

Call Him...

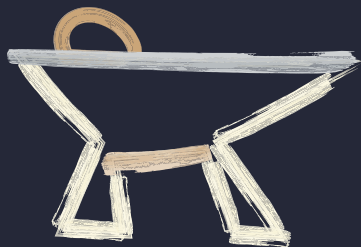
SAVIOR

IMMANUEL

MESSIAH

LORD

*Jesus*



AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

# INTRODUCTION

## INTRODUCTION

The story of redemption is woven throughout Scripture. It finds its culmination in the birth of Jesus. Matthew 1:21 tells us that “*She will bear a son and call Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sin.*”

Salem’s Advent devotional this year, *Call Him... Savior*, draws its title from this focus passage.

## THE WONDER OF ADVENT

*Call Him... Savior* is a four-week devotional that guides you through the Advent season. As you read through the devotions, allow the Holy Spirit to show you how the story of redemption is evident in all Scripture.

## STRUCTURE

This book is separated into four sections—one for each week of Advent. Each day has a main Scripture passage, devotional thought, and a prayer. We encourage you to carve out some time each day to read through the Scripture passage. You may even want to look at the verses before and after each passage to give you an idea of the context. The deeper you dig into God’s word, the more wonderful meaning you will find.

Thanks to Salem’s members and staff for their contributions to *Call Him... Savior*.

Your creativity, hard work, and love for God are evident in these pages.

May you encounter the Savior in a new, fresh, and exciting way this Christmas season.

*Week One*

## THE FIRST PROMISE OF A SAVIOR

GENESIS 3:14–15 | BY BRIAN JENNINGS

*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.*

— Genesis 3:15

**H**UMANITY HAS AN INSTINCTUAL FEAR OF SNAKES. There are a unique few who seem to enjoy being around them, but for most of us, snakes are the stuff of nightmares. This despite the fact that they kill relatively few of us – only about five people die from snake bites each year in the U.S. Perhaps it's the way they silently slither, their penetrating stare, or wicked fangs that inspires our fear. Or perhaps it goes deeper than that, to something primeval in each of us. Call it the ghost of a memory of our ancient grandparents Adam and Eve.

Genesis 3 tells the story of the fall of humanity and it's a tragic one. We lived in perfect harmony with nature, each other, and our God in the Garden of Eden. All of that ended one afternoon when a serpent showed up and, with crafty words, convinced our ancestors God was holding out on them. They took a bite of the forbidden fruit and sin, suffering, and death entered our world. Adam and Eve found themselves naked and ashamed, hiding from their creator, casting blame, and reeling from the curse. Good thing for them – and us – God loves to turn the worst of situations into the greatest of victories. In the midst of the curse to the serpent, a promise is embedded in verse 15. There is going to be perpetual conflict between humanity and the serpent. Evil and all its fruits will reign on this broken world, but one day it will come to an end. On that day, the serpent will bruise the heel of the offspring of the women, but this offspring will crush the head of the serpent.

God was setting into motion a plan to put an end to the evil, suffering, and death our sin brought into the world with one crushing blow. The serpent would strike with a torturous wooden cross, but our Savior would strike back with glorious empty grave. This Savior would be the offspring of a woman, a woman named Mary giving birth to him in a stable in Bethlehem. This child had been destined since the creation of the world to crush evil and all its offspring once and for all.

### Prayer

*Father, thank you for how you use even our mistakes and failures to bring about your good plans for us. This Christmas, help me see the big picture of your plan to set us free from sin, suffering, and death through the offspring of the woman – Jesus – and how I fit into it.*

*Amen*

## THE BLOODLINE & THE BLESSING

GENESIS 12:1-4 | BY EMILY JENNINGS

*And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. — Genesis 12:2*

**T**HE RELIEF OF GOD'S PROMISE TO CRUSH EVIL WAS SHORT-LIVED. The world was pressed with dissent and death. Instead of glad submission to God, Adam and Eve's descendants persisted in rejecting Him. Rather than bowing to the God of Heaven, mankind built a tower *to* Heaven, begging the world to worship *them*. Their subsequent dispersion seemed another hopeless blow to the life God wanted for his people.

Yet, in the throes of man's rebellion, God spoke to Abram. Abram was just another son in Noah's bloodline until God's voice came to him uninvited and clear. God told Abram to leave the three deepest wells of a person's comfort and identity: his house, his family, and hometown. If he obeyed, Abram would receive hoards of children and a great name.

At first, there's an attractiveness to this transactional obedience: *obeying God yields reward*. However, these rewards were not for Abram's personal storehouse...they were to be leveraged for *others*.

