Old Time Christmas



25 Day Christmas Devotional

by Mark Robinson

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Summary: Christmas is a time of nostalgia. We enjoy traditions that have been passed down through the decades because they help us feel grounded and provide great comfort. A tree in the living room, lights on the house, or attendance at special services are just some of the traditions many enjoy each December. For those who love a good "Old Time Christmas," this devotional will be instructive. Looking all the way back to the Old Testament, we will see that Jesus' birth came after thousands of years of planning and thus is pointed to throughout the Old Testament period. Our story is anchored to Someone ancient. We will see that over the next twenty-five days.

Day 1

Read John 1:1-5, 12, 14

Imagine you are on a walk in the woods on a cold winter day and you see a cabin built by a stream with a fire built in the hearth providing warmth to the home. Fresh cookies are on the counter and holiday recipes are on a table near the stove. A poinsettia adorns the center of the table, and a Christmas tree covered in ornaments is in the living room.

Upon seeing a cabin like this, would any sane person say, "This scene is a total accident! How amazing that matter randomly organized to produce a cabin, cookies, and a Christmas tree!" Nope… no one would say that. Instead, if you saw a cabin like this you would begin looking around for the owner. Who built this cabin and where are they? If they are gone, when are they coming home? And (maybe more importantly) will they invite me inside to share in the warmth and comfort of this place? Based on the appearance of the cabin, we would probably anticipate the cabin owner is someone we would want to meet.

We live in a world that is not an accident. In six glorious movements, God made this universe on purpose and for His purpose. He especially built a "cabin" of a world that expresses His hospitality toward people: just enough oxygen, just the right temperature, ample food and water, and a dazzling array of color and beauty across the topography and night sky. These wonders illicit an understanding to this world's intelligent inhabitants that the Owner of this world is Someone we would want to meet.

Upon recognizing His greatness in creation, we may wonder if the Owner of this world is soon to return. We know He created this world, but is there any evidence that He may have visited here before? When we look at John 1:1-5, 12, 14, we find that the Creator of this world is none other than Jesus Christ, the Word of God. He created this world in the distant past, but He also VISITED this world with His birth in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago.

Christmas is the celebration that our Creator came for us and invites us into the warmth of a relationship with Him. Receive this blessing and experience the joy of being a child of God this Christmas season.

Day 2

Read John 8:56-59, Exodus 3:13-14

Imagine you are sitting around the Christmas tree opening presents with your family. As you open each gift, you decide to have each family member share one of their first Christmas memories.

Grandpa goes first and talks about a Christmas during the Great Depression when the only gifts exchanged were mittens his mom had made to keep his little hands warm during the winter months.

Next up is your wife. She shares a memory of getting her very own Cabbage Patch Doll for Christmas, something that seemed improbable because they were sold out at Toys 'R Us, adding to the joyful surprise.

Finally your four-year-old speaks and shares her first memory of Christmas. She talks of shivering on the banks of the Delaware River and seeing General George Washington and a band of soldiers come ashore for a surprise attack on Christmas night.

When you hear your four-year-old say this, you are stunned! Your daughter was born in 2022, yet she is talking about events that took place 250 years ago! How is this possible? Is she crazy?

With the emotion of the above interaction in mind, let's float back to John 8:56-59 where Jesus is talking to a group of Jewish people and tells them that He was alive before Abraham. Abraham, whose life is recorded in the book of Genesis, lived around 2100 BC… 2100 years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem! Jesus was telling them that He was older than Abraham! This was too much for them to believe. They thought He was crazy.

But then Jesus takes it one step further: He says that before Abraham was born, "I am." This is a callback to God's name from Exodus 3:13-14. God's name is the "I am." By saying this, Jesus was telling this audience that He was not crazy, but that He was God… that's why He knows so much about Abraham! Incensed by this declaration, many people wanted to stone Jesus that day for what they assumed was an act of blasphemy.

Jesus is God, though, so it was not wrong for Him to say that He was. The amazing truth of Christmas is that the Ancient of Days, God Himself, came to His people to reveal Himself to them and to reveal Himself to us! This is a truth that is crazy good news for you and for me.

Day 3

Read Luke 24:27, 31, 44-49

As a kid at Christmas, I became an investigator. Hopeful that there would be presents under the tree for me, I began each day of December inspecting any new gifts that had been placed the night before. If there was a gift with my name on it, I began a scientific process of guessing what the present might be. I would shake the package and listen to see what it sounded like. I would look at the package's shape and gaze through the thin wrapping paper to see if I could guess the contents.

After a thorough investigation, I would then try to guess where the evidence led. One thing was for sure, though, the presence of the package reminded me that someone loved me and had thought ahead to get me something special.

God has given all of us a tremendous collection of sixty-six gifts. He has wrapped them up and placed them inside the Bible - the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testament. Knowing these are gifts for us, may we begin to investigate them to see what message they contain. When we pick up the Bible, shake it open, and look at its contents, we begin to understand what it is all about.

After His resurrection from the dead, Jesus opens the eyes of His disciples to explain to them (and to us) what the Bible is all about. Its central message is a revelation of who God is, who we are, and how we can be reconciled to God. Because of this, Jesus is the perfect summary of the entire message of the Scripture. Jesus is God, so knowing Jesus is knowing God. Jesus also took on flesh at Christmas, so He is fully man, revealing what a truly sinless human life looks like. And Jesus ultimately died on the cross to pay the penalty that our sins demanded so that we could be reconciled to God. Want to know what the present of the Bible points to? Look to the presence of Jesus throughout the Scripture.

