



HOME FOR  
**CHRISTMAS**

by Mark Robinson

25 Day Christmas Devotional

## Intro:

In 1943, the United States was deeply involved in World War II. Nearly 9 million Americans were a part of the Army or Navy at that time, and many were deployed overseas. Against this backdrop, Kim Gannon and Walter Kent wrote a song from the perspective of these deployed soldiers who longed to be with family as the holidays approached. The song, originally recorded by Bing Crosby, was called "I'll be home for Christmas," and it became an enduring hit.

Though World War II happened a long time ago, people today still resonate with this song, in part because so many are also (for a variety of reasons) separated from their homes at the holidays. Like in 1943, some are deployed in military service, others are working in distant locations, and for others, death or a move have confused the answer of where "home" actually is. But beyond these reasons, every Christian can relate to this song to some degree. What do I mean?

Christians are people who find their identity in their Savior Jesus Christ. If our identity is in Him, then our primary home is in heaven ... and if that is the case, all who live on this earth find themselves away from "home" as Christmas approaches.

In this 25 day devotional, we will journey home together through the Christmas Scriptures as we reflect on the significance and meaning of the homes of Christmas: Bethlehem, the experiences of Mary and Elizabeth, and the humble manger. Then, we will end the study by receiving anew the invitation from God for us to find our home in Him.

Each day of this devotional includes a Scripture reading, followed by a short reflection on the significance of the verses. The study is written for there to be a reading each day from December 1-25, though you can certainly read the devotional at your own pace. It is my prayer that each of us finds our hope in Him this holiday season.

If you are looking for a church home in Norman, Oklahoma this Christmas, we would love to have you worship with us at Wildwood Community Church. You can find more information about our church and Christmas programs by visiting [wildwoodchurch.org](http://wildwoodchurch.org). Merry Christmas!

In Christ,

Pastor Mark Robinson

## WEEK 1: Home to Bethlehem

### December 1

VERSES: Genesis 35:19, Mark 10:45, Romans 3:23, Romans 6:23

Certain towns are so connected to iconic images or moments that the mere mention of the one reminds all of the other. One can hardly imagine Green Bay, Wisconsin, without thinking of the Green Bay Packers, their NFL team. Say Paris, France, and people see the Eiffel Tower. Mention Las Vegas, Nevada, and people see a roadway dotted with neon and casinos.

Another location that evokes an immediate reaction is Bethlehem in Israel. Oh, when we mention this little town, we think of the birth of Jesus Christ 2,000 years ago. To be clear, Jesus' birth is THE BIGGEST THING that has ever happened anywhere, much less the biggest thing to occur in the town of Bethlehem! Yet, Bethlehem had history before Jesus' birth ... a history that goes all the way back to the book of Genesis.

The first reference to Bethlehem is in Genesis 35:19 when Jacob's wife Rachel dies giving birth to their child Benjamin. Rachel was buried on the road to Bethlehem by her husband. Rachel wanted to name her son Ben-oni which meant "son of my sorrow." Instead, Jacob renamed the boy Benjamin, meaning "son of my right hand." This is a powerful foretaste of another who would one day be born on the outskirts of Bethlehem, Jesus Christ.

Jesus was born to die for the sins of the world - His death paying the ransom price our sins deserve. The sorrow of His death, however, would lead to the redemption of all who trust in Him, who are declared righteous in Him and made children of God. From sorrow to sons (and daughters) ... Bethlehem's history is important to note.

All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. If we reject Jesus, sorrow for all eternity is our ultimate future. BUT, if we trust in Jesus, we are made a son or daughter who experiences fellowship with God forever. From sorrow to sonship ... Bethlehem has quite a history indeed.

## December 2

VERSES: Ruth 1:1-5; 4:11, John 6:35

What if there was no money in the bank, no food in the silo, and no children in the nursery? Well, if those things happened, you would have situations of intense difficulty, but also you would have an amazing start to a top 10 country and western song!

In the book of Ruth, we see another verse to our country tune ... there was no bread in the house of bread ("Bethlehem" in Hebrew means "house of bread.") Since there was no bread in the house of bread, a man named Elimelech and his wife Naomi headed over the hills into Moab (modern day Jordan) to find something to eat. Not only did they find food, they also found wives for their sons! One of their sons married a woman named Ruth. Some time after their marriage, though, the men in Elimelech's family died, leaving Elimelech's wife Naomi and his daughter-in-law Ruth widows.

In due time, the famine was over in Bethlehem, so Naomi and Ruth head back to the "house of bread." In that culture, a kinsman could "redeem" a widow by marrying her and providing offspring to honor the legacy of the man who had died. Elimelech's kin, Boaz, meets Ruth and "redeems her," marrying her and giving her children. All these events happen in the little town of Bethlehem.

How fitting that Jesus Christ would be born in this town. One of Jesus' nicknames He gave Himself in John's Gospel is "bread of life." Jesus came to provide for our deepest spiritual needs. He came to sustain and fill our souls. He redeems us from a barrenness of spirit and provides for us an abundance of life.

Is there a famine in your land spiritually speaking? Are you living in the shame of your sin, feeling distant from God, or hungering for more in life? Do not simply sing the blues. Instead, turn to Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life, who can provide for you no matter the circumstances.

## **December 3**

VERSES: 1 Samuel 16:1-13, John 10:10-14

Yesterday we saw that through Boaz, Ruth was redeemed and had children. One of her children was a man named Obed. In due time, Obed married and had a son named Jesse. And, years later, Jesse married and had several sons, one of whom was named David. That's right, King David was born in Bethlehem, and was Boaz and Ruth's great grandson.

