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” this Christmas, may we remember the first fruits that came from Jesus’ first coming at Bethlehem. May that bring hope that “He will be with us tomorrow.” And, when Jesus comes again, our bodies will be redeemed and the world will be restored. Therefore, we sing (and wait) with a patient hope.

O Come, O Come Emmanuel

*O come, O come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel*

*O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny
From depths of Hell Thy people save
And give them victory o'er the grave
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel*

*O come, Thou Day-Spring
Come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death's dark shadows put to flight
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel*

*O come, Thou Key of David, come
And open wide our heavenly home
Make safe the way that leads on high
And close the path to misery
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel*

*O come, O come, Thou Lord of might
Who to Thy tribes, on Sinai's height
In ancient times did'st give the Law
In cloud, and majesty and awe
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel*

Day 2
JOY TO THE WORLD!

Read: Psalm 98

When is it too early to listen to Christmas music? Halloween? Thanksgiving? Black Friday? December 1?

Whenever you change your playlist, at some point, most will begin listening to Christmas music by the time December rolls around. However, one Christmas carol was intended to be sung in July . . . and April . . . and February! It is the most popular Christmas song in North America, “Joy to the World!”

In 1719, prolific hymn writer Isaac Watts wrote this song, and published it in his book, “The Psalms of David: Imitated in the Language of the New Testament.” Yet, roughly 3,000 years before Watts arranged it with a Christian perspective, the Psalmist wrote the message in Psalm 98. Interestingly, Psalm 98 is not about Jesus’ birth. It is a psalm about when the LORD will come “to judge the earth . . . with righteousness, and the peoples with equity” (Psalm 98:9).

The earth celebrates with joy, in Psalm 98 and in Watts’ hymn, when the Messiah comes in righteous judgment. This reference is clearly NOT to Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, but to Jesus’ return at the end of the world as pictured in Revelation 19:11-21. The earth rejoices on that day because sin and sorrow will finally and fully be dealt with. Jesus will rule the world with truth and grace, and all will see the “wonders of His love” (see Revelation 20). After the establishment of this Kingdom, Jesus will also usher in a new heaven and a new earth that will make His blessings flow upon the earth in opposition to the effects of the curse (compare Genesis 3:14-24 with Revelation 21-22.)

Knowing this background, is it wrong to sing “Joy to the World” at Christmastime? Absolutely NOT! This song is great any time of the year, including Christmas. When we think of Jesus’ birth, we also can sing for joy at His coming, when the full effects of what this song promises will be felt upon the earth. The historical reality of His first coming is a down payment on the reality of His second! Just as Jesus brought forgiveness for our sins and revelation of who God is at His first coming, He also will bring judgment and righteousness at His second coming.

So, join the world in singing JOY this year . . . knowing that God’s redemption is coming.

Joy to the World

*Joy to the World , the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing.*

*Joy to the World, the Savior reigns!
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat, the sounding joy.*

*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,
Far as the curse is found,
Far as, far as, the curse is found.*

*He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders, of His love.*

Day 3
COME THOU LONG EXPECTED JESUS

Read: Romans 6:5-11; Isaiah 9:6-7

The very first churches I knew were Methodist. Most every Sunday for the first eighteen years of my life, I could be found somewhere around East Cross United Methodist Church in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. One of the many blessings I received from that heritage was a knowledge of John and Charles Wesley. Though the Wesleys never set out to start “Methodism,” God used them to reform the Church of England and call it to both passion and application. If Luther’s reform in Germany was about orthodoxy then the Wesleys’ reform in England 200 years later was about orthopraxy . . . as much about what we do as what we believe.

While John Wesley preached, Charles Wesley was best known for his hymns. One of the eighteen Christmas carols Wesley wrote was “Come Thou Long Expected Jesus.” This song not only laid out sound theology and Scriptural references, but called followers of Jesus to act in certain ways.

The first verse points out that Jesus has released us from our “fears and sins” (Romans 6:5-11). This is a theological truth . . . but the application of this truth is that we would find “our rest in Thee.”

In the second verse, Jesus is described as “a child, and yet a King” (Isaiah 9:6-7). Charles takes the next line, though, and drives it home, stating that Jesus was “Born to reign in us forever . . . Rule in all our hearts alone.” The application is not just to say that Jesus is the “King of Kings,” but to have Him be our King - the ultimate authority in our lives.

This Christmas, as we sing Wesley’s song, may we have a reformation of our practices, and find our rest in Jesus, the ultimate authority in our lives!

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus

*Come, thou long expected Jesus
born to set thy people free
from our fears and sins release us
let us find our rest in thee
Israel's strength and consolation
hope of all the earth thou art
dear desire of every nation
joy of every longing heart*

*Born thy people to deliver
born a child and yet a King
born to reign in us forever
now thy gracious kingdom bring
By thine own eternal spirit
rule in all our hearts alone
by thine all sufficient merit
raise us to thy glorious throne*

*You draw the hearts of shepherds
You draw the hearts of kings
Even as a baby
You were changing everything
You called me to Your Kingdom
Before Your lips could speak
And even as a baby
You were reaching out for me*

*And now we are awaiting
The day of Your return
When every eye will see You
As heaven comes to earth
Until the sky is opened
Until the trumpet sounds
The bride is getting ready
The church is singing out*

*Come, thou long expected Jesus
born to set thy people free
from our fears and sins release us
let us find our rest in thee
Come Thou long expected King*

Day 4 LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Read: Exodus 13:21-22; John 8:12

3,500 years ago, God called His people out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and into the land that He had promised them. This is the story of the Exodus, recorded in the second book of the Bible. As the Israelites left Egypt, God led them at night, represented by a visible fire. Like a child comforted by a night light, so the children of Israel were comforted in their journey by the fire in the sky, reminding them that God was with them.

Fast forward 1,500 years to the time of Jesus. While the rest of the Israelites were celebrating the Festival of the Tabernacle (remembering when God led them like a fire at night), Jesus makes an amazing assertion. He says in John 8:12, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Jesus was making a few VERY important points:

- **Jesus is the Light.** During the Exodus, the people saw a fire cloud in the sky, but this presence did not talk or provide a 3-D example of what God is like. Jesus is our reminder that God is with us, a living Light!
- **Jesus is the Light of the World!** Additionally, the fire was only for the people of Israel. However, by calling Himself the light of the world, Jesus was pointing out that ALL people, regardless of nationality can be encouraged by His presence.
- **Jesus invites us to follow Him.** Jesus' light is not just meant to comfort, it is meant to direct.
- **If we follow Him, we will not walk in darkness.** Jesus will never lead us to sin. He only leads us towards righteousness, for He desires our growth, not our destruction.
- **If we follow Him, we will have life.** Darkness leads to death. Yet, Jesus is the Light of life . . . He came to give us life, not take it from us!

At Christmas time, we often place lights on our landscaping and homes. This is appropriate because, as Lauren Daigle's song reminds us, Jesus is the Light of the world! As we sing this song, or look at Christmas lights, let us remember God's presence with us, and His desire that we walk in obedience following Jesus' commands and example. If we do, we will have life as God intended!

Light of the World

*The world waits for a miracle
The heart longs for a little bit of hope
Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel
A child prays for peace on Earth
And she's calling out from a sea of hurt
Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel*

And can you hear the angels singing

*Glory to the light of the world
Glory, the light of the world is here*

*The drought breaks with the tears of a mother
A baby's cry is the sound of love
Come down, come down, Emmanuel
He is the song for the suffering
He is Messiah, the Prince of Peace has come
He has come, Emmanuel*

Glory to the light of the world

*For all who wait
For all who hunger
For all who've prayed
For all who wonder
Behold your King
Behold Messiah
Emmanuel, Emmanuel*

*Glory to the light of the world
Glory to the light of the world
Glory to the light of the world
Behold your King
Behold Messiah
Emmanuel, Emmanuel*

*The world waits for the miracle
The heart longs for a little bit of hope
Oh come, oh come Emmanuel*

Day 5
ALL PRAISE TO THEE ETERNAL LORD

Read: John 1:14-18

By the beginning of the 16th century, the Church was in desperate need of reform. The Scriptures, songs, and liturgies that filled the worship services were in languages foreign to most people. In the “high church,” God was kept distant from the people who were “lowly” and less educated.

Though this was the pattern of the church in the middle ages, it was not the plan of God. God does not require that we speak Latin to know Him or read His Word, and Martin Luther recognized this. Luther set out on a mission to strip away the mystery of the church regalia and to return the beauty of the Gospel to the people. He translated the liturgy, the Scripture, and the songs of the church from Latin into German – the language of his fellow countrymen.

One song that Luther translated was “All Praise to Thee Eternal Lord,” a Christmas song written by Gregory the Great in the sixth century. One of the lines of this song states, “A little Child, Thou art our guest, That weary ones in Thee may rest; Forlorn and lowly is Thy birth, That we may rise to heaven from earth.”

These lyrics remind us that God has not stayed distant, speaking foreign languages. He came to us in the lowest common denominator - a human baby - so that ALL of us may know who He is and have a chance to find rest and rise to heaven one day.