Of course we expect to see Jesus in the New Testament, but today's reading reminds us that we can see Him, covered in prophetic and symbolic "wrapping paper" but present nonetheless, throughout the Old Testament.

He loves us and gave us this gift. We will be shaking these Old Testament packages throughout this reading plan.

Day 4

Read Genesis 12:1-3, Matthew 1:1-2, Galatians 3:16

Christmas is a time when many gifts are delivered through the air from "up north." By up north, I mean WAY north, like Seattle, home of the e-commerce giant Amazon. According to a quick Google search, it is estimated that Amazon sells $150 billion worth of merchandise every Christmas season and delivers well over one billion packages in the month of December alone. That is serious business.

In order to facilitate this volume of package deliveries, Amazon has a network of over 1,000 warehouses and 300 gigantic fulfillment centers around the country to effectively process orders and deliver them to people in 48 hours or less. This is a prime effort but is necessary given the scope of the blessings they are charged to deliver.

The New Testament begins with Matthew giving us a genealogy of Jesus' earthly family. In Matthew's telling, it begins with Abraham. Certainly the genealogy could have gone back further (Abraham also had parents after all), but Matthew begins with Father Abraham because of the promise God made him.

Sin had separated mankind from God since the Garden of Eden. But God had a plan to reconcile His people to Himself. This reconciliation plan would ultimately lead to billions of blessings coming forth to God's people. Indeed, God said to Abraham that through Abraham God would bless all the families of the Earth. But how could that be? How would He deliver through Abraham such a worldwide blessing?

Rather than establishing 1,000 different religions as fulfillment centers of His blessing, God decided to send to humanity the gift of deliverance from sin through one source. If what humanity needed most was moral advice or religious festivals, then many religions would do. But knowing that we needed a Savior, God would send His only begotten Son, and blessing would flow to all who believe in Him.

Jesus, as Abraham's descendant, would be the ultimate center of the fulfillment of God's blessing. Through Him alone salvation is found. Have you placed your faith in Him?

Day 5

Read Luke 3:34, Genesis 22:1-19, Hebrews 11:17-19, Romans 8:31-39

What is the most expensive Christmas present you have ever received? Perhaps an engagement ring or an extravagant necklace from your spouse? Or maybe even a Lexus "December to Remember?" Ever received anything like that? Me neither.

Because of this, we are tempted to think that expensive gifts only come to those in movies or on television commercials. But let us not fall to this temptation. We have all been given a much more expensive Christmas gift than any car or diamond. Today we are going to reflect on that gift.

In Luke's genealogy of Jesus he mentions that Isaac was also earthly kin to Jesus. In the book of Genesis we read that Isaac was a special child of promise, the first born son to Abraham through his wife Sarah. God had promised that the covenant He had made through Abraham would continue through Isaac.

In Genesis 22, though, we see God ask a most peculiar thing of Abraham: He asks Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac on an altar! Amazingly, in a step of remarkable faith, Abraham proceeded up the mountain to sacrifice Isaac…but God intervened. Before Abraham went through with the action, God provided an animal to die in Isaac's place.

Fast forward from Abraham's day to the end of Jesus' earthly life. God the Father sent His Son Jesus to the cross to be a sacrifice for the sins of the world. The picture of Jesus dying upon the cross is reminiscent of his relative Isaac but with one massive difference: what God did not require of Abraham, He did require of Himself. No substitute was provided in Jesus' place. Jesus WAS the substitute who died for us.

Because of this, Jesus' birth in Bethlehem was a VERY expensive gift. Jesus was born to die in our place. The perfect Son of God, naked upon a cross, receiving our guilt as He gave us His grace. This gift was beyond expensive…it was priceless. Only Jesus could do what He did, and God did not hold back but lavished this gift for you and for me.

Want an expensive gift for yourself under the tree this year? Look back to the cross. Salvation was provided upon that tree for all who trust in Him.

Day 6

Read Luke 3:34, Genesis 28:1-17

Christmas is a time of togetherness. My earliest memories of Christmas involve the people with whom I spent the holiday. Certainly this included my parents and sister, but also I have strong memories of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins who traveled great distances to celebrate Christmas together. The visit was often short (sometimes even just one day), but it was always meaningful. Even now, we always try to be close to family around Christmas Day.

In many ways being present with those you love is a powerful picture of Christmas. After all, Christmas is the time of year when we celebrate that God took on flesh and dwelt among us. He made the effort to travel a considerable distance (from Heaven to Earth) to be physically present with His people. This was not a "one day visit" but was somewhat short. Jesus' earthly life was only about thirty years, but in that time Jesus showed us what God was like and paved the way for us to be rightly connected to Him.

Another of Jesus' earthly "forefathers" was Jacob, as referenced in Luke's genealogy. Jacob was Abraham's grandson and Isaac's son. He is the very picture of God's gracious choice. The Genesis account of Jacob's life does not present him as a picture of piety. In fact, in his early days, it shows Jacob as a trickster, liar, and maybe even a bit of a coward. Yet God, in His grace, chose Jacob to be the recipient of the blessing that had begun with His promise to Abraham. God saves us not on the basis of our resume but in spite of it, and God graciously chose Jacob to be the bearer of His blessing.