But, when David was born, he was not born in a palace. Certainly God had plans for David, as it was God's idea to anoint David as King (David did not apply for the job!), yet David did not begin in royalty, he began on a farm. There, tending sheep, David learned how to shepherd, and God would use that experience to guide and care for Israel after David ultimately (through God-ordained events) ascends to the throne.

David was not the tallest or oldest of Jesse's sons, but God saw in the heart of the one tending the sheep in their stables a King.

One thousand years after the time of King David, another King was born in Bethlehem. This King was more than simply the King of Israel, He was the King of Kings, Jesus Christ. As David's descendent, Jesus had a rightful claim to the throne, and as the Son of God, He would have a Kingdom that would know no end.

Jesus would be called the "Good Shepherd" who cares for His sheep. As King, He reigns on high, and as the Good Shepherd, He guides and cares for us, His sheep.

Bethlehem is the town of the Shepherd Kings. What an amazing combination! Jesus is mighty and He is gentle. He reigns over all and cares for the least of these. Will you find your home in Him this holiday season?

## **December 4**

VERSES: Isaiah 53:1-12

I have grown up playing a lot of basketball. Though I played my fair share of organized basketball games in leagues and for schools, I have played MORE games on playgrounds, in front yards, and at rec centers where two captains "pick sides." On these less formal courts, captains do not always know the ability of those they are selecting, so superficial appearances lead to who is picked first. Since I am not 6'5" and could never jump high enough to touch the rim, I often slid down the draft board when teams were forming. Man looks at appearances - a lesson I learned at the YMCA at an early age.

Yesterday, we saw that though David was not the oldest or the tallest (two characteristics his culture looked for in a king), he was the one picked first by God to be the King of Israel. Man looks at outward appearances, but God looks at the heart.

As we have seen, Jesus Christ comes in the vein of King David. In Isaiah's prophetic words about Jesus (written 700 years before Jesus was born), Jesus is described as "one without form or majesty that we should look at Him." In fact, Jesus became a "man of sorrows" who was "pierced for our transgressions."

Praise God that Jesus, our King of Kings, was not the kind of king who majored on pomp and circumstance during His earthly ministry. He humbled Himself to give us what only He could offer ... forgiveness and eternal life.

Because Jesus looked "normal," He did not glow at His birth. The shepherds who came to visit Him on that first Christmas night identified Him as one lying in a manger, not as one having a halo floating over His head.

The God who looks at the heart, sees your heart today. We cannot fool God through our religious performance. He knows who we really are. Thankfully, He chose us first. He was willing to be pierced for our transgressions and to cleanse us from the inside out.

## December 5

VERSES: Isaiah 7:10-16 & Matthew 1:18-25

Seven hundred years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, His conception was prophesied in Isaiah 7:14. This verse from Isaiah is referenced in Matthew 1:23 as being fulfilled at the birth of Jesus.

This prophecy would have a DOUBLE fulfillment. It came true TWICE. At least in a sense.

In Isaiah 7, the King of Judah, Ahaz, has turned to the hated Assyrians to find protection against two other warring kings intent on Judah's conquest. Rather than trusting in God alone, Ahaz was trusting in men (the Assyrians).

In Isaiah 7:10-11, God speaks to Ahaz and dares him to trust in God alone for deliverance. God says to Ahaz in 7:10-11 (paraphrasing), "Try me! Try trusting in Me alone and see what I can do for you! I will deliver you and to prove it, pick a sign and I will make it come true to show you I will deliver you as promised."

Ahaz fails to answer, so God responds in 7:13-16 and says, "I will pick the sign for you. Right now, there is a virgin in Israel who will soon be married. She will get married and have a child by natural means who will be named Immanuel. Before he is weaned and eating solid foods, the kings you fear will fall and you will be safe from their threat." God was saying, within a few short years I will deliver you without the help of the Assyrians. This prophecy was given in 735 BC ... and God indeed delivered on this promise with the deaths of the rival kings by 732 BC!

So, the first fulfillment of Isaiah 7 was almost immediate ... but in Matthew 1:23, the prophecy is shown to have a second fulfillment; indeed, a BETTER ONE. Through miraculous means and supernatural power, Mary conceives of a child without physical contact with a man. The Holy Spirit comes upon her and the virgin gives birth to a son - Jesus, the Son of God. This miraculous birth is a sign of the supernatural deliverance that God would provide - not from enemy armies, but from sin and death.

This prophecy dares us to trust in God alone for our salvation. Are you trusting in yourself, your family, or your friends for your salvation, or are you trusting in God alone? He is worthy of our trust!

## **December 6**

VERSES: Isaiah 9:1-7

We live in a world at war. Each generation faces its own battles and, though the faces and locations of the conflicts vary, what remains constant is the presence and threat of military battle. This is one of the lingering affects of sin in this world.

Isaiah 9:1-7 is one of the most famous passages in all of the Old Testament . . . and for good reason! What a blessed hope it promises. From the land of Galilee, a small rural province in northern Israel that often drew the first attack from invading armies because of its northern exposure, a leader would emerge that would bring glory and peace to God's people. This leader would be a bully-buster who would establish peace on the earth and eliminate the need for trillions of dollars to be spent on national defense. Surprisingly, though, the leader who would quell the bullies would not be a bigger bully, but a child. What a contrast! The mighty Assyrian army (in Isaiah's day) would be stopped by God working through a little child. The terror of the terrorists would be silenced from the crib of Bethlehem's manger. This child, of course, was Jesus who would grow up and reveal Himself as Mighty God. Seven hundred years after this prophecy was given, Jesus would be born as a child, clothing Himself in humanity, to set in motion a plan to bring lasting peace to the earth.