The early prophecy of Satan's defeat was advanced when God called Abram to leave kindred and country. But *how*? What was this blessing and how would all the families of the earth receive it?

After he obeyed, Abram's barren wife gave birth and made him father of Israel. Israel was God's chosen race with exclusive claim on Yahweh as God. Access to Him was gained only by Abram's bloodline. The Old Testament is teeming with genealogies, proving Israelite heritage. However, Scripture's final two genealogies are in the New Testament.

Matthew opens with: "*The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham (Matt. 1:1).*" The death of Abram (later Abraham) is recorded in Genesis 25. Yet, generations later, in the first verse of the first Gospel, here he is. Why did Matthew drag readers through a tedious family tree? Because Jesus' name in Abraham's family tree is God making good on His promise in Genesis 12. The blessing had arrived.

When God scattered Babel's builders to the ends of the earth in Genesis 11, He already had a plan to bring them home. Jesus' placement in Abraham's family tree is God calling out to *all* the scattered, Israelite *and* Gentile.

No one is blessed because they are Abraham's relative, but everyone can be blessed because of Christ. Jesus – His coming, living, dying, resurrection, and saving – is the blessing God promised the world through Abraham.

Why are Matthew and Luke's family trees the *very* last ones? After Christ's birth, genealogies were irrelevant. Jesus' blood, not a bloodline, determines someone's status before God. He is our Messiah, our Savior, and the promised Blessing.

### Prayer

*Father, thank you for grafting me into your family tree through Christ's blood. This Christmas, move me to leverage the tangible blessings in my life for the families who remain scattered outside Your family and need the blessing of Christ*

*Amen*

## THE PASSOVER LAMB

EXODUS 12:1–32 | BY JAMIE HYDEN

*For the Lord will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the Lord will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you. — Exodus 12:23*

**M**ANY THINGS COME TO MIND AS WE THINK OF CHRISTMAS: the season of Advent; the season of preparation; the season of Christmas. For some, perhaps mainly children (and me, the big kid), it is anticipation about those wrapped presents under the tree. For some, it is anxiety over the busyness of the holiday season. For some, it is the thought of trees, lights, wrapping paper, bows, seeing family, and perhaps some time off work. For others this season reminds them of the losses of the last year or from past years, of the one with whom they will no longer celebrate. Hopefully for all of us, this season causes us to think on the wonderful truth of that Babe, King, Savior, and Friend born in a manger.

How often do you think about blood on Christmas? **I am certainly not trying to be morbid or gross (as one of my daughters would say).** It is likely that few of us think about blood during this wonderful season, but perhaps we should. Today's text is the account of the first Passover. God had done miraculous things through Moses by sending nine horrible plagues on the hard-hearted Pharaoh of Egypt who refused to let God's people go. And then one more act of God: on a specific night God sent the death angel and every firstborn child and beast in Egypt died that night... unless the sign of protection was seen by God. This sign of protection was the blood of a lamb spread on the door post of a house. When God saw that blood on the post, He would not allow the death angel to enter that home.

What I love about this story is that it did not matter who you were or were not – Israelite or Egyptian. It did not matter what you had done or not done. It did not matter how old or young, male or female. It did not matter if you were a God follower or an idol worshipper – if you were in a home with blood on the door, God saw what *the blood made you: protected!* ***If Pharaoh's family had lived in a house with blood on the door, his family would have been saved.***

And here we are at Advent, thinking of that precious baby Jesus lying in a manger and knowing that He did not stay a baby, knowing that He came once and is coming again. But also knowing that He was the only King *born to die and that the blood He shed STILL protects us from the deserved anger of God toward our sins.* Who you are or who you are not; your failures or your successes; your money or lack thereof, doesn't matter! All that matters is your response to the blood of Jesus shed for us. Nothing we have done can overcome the power of His blood! And one day, soon, we will finally get to look into the eyes of that Lamb who protected us and set us free!

### Prayer

*Father, thank you for the blood that Jesus shed for me.*

*Amen*

## A PERFECT PROMISE FOR A BROKEN PEOPLE

2 SAMUEL 7:12-13 | BY PETER THOMPSON

*He shall build a house for my name,  
and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. — 2 Samuel 7:13*

**I**N TODAY'S PASSAGE, KING DAVID HAS JUST ASKED TO BUILD a permanent temple for God and God has just told him no. As part of that refusal, however, David received an amazing promise from God known as the Davidic Covenant. In this covenant, God promises David that his son will be king, his son will build the temple where God's presence dwells, and his family dynasty will rule forever. And these are unconditional promises! They have nothing to do with David's obedience but everything to do with God's faithfulness. God rejects David's plan, only to replace it with the promise of an even greater legacy.