Luther translated “All Praise to Thee Eternal Lord” into German - what a gift! Jesus “translated” an understanding of who God is to the world - what an unbelievable gift! Today, sing a really, really old song and be thankful for the translation of God’s glory that Jesus has done for us: because He came, we can know God.

All Praise to Thee Eternal Lord

*All praise to Thee, eternal Lord,
Clothed in a garb of flesh and blood;
Choosing a manger for Thy throne,
While worlds on worlds are Thine alone.*

*Once did the skies before Thee bow;
A virgin's arms contain Thee now,
While angels, who in Thee rejoice,
Now listen for Thine infant voice.*

*A little child, Thou art our guest,
That weary ones in Thee may rest;
Forlorn and lowly is Thy birth;
That we may rise to Heaven from earth.*

*Thou comest in the darksome night
To make us children of the light;
To make us, in the realms divine,
Like Thine own angels round Thee shine.*

*All this for us Thy love hath done;
By this to Thee our love is won;
For this we tune our cheerful lays,
And sing our thanks in ceaseless praise.*

Day 6
ANTHEM FOR CHRISTMAS

Read: John 1:1-4

Jesus' birth in Bethlehem marked the beginning of many things, most notably the beginning of His earthly life. However, Jesus' birth in Bethlehem was not the beginning of Jesus' existence. His "beginning" goes way before that first Christmas. John 1:1 says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." This verse is absolutely full of meaning:

- "In the beginning was the Word." That is, in the time that we know of as the beginning (referring of course to the events of Genesis chapter 1, and the creation of the world), the Word ALREADY "WAS!" The One known as "the Word" was already in existence when everything was created.
- "The Word." John 1 lets us know that the "Word" is Jesus. Words express things. Jesus as the "Word" expresses to us who God really is.
- "The Word was God." Likewise, this verse lets us know that Jesus is God. Therefore, Jesus not only did not have His "beginning" in Bethlehem, He has no "beginning" at all! God exists eternally. He was not created, has always been, and always will be.

This verse places Jesus in an appropriately eternal context. At Christmas, we celebrate the Eternal God humbling Himself in a human birth . . . God became man so that man can be with God. Michael W. Smith's song "The Anthem of Christmas" tells this cosmic story - from creation to the cradle and beyond. In this song may we all find the words to proclaim His love this Christmas.

Anthem for Christmas

*In the space of the beginning
Was the living Word of Light
When this Word was clearly spoken
All that came to be was right*

*All creation had a language
Words to say what must be said
All day long the heavens whispered
Signing words in scarlet red*

*Some failed to understand it
So God spoke His final Word
On a silent night in Judah's
Hills a baby's cry was heard*

*"Glory!" sang the angel chorus
"Glory!" echoed back the night
Love has come to walk among us
Christ the Lord is born this night*

*All creation sing His praises
Earth and heaven praise His name
All who live come join the chorus
Find the words His love proclaim
Find the words His love proclaim*

Day 7
MANGER THRONE

Read: Hebrews 4:15; Romans 5:8

I love our house at Christmas. Meaningful decorations fill each room, including three nativities. One set is a Willow Tree nativity. The faceless characters with long carved bodies evoke emotion like an impressionist painting. A second is a Precious Moments nativity, a childhood gift to my wife from her parents . . . a different piece every year. Because of that history, this set is a yearly reminder of the “good deposit” my wife’s family made in teaching her about Jesus. The third set is a Fisher-Price Little People nativity that we acquired when our son was a toddler. It allowed him to play with the pieces while learning the Christmas story. Shortly after receiving this nativity, he relayed his version of the story using the figurines. The angel came to Mary’s house and said, “Good news about Jesus. He came to take away our badness.” Then the angel tackled Mary.

Despite the differences among these nativities, there is one striking similarity. They all have baby Jesus asleep in a trough of hay. Each year, I am awestruck again that the God of the universe would humble Himself to THAT extent. The independent God coming as a dependent baby. The One who sits at the Father’s right hand, lying in fodder. It seems so drastic . . . and so odd. Yet, there is a plan. Jesus comes as a baby to fully identify with our experience (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus comes in a mortal body to die to bring immortality to His people (Romans 5:8).

In the Old Testament, God’s presence hovered over the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies, a place of grandeur and formality. Because of this, it is surprising to find the Savior in the manger. Perhaps Jesus was born in the stall to announce that the presence of God would no longer reside behind a curtain. The Spirit of God was moving from a grand room that few would ever see, to a public location where lowly shepherds and foreigners could visit. This move sets the stage for the Spirit of God taking up residence in the hearts and lives of believers today. The same God who lay in the manger, now resides within us!

This awesome truth is spoken of in “Manger Throne” (by Third Day et al). May we be reminded “Our heart is a home for God’s own Son!”

Manger Throne

*What kind of King would leave His throne
In Heaven to make this earth His home?
While men seek fame and great renown
In loneliness our King comes down*

*Jesus, Jesus, precious One
How we thank You that You've come
Jesus, Jesus, precious One
A manger throne for God's own Son*

*You left the sound of angels' praise
To come for men with unkind ways
And by this Baby's helplessness
The power of nations is laid to rest*

*What kind of King would come so small
From glory to a humble stall?
That dirty manger is my heart, too
I'll make it a royal throne for You*

*My heart is a throne
My heart is a throne for God's own Son*

Day 8 MARY, DID YOU KNOW?

Read: Luke 1:26-38

In 1991, Buddy Greene and Mark Lowry wrote a Christmas song that has become a contemporary “classic.” In its short history, this tune has been recorded by multiple artists and sung in many church services.

The song asks a simple rhetorical question: Mary, did you know who your Son was? The question is expanded throughout the lyrics, citing both the salvation Jesus would bring and the miracles He would work. Did Mary know while holding Him in Bethlehem’s barn who Jesus really was?

The question shines a spotlight on the paradox of the Sovereign God becoming a dependent baby. But for all the song’s popularity and beauty, is it accurate? Did Mary know? If so, what did Mary know?

Mary certainly knew that Jesus was not a normal baby. In Luke 1:26-38, Mary discovers she is pregnant through a conversation with the angel Gabriel. During this exchange, she would come to know:

- She had found favor with God (1:28-30)
- She was pregnant with a Son, even though she was a virgin (1:31)
- Her Son would be the Son of God (1:32a, 35)
- Her Son would be the promised Messiah (1:32b)
- Her Son’s Kingdom would know no end (1:33)

For nine months Mary carried Jesus with the words of the Angel reverberating in her ears and heart. Then, when Jesus was born, angels, shepherds, and Magi remind Mary of the supernatural nature of her Son. As He grew, she continued to understand Jesus’ uniqueness. She even had an expectation that He could do miracles like turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana. So, based on these verses, did Mary know? Yes, I think she did.

However, Mary was still human. At one point, she and Jesus’ half brothers openly questioned His methods (Matthew 12:46-50). After Jesus’ crucifixion, Mary was not outside the tomb expecting to see the stone rolled away. She, like the other disciples, thought the Dream died on the cross. So Mary knew, but she didn’t fully understand.

The question asked in this song reminds us that we can KNOW a truth about God yet still have questions. Allow this tension to be an encouragement in areas of your life where you know, but in another sense don’t fully understand.

Mary Did You Know?

*Mary did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water?
Mary did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?
Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new?
This child that you've delivered, will soon deliver you*

*Mary did you know that your baby boy will give sight to a blind man?
Mary did you know that your baby boy will calm a storm with his hand?
Did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod?
When you kiss your little baby, you kiss the face of God*

*Mary did you know? Mary did you know? Mary did you know?
Mary did you know? Mary did you know? Mary did you know?*

*The blind will see, the deaf will hear, the dead will live again
The lame will leap, the dumb will speak, the praises of the lamb*

*Mary did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation?
Mary did you know that your baby boy would one day rule the nations?
Did you know that your baby boy is heaven's perfect lamb?
That sleeping child you're holding is the great I am*

*Mary did you know? Mary did you know? Mary did you know?
Mary did you know? Mary did you know? Mary did you know?
Oh Mary did you know?*

Day 9
O COME ALL YE FAITHFUL

Read: Luke 2:8-20; Matthew 2:1-12

Every year on my son's birthday, we have a party, which raises the question of whom to invite. Some years, the guest list is only family. Other years, we add a few friends. Still other years, the list has included all the boys on a team or in his class.

The next step is to send an email, phone call, or post card. Those who receive the invite then have a choice. Will they attend? Are they able?

I thought about this dynamic as I sang the lyrics of one of my most beloved carols, "O Come All Ye Faithful," which recounts the birth day of Jesus when a "party" broke out near the manger. Of course Mary and Joseph were there, but soon others began to arrive. God the Father went out of His way to invite two very different (and unlikely) groups to the party - shepherds and Magi (see Luke 2:8-20, and Matthew 2:1-12). The shepherds represented common Jewish people - a class of citizens who would normally NEVER have been invited to a religious ceremony or royal birth. The Magi were Gentiles from a faraway land who had no expectation of inclusion in the plans of the God of Israel. Yet, at Jesus' birthday party, God sends an angelic invite to the shepherds and a starry message to the Magi.