What is amazing about reading this prophecy from Isaiah at Christmas time, though, is that the accomplishment of this prophecy has not yet fully taken place. The gifts of Isaiah 9 are still wrapped under the Christmas tree of Christ's second advent. When Jesus returns to the earth at a future time, He will put an end to war and He will rule the world in peace. One day war will cease, and the bullies will be stopped. The One who was born a Child will return in glorious triumph and shine His light throughout our world. That is one present I cannot wait to be unwrapped.

## **December 7**

VERSES: Micah 5:2 and Matthew 2:3-6

The Old Testament holds many promises and prophecies about the coming Messiah. The Messiah would be the savior of the world and would bring blessing and shared victory to all who trusted in Him. Yesterday, we saw some of the victories that Messiah would bring as we reflected on Isaiah 9:1-7.

In Micah 5:2, we see a prophecy that tells us where the Messiah will be born - in Bethlehem Ephrathah. Ephrathah was an ancient name for the territory around the town of Bethlehem. The savior of the world would be born in this little town. Micah's prophecy, written 700 years before Jesus' birth, was clearly understood by the people of Israel. After all, when the Gentile wise men arrived in Matthew 2 and inquired where the Messiah was to be born, Herod's advisors quickly confirmed Bethlehem as the birth place of the King of Kings, quoting today's verse, Micah 5:2.

To you and me, this makes sense. We have ALWAYS associated Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Son of God because we are so familiar with what took place there at Jesus' birth 2000 years ago. But at the time of Jesus' birth, Bethlehem was not a thriving metropolis. It was a very small town, so insignificant that it does not even show up in the list of towns in Judah in Joshua 15 and Nehemiah 11. But, this was the place that God had ordained for His birth.

Micah 5:2 continues to say that His "coming forth is from of old, from ancient of days." This is a reminder that the Messiah would not begin His existence at His birth, but that He would appear in Bethlehem like the sun appearing in the sky as the clouds part after a rainy day. The sun was always there, we just could not see it until the clouds parted. In a similar way, Jesus has always existed as the eternal Son of God, but became visible to humanity as He humbled Himself and was born in Bethlehem.

You may be familiar with the term "Advent." This is a term used in connection with the Christmas season in many churches. "Advent" means "appearing." At Christmas, we celebrate the Son appearing in Bethlehem, advancing His mission to reveal God to mankind and reconcile mankind to God.

## WEEK 2: At home with Elizabeth and Mary

### December 8

VERSES: Malachi 4:5-6, Isaiah 40:3-5, Luke 1:16-17, Matthew 17:11-13

At the very end of the Old Testament, in Malachi 4:5-6, we see an intriguing prophecy. Before the "great and awesome Day of the LORD comes," Elijah will appear and serve a prophetic role of preparing people for the arrival of the Day of the LORD.

A few questions must be asked of this passage. First, what is the "Day of the LORD"? In the Old Testament, this spoke of the day when Messiah would come and judge the earth and establish His Kingdom reign.

Second, we might ask, is the Old Testament prophet Elijah, really going to come back to life and have a second go 'round of ministry BEFORE Messiah establishes His kingdom? It seems the answer to this is "not exactly," but that one would come in the "spirit and power of Elijah" to fulfill this role before Messiah comes.

Third, we might ask, who this Elijah-like person was or will be? Studying the Scripture from the vantage point of the 21st century, we are blessed with a perspective not had by the Old Testament authors. We know that Messiah was going to come not only once, but twice! Jesus, the Messiah, came once to die on the cross for our sins, and He will come a second time to establish His Kingdom on the earth. Since Jesus came/is coming twice, there actually are TWO instances where someone runs ahead of Jesus preparing the way for His arrival. At His first coming, it was John the Baptist, and at His second coming, it appears to be the two witnesses of Revelation 11:1-13. Interestingly, both sets, like Jesus Himself, would/will be martyred for their faith.

So, why do we get into all this today? Well, in Luke's Gospel, where we get the most information in the Bible about Jesus' birth, we also get an extended section on the birth of John the Baptist. Why? Because Luke goes to great lengths to show that our God is faithful to His promises and prophecies. God said that Elijah would come, and indeed John the Baptist came in an Elijah-like role before Jesus began His public ministry. God's Word is true about all it speaks ... including the future!

Over the next few days, we will see more of the birth of John and the interactions between John's mother Elizabeth and Mary, the mother of Jesus.

## **December 9**

VERSES: Luke 1:5-25

All people have a birth story. We all have parents. We were all born at a particular time and into a particular context. The details of birth stories are something that get recorded in baby books and told over Thanksgiving dinners so that individual families continue to remember the tribe that they are a part of.

Certain births, however, are even more significant. Not only is their story shared at their Thanksgiving table, but it is widely known among all within a society. The birth and childhood of George Washington is taught in elementary schools, and the early life of Martin Luther King Jr. is a part of all his biographies.