But God's grace is even more incredible. David didn't know it yet, but this covenant found its fulfillment in his son Solomon. Solomon, the son of Bathsheba, born after David shirked his military responsibilities, committed adultery with Bathsheba, and murdered one of his trusted friends, was the one God chose to continue the rule of Israel and build the temple. Even before David sinned, God already had a plan to redeem.

The Davidic Covenant has three main parts. David's son Solomon succeeded him as king, something not seen with the previous King Saul. Solomon did indeed build a beautiful temple for God. And though the nation of Israel split, David had a descendant on the throne of the kingdom of Judah, but what about when Judah was overthrown? What about today?

The Davidic Covenant finds its ultimate fulfillment in King Jesus. Jesus, the Son of David, is the promised Messiah, the king who will rule forever. Through Him, God's kingdom is established in the church, where God dwells with His people. Here's the most beautiful thing: God's plan for redemption through Jesus was enacted even before creation (1 Peter 1:18-20). Before Adam and Eve ate the fruit, before Abraham lied to Pharaoh, before Moses hit the rock, before Solomon built altars for idols, before Jonah ran away, before Peter disowned Him, and before Paul persecuted Him, salvation through Jesus was always the plan. Before you lied to your teachers, before you disobeyed your parents, before you gossiped, and before you cheated on your spouse, Jesus was ready and willing to save and redeem you. What kind of God would do this? One who loves you and I more than we can fathom.

### Prayer

*Most gracious God, you are awesome and your plans are perfect. I confess that I fail to obey you and trust you completely. And you chose me in spite of all my failures. Thank you for keeping your promise to send Christ Jesus to redeem me. Thank you for your mercy and grace. And fill me with your Spirit that I may proclaim your redemptive work in all I think, say and do. In Jesus' name,*

*Amen*

## MY REDEEMER LIVES

JOB 19:23-27 | BY JEFF OLDS

*For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth.  
— Job 19:25*

**T**HE PASSAGE FOR TODAY'S ADVENT THOUGHT IS JOB 19:23-27.

Job's declaration "For I know that my Redeemer lives" is an incredible statement! In it, Job expressed his confidence and certainty that the Lord would act on his behalf. Job knew that his Redeemer lives and that he would rescue him from the crisis, despair, and all the accusations set against him. He was certain his Redeemer would act.

We have this same confidence!

Jesus, our Redeemer, acted by entering this world as a baby. He set in motion the Father's plan for the redemption of mankind by coming to Earth. He lived a perfect life, died on the cross, was buried, rose on the third day, and reigns with the Father in heaven. The incarnation of Christ is the fulfillment of the confidence Job expressed in Job 19:25 and is the hope we celebrate this Advent season. Christ's action rescues us from the crisis, despair, and all the accusations set against us!

Christ brings us life!

During this Advent season may we rejoice in the life that our Redeemer brings us.

### Prayer

*Father, please help me to allow Christ, the Redeemer, to rescue me from all the crises, despair, and accusations I may be experiencing this Advent season. May I rest in the confidence of the Redeemer's accomplished work.*

*Amen*



### COMFORT FOR A WEARY WORLD

ISAIAH 7:14 | BY TAMMY PRESSLEY

*Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a Son, and will call Him Immanuel. — Isaiah 7:14*

**D**URING THE TIME OF ISAIAH, THE NATION OF ISRAEL HAD TURNED ITS BACK ON GOD. The prophet gave a stern warning of coming judgment and called for repentance. Despite His people's persistent unbelief and idolatry, God sent a message of hope to Israel: a virgin would conceive and give birth to their Savior, who would be called Immanuel, God with us.

That message and promise is still true today—God is with us. But as true and good as that promise is, we still struggle to trust it sometimes, don't we? How do we know God is truly with us? How do we trust God when everything around us falls apart?

That was the problem King Ahaz and the people of Israel were dealing with in this passage. It's not a new struggle at all. But, what's so good is that God doesn't just say, "Trust Me." He certainly didn't have to do anything else, but God is not only faithful, He is gracious. He doesn't just proclaim He's with us, He shows us.

The ultimate display of God's faithfulness was the fulfillment of the message Isaiah proclaimed. Fast forward to Luke 2, where we see that ultimately, God Himself came to rescue His people in the form of a Son born to a virgin.

God doesn't want us to trust blindly that He is with us. He has proven that in Jesus, and all we have to do is look to Him. In all circumstances, no matter what we go through, no matter how chaotic and difficult life may be, the faithfulness of God has been proven once and for all. He will not abandon you; He will not leave you; He is with you.