When these invites come, the shepherds and Magi have a choice. Will they attend? Are they able? Both groups decide they cannot miss this special moment and move toward the manger. As a result, both are incredibly blessed.

Now think about your own life for a moment. By virtue of reading this devotional and knowing the Christmas story, you have received an invitation from your Heavenly Father to come to Jesus and find your hope in Him.

This invitation is not based on our performance but on His grace. Sinful people like you and me, like the shepherds and wise men, get the invite to come to Jesus and find our hope and forgiveness and life in Him. Have you placed your faith in Jesus as the Son of God who took the penalty of our sins through His death on the cross? If not, hear "O Come All Ye Faithful" as an invite to come and adore Him and place your faith in Christ.

O Come All Ye Faithful

*O come, all ye faithful
Joyful and triumphant
O come ye, oh come ye to Bethlehem
Come and behold Him
Born the king of angels*

*Oh come let us adore Him
Oh come let us adore Him
Oh come let us adore Him
Christ the Lord*

*Sing, Choirs of angels
Sing in exultation
Sing all ye citizens of heaven above!
Glory to God
Glory in the highest*

*Oh come let us adore Him
Oh come let us adore Him
Oh come let us adore Him
Christ the Lord*

*Yea, Lord we greet thee
Born this happy morning
Jesus to Thee be all glory given
Word of the Father
Now in flesh appearing*

*Oh come let us adore Him
Oh come let us adore Him
Oh come let us adore Him
Christ the Lord*

Day 10
STRANGE WAY TO SAVE THE WORLD

Read: Matthew 1:18-25

For good reasons, Mary the mother of Jesus gets much attention in the Christmas story. After all, the Gospel of Luke gives a number of details (throughout Luke 1-2) about Mary's experiences while Jesus was in the womb and at His birth. Further, it seems as though Joseph died by the time Jesus' public ministry took off, while Mary lived on. Yet, it is important for us to think through Joseph's experience in the story, for it is a remarkable testament to faith and faithfulness.

Matthew 1:18-25 relays Joseph's experience during the time Jesus was inside Mary's womb. Joseph and Mary were betrothed, but not yet married. This meant that they had made the commitment to spend the rest of their lives together, but they had not yet begun to live together and sleep together. Two days ago, we looked at Mary's experience from Luke 1 as God announced through an angel that Mary would be pregnant even though she was a virgin, and would have a Son who would be the Messiah. This was HUGE news, and certainly difficult to believe for anyone who was not speaking with angels! And at first, Joseph was NOT talking to angels. God first brought the news to Mary before sharing it with Joseph. So, with Mary pregnant, and Joseph looking only to natural explanations for this situation, Joseph decided to divorce Mary quietly - probably so she could then marry whomever was the child's father.

But it was not God's will that Joseph leave Mary. Therefore, an Angel intervened and informed Joseph that Mary's child was indeed supernatural, and that Mary was telling the truth that the Baby was the Messiah.

In "Strange Way to Save the World," we get to be a fly on the wall of Joseph's room as he prays aloud, processing the news of Mary's pregnancy and the Angel's visit. This fictional conversation is probably not far from what Joseph must have been thinking that night after the Angel came.

As we listen to this song, may we ponder the things about God that don't make sense to us. Things we might wish to "dismiss quietly" instead of receiving as true. Let this song remind us that though God's ways are sometimes "strange" to us, there is salvation and blessing in God's plans in this world.

Strange Way to Save the World

*I'm sure he must have been surprised
At where this road had taken him
Cause never in a million lives
Would he have dreamed of Bethlehem*

*And standing at the manger
He saw with his own eyes
The message from the angel come to life
And Joseph said*

*Why me, I'm just a simple man of trade
Why Him with all the rulers in the world
Why here inside this stable filled with hay
Why her, she's just an ordinary girl
Now I'm not one to second guess
What angels have to say
But this is such a strange way to save the World*

*To think of how it could have been
If Jesus had come as He deserved
There would have been no Bethlehem
No lowly shepherds at His birth*

*But Joseph knew the reason
Love had to reach so far
And as he held the Savior in his arms
He must have thought*

*Why me, I'm just a simple man of trade
Why Him with all the rulers in the world
Why here inside this stable filled with hay
Why her, she's just an ordinary girl
Now I'm not one to second guess
What angels have to say
But this is such a strange way to save the world*

*Now, I'm not one to second guess
What angels have to say
But this is such a strange way to save the world
Such a strange way to save the world*

Day 11
BREATH OF HEAVEN

Read: Luke 1:5-25; Luke 1:39-45

Do you want a “blessed” life? Of course you do! Who doesn’t, right? Only a hardcore atheist who does not believe in a “Bless-or” is repelled by the concept of being blessed by their Creator. However, what does the blessing of God look like, and how do we get on the blessed list?

After Mary was visited by Gabriel and told she was carrying the Son of God, she visited her relative Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-45). At that time, Elizabeth declared to Mary that she was indeed “blessed” by God (Luke 1:42). Of course, the blessing Elizabeth was referring to was the Baby Mary was carrying in her womb . . . but a closer reading of this passage (in context) also reveals to us another way Mary was blessed in Luke 1.

After speaking with the Angel Gabriel, Mary was mostly left in isolation to ponder her new found pregnancy. Her parents would have been concerned. Her betrothed, Joseph, was considering a divorce. Who would believe her? Did she really hear the Angel correctly? These were probably some of the questions Mary was asking.

So, where does she go? How does God provide and bless Mary in the midst of her situation? The Lord has Mary walk 50-70 miles to the hills of Judah to visit Elizabeth, the only other woman in the world who would understand miraculous pregnancies (see Luke 1:5-25)! The Lord blessed Mary through another person - her cousin Elizabeth’s company!

- 1) Can you imagine what Mary may have been thinking as she walked to Elizabeth’s house? The song “Breath of Heaven” shares a fictionalized perspective from Mary as she made that trek. Listen to this song as you relate Mary’s circumstances.
- 2) Realize that the “Breath of Heaven’s” blessing that fell on Mary at that time was not a second angelic visit, but a cup of coffee with her cousin.

Are you longing for the supernatural provision of God? Have you ever stopped to think that the blessing of God . . . the breath of heaven . . . may be coming to you by another member of the Body of Christ who lives down the street, or is in your small group, or is just a phone call away. The supernatural blessing of God is often wrapped in natural paper.

Breath of Heaven

*I have traveled many moonless nights
Cold and weary with a babe inside
And I wonder what I've done
Holy Father, You have come
And chosen me now to carry Your Son*

*I am waiting in a silent prayer
I am frightened by the load I bear
In a world as cold as stone
Must I walk this path alone?
Be with me now, be with me now*

*Breath of Heaven, hold me together
Be forever near me, breath of Heaven
Breath of Heaven, lighten my darkness
Pour over me Your holiness for You are holy
Breath of Heaven*

*Do you wonder as you watch my face
If a wiser one should have had my place?
But I offer all I am
For the mercy of Your plan
Help me be strong, help me be, help me*

Day 12
GOD REST YE MERRY GENTLEMEN

Read: Hebrews 13:5-6; Matthew 28:20

There is a great scene in the 1995 movie “Apollo 13” where Tom Hanks (playing the part of Astronaut Jim Lovell) sits in his back yard staring at the moon. Lovell was soon to pilot the famed Apollo 13 spaceship to a lunar landing. As he sat in his suburban backyard on terra firm, however, Lovell was thousands of miles from his destination. While staring at the moon, Lovell closes one eye and extends his fist in front of him then raises his thumb. The camera switches to Lovell’s perspective, showing the captain’s ability to make the moon disappear behind his thumb.

Now, two possible explanations exist regarding Lovell’s disappearing moon:

1. The disappearance of the moon was an optical illusion created by the close proximity of the finger to the eyeball. In other words, it was a matter of perspective.
2. Tom Hanks has an extremely large thumb! In other words, his thumb is bigger than the moon.

Of course, option one is correct! It also serves as a helpful reminder that our problems have a very near proximity to our eyes. Medical issues, crumbling relationships, and dashed dreams are so close to us that they feel enormous. In fact, their perceived size can even cause us to not see God in the midst of our difficulty.

Again, two possibilities exist:

1. We have really large problems . . . larger than the God who created the universe.
2. We are allowing our current circumstances to create an illusion, blinding us to the reality of God’s presence.

This Christmas season, many are no doubt dealing with tough trials. Because of that, we have a tendency to miss God. Under our stress and strain, we squint our eyes and see only that which is attached to our hands. Don’t be fooled! God is there! The infant born in Bethlehem is not small in stature . . . He is Lord, and He is our Immanuel – God with us. Therefore, sing loudly the chorus to “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen.”

Be comforted because God does not disappear . . . He has come to us in Christ. Remember Jesus’ last words to His disciples, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” This promise dispels the illusion that we are alone. He is here, and we can trust Him with problems, big and small.