And what was that blessing? Jacob had a dream where He saw a ladder connecting Earth to Heaven. God was making a way for Heaven to come to Earth and bless His people. Though there were hints of this blessing throughout the Old Testament, the clearest expression of this blessing comes when God Himself, Jesus Christ, came to this Earth and lived among Jacob's people. God eventually would change Jacob's name to Israel, and many years later Jesus would descend that ladder and dwell among the people of Israel, making a way for all who trust Him to be reconciled to God forever.

He came to be with us…on Christmas Day.

Day 7

Read Matthew 1:2, Genesis 49:8-12, Revelation 5:1-14

When do you start planning and preparing for Christmas? Some begin to prepare on the day after Thanksgiving. Others start after Halloween. Still others begin to organize at the first sign of fall. When do you start your preparations?

In our family, we typically begin decorating the house around Thanksgiving time and listening to Christmas Carols around the first of December. But sometimes our preparations begin much earlier.

I remember one year when our son was young we bought him his "big" Christmas gift in early January (but did not give it to him until the following December!). We had an idea of the "perfect" gift for him and made preparations early to ensure we had it ready to go under the tree months later. Occasionally, the important things in life are spontaneous, but often they come after a significant time of preparing and planning ahead.

In Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, we learn that Jesus was also a descendant of Judah. Judah was one of Jacob's sons and the patriarch of the tribe of Judah in the nation of Israel. Near the end of Jacob's life, he called each of his sons to himself to bless them. When Jacob came to Judah, inspired by the Spirit, Jacob said that Judah would be "lion-like" and that he would be a ruler or king. Only Judah got this designation from his father. Jesus being from the line of Judah demonstrates that the ultimate expression of Jacob's final blessing over Judah would be fulfilled in Jesus.

Far more than just a local leader or tribal chief, Jesus is the King of Kings! As the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Jesus has authority that no one else has. In Revelation 5 we see a picture of heaven where Jesus (Judah's Lion) is being celebrated in heaven for His unique ability to lead.

Long before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Judah's line was prophesied to be the kingly line. This Christmas gift was planned not months, or even years, but millennia in advance. Jesus didn't decide to come to the Earth on a whim, but God had planned Jesus' arrival and His reign as King since before there was time.

From eternity past to heaven's glory, Jesus is the perfect gift. Like Jacob's prophecy and the picture of heaven's throne room, may we bow before our King this Christmas.

Day 8

Read 2 Samuel 7:12-16, Isaiah 9:7, Luke 1:32-33; Acts 13:22-23

I don't know about you, but I am always sad when the holidays come to a close. I love the Christmas season. I love the music, the food, the celebrations, the public activation towards generosity and goodwill, and the special opportunities to gather with God's people to worship and to remember God's love and goodness. Truly, Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year, so I am always sad to see it go.

The holiday season seems to have an expiration date. Don't believe me? Try leaving your decorations up past mid-January and count the strange looks you receive from your neighbors!

That said, there is an irony to the brevity of the Christmas season. After all, Jesus came to inaugurate a kingdom that will know no end!

Think back to the days of King Saul in the Old Testament. Because of his disobedience, Saul was a "one term" king. God disciplined and removed Saul and his descendants from the royal line of Israel. In his place, God appointed David as the new King of Israel, but as David began to age, he probably wondered if his kingdom would also be brief. Would his royal line last past him, or would it terminate with his death as the previous administration did with Saul?

God removes this doubt in David's mind by sending the prophet Nathan to communicate to David that his descendant would have a kingdom that would never end. The early hint of this fulfillment would be having David's son Solomon assume the throne after David's death. Despite Solomon's disobedience and resulting discipline by the Lord, God's commitment to the Davidic kingly line would remain in tact. One day, as Isaiah 9 indicates, a righteous ruler would emerge from David's line to reign forevermore!

When the Angel appeared to Mary to announce Jesus' birth, he told her that her son would be that ruler who would reign from David's throne in an eternal kingdom. Jesus, the distant in time but close in purpose, offspring of David would never be unseated!

Christmas may only be celebrated for one season a year, but the reign the Christ established will never be boxed up. May we follow Him as Savior and Lord in every season.

Day 9

Read Genesis 3:14-15, Hebrews 2:14

Do you have a person in your life who is hard to buy a Christmas present for? Someone who already has "everything" or who seems to need nothing? When shopping for someone like this, we usually wander around a store or scroll online shops trying to find something, anything within our budget that simply says, "We are thinking about you."

When we have someone who is hard to buy for and we think of something they would actually like or need, we jump at the chance to buy them that gift and can't wait to present it to them.

But even for the person who seems to have it all, there is something that they need. Every human being since the Garden of Eden has a persistent and painful problem: death. Death is no respecter of persons. One out of one people die, so dealing with death is a problem we all face. The richest and poorest person in your life share this same problem. And we know where this problem originated.

Human death is a result of sin … original sin that dates all the way back to when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden. Tempted by the devil in serpent form, Adam and Eve disobeyed God initiating deadly consequences, and people have dealt with this pain ever since.

But is there a Gift that would defeat this enemy? The answer is an emphatic YES. In Genesis 3, right after mankind sinned, God proclaimed a punishment to the devil. He declared that one day the Seed of the woman would come along and crush the head of the snake. This would bruise the heel of woman's Seed but would deal the enemy a fatal blow.