The presence of God at Christmas is the best present we can receive.

#### Prayer

*Lord, thank You being Immanuel, God with us. May we remember that You walk this road of life with us each day and be grateful for that promise.*

*Amen*

## A SAVIOR TO BE BORN

ISAIAH 9:1-7 | BY KASEY COOPER

*For a Child will be born to us, and the government will be upon His shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. The dominion will be vast, and its prosperity will never end. He will reign ... with justice and righteousness from now on and forever... — Isaiah 9:6-7*

**I**T DOESN'T TAKE LONG BEFORE A CHILD BECOMES AWARE that there is wrong in the world. For most of us, as we grow, that darkness becomes all too real in our own lives and manifests itself as sin that we ourselves struggle with or sin done against us.

God has built into our human DNA a yearning for hope. Many of us have tried to fill this void by pursuing relationships in an ungodly way, giving into temptations, or judging others in a hopeless attempt to make ourselves feel better. Others have tried more socially acceptable ways to fill that void by doing all the right things, going to church, serving on committees, giving everything to a career, or people pleasing. We search for it in all the wrong places and are left more desperate than before because nothing in this world can truly give us the hope we seek. We suffer in our fallen world under the oppressive yoke of sin.

While we were trapped in our sin, God sent His Son as a humble Servant. He crushed the Enemy. He conquered death. “For you have shattered their oppressive yoke and the rod on their shoulders...” (v.4). He is a God of justice that cares for the orphan and widow and does not allow evil to escape its consequences. He is a God of mercy that offers redemption to the one who runs to Him as a little child to their Father. He is a God that reigns sovereign over the pain, the suffering, the disease, and the grief that we experience today. Jesus knows our pain intimately because He was the One born to a teenage couple on a busy night in Bethlehem and placed in a manger. He was the One who walked among mankind and knows our struggles because He experienced them too.

We have hope in Him because we know He wins. At the name of Jesus, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. He loves us and desires a relationship with us as His beloved children. He pursues us with a promise of hope and an eternal purpose.

### Prayer

*Lord, I have known darkness. I have seen the ramifications of sin in my life and others' lives. I need more than what this world can offer. I need you. God help me to place my hope in You alone.*

*Amen*

*Week Two*

# THE RIGHTEOUS REIGN OF THE BRANCH

ISAIAH 11:1–10 | BY JESSICA CORRELL

*There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. — Isaiah 11:1–2*

**I**N THE DESTRUCTION OF A VAST FOREST from chapter 10, Isaiah gives a poignant description of God's judgment on sinful Israel.

Here in chapter 11 he continues to use the same imagery in a Branch growing from what remains of that felled forest of cedars. The stump of Jesse, the preserved remnant of the house of king David; and growing out of that stump, the hope of the world, the promised Messiah.

Despite the condition of humanity, dead in sin, the Branch springs forth. He will bear much fruit and be filled with the threefold fullness of the Spirit. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. Unlike our earthly leaders, Jesus will not be deceived by appearances, but he shall rule in ultimate righteousness.

The coming King will not only restore social justice, but by His power, all nature will be transformed and the world will be restored to paradise by the full and glorious knowledge of the Lord. During this season of advent, let us look toward this promise, and to our ultimate hope, a world governed by the Prince of Peace.

## Prayer

*Father, thank you for keeping your promises. Help me to look forward to the reign of the coming King, and to have hope in the transforming power of the knowledge of the Lord.*

*Amen*

## NOT THE MESSIAH THEY EXPECTED

ISAIAH 42:1-4 | BY JEFF FISHER

*Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations — Isaiah 42:1*

**SOME PASSAGES UNDERScore MESSIAH AS A DELIVERER, KING OR SUFFERING SERVANT.** Today's passage reminds us that God's Chosen will have a heart for people who had been damaged and downtrodden with life.

Let's do a mini-bible study. Take a moment to read today's passage 2 or 3 times. Write down your thoughts or circle key phrases that jump out before you read on.

It's not hard to miss the phrase "My Servant" and know that this is the Messiah. God would send One who would bring justice, but not in a manner most would expect:

- He would "not cry out or raise His voice".
- He would not break "bruised reeds".
- He would not snuff out a "dimly burning wick".

OK... what does this mean? Could someone speak in modern English, please?

God's Messiah would not be a flamboyant, attention-grabber. He would not come with a political, military or business agenda. He would not plow through others to get to the top of the status ladder. Instead, He would bring his strength and justice in a gentle, loving, controlled, determined way. He would have a special heart for hurting people.

Do **YOU** ever feel...