God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen

*God rest ye merry gentlemen let nothing you dismay
Remember Christ our Savior was born on Christmas Day
To save us all from Satan's power when we were gone astray*

*Oh, tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy
Oh, tidings of comfort and joy*

*Fear not then, said the Angel let nothing you affright
This day is born a Savior of a pure Virgin bright
To free all those who trust in Him from Satan's power and might*

*Oh, tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy
Oh, tidings of comfort and joy*

Day 13
THE FIRST NOEL

Read: 2 Corinthians 5:17; John 3:3-8

In 1833, William Sandys wrote the hymn, “The First Noel.” The song details Jesus birth, with each verse telling a new part of the story, separated by the chorus refrain, “Noel! Born is the King of Israel!” “Noel” is a French word for Christmas that comes from Latin roots that mean “new birth.” Therefore, the song is ultimately about how the new birth of Jesus in Bethlehem leads to the new birth of the people of God in Christ.

2 Corinthians 5:17 and John 3:3-8 tell of the new birth that believers have in Jesus Christ. Christians’ new or second birth occurs because in Christ, their full identity changes. Without Christ, a sinner’s core identity is an “object of wrath” before a Holy God. After trusting in Christ for the forgiveness of sins, the Christian’s core identity is a child of God . . . an heir according to His promise.

What this means is that believers in Christ celebrate the first birth of Jesus because it provides for them their new birth into the family of God. That is why the sixth verse of “The First Noel” is so powerful. It begins, “Let us all with one accord . . .” Since this hymn has been sung for 190 years, our voices join with “one accord” to literally millions who have sung this very song previously. The verse concludes by declaring the reason for our cross-generational unity, “With His (Jesus) Blood mankind hath bought.” Because of the blood of Jesus Christ, all believers now have a second, “new” birth. With this in mind, the chorus sounds like the cry of a 1930’s newspaper salesman calling, “Extra, Extra, read all about it!” The chorus shouts, “New birth! New birth! New birth! New birth! Born is the One who brings us new birth!

Let us think about that as we reflect on the lyrics of this great Christmas hymn!

The First Noel

*The First Noel, the Angels did say
Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay
In fields where they lay keeping their sheep
On a cold winter's night that was so deep.
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel
Born is the King of Israel!*

*They looked up and saw a star
Shining in the East beyond them far
And to the earth it gave great light
And so it continued both day and night.
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel
Born is the King of Israel!*

*And by the light of that same star
Three Wise men came from country far
To seek for a King was their intent
And to follow the star wherever it went.
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel
Born is the King of Israel!*

*This star drew nigh to the northwest
O'er Bethlehem it took its rest
And there it did both Pause and stay
Right o'er the place where Jesus lay.
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel
Born is the King of Israel!*

*Then entered in those Wise men three
Full reverently upon their knee
And offered there in His presence
Their gold and myrrh and frankincense.
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel
Born is the King of Israel!*

*Then let us all with one accord
Sing praises to our heavenly Lord
That hath made Heaven and earth of nought
And with his blood mankind has bought.
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel
Born is the King of Israel!*

Day 14
JOY HAS DAWNED!

Read: Philippians 2:4-11

Great Christian songs are not always old. There are wonderful songs currently being written that reflect upon the majesty of Jesus. Of the groups currently writing modern hymns, my favorite is Keith Getty and Stuart Townend. They have authored a number of very popular modern hymns including the “Power of the Cross” and “In Christ Alone.” They also have composed a few songs that reflect on the birth of Jesus. Of these new Christmas songs, my favorite is “Joy Has Dawned.”

In “Joy Has Dawned,” each verse reflects upon the paradox of the birth of Jesus Christ. Just some of the poetry in this song:

- “Not with fanfare from above, not with scenes of glory, but a humble gift of love - Jesus born of Mary.”
- “Hands that set the stars in place, shaped the earth in darkness, cling now to a mother’s breast, vulnerable and helpless.”
- “Shepherds bow before the Lamb, gazing at His glory”
- “Son of Adam, Son of heaven, given as a ransom; reconciling God and man, Christ our mighty champion!”

These statements remind me of Philippians 2:4-11, where the birth of Jesus is described as a step of tremendous humility - “though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:6-8).”

The humility Jesus shows is meant to do more than just inspire us, it is to instruct us with a model for our lives. If the Creator God humbled Himself in love to come to the earth for us, then we should (following that example) humble ourselves in service to others. As we sing “Joy has Dawned” today may the humble example of Jesus inspire us, for joy dawns not when we cling onto our lives and rights but when we freely give ourselves away in love for others.

Joy Has Dawned

*Joy has dawned upon the world,
Promised from creation—
God's salvation now unfurled,
Hope for ev'ry nation.
Not with fanfares from above,
Not with scenes of glory,
But a humble gift of love—
Jesus born of Mary.*

*Sounds of wonder fill the sky
With the songs of angels
As the mighty Prince of Life
Shelters in a stable.
Hands that set each star in place,
Shaped the earth in darkness,
Cling now to a mother's breast,
Vuln'rable and helpless.*

*Shepherds bow before the Lamb,
Gazing at the glory;
Gifts of men from distant lands
Prophesy the story.
Gold—a King is born today,
Incense—God is with us,
Myrrh—His death will make a way,
And by His blood He'll win us.*

*Son of Adam, Son of heaven,
Given as a ransom;
Reconciling God and man,
Christ, our mighty champion!
What a Savior! What a Friend!
What a glorious myst'ry!
Once a babe in Bethlehem,
Now the Lord of hist'ry.*

Day 15
O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM

Read: Micah 5:2; 1 Peter 1:8-9

In 1868, Episcopalian Pastor Phillip Brooks needed a carol for the kids to sing at a Christmas service at his church. Not satisfied with any songs he had heard, Brooks decided to write one himself. Inspired by a Christmas Eve service he had attended in Bethlehem during a Holy Land trip three years prior, Brooks sat down and authored “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” Not only did the children in his church sing this song in their Christmas program, but millions continue to sing the tune today, some 150 years later. Think about that for a moment. This Philadelphia pastor has a top hit that has lasted fifteen decades! Knowing that best sellers in the iTunes music store top the charts for only about fifteen days, and even the best of our contemporary praise and worship songs seldom persist in popularity past fifteen years, Brooks’s song is amazingly durable. What is it about this song that has allowed it to endure?

I think the message of this hymn is very powerful. I have always been struck by the phrase at the end of the first verse, “the hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight.” The idea that Jesus Christ comforts our deepest fears and provides for us our greatest hope is an amazingly powerful message! As I ponder the significance of this phrase, I am reminded of 1 Peter 1:8-9, “Though you have not seen Him, you love Him; and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” Our deepest fear is death. Our greatest hope is eternal life in fellowship with our Creator, the salvation of our souls. Truly, in Christ the hopes and fears of all the years are met.

As we sing this hymn, may we be reminded of the comfort and hope Jesus Christ provides to you and me.

O Little Town of Bethlehem

*O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight*

*For Christ is born of Mary
And gathered all above
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love
O morning stars together
Proclaim the holy birth
And praises sing to God the King
And Peace to men on earth*

*How silently, how silently
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him still,
The dear Christ enters in.*

*O holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born to us today
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell
O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel.*

Day 16
WHAT CHILD IS THIS?

Read: Matthew 16:13-20; 1 Peter 1:3

At the age of 29 William Dix was living in Glasgow, Scotland, working as an insurance salesman. He contracted a serious illness that left him in bed and also (eventually) depressed. For the promising young hymn writer, his illness threatened to limit his ministry. But, the Lord is not restricted by our limitations. In our weakness, the strength of the Lord is often most clearly seen.

It was from this bed of despair that William Dix wrote the hymn “What Child is This?” The song is a simple Q&A style, where the verses ask questions which the chorus answers.

- Question: “What child is this that lay to rest in Mary’s lap sleeping?”
- Answer: “This, this is Christ the King!”

In Matthew 16:13-20, Jesus asked His disciples who they thought He was. Dix’s song points Jesus’ words forward to us. During the Christmas season, we see depictions of Baby Jesus everywhere. As we see these depictions of Jesus, may we ask ourselves the question of the song, “What child is this who laid to rest on Mary’s lap is sleeping?” Some say that Jesus was simply a prophet or a religious leader, but who do you say Jesus is? Is He just those things, or something more?

May we come to know (as Peter did in Matthew 16) that Jesus is the Christ (Savior), the Son of the Living God. And because He is a living God, He offers us a living hope, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to His great mercy, He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Peter 1:3).”

From a place of personal frailty, Dix reminded us of the power of God in Christ. The Child that lay sleeping on Mary’s lap offers hope and life to all who come to know His true identity and trust in Him. Who do you say this child is?

What Child Is This?

*What Child is this Who, laid to rest
On Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet
While shepherds watch are keeping?
This, this is Christ the King
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing
Haste, haste, to bring Him laud
The Babe, the Son of Mary*

*Why lies He in such mean estate
Where ox and lamb are feeding?
Good Christian, fear, for sinners here
The silent Word is pleading
Nails, spear shall pierce Him through
The cross be borne for me, for you
Hail, hail the Word made flesh
The Babe, the Son of Mary*

*So bring Him incense, gold and myrrh
Come peasant, king to own Him
The King of kings salvation brings
Let loving hearts enthrone Him
Raise, raise a song on high
The virgin sings her lullaby
Joy, joy for Christ is born
The Babe, the Son of Mary*

Day 17
SILENT NIGHT

Read: Romans 8:28

“You have found it! The right song! God be praised!” said the organist to Priest Joseph Mohr at a Catholic Church in the Austrian Alps just before Christmas 1818. The organ had broken down, and the priest and his musician were trying to compose a song that would befit the majesty of Christmas but would not require the booming sound of the organ. The simple song that was written (to be accompanied by a guitar), was “Silent Night.” This Christmas, this song celebrates its 206th birthday! What a gift born out of necessity.