What was this prophecy referring to? Jesus Christ, the Seed of the woman, would one day come to Earth, have His heel wounded upon the cross, but through that act crush the devil and win a victory over death for all His people.

Everyone in your life needs the gift of victory over death that Jesus provides. What gift can you share with all in your network this Christmas? Offer them eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord who won a victory for them on the cross.

Day 10

Read Isaiah 9:1-5, Matthew 4:12-17

In many ways, Christmas is a season of hope. Christmas celebrates the Son of God coming to the Earth and rising to bring a new day for all who trust in Him.

This idea is imbedded in Old Testament prophecies of Jesus' coming. Isaiah 9 is a significant passage pointing to Jesus' coming. Written 700 years before Jesus' birth, Isaiah writes of the hope that will come to those who were in anguish and who dwelled in a land of deep darkness. Isaiah here points to the region of Zebulun and Naphtali, which are the lands of Galilee in the northern section of Israel. There are two things to note about this region. First, Galilee was a place connected to the "outside world." Isaiah refers to it as "Galilee of the nations" and a place on the "way to the sea" because of its proximity to other nations. Sitting along a major roadway, it was a place of trade where both Gentiles and Jews intermingled. Second, because of Galilee's northern location, it often drew first fire in military conflict from the north. To this cosmopolitan but beleaguered location, Isaiah says a light of hope will shine that will both bring light to all in this region (Jew and Gentile) but will also bring about the end of military conquest.

What was Isaiah referring to when he mentions the "great light" that will shine? Matthew 4 tells us that this great light was Jesus Christ who would operate His earthly ministry primarily in the Galilean region! Jesus would be the One whose presence would give the present of hope to all people who trust in Him!

Did Jesus put an end to all military conflict when He came to the Earth on Christmas? The short answer is no, at least not yet. But Isaiah 9:5 indicates that earthly peace will come because of Jesus. When will this happen? This portion of the prophecy will be fulfilled when Jesus returns to the Earth one day at His second coming. In some ways, it is like an unopened gift still under the tree.

As a reminder of what Jesus will one day provide on His second coming, maybe we should all put a wrapped package under our Christmas trees that we do not open … a reminder that some of the gifts Jesus promised have not yet been realized but one day certainly will be!

Day 11

Read Isaiah 9:6, Matthew 18:1-4

As Christmas is celebrated today, it is a holiday with special significance for children. At our church, we have a special children's singing program in our worship services. In our community, schools and youth organizations have Christmas parties. In our homes, we do special activities with our kids to mark the reason for the season. In a real way, this time of year engages the next generation the way few others do.

And this is appropriate. "Why?" you may ask. This day is far more than just child's play! And I agree. BUT, at Christmas we remember that "to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given." Jesus was not born as a thirty-year-old man. He spent nine months in utero before spending time as an infant, toddler, pre-adolescent, and teen! He grew up.

Because of His experiences, Jesus can not only relate to adults but to children as well. He lay where they lay, crawled where they crawled, and toddled where they toddled. He also learned to talk (He was not born speaking), relate (He had brothers and neighbors), and memorize (can you imagine Jesus learning to read!?).

But the incarnation of Jesus is even more impressive when we remember that not only did He take on the life of a child, but He also retained His divinity. He is mighty God, everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace after all…even at His birth! Jesus was fully God and fully man.

That means that as a child growing in physical stature, He humbly refrained from exercising His divine prerogative so that He could identify with us.

This Christmas, when you see a child of any age, remember this: God took on flesh and experienced THAT AGE, whether an image on a sonogram, a child in a stroller, or a pre-teen finding their way. The Way, the Truth, and the Life invites people of all ages to embrace Him with the faith of a child.

Day 12

Read Isaiah 11:1-9

Every Christmas my family sets out a small forest of Christmas trees around the house. We have our "big tree," a "small tree," and a "Jesse tree."

You may be wondering what is a "Jesse Tree?" The Jesse tree in our home is a small evergreen tree, but on it we hang ornaments representing the Old Testament promise of Messiah's arrival. The tree is called a "Jesse Tree" because its name is based on Isaiah 11:1-9. In those verses, we see God promise hope for Israel. Because of their disobedience, Israel had been judged by God; chopped down like trees in a forest. But God was not through with Israel. He would cause a new leader to emerge from Jesse's descendants ("a shoot from the stump of Jesse") who would lead the nation in a beautiful way. Our small Jesse tree helps us remember this history.

Israel's experience with earthly kings had been mostly bad. Of the forty-one kings Israel and Judah had in their history, only eight of them were "good." Most of them led the nation into apostasy and idol worship which provoked God to discipline them. Simply stating that God would raise up a descendant of Jesse to lead would not necessarily be a good thing for the people…especially if that leader was like most of the kings who had come before him.

But Isaiah prophecies that this "stump of Jesse" would be amazingly good. The Messiah described in today's verses is One we should all long to live under, as He governs with wisdom and grace. Who is this shoot off the stump? Jesus Christ (one of Jesse's descendants) is clearly the member of Jesse's family tree that Isaiah had in mind.

So, let us praise God together. Not just because He has provided a Messiah, but because that Messiah, Jesus Christ, is UNLIKE the Old Testament kings. Jesus is the King of a new order. He is the King of Kings and a monumentally good King at that.

This Christmas, praise Jesus that He is both the promised Savior and the Righteous Ruler. It is a joy to sit in the shade created by the care of the shoot that became the Savior. Reflect on all the ways you are glad Jesus is your king today.