- Ignored by those who are above you and neglected?
- Wounded, or "bruised" by life?
- Tapped out or losing hope like your "wick" is burning dimly?

The Messiah would come with a special heart toward struggling people. He would not ignore hurting individuals who were struggling to get by.

The Gospel writer Matthew saw Jesus as the fulfillment of this passage in his gospel. Jesus pushes past the religious legalism of the time and heals a man on the Sabbath. Read **Matthew 12:8-21** and see what the author is trying to say by looking back at Isaiah 42. The Messiah was unfolding in front of their eyes in unexpected ways.

**Isaiah 42** – A different Messiah will be coming.

**Matthew 12** – A different Messiah was emerging, live, right on front of them, and the prophecies of the past were starting to become clear.

**December 2022** – What is God bringing to light in your own heart? Jesus the Messiah is different than any others. Take some time today to seek Him.

### Prayer

*God, please continue to reveal Your Servant to us and His heart for us.*

*Amen*

# SUFFERING SERVANT

ISAIAH 53 | BY BETTY EVANS

*Surely he has borne our griefs  
and carried our sorrows;  
yet we esteemed him stricken,  
smitten by God, and afflicted.*  
— Isaiah 53:4

**O**VER THE YEARS I HAVE SUFFERED WITH PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL PAIN, grieved the loss of loved ones and continued to learn the value of growing while suffering. Looking at the suffering surrounding us today, we seek to understand and yet we cannot. This chapter in Isaiah continues to speak of the Messiah who will come and suffer for the sins of all people. Being amazed at how God would plan to save the world by a humble, suffering servant rather than a glorious king, we see more clearly the wonder and majesty of God's love for all people and His plans being greater than we understand.

Trusting and believing in His plan gives us strength shown through the Messiah by his humility, suffering and mercy. God's plan through the Messiah would result in making forgiveness available to all mankind. The plan would give believers strength through the Messiah, a visual of God's welcoming us to His family, forgiveness for all our sins and a love that passes all understanding.

Many times I wanted to push pain away, deny I had pain or refuse to see the greater picture God had planned for me. Reading Isaiah 53 and being aware of Jesus' life, my heart opens to see more of God's working to bring all people to Him.

To God be the Glory.

## Prayer

*Father, as time has evolved and we see your plan unfolding here on earth, we thank you and praise you for you are God, our creator. Help us each day to believe and trust your plan. For sending Jesus to us, for His serving in a humble way and for His suffering on the cross to die for our sins, we lift our praises. Help us to love others, to seek you daily and to be the person you want us to be.*

*Amen*

## JESUS' MINISTRY

ISAIAH 61:1-3 | BY BETTY EVANS

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor;  
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn;  
to grant to those who mourn in Zion—  
to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;  
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,  
the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified..*

— Isaiah 61:1-3

**SOME OF THESE WORDS WRITTEN IN ISAIAH** were quoted by Jesus in Luke 4:18, 19. In Luke 4:21 Jesus said, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s words spoken through Isaiah and a gift to each of us providing us with love, grace and mercy. Believe Jesus is God’s gift planting His Spirit within us to display His splendor. He comforts us and gives us strength, peace and love for all the challenges life throws our way.

### Prayer

*Lord, today I thank you for your Word giving hope and showing us your plan. I will believe in Jesus live a life shining your light to others each day. May you receive the honor and glory.*

*Amen*

## THE ORACLE OF THE TWO ADVENTS

MICAH 5:2-5a | BY GREG OWEN

*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved. — Acts 4:12*

**P**ROPHETS ARE AWESOME, WELL, AT LEAST I THINK THEY ARE. This random guy from a rural village in Judah gets to hear from God and makes a prediction with pinpoint accuracy approximately 700-750 years before it comes true. How cool is that? I can't predict what will happen tomorrow, much less 700 years from now. Micah tells us that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem Ephrathah.

Guess what? He was.

Micah was able to “see” the two advents of Christ – His human birth (v. 2) and His second coming (vv. 3-4). In verse 2 Micah says, *"But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days."*

Here, Micah tells us where the Messiah will be born (the little town of Bethlehem), and he also tells us that He's been around since the beginning. Jesus the Messiah has been around since the beginning of time, yet He came to earth to live as a human being to save us (me and you, yes you!) from our sins.

Then, in verses 3-5a Micah says, *"Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall be their peace."*

In these few verses Micah tells us that the Messiah will deliver His flock from tribulation and that they will be secure forevermore because His greatness is over all the earth. Then, in verse 5a, Micah tells us that Jesus is our peace – we have no reason to worry, be afraid, be anxious or any other related synonyms because Jesus is our peace. We can rest in Him.