Two things came to mind when I learned of the origin story for this song:

- 1) “Contemporary” styled church music (with guitars and other instruments) has been around a long time!
- 2) Necessity is the mother of invention.

Just think, if the organ had not broken, “Silent Night” might never have been written. As a pastor who has planned many Christmas services, I can only imagine that the broken organ was a major inconvenience and potentially a discouragement during the holiday season. Yet, God took this challenge and (in the midst of it) gave the church an enduring gift.

Romans 8:28 reflects on the sovereignty of God by saying, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.” God is able to take the broken instruments in our lives and work through them to create a beautiful song.

As we sing “Silent Night” this year, let us remember its birth through necessity. What aspects of your life seem out of tune? Trust the Lord to work through them for good.

Silent Night

*Silent night! Holy night!
All is calm, all is bright,
Round yon Virgin Mother and Child!
Holy Infant, so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace!
Sleep in heavenly peace!*

*Silent night! Holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight!
Glories stream from Heaven afar,
Heavenly Hosts sing Alleluia!
Christ, the Savior, is born!
Christ, the Savior, is born!*

*Silent night! Holy night!
Son of God, love's pure light
Radiant beams from Thy Holy Face
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at Thy Birth!
Jesus, Lord, at Thy Birth!*

Day 18
AWAY IN A MANGER

Read: Isaiah 53:2; Luke 2:12; Hebrews 4:15-16

After Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph placed Him in a manger, which is a feeding trough for livestock. This reality is sung about in "Away in a Manger" and feels commonplace to us since the Christmas story is so familiar. However, have you ever wondered WHY God had Jesus placed in a manger on that first Christmas day?

While the repurposed manger certainly symbolized the humility of Jesus, Luke 2:12 gives the specific reason for the trough: "And this will be a sign for you, you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloth and lying in the manger." These words, spoken by the angels to the shepherds, indicate that the manger crib was the sign to let the shepherds know which baby was Jesus. In other words, there were other babies in Bethlehem that night, but only one could be found wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger - Jesus!

Since all Jewish mothers wrapped infants in cloths, it was the manger that highlighted Jesus' identity as the Son of God. The manger was a spotlight. The shepherds would go house to house until they found the baby in the feeding trough. When they found THAT child, they would worship Him.

It is significant that the BED Jesus lay in was the distinguishing factor as to His identity. This lets us know that He otherwise LOOKED like a normal baby. He was not glowing in holiness or preaching in perfect Aramaic. In fact, he was probably crying, despite what the lyrics of "Away in a Manger" suggest. Everything about Jesus looked normal, so the angels could not identify Jesus to the shepherds through His physical appearance; they needed to describe His bed.

This simple point reminds us that the Son of God truly did become the fully human Son of Man. Hebrews 4:15-16 confirms this. Therefore, Jesus knows what it means to live a normal human life. He did so in every way . . . except that He did not sin. Thus, He can help us and forgive us as we deal with the sin in our own lives.

As we sing "Away in a Manger" this Christmas season, be reminded that Jesus' bed (not His body) revealed His uniqueness that first Christmas night. He knows normal, and so He can help normal people like you and me.

Away in a Manger

*Away in a manger
No crib for a bed
The little Lord Jesus
Laid down His sweet head
The stars in the sky
Looked down where He lay
The little Lord Jesus
Asleep on the hay*

*The cattle are lowing
The Baby awakes
The little Lord Jesus
No crying He makes
I love Thee, Lord Jesus
Look down from the sky
And stay by my cradle
Till morning is nigh*

*Be near me, Lord Jesus
I ask Thee to stay
Close by me forever
And love me I pray
Bless all the dear children
In Thy tender care
And fate us for heaven
To live with Thee there*

Day 19

HOPE WAS BORN THIS NIGHT

Read: Psalm 42

Hope is neither a luxury nor an option. We may need water, food, and air to survive, but we need hope to thrive. So how do we have hope in this dark world? Where is our hope found?

In Psalm 42:5a, the psalmist asks, “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?” In other words, my spirit feels crushed! I am prone to discouragement! What am I to do?

The psalmist continues with the solution to a down cast soul, “Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him, my salvation and my God.” Put another way, the solution for our spirit today is hope for tomorrow.

Some believe the “good old days” belong to our present or past, but hope for tomorrow means that we do not think of today or yesterday as the best that will ever be. As we age, we are also tempted to think that our remaining years will only be full of loss of health, deaths of loved ones, and activities we can no longer enjoy. This perspective makes our past or present the pinnacle of existence, and everything else is simply downhill. If our perspective is solely earth bound then there may be some truth to this existential depression. However, if we know the God of the universe, we have access to an unending hope . . . because it is anchored to something OUTSIDE this life.

When we “hope in God,” we connect our perspective to the eternal. In eternity, we are saved. In eternity, our broken and breaking bodies are made imperishable. In eternity, God richly provides for all our needs. In eternity, we neither sin nor struggle. With this eternal perspective, we can have an enduring hope!

Jesus’ birth demonstrated His intimate connection between the world in which we live and His eternal order. Jesus came to give us a tangible and living hope, to provide a way for us to enter eternity. When we place our faith in Christ, we can have a hope today based on what He has promised us tomorrow.

The psalmist ends 42:5 by reminding us to demonstrate our hope in God by praising Him. As we listen to “Hope was Born this Night,” may we hear “the echoes of grace of our Savior’s embrace because hope was born this night.”

Hope was Born this Night - Sidewalk Prophets

*Tonight I can see a star shine
And its splendor fills up the sky
It's the same that appeared
And the wisemen revered
When Hope was born this night*

*Out upon the snowy fields
There's a silent peace that heals
And it echoes the grace
Of our Savior's embrace
Because Hope was born this night*

*Glory to God in the highest
Peace on earth
Goodwill to men
Let all of the world
Sing the chorus of joy
Because Hope was born this night*

*I can hear the Christmas bells ringing
As softly a church choir sings
It's the song used to praise
The Ancient of Days
When Hope was born this night*

*There are angels in this place
And my heart resounds in the praise
Like a shepherd so scared
I'll rejoice and declare
That Hope was born this night*

*Glory to God in the highest
Peace on earth
Goodwill to men
Let all of the world
Sing the chorus of joy
Because Hope was born this night*

Day 20

ANGELS, FROM THE REALMS OF GLORY

Read: Matthew 2:1-12; Matthew 13:10-17; Ephesians 1:18

Journalist James Montgomery wrote a poem that ran on Christmas Eve 1816 in his London paper. This poem (“Angels from the Realms of Glory”) would later be set to music by a blind organist, and the song has been sung for over 200 years now in churches all over the world.

Given that the music was written by a blind man, I especially love the third verse that says, “Sages, leave your contemplations; brighter visions beam afar; Seek the Great Desire of Nations; Ye have seen His natal star.” Of course the direct reference of the lyric points to the Magi (the sage foreigners) who saw the brighter vision of the Christmas star and went to check it out (see Matthew 2:1-12). However, this brighter vision need not be confined to only the first century.

A very common miracle that Jesus worked was giving sight to the blind. This is both a physical miracle and a picture of what He does for you and me – gives us spiritual eyes so we can see who He really is (Matthew 13:10-17).

Two thousand years after the birth of Jesus, He still wants us to see Him for who He really is . . . the Son of God, and the Savior of the World. May the eyes of our hearts be enlightened so that we may know Him (and the blessing He gives to us) more this year (Ephesians 1:18).

Take a moment today and sing Montgomery’s song, and pray for a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ this Christmas season.

Angels From the Realms of Glory

*Angels from the realms of glory,
Wing your flight o'er all the earth;
Ye who sang creation's story
Now proclaim Messiah's birth.*

*Refrain: Come and worship, come and worship,
Worship Christ, the newborn King.*

*Shepherds, in the field abiding,
Watching o'er your flocks by night,
God with us is now residing;
Yonder shines the infant light:*

*Sages, leave your contemplations,
Brighter visions beam afar;
Seek the great Desire of nations;
Ye have seen His natal star.*

*Saints, before the altar bending,
Watching long in hope and fear;
Suddenly the Lord, descending,
In His temple shall appear.*

*Sinners, wrung with true repentance,
Doomed for guilt to endless pains,
Justice now revokes the sentence,
Mercy calls you; break your chains.*

*Though an Infant now we view Him,
He shall fill His Father's throne,
Gather all the nations to Him;
Every knee shall then bow down:*

*All creation, join in praising
God, the Father, Spirit, Son,
Evermore your voices raising
To th' eternal Three in One.*

Day 21

IT CAME UPON THE MIDNIGHT CLEAR

Read: Luke 2:14; Isaiah 9:1-7

Some songs are as powerful today as they were when they were written hundreds of years ago. Great music transports us to a place beyond time, where lyrics and melodies can speak to many generations at once. However, because of music's timeless quality, we may forget that songs are written inside of time. The setting and context into which a hymn is composed often provides insight into the meaning of the lyrics.