Day 13

Read Isaiah 42:1-4, Matthew 12:15-21

One thing I love about Christmas is the kindness it elicits in people. People buy extra presents for those in need, communities and churches provide meals for the hungry, and many fill shoe boxes with toys and toiletries to send to children around the world to assist in sharing the Gospel. These are just some of the ways this season inspires generosity.

Why is it that such kindness accompanies the celebration of Jesus' birth? Where does it come from?

Well, it comes from Jesus Himself. He has inspired it! He is remarkably kind and compassionate. Upon seeing people who are vulnerable, He does not exploit them. Upon seeing people in need, He does not ignore them. No, Jesus (as the prophecy of Isaiah 42 says and Matthew 12 reiterates) did not quench the smoldering wick or break the bruised reed. Instead, Matthew 12 tells us He healed them all.

A common temptation for leaders in any country or organization is to talk tough and to "carry a big stick." Jesus, by contrast, came not carrying a stick but binding up the broken. He did not come with angry words and much bravado, but with a demeanor that was "quiet in the streets."

To be sure, Jesus was no pushover. He knew who He was and was confident where He stood - always championing the truth. Jesus was not one who only said nice things. At times He spoke judgment to those who were distorting God's truth. Certainly, Jesus will come again one day to judge the living and the dead. So, what do we make of these verses in Isaiah 42?

To those who were hurting, Jesus recognized their need, and to those who humbly came to Him, Jesus brought healing and help. People experienced Him at His first Advent as the servant of Isaiah 42 if they approached Him in this manner. Rather than trying to exploit the downcast, He came to lift them up… and He continues to do so today.

Given that, it is appropriate for all to remember His coming by offering acts of compassion and grace. Perhaps following His example and empowered by His love you can be His servant to others this season.

Day 14

Read Isaiah 53:1-12, John 1:29, Mark 10:45, Hebrews 10:11-14

The Christmas season is a time when the family budget is stretched to the limit. The extra expenses of the season add to the monthly strain of trying make ends meet. In today's life, purchases are often made by swiping a credit or debit card at the store to initiate the transaction. Do you know what I have found about these purchases? Banks and card companies actually expect you to pay back what you swipe for! Without sufficient funds in our accounts, the things we take home won't be ours for long!

Throughout the Old Testament, when people sinned, they brought the required sacrifice to the Temple and the priest offered the sacrifice for them. The more sins committed, the more sacrifices were necessary. To say it another way, today's sacrifice would cover yesterday's sin but not tomorrow's. Beyond that, there was never full forgiveness and atonement for sin through these animal sacrifices. These animal sacrifices were like card swipe purchases needing some truly righteous "funds" to ultimately cover the bill.

When Jesus came to the Earth He came to serve but also to give His life as a ransom for many. He lived a perfectly sinless life, creating a deposit of an eternally righteous life.

Jesus also gave His life upon the cross to pay the price of death our sins deserve. Far superior to many animal sacrifices, Jesus would be the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." As Hebrews 10 affirms, Jesus' death was the once and for all payment for our sins.

Jesus' life created an infinite amount of righteousness, and His death created a completely sufficient substitutionary payment for sin so that we might be both forgiven and declared righteous in God's eyes!

Though we live many miles from the "store" of Calvary where Jesus died, let us not forget the cost that He paid. Seven hundred years before Jesus' birth, Isaiah talked of the price Jesus would pay in order to reconcile those who trust Him to God. As the eternal God, Jesus knew this was awaiting Him when He came to Earth, and He came anyway.

What is your response to Jesus this Christmas? Place your faith in Him and accept His deposit of eternal life to your account.

Day 15

Read Psalm 22:1-31, Matthew 27:35-46, John 19:28-37, Romans 5:8

There are many famous Christmas songs. Most are known by their titles, but a few are best recognized by their opening line. Do you know the "Christmas Song?" You may think you don't recognize that title, but if I say its opening line, "Chestnuts roasting on an open fire," you could probably sing along. The opening line of that classic tune is actually more familiar than the title!

When Jesus hung upon the cross to pay the penalty for our sins, He referenced a song. Hanging there, moments before death, He referenced a particular song: Psalm 22. Jesus referenced this song not by its title but by its opening line, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

Psalm 22 was a Psalm crying out to God in a moment of great suffering. King David apparently wrote the song during a moment in his life that he thought would end in death at the hands of his enemies. David's fears in the song were not personally realized as this Psalm was not a prelude to his death. That said, Psalm 22 was written by more than just David - it was inspired by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, what David feared but avoided, Jesus would eventually experience upon the cross one millennia later.

There are several allusions to Jesus on the cross in this Psalm: Jesus mocked on the cross (Psalm 22:7-8, Matthew 27:39–44), dry and thirsty (Psalm 22:14-15, John 19:28), piercing hands and feet (Psalm 22:16, John 19:34, 37), and gambling for His garments (Psalm 22:18, Matthew 27:35). Psalm 22 is an apt soundtrack for what Jesus really experienced on the cross.

Psalm 22 was inspired by God 1,000 years before Jesus' day. Jesus knew before He came to Earth He would be mocked, beaten, nailed, and killed … and yet He came anyway because He loves us and came to die for our sins.