As we celebrate this season of Advent, let's keep our focus on Christ and remember that He came from a small town to save us, He will be there at the end for all believers, and that He is our peace. During the craziness that can envelop this season, we have reason to be at peace amongst everything because of Jesus.

### Prayer

*Dear Lord, we thank You for sending your son Jesus from a humble town to save us and rescue us forever because your greatness extends to the ends of the earth.*

*Amen*



## GOD'S MERCY AND FAITHFULNESS

MICAH 7:18–20 | BY LARRY GREEN

*You will be true to Jacob, and show mercy to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our fathers in days long ago.” — Micah 7:20*

**I**N THE WESTERN PACIFIC OCEAN, NEAR THE ISLAND OF GUAM, lies the Challenger Deep, an undersea canyon that is the deepest known place on Earth. At more than 35,000 feet, it's so deep that it could swallow up Mount Everest, the tallest mountain in the world, and the peak of that mountain would still be more than a mile under water.

Even so, its depth doesn't compare with the separation between us and our sins forgiven by God: "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12).

The prophet Micah's own name announces the incomparable nature of God – it means "Who is like the Lord?" And of course, there is none. In view of the many provocations and backslidings of the people over the centuries, Micah was filled with wonder by God's mercy: "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of His inheritance. You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy." (Micah 7:18) He delights to "have compassion on us", to "tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea." (Micah 7:19) He doesn't just drop them gently into a shallow pond, where they are barely concealed and from which they might re-emerge, but forcefully hurls them into the abyss!

And he knows that God will be faithful to his promise: "You will be true to Jacob, and show mercy to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our fathers in days long ago." (Micah 7:20)

At least as far back as Jacob (Genesis 49), God had promised their fathers that He would send a redeemer, a messiah. He demonstrated His great love and made good on that promise when His Son was born in Bethlehem some 2000 years ago.

### Prayer

*Heavenly Father, we stand in awe before your glorious majesty. As we look forward to our celebration of the Savior's coming in human form, we praise you for your mercy and forgiveness, and we say with Micah, "Who is like the Lord!"*

*Amen*

## HOPE RESTORED

ZEPHANIAH 3:17-20 | BY TERESA CRAWFORD

*The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save;  
he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will quiet you by his love;  
he will exult over you with loud singing. — Zephaniah 3:17*

**SIN. CALAMITY. STRUGGLES. REBELLION. DARKNESS.**

This was the state of Israel when Zephaniah wrote his short letter. Zephaniah's words are depressing. God was not happy with his people. They disobeyed his laws and worshiped idols. Zephaniah warned the people that their sin would certainly bring God's judgement.

We often feel as Zephaniah did. We disobey God and worship idols of all types in our modern world. We too have struggles, disease, rebellion, and the darkness of sin looming on every corner.

But God... God showered His people with a ray of hope in Zephaniah 3:17-20. The kind of hope no one can take away from you. The kind of hope we cling to in the darkest of hours. You know those dark hours. That terminal cancer diagnosis. That financial collapse. That rebellious teen. You get the picture. Hope is bigger than our sin and struggles, mightier than disease and rebellion. Hope is in our God.

The Lord is in your midst

The Lord is the mighty one who saves.

The Lord rejoices over you.

The Lord will SING over you.

Charles Surgeon once said: *"If God sings, shall not we sing? He did not sing when he made the world. No; he looked upon it, and simply said that it was good. The angels sang, the sons of God shouted for joy: creation was very wonderful to them, but it was not much to God, who could have made thousands of worlds by his mere will. Creation could not make him sing... When all was done, and the Lord saw what became of it in the salvation of his redeemed, then he rejoiced after a divine manner."* (Spurgeon)

Can you imagine the Lord singing over you? In spite of "all of your junk", the Lord of the universe sings because of the "salvation of his redeemed". Doesn't that thought make you want to shout?

God brought HOPE to the world in the form of a tiny baby so long ago. God knew we needed a Savior. Have you discovered that Hope through Jesus? If not, are you ready now to rest in Him? If you know that Hope, will you share it with others this Christmas? A whole world is waiting to hear the good news. Hope is here!

## Prayer

*Thank you for your unfailing love for me. Lord, because of your love for me, you sent Jesus to suffer, die, and rise again on my behalf. May I never lose sight of the seriousness of my sin and your overwhelming desire to know me and to "sing over me" as one of your redeemed. May I be a light and share your love with others.*

*Amen*

*Week Three*

# REJOICE, HE IS COMING!

ZECHARIAH 9:9–13 | BY PETER THOMPSON

*Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope;  
today I declare that I will restore to you double. — Zechariah 9:9–13*

**I HAVE MANY FOND MEMORIES OF CHRISTMAS**, especially as a young child. No matter how the year is going, no matter how stressful life feels, how disappointing the year has been, or what relationships are strained, Christmas beckons as a guaranteed break. No school, no tests, no homework. Time off of work. Presents and feasting to, if only temporarily, distract from the pains of stressed or broken relationships.