"It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" was written in 1849 by a pastor from Massachusetts, Edmund Sears, as he reflected on the tensions rising around him. The United States was just twelve years from the Civil War, and trouble was already brewing. Out of this context, Sears drew comfort from the words the angels spoke to the shepherds on the night of Jesus birth, declaring "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests (Luke 2:14)." In the dark of night, a new light shone that would provide peace for the people on the earth. This song begins 2,000 years ago with the angels, "bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold." It continues to talk about the contemporary experience of mankind who are "beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low." The song climaxes with a look at the future where "the whole world sends back the song which now the angels sing." In other words, the promise of the angels of peace on earth will ultimately be fulfilled when Christ returns.

Think of all the wars that have been fought all over the world since the time of Christ's birth in Bethlehem. The earth has hardly been a peaceful place for the last two millennia. However, the promise of the angels will ultimately be fulfilled. Upon Christ's second coming, peace will fill the earth for those who trust in Him. We look forward to that day . . . and we sing. May the latest conflicts in Israel and Ukraine not obscure the reality that the Prince of Peace will one day reign, and earthly armies will forever rest. Sing "It Came Upon A Midnight Clear" as a cry for peace this year.

It Came Upon a Midnight Clear

*It came upon the midnight clear,
That glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth,
To touch their harps of gold;
"Peace on the earth, good will to men,
From Heav'n's all-gracious King."
The world in solemn stillness lay,
To hear the angels sing.*

*Still through the cloven skies they come
With peaceful wings unfurled,
And still their heav'nly music floats,
O'er all the weary world;
Above its sad and lowly plains,
They bend on hov'ring wing,
And ever o'er its Babel sounds,
The blessed angels sing.*

*Yet with the woes of sin and strife,
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel strain have rolled,
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not,
The love-song which they bring;
Oh, hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing.*

*And ye, beneath life's crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way,
With painful steps and slow,
Look now! for glad and golden hours,
Come swiftly on the wing,
Oh, rest beside the weary road,
And hear the angels sing!*

*For lo! the days are hast'ning on,
By prophet seen of old,
When with the ever-circling years,
Shall come the time foretold,
When Christ shall come and all shall own,
The Prince of Peace, their King,
And saints shall meet Him in the air, And with the angels sing.*

Day 22
ANGELS WE HAVE HEARD ON HIGH

Read: Luke 2:8-16; 1 Peter 1:8-9

On that first Christmas night, the shepherds could not have imagined the sight they were about to behold. Angels appeared in the sky, singing “Gloria in excelsis Deo” and instructing the shepherds to go to Bethlehem and see the baby who was the Savior of the world.

Imagine the shepherds’ conversation on the way. “What will He look like? What does this mean? Did everyone get this same announcement? How long will we wait in line?”

Upon arriving, I am sure the shepherds were scratching their heads. There was no line of government and religious dignitaries. The stable smelled of animals, not temple incense. No halo circled the baby’s head. Given the disparity between what they saw and what they expected, the shepherds were being asked to take God at His Word.

It is tempting to think that if everyone could see what the shepherds saw then everyone would believe that Jesus is the Savior. The reality, though, is that it took LOTS OF FAITH for the shepherds to believe. In fact, they lacked many of the benefits we have today.

When the shepherds saw Jesus in Bethlehem, they had never heard Jesus preach or seen Him work miracles. They had never imagined the cross or conceived of the empty tomb. They were asked to take God at His Word (through the angels) and trust Him. Today, we have records of Jesus’ preaching, miracles, death and resurrection. We have the testimony of 2,000 years of Church history and corroborating evidence of ancient historians. We are asked to take God at His Word (through the Bible) and trust Him.

Like us, first generation Christians had the testimony of eye-witnesses and Scripture, but had not physically seen Jesus. The Apostle Peter celebrates such faith! (1 Peter 1:8-9) Furthermore, when we believe in Jesus based on what we know (but have not seen), we reap the same benefits as His first followers, “an inexpressible joy” and “the salvation of our souls.”

At first glance, it appears we have little in common with the shepherds, but we actually share the same invitation – to embrace by faith that the child born in Bethlehem is Christ the Lord. Will you believe in Him based on what you know, trusting Him with things that are harder to understand? If so, then joy and salvation await.

Angels We Have Heard on High

*Angels we have heard on high
Sweetly singing o'er the plains
And the mountains in reply
Echoing their joyous strains
Gloria, in excelsis Deo
Gloria, in excelsis Deo*

*Shepherds, why this jubilee?
Why your joyous strains prolong?
What the gladsome tidings be
Which inspire your heavenly song?
Gloria, in excelsis Deo
Gloria, in excelsis Deo*

*Come to Bethlehem and see
Him whose birth the angels sing,
Come, adore on bended knee,
Christ the Lord, the newborn King.
Gloria, in excelsis Deo
Gloria, in excelsis Deo*

*See Him in a manger laid,
Whom the choirs of angels praise;
Mary, Joseph, lend your aid,
While our hearts in one we raise
Gloria, in excelsis Deo
Gloria, in excelsis Deo*

Day 23

HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING

Read: John 4:19-24

Within the story of 18th century western church history, John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield must be included. Growing up within the Church of England, these men each came to genuine faith in Christ later in life then followed Him in radical ways. As some of the fathers of American Evangelicalism, they spread the gospel through open air revival meetings and church services with thousands in attendance. Whitefield alone preached to as many as 30,000 in one audience!

Given their common threads, it is no surprise that these men were friends and had a great deal of respect for each other's ministry, despite some theological differences. For instance, Charles Wesley wrote over 7,500 hymns, and Whitefield incorporated some of them into his revivals. One such hymn Wesley titled, "Hark, How the Welkin Rings!" (The word "welkin" means "vault of heavens".) Whitefield loved the song, but decided to change the opening line to "Hark the Herald Angels Sing!" Whitefield, however, never asked Wesley's permission. Outraged, Wesley refused to acknowledge or sing the Whitefield version. Can you imagine that? The author of one of the most famous Christmas songs ever written never sang it!

What do you do at Christmas time that would upset you if changed? Is it the day presents are opened? The songs sung in church? A particular service that must be attended or passage of Scripture that must be the text for that service? Whatever it is, there are some traditions that just "have to happen" in order for it to be Christmas for you.

But what if you open presents on Christmas Day instead of Christmas Eve? What if you sing "Manger Throne" instead of "Silent Night"? What if the "wrong passage" is preached at the Christmas service?

Will you refuse to sing?

May we learn from Wesley's folly. Santa has not always been at the mall. Candles have not always been a part of Christmas Eve services, and at one time, it was the "Welkin," not the "Herald Angels" who were ringing/singing. The key is not the tradition, but the spirit behind it. Whitefield and, later, Felix Mendelssohn improved Wesley's hymn. Likewise, God might be using changes in your Christmas celebrations to increase your soul's rejoicing. Don't refuse to sing. Join the angel chorus and worship Christ the new born King!

Hark, How All the Welkin Rings! - Wesley

*"Hark, how all the welkin rings,
"Glory to the King of kings;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!"
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
Universal nature say,
"Christ the Lord is born to-day!"*

*Christ, by highest Heaven ador'd,
Christ, the everlasting Lord:
Late in time behold him come,
Offspring of a virgin's womb!
Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see,
Hail the incarnate deity!
Pleased as man with men to appear,
Jesus, our Immanuel here!*

*Hail, the heavenly Prince of Peace!
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings
Risen with healing in his wings.
Mild He lays his glory by,
Born that man no more may die;
Born to raise the sons of earth;
Born to give them second birth.*

*Come, Desire of nations, come,
Fix in us thy humble home;
Rise, the woman's conquering seed,
Bruise in us the serpent's head.
Now display thy saving power,
Ruined nature now restore;
Now in mystic union join
Thine to ours, and ours to thine.*

*Adam's likeness, Lord, efface;
Stamp Thy image in its place.
Second Adam from above,
Reinstate us in thy love.
Let us Thee, though lost, regain,
Thee, the life, the inner Man:
O! to all thyself impart,
Form'd in each believing heart."*

Hark, The Herald Angels Sing! - Whitefield

*"Hark, the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new born King;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!"
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
With the angelic host proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"*

*Christ, by highest Heaven ador'd,
Christ, the everlasting Lord:
Late in time behold him come,
Offspring of a virgin's womb!
Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see,
Hail the incarnate deity!
Pleased with us in flesh to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.*

*Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
Risen with healing in his wings.
Mild He lays his glory by,
Born that men no more may die;
Born to raise us from the earth;
Born to give us second birth.*

*Come, Desire of nations, come,
Fix in us thy heavenly home;
Rise, the woman's conquering seed,
Bruise in us the serpent's head.
Adam's likeness now efface;
Stamp Thy image in its place.
Second Adam from above,
Work it in us by thy love.*

Day 24
O HOLY NIGHT

Read: Philippians 1:15-18; Mark 9:38-40

In 1847, a French Catholic Priest commissioned a Christmas poem from local winemaker Placide Cappeau de Roquemaure who penned the words to "O Holy Night." Cappeau believed these verses would do well set to music and approached noted composer Adolphe-Charles Adam. The finished product was first sung at Christmas Eve Mass in 1847 and quickly became popular throughout France. However, when Cappeau left the Catholic Church to become a socialist, and when it was discovered that Adam was actually Jewish and did not believe Jesus was the Son of God, the church banned the song.