This Christmas as you hear the "Christmas Song" and its familiar first line, may your heart sing a song of praise and thanksgiving to the God who sang the first line of Psalm 22 upon the cross and lived out the awful reality to which the rest of the song points for you and for me. And as you sing, may your heart bow in thanksgiving for the God who gave it all for you.

Day 16

Read Psalm 118:1-29, Luke 19:28-40

My favorite types of Christmas Carols are ones that place us in the shoes of Old Testament Jewish people longing for their Messiah to come. Songs like "O Come O Come Emmanuel" and "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus" invite us to feel what the BC faithful felt and sing as they may have sung.

These Christmas Carols, though, are not the songs the Old Testament believers sang when they were longing for Messiah. The songs they sang have been preserved for us in the book of Psalms. Though we do not have their original melodies, we have the original words. Every year during the celebration of Passover, Jewish pilgrims would sing Psalms 113-118 (the Psalms of Praise) on their way to Jerusalem. These songs praised God for the salvation that He brought to His people in the past while also looking forward to deliverance in the future.

The last of these Psalms of Praise (Psalm 118) was actually the song highlighted during the Palm Sunday events when Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey just a few days before His crucifixion. As Jesus entered the city, people sang Psalm 118 over Him. Many in the crowd that day sang, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord," with belief and hope in their heart that Jesus may in fact be the Messiah. Therefore, they sang out, "Save us, we pray, O LORD," with hope that Jesus would kick out the Romans and establish an earthly kingdom.

The picture of Palm Sunday is one of singing of a future hope with their future riding on a donkey right beside them! This would be like us singing "O Come O Come Emmanuel" on Christmas Eve night and looking over and seeing Jesus already returned for His second coming, riding a white horse! What a moment that would be!

Just as Jesus really came once, so also He really will come again. The cornerstone of our salvation will again do marvelous things! As you sing Christmas Carols of anticipation this year, have a real sense of expectation in your heart. When you sing, "Come Thou long expected Jesus," know that one day He really will come! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Therefore let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Day 17

Read Isaiah 49:6, Acts 13:46-47, Ephesians 2:8-9, Romans 3:23, Romans 6:23, Matthew 28:18-20

Under Christmas trees are gifts given to different individuals. Most gifts aren't for all but instead are from one person to another. But what if there was a Christmas gift for ALL who wanted it?

Salvation is by grace through faith. This is the clear teaching of Scripture. No person is saved because they have lived such a righteous life that God is forced to save them as the winner of some kind of cosmic game. The Scripture teaches that ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and that the wages of sin is death. Therefore, God is required to save none and is justified in judging all.

But God is not only just, He is also gracious, giving to people what they do not deserve. If God were only to save ONE PERSON He would be gracious, since all have sinned. But God's plan for salvation has always involved way more than one person…more than even one nation! God's plan is to save people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. And though He saves MORE than one person, He accomplishes that salvation through the righteous acts of the ONE Man - Jesus Christ. Through His one death He offers salvation to all who believe in Him. This is amazing grace!

In Isaiah 49, speaking of Messiah coming, God says it is "too light a thing" to simply save the descendants of Jacob (Israel). For Jesus to come to this Earth to only save the Jews would be too focused a scope. Therefore, the plan was always for the gift of salvation to be taken to all the nations of the Earth. The good news of Jesus is not just a light to Israel but to the Gentiles as well!

This is why Jesus commissioned His disciples to take the Gospel to the ends of the Earth, making disciples of all nations. World evangelism was the plan from the very start. The rescue plan that began with Abraham to Isaac to Jacob to Jesse to David and through Isaiah's prophecy, would find its full expression not only in Jesus' death and resurrection, but also in His followers (like Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13) taking this message to the rest of the world.

Jesus is a Christmas gift labeled "from God, to the world." Will you help deliver this message to all this season?

Day 18

Read Isaiah 7:1-17, Matthew 1:22-23, Luke 1:26-31

What are the "signs" that Christmastime is here? In our day, we might recognize Christmas is nigh upon us when Home Depot replaces mums with evergreens, or when December arrives, or at first snowfall. Whatever the clue, there are signs that the Advent season is beginning.

Biblically, signs were a part of the Christmas account from the very beginning, but these signs had little to do with decorations. The context of Isaiah 7 is during Israel's divided Kingdom: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. King Ahaz was leading Judah at the time, and Judah was being threatened by an alliance of Israel and Syria. Through Isaiah, God speaks to Ahaz informing him that God would protect Judah from their enemies. To provide a timeline for their salvation, God gives a sign. He says that there was a virgin who would soon marry and conceive a child (through natural means), and before this child (named Immanuel) was old enough to eat curds and honey (solid food) God would win the victory for Judah. This meant that the deliverance was certain but would not come until at least nine months and no more than three years away. And this deliverance God truly provided for Judah inside that time frame!

But, you may be protesting, "I thought Isaiah 7:14 was a prophecy about Jesus, not a prophecy about the days of King Ahaz! What gives?"

Well, the Isaiah 7:14 prophecy actually has a double fulfillment as Matthew 1:22-23 and Luke 1:26-31 tell us. In Ahaz's day, the virgin would marry and have a child through natural means, and before the child was three years old, Judah would get a temporary deliverance from their enemies. In Jesus' time, though, the virgin Mary would conceive through SUPERNATURAL means and her Child would truly be "God with us." He would win a victory over THE ENEMY that would be permanent … a victory that occurred within Jesus' lifetime.

The second fulfillment would be infinitely more powerful and significant than the first!