To the Jews of his day, I expect Zechariah's words brought a similar feeling: a coming break from their stresses. They'd been through a painful exile, and while they were blessed to return to the Promised Land, they were now struggling to rebuild what had been lost. But on the horizon was the savior-king, the Messiah. Coming in peace (*v. 10*). Coming with victory (*v. 13*). A King to restore God's people and bring a break from the struggle.

The Jews had to wait over 500 years from the time of Zechariah's prophecy for it to be at least partially fulfilled. We celebrate the Messiah's first coming at Christmas, the Incarnation. And, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, the week before His crucifixion and resurrection, He fulfilled, in-part, Zechariah's prophecy, riding in on a colt (Matthew 21:1-5). And the people rejoiced at His coming! Here was the Messiah, the King, coming with salvation for His people! The virgin birth, Christ's ministry, all led to this moment of a fulfilled promise. Surely the wait had been worth it.

And yet, by the end of that week, the Jews had no new earthly ruler, no freedom from the Romans, no worldwide peace or earthly kingdom resembling the one described in verse 10. Instead, the kingdom was different, not of this world (John 18:36). In His first coming, Jesus brought salvation from sin, not political salvation. He brought us peace with God, not an earthly, political peace, all through "the blood of [His] covenant with [us]" (*v. 11*), shed by Christ on the cross. And while this means that we need to continue to wait expectantly for the complete fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy, we have confidence that our Savior-King is coming back (Acts 1:11).

So rejoice! Our King is returning. In His first coming, He brought salvation from sin and established a spiritual kingdom of which we are a part. In His second coming, He will bring salvation from pain, from strife, from heartache. He will establish a permanent, lasting peace! He will fully restore us, double (*v. 12*). Rejoice!

## Prayer

*King Jesus, I look to you expectantly, awaiting your coming. Give me a spirit of hope and joy as I await your return. Protect me from the temptation to focus on the struggles of this life, dwelling on past failures, and despairing at the consequences of sin. Instead, turn my heart and my gaze to you. Help me to rejoice in all you have done for me and for your people. Fill me with a desire to serve you, to build your kingdom, and to proclaim your salvation to all! Come, King Jesus, come!*

*Amen*

## JESUS RULES FOREVER

DANIEL 7:13-14 | BY CRAIG HARDEE

*And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom,  
that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him;  
his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away,  
and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.*

— Daniel 7:14

**“JESUS WINS IN THE END”** – That was a phrase that was uttered by us as we did a study of the Book of Revelation. It was a source of assurance to us as we worked our way through the book.

It should be a source of assurance for us as we live our lives. Not only is God always with us, but Jesus will rule forever!

The story is told of a missionary who was coming home from the field. This was during the time when the only mode of travel from overseas was by ship.

There was a celebrity on board the ship, so when the ship docked, there was a large crowd yelling, screaming and holding up posters for the celebrity. If this was today, I'm sure the social media outlets would be buzzing about the return of the celebrity.

The missionary scanned the faces of the crowd, hoping that someone was there for him. He kept watching, and even after the crowd thinned out, there was no one there for him. But he knew that God was with him, and that God would reign forever.

In our passage for today, Daniel was in the midst of having a vision. Toward the end of the vision, he “saw” the Son of Man (Jesus) being presented to the “Ancient of Days.”

In the second part of Daniel 7:14, it says: “His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”

Daniel's vision gives us the calm assurance that no matter how bad it gets, even if it seems that all is lost, Jesus will win in the end and will rule forever.

As the great composer Handel writes, “And He shall reign forever and ever.”

While celebrating the birth of Jesus during this season, let's also celebrate the victory of Jesus in the end.

### Prayer

*Thank you for the assurance that Jesus will rule forever. Help us to be able to grab hold of that truth when things are good or bad.*

*Amen*

# JESUS BECOMES OUR SACRIFICE

HEBREWS 10:5-10 | BY CRAIG HARDEE

*YAnd by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. — Hebrews 10:10*

**I**MAGINE FOR A MINUTE WHAT OUR LIVES WOULD BE LIKE if Jesus had not come to earth, suffered and died, then arose in victory over the grave.

Our church life would be very different, because we would constantly have to offer sacrifices to God, sacrifices that wouldn't last. So we'd have to offer them again and again.