Given this dynamic, when we see a detailed account of the birth of a child in the Bible, we should ask ourselves, "Who is this, and why is their birth so significant?" In today's reading, we read about the conception of John the Baptist. This conception was natural (he had a mom and a dad after all), but it was also supernatural (John's folks, Zechariah and Elizabeth) were old at the time John was conceived. To top it off, the angel Gabriel foretold John's birth while Zechariah was at work in the Temple. This is one birth story we all need to know!

The significance of this birth, of course, was the role that John was born to play. Zechariah and Elizabeth's son would be the one who would go forth "in the spirit and power of Elijah" to pave the way for the Messiah's entrance into history. As we saw yesterday, this was to make good on the promise of God to have a forerunner to the entrance of the King of Kings.

John's role was unique, but his mission is also our mission. John was to call hearts back to God and prepare them for Christ. In a similar way, we are to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with all we come into contact with and invite men and women to believe in Jesus as their Savior and Lord. You have a "re-birth" story ... born again in Jesus for an important role and to invite others to follow Him as well. Who can you invite to follow Christ this Christmas season?

## December 10

VERSES: Luke 1:26-38, & Ephesians 2:8-9, Romans 5:8

In life there are times when we earn an outcome. We work all week in order to get a paycheck on Friday. We save every month so that we have a downpayment for our home. Some things come in response to our efforts.

Still, other things in life come to us as a gift we did not earn. We were fed by our parents when we were babies. Friends give us gifts for our birthdays. Sometimes we are simply surprised and/or blessed by the generosity and care of others.

In today's reading, we see Gabriel (the same angel who visited Zechariah in the Temple) call on Mary at her home in Nazareth. Mary was a virgin who was engaged to Joseph. Gabriel tells Mary that she is "favored" by God. In the original language, the word used is "graced." Gabriel basically says to Mary, "Greetings 'graced' one! The Lord is with you! Do not be afraid, for you have been graced by God."

"Grace" means gift, something given not earned. Mary did not earn the right to be the mother of Jesus, she simply was "graced" by God. God would do for Mary the impossible.

Transitioning now to our lives, many world religions imagine salvation as something we earn. Work all lifelong and do more good than bad and earn eternal life. Biblical Christianity is different. Instead of salvation coming as a wage we earn, it is a gift God gives. Jesus came and died for our sins while we were still sinners. What we "earn" is judgment and death, but what God gives (to those who trust in Jesus Christ) is forgiveness and life.

Such generosity may sound improbable to us, but let us not forget, what is impossible for us is possible for God. The virgin was with child ... and that child would ultimately die on the cross for our sins so that whoever believes in Him would not perish but have everlasting life. It is by grace we have been saved! God comes to us with a message of hope and life at Christmas ... like Mary, will we receive it?

## **December 11**

VERSES: Luke 1:39-45 & Galatians 6:2

There is power in community. When we share an experience with someone else, we receive a type of encouragement that is like an oasis in the desert, water for our thirsty soul. At our church, we host groups for widows and for those grieving the loss of a loved one. All the members of these groups are dealing with similar issues and find comfort in fellowship with others walking the same road. Like a heavy piece of furniture that needs to be moved, the task is easier if more people are grabbing and helping share the load.

Maybe you have experienced something like this in your life ...

At the end of yesterday's reading, the angel Gabriel told Mary that her relative Elizabeth was pregnant, even though she was well past child-bearing days (Luke 1:36). This was shared to encourage Mary that God can do impossible things (Luke 1:37). Now, what was more impossible: Elizabeth conceiving through natural means yet as an old woman, or Mary conceiving through supernatural means as a young virgin? While both are miraculous, Mary's situation was even more improbable, but Gabriel still used Elizabeth's example to encourage Mary of what God can do.

In today's verses, we see Mary head to Elizabeth's house to spend time with Elizabeth and Zechariah while their babies were still in utero. The interaction was super encouraging for both, and that should not surprise us. These two women were the only two women in the world who understood what it meant to have a miraculous pregnancy!

Mary did not have daily dialogues with Gabriel ... he visited once. I am guessing that somewhere along the way, Mary might have wondered, "Did I hear the angel correctly?" How did God minister to her during the time of her pregnancy? It seems God cared for Mary the same way He cares for many of us ... through the warm embrace of a friend who is going through something similar.

Do you need care today? Like Mary, move in the direction of Christian community and help bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.

## December 12

VERSES: Luke 1:46-56 and 2 Corinthians 4:17-18

All too often, Christmas is a season when we compare ourselves to others. As kids, we compared our presents to those of our siblings or friends. As adults, we compare the decorations we place on the outside of our homes with our neighbors. As workers, we may compare end of year bonuses with other employees. Sadly, the Christmas season can be a time of comparison.

All comparisons must have a point of reference. If a gift is said to be inexpensive, we must ask, "Inexpensive compared to what?" If we say our house is plainly decorated, we must ask, "Plain compared to what other home?" Our point of reference matters.

In today's reading, we see Mary's response to the news that she is pregnant with Jesus. This is not her initial reaction ... we got that in Luke 1:38, which we read two days ago, when she said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." In today's reading, we get her reaction after reflection ... several weeks later as the baby is growing her womb. Her response is called the "Magnificat" (Latin for "magnify") which is what Mary is doing as she responds to her circumstances. But what is Mary magnifying?

Was she magnifying the challenges that she and Joseph had to work through as she was pregnant with Jesus? Was she magnifying the sideways looks she must have been receiving at the marketplace as a pregnant woman not yet married? Was she magnifying the discomfort that comes from carrying a child? No, Mary was not magnifying any of those things. Instead, Mary was magnifying the Lord.