The virgin being with Child was a sign that Christmas and Christ's coming victory over sin were nigh upon us! God gave His people this sign so that they would not miss it.

This year, as you see the signs that Christmas is coming, don't miss the opportunity to worship Jesus and receive the salvation that He brings.

Day 19

Read Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:21-23

Do you know anyone who was born near Christmas? If so, did their parents give them a holiday-sounding name? Perhaps a young girl with a December birthday is named Holly or Grace, or a young man born at year's end might be named Chris or Manny.

Manny? Why would that be a Christmas name?

In Isaiah 7:14, the prophecy we looked at yesterday, we saw that the virgin's Child would be named Immanuel (in our day, Manny for short!). Immanuel is a Hebrew name and it means "God with us." Throughout this reading plan we have been talking about how Jesus is God and always has been. Though born in Bethlehem, Jesus has eternally existed. Because He is God, Jesus' birth led to God being with us; therefore, Immanuel is a very appropriate nickname for Jesus!

But what about the name "Jesus?" Where did that come from and what does it mean? Matthew 1:21 lets us know that it was God Himself who gave Jesus His name, as the angel told Joseph what His name would be. The name Jesus has its roots in the Hebrew name "Yeshua" (or Joshua). The name "Yeshua" means "God saves." The New Testament was written in Greek, and the Greek translation of "Yeshua" is "Iesous." The English version of this name is "Jesus."

Of course the name Jesus, meaning "God saves," is a perfect name for the Savior of the world! Put both names together, and we have Jesus' identity and work: God who came to us to be our Savior.

Is Jesus your Savior? Is He your Immanuel? Jesus is not just a good moral teacher or a famous religious figure. He is God, and He came to be our Savior. Do not simply acknowledge Jesus as interesting; instead, submit to Him as your Lord and Savior. This is who He is, and this is what He came to do.

Jesus' names tell us so much about Him and are worthy of our consideration at Christmastime and always!

Day 20

Read Micah 5:2, Matthew 2:1, Luke 2:4-6

The Old Testament has 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. We have seen a number of these prophecies over the past three weeks in this reading plan.

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 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 arrive in Matthew 2 and inquire where the Messiah was to be born, Herod's advisors quickly confirm that Bethlehem is the birth place of the King of Kings and quote today's verse, Micah 5:2. In his Gospel, Luke also confirms Bethlehem as the location of the Savior's arrival.

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 is the place that God had ordained for Jesus' birth.

Micah 5:2 continues, saying 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, the eternal Son of God, but He 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 to reconcile mankind to God.

Day 21

Read Galatians 4:4-5, Genesis 3:15

Do you often feel rushed at Christmastime? The combination of things to do, places to go, and people to see often leaves us feeling like we have to cram twelve days of Christmas into one hectic afternoon!

The Christmas rush is not unique to our day, as even in the first century, due to Caesar's Empire-wide decree that a census be taken, many were rushing about on the night Jesus was born. But despite all the activity, there is One who was absolutely ready for Christmas Day.

God the Father had been planning the timing of Christmas since the foundations of the Earth. As we have seen in this study, all the way back in Genesis 3:15, at the moment of mankind's first sin, God set the plan in motion to rescue us from sin's deadly consequence by having the seed of the woman crush the head of the snake.

Over the past three weeks we have seen much of what God has done to prepare the world for Jesus' arrival. Through the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God promised that blessing would come through the sacrifice He would provide to reconcile man to God. Through the words of the prophets, hope and anticipation continued to grow for the arrival of Messiah. Finally, after all of these preparations, at the perfect moment, the Father's plan was fully implemented. In the words of Galatians 4, in "the fullness of time" and right on schedule, God sent forth His Son.

And what would Jesus' birth lead to? It would lead to the redemption of those who trust Him. Even more, the redeemed are adopted as children of God, heirs of the promises first given to Abraham so long ago.

As you rush about this Christmas and hurry to implement your plans for the holidays, remember God the Father's plan has always been right on schedule. In the fullness of time, Jesus came for you and for me!

Day 22

Read Luke 2:1-12, Hebrews 4:15-16

After Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph placed Him in a manger (an animal's feeding trough). This reality is sung about in the song "Away in a Manger." This fact is commonplace to us since the Christmas story is so familiar. However, have you ever stopped to wonder WHY Jesus was placed in a manger that first Christmas day?

While certainly the repurposed manger symbolizes the humility of Jesus, Luke 2:12 gives us another reason for the trough. The shepherds are invited to visit Jesus and identify Him by the manger crib. In others words, there were other babies in Bethlehem that night, but only one was wrapped in cloth and lying in an animal's feeding trough. That One was Jesus.

Since every Jewish mom would wrap their child in cloths, it was the manger that highlighted Jesus' identity as the Son of God. 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.

Jesus must have LOOKED like a normal child. He was not glowing in holiness. He was not talking in perfect language (He was cooing and crying like a baby). Everything about Jesus looked normal, so the angels could not identify Jesus to the shepherds through His physical appearance. Instead, they described the bed He lay in.

Friends, this simple point helps remind us that the Son of God really did become the Son of Man. Jesus really did become fully human, including appearing and sounding like a typical infant. This reminds us that we have a High Priest who can relate to us. Jesus knows what it means to live a normal human life, as He experienced it in every way, except that He did not sin. Therefore, He can help us and forgive us as we deal with the sin in our own lives as well!