The song may have never reappeared had it not been for American John Sullivan Dwight, an abolitionist, who held a special affinity for the verse that says of Jesus, "Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother, and in His name all oppression shall cease." He translated the song into English and on the verge of the United States Civil War, introduced the song to American churches where it gained quick acceptance in the North due to its anti-slavery message. The song then exploded in popularity around the world!

This reminds me of Philippians 1:15-18 and Mark 9:38-40 which show that God does not use perfect people to accomplish His plans. In fact, He does not always even use believing people to accomplish His plans. God can call forth praise for Himself from any vessel He chooses. In the case of "O Holy Night," God used a Socialist French poet and a Jewish composer to inspire praise and worship among His people. Now THAT is sovereignty. If you are a believer in Christ rejoice as you hear "O Holy Night," knowing God's gracious intentions of using fallen people to accomplish His grandest plans.

One last note . . . in 1906, Chemist Reginald Fessenden (working with Thomas Edison) turned on a microphone on Christmas Eve, read from Luke 2, then picked up his violin and played "O Holy Night." This was the first broadcast of music over the new technology of radio. Telegraph operators on ships and in newspaper offices around the country, instead of hearing their usual codes of clicks and pops, heard clearly the words of the Bible and the beautiful tune of Cappeau and Adam.

O Holy Night

O holy night, the stars are brightly shining;
It is the night of the dear Savior's birth!
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope, the weary soul rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.

Fall on your knees, O hear the angel voices!
O night divine, O night when Christ was born!
O night, O holy night, O night divine!

Led by the light of faith serenely beaming,
With glowing hearts by His cradle we stand.
So led by light of a star sweetly gleaming,
Here came the wise men from Orient land.
The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger,
In all our trials born to be our friend!

Fall on your knees, O hear the angel voices!
O night divine, O night when Christ was born!
O night, O holy night, O night divine!

Truly He taught us to love one another;
His law is love and His Gospel is peace.
Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother
And in His Name all oppression shall cease.
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we,
Let all within us praise His holy Name!

Fall on your knees, O hear the angel voices!
O night divine, O night when Christ was born!
O night, O holy night, O night divine!

Day 25
Go TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN

Read: John 10:10-11

From a secular, American perspective, Christmas is a marketer's dreamland. Beginning in early November, targeted marketing campaigns convince us of the gifts - trinkets, toys, bling, and tech do-dads - that we and our loved ones "need". However, at some point the happiness we thought we were buying often turns out to be just a bill of goods.

The first Christmas gift ever given was provided by our Heavenly Father to mankind. The gift was the baby Jesus, born in Bethlehem, and God launched a "marketing campaign" to announce His arrival. Angels appeared, advertising the birth of Jesus to certain shepherds and explaining the Good News. About this same time, God also placed a marquee in the sky, illuminating the way to the Savior for those in the East. This star would be a cosmic press release announcing His coming to a set of gift-bearing star gazers.

Now, because of our past experiences with marketers, the language used above might seem crude and insincere when applied to God's announcements. However, this illustration is important because marketing a product that is actually necessary is not self-serving, but loving. On the night of Christ's birth, God launched a loving media blitz to remind the people of their need and to illustrate how Jesus was the One who could bring them joy.

Since the needs Christ addresses are not imagined but actual, and since Jesus' provision delivers all it promises and does not disappoint . . . the marketing of the coming of Christ is a blessed thing! Can you imagine if scientists discovered the cure for cancer but never told anyone? That would be crazy! We would want them to market that cure because its provision is so important and its need so real. In the same way, the arrival of the Savior of the world is not a truth to keep quiet but one to shout from the mountaintops.

Think about that as you consider what God wants you to do with the good news that the baby in Bethlehem is the One who saves us from our sins. God wants us to be part of His marketing campaign, spreading the good news to all whom we interact with. God began this campaign on the first Christmas, and is continuing it through us today. "Go tell it on the mountain! Jesus Christ is born!"

Go Tell it on the Mountain

*Go, tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere;
Go, tell it on the mountain,
That Jesus Christ is born.*

*While shepherds kept their watching,
O'er silent flocks by night,
Behold, throughout the heavens,
There shone a holy light.*

*Go, tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere;
Go, tell it on the mountain,
That Jesus Christ is born.*

*The shepherds feared and trembled,
When lo! above the earth,
Rang out the angel chorus,
That hailed the Savior's birth.*

*Go, tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere;
Go, tell it on the mountain,
That Jesus Christ is born.*

*Down in a lowly manger,
The humble Christ was born,
And God sent us salvation,
That blessed Christmas morn.*

*Go, tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere;
Go, tell it on the mountain,
That Jesus Christ is born.*

Day 26
WE THREE KINGS

Read: Matthew 2:1-12

Most boxed nativity sets include three “wise men” or “magi” which is actually quite surprising. The Magi were an ancient order of star-gazers from Babylon who made a living interpreting dreams and foretelling the future. By the first century, their reputation had deteriorated toward “snake oil salesmen” who told customers what they wanted to hear in order to make a buck. Most people did not view them as honorable, and certainly, no one viewed them as godly.

The Magi WERE NOT in the same “box” as Jesus. Their travels to the manger were far both physically and spiritually. Yet in God’s mercy, they arrived due to a carefully constructed divine plan.

- 1400 years before Jesus’ birth, Balaam issued a prophecy about a star rising for the Messiah. This led Jews to expect a real star would one day be a sign that Messiah had arrived.
- 700 years before Jesus’ birth, Micah prophesied the Messiah’s birth in Bethlehem.
- 600 years before Jesus’ birth, the Jews were conquered by the Babylonians whose foreign policy was to take the best and brightest captives back to Babylon to work for the improvement of their culture. One such captive was Daniel. After demonstrating his ability to interpret dreams, Nebuchadnezzar promoted Daniel to overseer of the Magi (Daniel 2:48). In this position, Daniel would have shared his understanding of Jewish prophecy, which would have then been passed from generation to generation of Magi.

In contrast to the Gentile Magi, the Jewish priests and scribes WERE in the same “box” as Jesus. They were physically just down the road from Bethlehem and spent hours studying scripture, yet they missed the manger.

This Christmas, are you FAR from the Savior? Do you realize that God has been working since the foundation of the world to get the message of salvation to you?

Or, have you grown up inside the church and NEAR to the Savior? Do you realize that it is possible to look like you belong, but lack a genuine relationship with Christ?

Whether you are FAR or NEAR, the life of Christ, the preservation of God’s Word, the sending of the Holy Spirit, and the influence of others has served as a “star” to invite you to the manger. Will you follow the signs God has given and worship Jesus as “King, and God, and sacrifice?”

We Three Kings

*We three kings of orient are,
Bearing gifts we traverse afar
Field and fountain, moor and mountain,
Following yonder star.*

*Oh, star of wonder, star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide with thy perfect light.*

*Born a King on Bethlehem's plain,
Gold I bring to crown him again
King for ever, ceasing never,
Over us all to reign.*

*Frankincense to offer have I,
Incense owns a Deity nigh
Pray'r and praising, all men raising,
Worship him, God most high.*

*Myrrh is mine: its bitter perfume,
Breathes a life of gathering gloom
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
Sealed in the stone-cold tomb.*

*Glorious now behold Him arise,
King and God and sacrifice;
Alleluia, Alleluia!
Sounds through the earth and skies.*

Day 27
THIS BABY

Read: Luke 2:40, 52; Hebrews 4:15-16

As we reflect on the miracle of the incarnation - when Jesus (the Son of God) took on flesh and was born in Bethlehem - it is remarkable to think of the humility it took for the independent and Sovereign God to become a fetus, dependent on an umbilical cord! But as amazing as that is, it is also wild to imagine the commitment God showed to the incarnation AFTER Jesus' birth. He did not simply jump from birth to full grown man . . . No, He grew up in real time, just like any other child.

Jesus had a mother and father, siblings, and friends. Jesus learned a vocation. Jesus went through puberty. The One who walked on water, once had a "first step." Jesus was once a middle schooler. Amazing, right? Adding some imagination to this notion, Steven Curtis Chapman wrote the song "This Baby" to flesh out the full implications of the 30+ year duration of Jesus' life.

This notion is confirmed by Luke 2:40, 52, as it says, "And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon Him . . . And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man." Matthew's and Luke's Gospels jump from the birth of Jesus to His public ministry. Mark simply begins with Jesus' baptism. The lack of what was written about Jesus' growing up years should not trick us into thinking that Jesus did not have an adolescent period. The "Major" was a "minor" at one point. But why?