Mary's point of reference was God Himself. And compared to the greatness of God, Mary's problems were relatively small. By magnifying the Lord, Mary found joy and mercy in the midst of trying circumstances.

Will we also follow Mary's example? May we find in the Lord our God a reference point on which to assess all circumstances? God has done great things for us in Jesus. THAT is a big gift! Spend some time magnifying the Lord today regardless of what circumstances you are facing.

## December 13

VERSES: Luke 1:13, 1:31 & 1:57-66

Why were you given the name you were given? My parents named me with a combination of a family name and a name that they liked. We did something similar with my son. Sometimes families will adopt the surname of the wife's family and use it as a first or middle name of their child to honor their family legacy. Sometimes we name our children after someone famous that has had an impact on our lives. Our culture and family traditions influence what we name our children.

In the first chapter of Luke's Gospel, we see that the names for both John and Jesus came from heaven (not earth). The angel directed Zechariah to name his son John, and the same angel directed Mary to name her son Jesus. So what is in these names?

The name John means "The LORD is gracious" and the name Jesus means "God saves." Interestingly enough, the titles of these two men help us understand more of their role in God's plan. "The Baptist" (John's descriptive title) talks of the role he played in calling people to be cleansed before God and turn to Him. "Christ" is a Greek rendering of the Hebrew "Messiah," the promised One who would come and be the savior of the world.

The names of both John and Jesus are important. That is why when John is eventually born, in Luke 1:57-66, his mom and dad insist on his being named John. They were faithful to be obedient to the naming of their child, even if it went against the expectations of their neighbors.

God is honored always when we obey Him. But when we obey Him even though it might be seen as odd by the watching world around us, I think God is extra honored. That is why Zechariah is rewarded with the return of his speaking ability after he follows through with faithfully obeying God in the naming of his son.

Are you honoring God by being obedient to His direction in His Word today? Most of us have not been given a name for our children by God Himself, but God in His Word is calling all of us to obedience in many areas of life. Will you obey Him even if it means looking odd to those around you?

## **December 14**

VERSES: Luke 1:67-80

Christmas is truly a musical holiday. I love the “soundtrack” that plays in the background of December every year. Whether you are in church, driving in the car, or even shopping at the local mall, songs of our Savior fill the air from Thanksgiving to New Year’s.

Sometimes, we think that our love for music at Christmas time is a part of the commercialization of the holiday, but a closer look at the biblical account of Christmas reveals that the first Advent was also a musical. From Mary’s “Magnificat” to angels singing, music/poetry was a key way heaven and earth welcomed the newborn king.

As you look at the albums first recorded around the birth of Christ, however, you will notice that both famous AND more obscure songs were recorded around the time of the manger. Right after Mary’s hit song, Zechariah records what some may see as the “B side” to her 45. You may have skipped this track in the past, but today, I want you to “press play” and read its beautiful lyrics found in Luke 1:67-79.

Zechariah sings a song at the circumcision ceremony on the 8th day of his son John’s life. After waiting a lifetime for the joy of fatherhood, it is striking that Zechariah spends most of the time at his son’s circumcision singing about Jesus, not John. Zechariah “got it” . . . he understood that the real joy in his AND John’s life would be their connection to Jesus. Zechariah waited a lifetime to be a father, but God’s people had waited a few millennia for Messiah’s birth. Therefore, the song centers around Jesus and His work.

At the end of the song, is one of the most poetic and beautiful statements about the work of Jesus in all of Scripture. “Because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

I am so thankful that in Christ we have a hope that one day all death will be replaced with life eternal, and all darkness will be illuminated with His light. This is the reason Zechariah sings . . . and the reason we sing as well.

## WEEK 3: The humble home of the manger

### December 15

VERSES: John 1:1, Isaiah 6:1-3, Revelation 4:1-11, Galatians 4:4-7

In the first 7 days of this study, we looked at the hometown of Jesus' birth, the little town of Bethlehem. In the next 7 days, we saw the interactions that occurred in and around the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth. These next 7 days, we will move on to discuss where Jesus was placed after His birth, in a manger. This feeding trough was the humble home of the Savior that first Christmas morning.

To fully appreciate where Jesus was born, however, we must remember where He came FROM. Most immediately, of course, He came from Mary's womb, but before that He came from heaven. Jesus has existed eternally. In the words of John 1:1, in the time that we know of as the beginning, the Word (Jesus) already was. He has always existed as the Son of God because He is God Himself, and God is eternal, knowing no beginning or ending.

That means that before He came to the earth in Mary's womb and eventually to Bethlehem, Jesus was in heaven. So, the descriptions we see in the Bible of heaven in Isaiah 6:1-3 and Revelation 4:1-11 are descriptions of where Jesus resided before humbly taking His place in the manger.

Heaven is a place of opulence and splendor, inhabited by angelic beings worshipping God Himself. What a place! Imagine the most beautiful home you can imagine set in the most spectacular location on the earth, and it would look shabby compared to the glory of heaven.

Jesus has always been, and came forth at just the right time to make it possible that you and I might be adopted by God and invited to join Him in His heavenly home. Take a moment today to thank Him for gift of His coming to earth to rescue and redeem us.

## **December 16**

VERSES: Philippians 2:1-11

There is a fundamental problem with humanity today. This problem is not the economy or immigration or national defense or disease or whatever other issue makes the evening news. The fundamental problem with humanity is sin.