As you 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.

The Eternal One lying in a manger: come behold the wondrous mystery!

Day 23

Read Luke 2:8-20, 1 Peter 1:8-9

On the first Christmas night angels appeared in the sky declaring to the shepherds "Glory to God in the highest!" For the shepherds, this was a unique event they had never experienced. The angels told the shepherds to go to Bethlehem and see a baby which was the Savior of the world.

The shepherds went to Bethlehem probably wondering how they got an invitation and curious how long the line must be to see the newborn King. Upon arriving on the scene, however, the shepherds were probably shocked to find no line outside the stable filled with government and religious dignitaries and local celebrities. Instead, the location was common and lowly. As they approached the baby in the manger, no halo circled His head, and the child looked quite normal. There was a disparity between what they saw and what they had expected, so the shepherds were placed in a spot that is very familiar to us … they were being asked to take God at His Word.

The shepherds never heard Jesus preach, never saw Him work miracles, and never witnessed Him risen from the dead. They had an angel declaration, but there were many facts of the story that they did not have. Based on what they knew, they were asked to take God at His Word and in faith trust Him with the rest.

Today, we have record of His preaching, miracles, and resurrection, plus the testimony of church history and historical evidence. But, we have never seen Jesus face to face, and angels have not visited us on hillsides. Based on what we know, we are asked to take God at His Word (through the Bible) and trust Him with the rest.

The Apostle Peter wrote a letter to people who had the testimony of eye-witnesses and the Scripture but who had not physically seen Jesus. To this group, including us, Peter writes in 1 Peter 1:8-9 that when we believe in Jesus based on what we know (but have not seen), we reap the same benefits that His first followers experienced, "an inexpressible joy" ("Good news of Great Joy") and "the salvation of our souls" ("a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord").

Will you believe in Him based on what you know and trust Him for the things that are harder for you to understand?

Day 24

Read Matthew 2:1-12, Numbers 24:17-19, Micah 5:2, Daniel 2:48

In Matthew 2, we are introduced to the Magi (or wise men) from the east. To you and me, these men belong in the Christmas story, as we have never heard it without them, but they are surprise additions given their history.

The Magi were an ancient order of star-gazers from Babylon who made a living interpreting dreams and foretelling the future. They had a poor reputation as those who would tell you what you wanted to hear as long as they could make a buck. Metaphorically, these wise guys came from afar, but their distance was even further spiritually than physically.

In God's mercy, though, the Magi made it to the manger at the end of a very long and well-thought-out divine plan:

- Fourteen hundred years before Jesus' birth, a prophecy mentions a star rising for the Messiah (Numbers 24:17-19).
- Seven hundred years before Jesus' birth, Micah prophesied the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2).
- Six hundred years before Jesus' birth, the Jews were taken captive by the Babylonians who carted away many young Jews to Babylon, including Daniel. After demonstrating his ability to interpret dreams, Daniel was promoted by Nebuchadnezzar to become the overseer of the Magi (Daniel 2:48). Daniel would have been in a position to influence this group with his understanding of Jewish prophecy, which would have included the idea that one day the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem and a star would mark his arrival.
- At the time of Jesus' birth, God sent a special star in the sky to guide the Magi from Babylon/Persia to Israel to see the newborn king (Matthew 2:1-12).

For 1,400 years, God had prepared a plan to invite those who were far off to come near and into a relationship with Himself. The night Jesus was born, the star rising in the sky made sense to the Magi because of years of divine planning.

In God's grace, those who are far are brought near to be included in God's plan. Do you feel far from God this year? Do you feel distant because of your lifestyle or reputation? Know that God invited the Magi to the manger, and He is inviting you as well. Come see the Star of Christmas: the Savior who was born for you, Christ the Lord!

To those who are far or near, Jesus is the "good news of great joy for all the people." He is our Savior, so come let us adore Him.

Day 25

Read Revelation 1:7, 21:1-22:21, John 14:1-3

Over the past twenty-five days we have been celebrating an "Old Time Christmas" by looking at the Old Testament prophecies of Jesus' birth, earthly life, and ministry. In our study we have seen how many of the prophecies of Jesus' arrival were fulfilled with His coming. That being said, there are a still a few more "presents" under the tree. In fact, some of the biggest gifts are still yet to come!

When I was growing up, my family opened presents on Christmas Eve night. After going to church as a family, we would return home to exchange presents with one another. On many Christmas mornings, however, my sister and I would find one or more extra gifts under the tree. This always added to the excitement of the big day.

In the Bible, many of the prophetically declared "gifts" of Jesus' coming (God with us, a full and final sacrifice for sin, death defeated, etc.) were opened at His first Advent. But there are other prophecies of both the Old and New Testament that have yet to occur, things like His Kingdom fully realized on the Earth, the creation of a new Heaven and a new Earth, and the drying of every tear. Did God have these on the Christmas list but end up cancelling them? Absolutely not. They are still gifts God intends to give, but they will not be fully opened until Jesus returns.

In the book of Revelation and in John's Gospel we see promises of Jesus returning to this Earth and giving these final gifts. Just as there were many, many years of preparation that went into His first coming, there is even more that is prepared for His return.

This Christmas, be encouraged! As you lay your head on the pillow tonight, there are still big gifts to open on the Final Morning of His return! May we join the refrain of the book of Revelation and say: "Amen, come Lord Jesus!"