Hebrews 4:15-16 explains, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." This verse reminds us that Jesus can fully identify with us in our human experience, and can provide the help we need in every stage of life.

Take a moment today to listen to Chapman's "This Baby" and reflect on the full implications of Jesus' birth . . . and life.

This Baby - Steven Curtis Chapman

*Well, He cried when He was hungry,
Did all the things that babies do;
He rocked and He napped on His mother's lap,
And He wiggled and giggled and cooed.
There were the cheers when He took His first step,
And the tears when He got His first teeth;
Almost everything about this little baby
Seemed as natural as it could be.*

*But this baby made the angels sing,
And this baby made a new star shine in the sky.
This baby had come to change the world.
This baby was God's own son, this baby was like no other one.
This baby was God with us, this baby was Jesus.*

*And this baby grew into a young boy,
Who learned to read and write and wrestle with dad;
There was the climbin' of trees and the scrapin' of knees,
And all the fun that a boy's born to have.
He grew taller and some things started changing,
Like His complexion and the sound of His voice;
There was work to be done as a carpenter's son
And all the neighbors said He's such a fine boy.*

*But this boy made the angels sing,
And this boy made a new star shine in the sky.
This boy had come to change the world.
This boy was God's own son, this boy was like no other one.
This boy was God with us. This boy became a man,*

*And love made Him laugh and death made Him cry.
With the life that He lived and the death that He died,
He showed us heaven with His hands and His heart,
'Cause this man was God's own son.
This man was like no other one,
Holy and human right from the start.*

This baby was God with us, this baby, this baby was Jesus!

Day 28

HALLELUJAH, LIGHT HAS COME

Read: John 1:4-5

Have you noticed that our world is dying?

- How many house plants have you seen turn brown?
- How many of your kids' gold fish have you had to flush down the toilet?
- How many trees in your yard could not weather the storm?
- How many pets have come and gone?
- How many funerals have you attended?

We live in a world where everyone and everything is dying. This is one of the impacts of living in a fallen world, and it causes much sorrow on its inhabitants.

Additionally, we live in a broken world:

- What was the life span of your last computer?
- How often do you have to change light bulbs?
- How many roofs have you replaced due to weather damage?

Things once shiny and new are breaking all the time. Lights that once shown brightly are extinguished with alarming frequency.

But . . . at Christmas time, we celebrate life and not death. At Christmas time, we celebrate light and not darkness. Why? Because of Jesus.

Listen to John 1:4-5: "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." This verse tells us that Jesus came as a giver of life, not a dispenser of death. In a world of death, Jesus brings eternal life. The Bible tells us that one day Jesus will return to the earth again and set up a kingdom that will never end, filled with people who are eternally alive, and inhabiting a world that is protected from decay. Why? Because "In Him was life."

So to all of us living in a dying and broken world, there is good news of great joy this (and every) Christmas season. Jesus' birth brought Life and Light into the world. Faith in Christ is more than a decision to follow a new religion. . . it is a step out of our dying and broken destiny into an eternally living and luminous future. We have a living and bright future because Jesus will sustain it. That is why we can sing today's song aloud, "Hallelujah, Light has Come!"

Hallelujah, Light Has Come - Barlowgirl

Heaven sent you to me
All the world's been praying
Who will save?
But who am I
That here tonight
I hold the one
Who'll bring us life

Hallelujah, we've been found
A child is born to save us now
Hallelujah, light has come
A Savior who will set us free
A Promise for those who believe

Do you hear the Angels
Sing for you my baby
Men and kings have come to
Bow to you
But here in my arms
So close to me
The son of God
Now all can see

Hallelujah, we've been found
A child is born to save us now, Jesus
Hallelujah, light has come
A Savior set us free

So praise to God on high
He has heard our cry
So praise to God on high
He has heard our cry

Hallelujah, we've been found
Hallelujah, we've been found
A child is born to save us now, Jesus
Hallelujah, light has come
A Savior who will set us free
A Promise for those who believe

Day 29
BORN TO DIE

Read: John 1:18; Mark 10:45; Matthew 16:21-23, 17:22-23, 20:17-19; Romans 5:8

John 1:18 tells us Jesus came to earth so that He might “make known” to us who God is. In the miracles Jesus worked, we see that God is both powerful and compassionate. In the sermons Jesus preached, we hear that He is wise and authoritative. In the interactions with His disciples, we recognize Jesus’ interest in growing us and using us in His work. Truly, we learn so much about who God is by looking at Jesus’ life.

However, Jesus did not just come to explain God to people . . . He also came to reconcile people to God. In Mark 10:45 Jesus says, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.” By giving His life for the many, Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice on the cross to pay the price necessary to set sinners like you and me free.

The death Jesus died was not a tragic accident, but an intentional plan. Jesus was not the victim of a vicious plot by Jewish leaders or Roman officials. If Jesus had wanted to avoid the cross, He could have. Jesus was capable of slaying His enemies, outsmarting their schemes, and avoiding their pursuit. But He chose not to do so. Instead, knowing what lay before Him, He walked directly to Jerusalem to offer His life on the cross (see Matthew 16:21-23, 17:22-23, 20:17-19).

This reminds us that Jesus was “born to die” as stated in Bebo Norman’s song lyrics. We cannot rightly understand the birth of Jesus without reflecting on His death on the cross. As Philippians 2:8 says, “And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” That is the full extent of the incarnation.

Jesus was born to die. And His death was a beautiful expression of God’s love for us. “But God demonstrates His own love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). Will we receive His love this Christmas and allow His death to be the ransom to pay the penalty our sins deserve?

Born to Die - Bebo Norman

*They never knew a dark night
Always had the Son's light on their face
Perfect in glory, broken by the story
Of untold grace, come that day*

*Majesty had come down, glory had succumbed now
To flesh and bone
In the arms of a manger, in the hands of strangers
That could not know, just who they hold*

*And the angels filled the sky
All of heaven wondered why
Why their King would choose to be
Be a baby born to die*

*And all fell silent for the cry of an infant
The voice of God
Was dividing history for those with eyes to see
The Son would shine from earth that night*

*And the angels filled the sky
All of heaven wondered why
Why their King would choose to be
Be a baby born to die, be a baby born to die*

*To break the chains of guilt and sin
To find us here, to pull us in
So we can join in heaven's song
And with one voice around the throne*

*All the angels filled the sky
And I can't help but wonder why
Why this King would choose to be
Be a baby born for me, be a baby born
Be a baby born to die*

Day 30

COME BEHOLD THE WONDROUS MYSTERY

Read: Isaiah 55:8-9

Some presents are easy to box up, fitting neatly under the paper or in the gift bag. Other presents, however, are hard to package due to their unique size or shape.

I was thinking about that reality as I listened to “Come Behold the Wondrous Mystery” by Matt Boswell, Michael Bleecker, and Matt Papa. This song describes a number of the truths about Jesus that are hard for us to wrap up inside our logical minds. Just a few of the “mysteries” of Jesus mentioned in this song:

- “The theme of heaven’s praises robed in frail humanity.” - The Son of God being hungry. The Son of God needing a nap. The Son of God needing His mother’s care.
- “In His living, in His suffering never trace nor stain of sin.” - We do not know any person who is without sin . . . yet Jesus was perfect!
- “In the stead of ruined sinners hangs the Lamb in victory.” - Calling the embarrassment and pain of a public crucifixion a victory seems crazy . . . until we think of what Jesus accomplished through that act - the salvation of His people!
- “Slain by death the God of life.” - How does the eternal Son of God die?

These realities are rightly called a “wondrous mystery” by the hymn writers. They also remind us that our brains are not smart enough to wrap up all of who God is in neat and logical packaging. God is so great that His actions and identity simply are beyond our ability to completely understand. Rather than throwing out the gift of Jesus because it does not fit neatly in a box, we are encouraged through this song to wonder at it - to embrace it by faith, and draw comfort from the fact that He is truly an awesome God.

Are you having a hard time reconciling God’s actions or identity today? Does His timing seem off, His plans seem unwise, His identity seem illogical to you? Rather than throwing Him away, sit in the mystery and worship the One who is greater than you.

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9)

Come Behold the Wondrous Mystery - Matt Boswell

*Come behold the wondrous mystery
In the dawning of the King
He the theme of heaven's praises
Robed in frail humanity
In our longing, in our darkness
Now the light of life has come
Look to Christ, who condescended
Took on flesh to ransom us*

*Come behold the wondrous mystery
He the perfect Son of Man
In His living, in His suffering
Never trace nor stain of sin
See the true and better Adam
Come to save the hell-bound man
Christ the great and sure fulfillment
Of the law; in Him we stand*

*Come behold the wondrous mystery
Christ the Lord upon the tree
In the stead of ruined sinners
Hangs the Lamb in victory
See the price of our redemption
See the Father's plan unfold
Bringing many sons to glory
Grace unmeasured, love untold*

*Come behold the wondrous mystery
Slain by death the God of life
But no grave could e'er restrain Him
Praise the Lord; He is alive!
What a foretaste of deliverance
How unwavering our hope
Christ in power resurrected
As we will be when he comes*