The word sin means to miss the mark, to err. Ultimately humanity has a condition that has sinned against God and wandered away from His direction and design. While the effects of our sin show up in the issues we see on the news each night, the root cause lies within the hearts of us all. In fact, we even bring it to church.

Churches all over the world for the past 2000 years are made up of sinners. Did you know that? Of course those who have turned to Christ are forgiven sinners, and have a declared new identity before God as "saint" or "one made holy," but even the "saints" inside the church sin in what they think, do, and say. It is a real problem.

At its core, sin compels people to act in selfish ways, looking out for only themselves, to the neglect of the needs of those around them. When a person places themselves and their desires above everything else, including God and the needs of others, they are moving in the direction of sin.

So how can humanity escape this vicious loop? Well, in today's verses, the Apostle Paul describes a path out ... by following the pattern and thinking of Jesus Christ. As we saw yesterday, Jesus is God, and has resided forever in heaven above, yet He did not cling to the luxury of heaven, but instead chose to come to this earth to serve our needs. He informed our ignorance, healed our diseases, identified with our existence, and ultimately died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. He did all of this for us. He looked "not only to His interests but also to the interests of others."

The birth, life, and death of Jesus create a beautiful model for Christians to serve one another, and not always look out for number one. How can you serve others and consider them as more important than yourself this week?

## **December 17**

VERSES: Matthew 1:1-17 & Hebrews 4:15-16

You are a part of a family tree. Your experience may be very positive or your experience may have been rocky. For good or for bad, we are still connected to and marked by our lineage. Personally, it bears great meaning to each of us.

However, there are some people whose family trees are not just PERSONALLY interesting but have implications that impact the world. Think about members of the British Royal Family. Their blood lines bring with them responsibility and authority that impacts the society around them.

In Matthew 1:1-17, we see the family tree of Jesus Christ. This family tree lets us know at least two things:

1. It shows us that Jesus (the Son of God) became fully human at His earthly birth. He did not just become "human-like," He PERSONALLY took on flesh and dwelt among us. Therefore, we do not have a Savior who cannot relate to us, but we have One who knows what it means to live in this world. His lineage is a reminder of that.
2. It shows us that Jesus' genealogy sets Him up for a WORLD-WIDE impact. He is a descendant of Abraham, reminding us that He is ethnically a Jew, thus continuing the fulfillment of God's promises to His people long ago. Also, we see that Jesus' great, great, great, great, great grandpa was David – a reminder that Jesus would be the promised descendant of David to sit on the throne of God and reign forever. His family tree supports and qualifies Him for not just personal influence.

At Christmastime, we sometimes skip the beginning verses of Matthew 1:1-17 and begin our Scripture reading when the angels show up in 1:18ff. When we do that, we miss the blessing of generations . . . reminding us of the PERSONAL and WORLD shaping reality of Jesus' life. He really did take on flesh and dwell among us, so He can relate to us and provide the help we require in times of need. Scan over the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 and see how many names you recognize.

## **December 18**

VERSES: Matthew 1:18-25

For good reason, Mary gets a lot of attention in the Christmas story. After all, Luke's Gospel seems to give us 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. Therefore, there are more biblical records of Mary's experience than Joseph's. All that said, it is important for us to think through Joseph's experience in the story of Jesus' birth – as it is a remarkable story of faith and faithfulness.

Today's passage tells the story of Joseph's experience during the time Jesus was inside Mary's womb. Joseph and Mary were engaged/betrothed, but not yet married. In this reading plan, we have already 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 have a Son who would be the Messiah. This was HUGE news, and certainly would have been hard to believe for anyone who was not talking to angels! And at first, Joseph was NOT talking to angels. God first brought the news to Mary before He brought the news to Joseph. So, with Mary pregnant, and Joseph looking only to natural explanations for this situation, Joseph decides to divorce Mary quietly – probably so that she could then marry whoever was the father of the child.

But it was not God's will that Joseph would leave Mary. So, an angel intervened and visited Joseph to tell him that Mary's child was indeed supernatural, and that Mary was telling the truth that the Baby was the Messiah. Can you imagine being 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? Ultimately, Joseph chooses to trust the Lord (and not his emotion, reason, or logic) and stay with Mary. As a result, generations of people all over the world have named their kids "Joe" and put statues of him out each Christmas season. What a great choice Joseph made!

Take a moment and ponder the things about God that don't make sense to you. Things you might wish to "dismiss quietly" instead of receiving them as true. Allow Joseph's account to help us remember that many times God's ways are simply higher (and better) than ours!

## December 19

VERSES: Luke 2:1-5 & Micah 5:2

In today's verses we see Luke describing the events that led to Joseph and Mary arriving in Bethlehem before Jesus was born. We might remember from earlier in this reading plan, that the Messiah was to be born in that little town. Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth, not Bethlehem, so a journey was required so that Jesus might be born in the correct place. Notice the precision with which Luke details this history. Fairy tales begin "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away" or "once upon a time," but the birth of Jesus is no fairy tale; it is a historical fact. So Luke describes the real world events that led to Jesus being born in the correct location.

Caesar Augustus, who reigned over the Roman Empire for the 40 years leading up to the birth of Jesus, called a census requiring all people in the Empire to travel to their ancestral home to be counted. This "counting" was done to both bolster the ego of the Emperor ("I have SO MANY people in my kingdom") and also to set the requirements for taxation. Caesar called three different censuses during his reign, but this particular one was the census taken before Quirinius' first go 'round as Governor of Syria (the phrasing "first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria" can also be translated "the registration before Quirinius became Governor of Syria.") Extra-biblical historical records confirm that there was indeed a census taken at the time of Jesus' birth, and these details included by Luke help us verify when Jesus was born.

So, Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem. They were thinking this was to fulfill Caesar's requirements. Caesar, who had no knowledge of who Joseph and Mary were, sends them (along with 50 million other residents of the Roman Empire) to their ancestral homes to satisfy his own ego and fill his own pockets. These are the earthly explanations for what happened, but because of the prophecy of Micah 5:2, we know that God was working behind the scenes to orchestrate a heavenly purpose.

Reading these verses reminds us that Jesus really came into history to save us. It also reminds us that God is sovereign over the events of history and works all things together for His good purposes. Our God is not the God of myths and fables but of reality and history.

## December 20

VERSES: Luke 2:6-14

Have you ever rewatched a movie with a surprise ending? The first time you saw it, your jaw dropped with the plot twist, but by the tenth time seeing the movie, you come to expect the previously unexpected turn.

In today's verses we see the birth of Jesus followed by a number of surprising twists and turns.

First of all, Jesus is laid in a manger. A MANGER! An animal's feeding trough. This was the humble abode where Jesus, the King of Kings, would spend His first night on the earth. How rare was this? Well, the angels tell the shepherds that they will be able to identify which baby was Jesus because Jesus was the only baby in Bethlehem lying in a manger! We are so familiar with this story, that we are no longer shocked by this reality. Even more shocking, though, is WHY Jesus was laid in a manger ... because there was no room for Him indoors. No one else was willing to be inconvenienced so that Jesus could be born in a more accommodating setting.

The next big surprise came with angels filling the sky outside Bethlehem. Again, we are so familiar with this story that we just think that angels ALWAYS fill the night sky around Bethlehem, but remember, those who first saw them were terrified. Why? Because it was not normal for angels to be in Bethlehem's sky. And, who did the angels first inform of the birth of Jesus? The shepherds of course! Again, we have lived an entire lifetime seeing shepherds in our nativity scenes, so their angelic visit makes sense to us, but it was a shock to the first century. Shepherds were not people invited to formal events, and due to their proximity to the elements they interacted with in their vocation, they were deemed ritually unclean, making them religious outsiders.

May you read these very familiar verses today with fresh eyes. As you "rewatch" this familiar piece of history, don't be desensitized to its amazing message. Unto the religious outsiders and those stained by sin, a Savior is born! "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!" May your heart do what the residents of Bethlehem did not - make room for Jesus to be honored and worshiped with our obedience, affection, and faith.

## **December 21**

VERSES: Luke 2:15-21

I recently read an account by Colin Webster of a woman named Thelma Howard. In 1951, Howard was hired by Walt Disney to be his housekeeper. She worked in that role for 30 years, becoming a real life Mary Poppins to Disney's children and grandchildren. Like many other members of Disney's staff, Howard was given a share of stock each year for Christmas. Howard collected all these shares, but never cashed them in, simply keeping them in a box beneath her bed.

According to an LA Times article from 1994, nearing the end of her life, Howard was living in poor conditions sharing a room with three other people in a very modest nursing home without a view. Disney's children found her in this condition and moved her to a better location for her last days but nothing indicative of what she was really worth. Upon her death, Thelma Howard's estate was valued at \$9 million (mostly due to the Disney stock she owned but never cashed in.) When those Christmas gifts from Walt were eventually "opened" and cashed in, they ultimately would be used to bless many through her foundation helping those in need.

This story reminds us that for Christmas gifts to be activated, they must be opened. Upon learning that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the shepherds had an option. Would they "open" this gift and go and see the newborn King, or would they stay in the field and keep this gift under their bed? The shepherds responded with faith and visited Jesus and told all the wonders of what they saw.

How about you? Jesus has come to offer you the Christmas gift of peace with God and forgiveness of sin. Will you open this gift and place your faith in Him today? Like Mary, will you treasure in your heart the person of Christ and rely on Him and Him alone for your salvation? You can open this Christmas gift today by praying to God and expressing your faith and trust in Him.

## WEEK 4: He Leads us home

### December 22

VERSES: Numbers 24:17, Daniel 2:46-49 & Matthew 2:1-6

In the days following Jesus' birth, a group of Magi from the east (probably Iraq or Iran), saw a new star and made a long journey to Jerusalem. This is a familiar story to us, so it seems "normal" that Magi would journey hundreds of miles across a desert in response to a new star ... BUT, we would do well to ask a few questions.

First, who were these Magi? The Magi were a group of star gazers who were prominent in Babylon and Persia for hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus. As a matter of fact, during the time of the Babylonian captivity, several young Jews were carted off to Babylon, and one of them (Daniel) was placed in charge of (you guessed it) the Magi in Nebuchadnezzar's court!

Second, why would these star gazers associate a new star with a new king in Jerusalem? Daniel lived in Babylon among the Magi 500 years before Jesus was born, but Daniel prophesied about the time when Messiah would come. He put a time table on it in Daniel 9:24-27 that pointed towards Jesus' day. Additionally, the Jews had another Scripture that alluded to a star representing the arrival of a liberating leader (Numbers 24:17). Daniel may very well have referenced this hope to the Magi during their decades together. It is difficult to know for sure, but it is easy to see Daniel's influence prompting the Magi to watch for the arrival of a new star around the time of Jesus' birth.

Third, we also need to ask, why were Herod's priests and scribes not also looking for Messiah's arrival? This will come even more clear if you read Matthew 2:13-18, but Herod was a ruthless and jealous man and saw Jesus as a threat. The priests and scribes knew where Messiah would be born, but they were too afraid of Herod to check it out.

It is interesting to see God's pursuit of the Gentile Magi, using Daniel to teach God's prophetic promises and create a Messianic hope. The Magi embraced that message and were ready to act and respond when the star appeared. God is still speaking through His Word and through His world today. Like the Magi, will we come and worship or, like the priests and scribes, will we stay at home?

## **December 23**

VERSES: Matthew 2:6-12

How did God lead you “home” to Him? For some, God uses the encouragement and testimonies of friends and family. For others, God uses the preaching of His Word or the reading of devotional material. Still for others, God uses natural revelation that illuminates the awesome power and divine identity of God. For others, God uses a bit of each of these things, all utilized by the Holy Spirit to draw us to God.

The point is, if we have a relationship with God, it is because He has invited us to have a relationship with Him. If the universe were a game of hide-and-go seek and God did not want to be found, we would never find Him. But God does not want to hide. Instead, God wants a relationship with us and has reached out in His grace, revealing Himself to us and leading us home to Him.

The Magi are just another example of God leading people to Himself. Through the testimony of His people (Daniel), and through the authentication of His Word (the quotation of Micah 5:2 recorded in Matthew 2:6), and through the star in the sky (Matthew 2:9), God wooed the Magi from their eastern home, across a rugged desert, past societal expectations, and above ethnic divisions and into the presence of the King of Kings and the Savior of the World.

And when the Magi arrive in Bethlehem, they bow down and worship Jesus with all that they had, offering symbolic gifts highlighting the identity and ministry that Jesus would reveal over His lifetime.

God has invited you home to Him. Like the Magi, have you responded to that invitation?

## **December 24**

VERSES: John 1:9-18

Many years ago in a 1964 game against the 49ers, a Minnesota Viking defensive end recovered a fumble and (in the confusion of the moment) got turned around and ran 66 yards THE WRONG WAY into his own end zone. Thinking he just scored a touchdown, he threw the ball out of bounds in celebration, resulting in a safety. Though he worked hard and sincerely thought he scored, he was mistaken. Instead of "winning," he was "losing" - that moment at least.

In today's passage, Jesus is referred to as both "life" and "light." These are two things that all of humanity wants and needs. In fact, they are intimately connected. You cannot have life without light. When God created the world at the beginning of all things, He FIRST created light, as it was necessary for everything else to survive (Genesis 1:3). Though all of us want and need life and light, we sometimes run the wrong way to find them.

In the confusion of life, it is all too easy for us to get turned around and headed in the wrong direction. Sometimes we think that Jesus wants death and darkness for us . . . to remove the fun out of life by telling us what we cannot do. In the temptation of everyday life, we scoop up an "opportunity" and run in the opposite direction of Christ, headed towards drugs, pornography, an affair, gossip, greed, etc., thinking that if we run hard enough in that direction, we will "win." The problem is, these temptations do not produce the celebrations we desire. When we reach that "end zone," like the Vikings "wrong way run," we find shame and not satisfaction.

When John tells us that Jesus is both life and light, he is like a coach reminding us which goal line we were created to move towards. Jesus does ask us to follow Him as He heads in a particular direction . . . but that direction is always life and not death; it is light and not darkness. This is not to say that there will not be challenges as we follow Christ . . . but it is to say that those challenges are momentary, while the "win" is eternal. When we do not follow Christ, it is just the opposite . . . the ecstatic feelings are fleeting, but the "loss" lasts.

Jesus wants to light your house this Christmas with His life. Will you follow Him?

## December 25

VERSES: Hebrews 11:13-16, 2 Corinthians 5:8-10, & John 14:1-6

In this reading plan, we have walked through the theme "Home for Christmas." The first seven days looked at the hometown of Jesus' birth, Bethlehem. The second seven days looked at the events in and around the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth in the days when Mary was pregnant with Jesus. The third set of seven days looked at the humble home of Jesus on that first Christmas night, a manger. And finally, the past three days looked at how God leads us home to Him, so that He might shine His light into our lives.

In today's reading, we conclude our study by asking a bigger question, "Where is our true home?" Years ago, my grandmother was struggling with dementia and would often call our house confused and ask to go "home." Problem was, she could not identify where home was. Time and disease had sadly confused her.

Where is your home? Many of us have lived in many different houses and in many different towns. As I write this, I am 51 years old and have lived in 13 different houses/apartments in 7 different cities. I spent all of my "growing up years" in one location, but have spent nearly 30 years in another. So which of these places is "home"?

Followers of Jesus, we actually share a home. Our home is not on this earth, but is in heaven. Our primary identity is not bound by this world, but by the God who made it. God has promised us an everlasting home, peace on the earth, and an environment where every need is met and every tear is dried. And yet, we live in a world where homes break down, nations war, and many tears are cried. Are God's promises for real? Yes, they are! However, not all of them will be fulfilled in this life. When we arrive in our heavenly home, and when God creates the new heaven and the new earth described in Revelation 21-22, then all His promises will come true. We can count on it.

Our citizenship is in His city, so let us live today in light of who we really are, and the values of our "homeland." One day, we will see Jesus face to face and give an account for our lives. May we follow Him home, expectant for that day.