There would be various animals all over the place, and we'd have to keep them under control before we sacrificed them.

Then there's the problem of where you get the animals. Do we raise them ourselves or buy them on the way to church or at church? Our church would become a marketplace for animals, and some folks would make their living selling animals on the church grounds.

Our pastors and deacons would have to work hard to control the chaos and deal with the problems that would ensue, leaving less time for other vital ministry tasks.

Fortunately, we don't have to deal with all that because of Jesus.

Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice, not just for us to have an easier time at church, but that we might have eternal life with Him in heaven.

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus during this season, we need to keep in mind His sacrifice. Jesus' birth is the beginning of the process that ends with Jesus making His sacrifice for us. Hebrews 10:10 reads: "We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."

We've all heard the phrase "Jesus is the Reason for the Season" and it's great one, but perhaps we need to think about the phrase "Jesus made the sacrifice for us all that we might have eternal life."

## Prayer

*Thank you Lord for sending Jesus that we might have eternal life. As we celebrate Jesus' birth during this season, help us to focus on His entire life here on earth and to be thankful for the sacrifice He made for all of us.*

*Amen*

## THE BEST THING IN LIFE IS FREE

PSALM 146: 3, 6-10 | BY DARYL HYDEN

*The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, to all generations. Praise the Lord!*  
— Psalm 146:10

**G**ROWING UP, I SPENT A LOT OF TIME WITH MY GRANDPARENTS. And by ‘a lot’, I mean that at least every weekend, summer trips to the mountains, visiting church folks — were all spent with them. One of my favorite things to do on the weekends was to watch television with my granddaddy; and on Saturday nights that meant only one thing: Walker Texas Ranger. In my little mind, I knew that Walker could beat up on the bad guys and protect the good guys. So in my eyes, Walker was powerful.

What a joy to know that true power doesn’t come from being famous, being wealthy, or having superhuman strength.

God is the true definition of power — He had the power to create the sun, moon and stars. The power to create humankind and the world around us. He has the power to rescue the wandering, feed the hungry, heal the suffering. His power brings rest, reconciliation, and restoration.

The Christmas season is now in full swing! I’m sure we are all pretty busy with all of the Christmas things. We’re stringing lights, baking cookies, preparing to receive family, listening to Christmas music, and purchasing just the right gifts for others. All of these things are exciting, festive, and fun.

Christmas is not just a time to enjoy making memories with our families, but a time to pause and reflect and remember how precious and humbling it is to know that the God who is powerful enough to do all those big things, cares so much about us and our little things. How wonderful He is for giving us the free gift of His Son, Jesus.

### Prayer

*Heavenly Father, thank You for creating us, for loving us, and giving us the things that we need. But most of all, thank You for giving us Your Son. In Jesus’ name,*

*Amen*

# YET THOUGH YOU SLAY ME... I SHALL REJOICE

HABAKKUK 3:17-19 | BY ANDREW OSBORNE

*Yet I will rejoice in the Lord;  
I will take joy in the God of my salvation. — Habakkuk 3:18*

**I**F THERE IS ONE THING GOD HAS FOCUSED ON teaching me over the past few years it has been to rejoice in the Lord, regardless of whatever else is happening.

Though the fig tree shall not blossom... though no fruit be on the vine... though inflation run rampant... though my stocks may plummet... though my health may fail... though this world may send every evil and difficulty it has my way...

Yet I will rejoice.

If you can agree with that wholeheartedly, then praise the Lord! For myself, I know what it is like to be a Christian who has no such joy. Who doesn't feel like rejoicing. For many years of my life I've felt the joy we talk about in church wasn't in my life.

If that is you today, then there is hope for you! We are called to walk in the joy of the Lord, that is God's will for your life! For me, that joy was blocked until I came to a place where I genuinely depended on God for everything, and stopped trying to control my own life. For others it may be a pattern of sinful behavior that is blocking that joy, or a general apathy towards God, or something else.

If that is you, know that God is calling you to Him. Pray, seek the scriptures, talk to a Christian friend or a pastor... find out what is blocking your joy. Don't miss this in your life, like I did for so long! Don't wait for life to get better... it wasn't until one of the darkest days of my life that I found the joy of the Lord! Our joy is not dependant on what is going on in our lives, good or bad.

For the rest of us who joyfully walk in the Lord, let us make an intentional effort during this special time of year to thank and praise God for the awesome gift of His joy in our lives.

## Prayer

*Thank you Lord, for making a way for our salvation. Without that there could be no true joy in our lives, but because of your gift to us on the cross we have an everlasting joy! I pray for everyone reading this that they may know the depth of your love for them, and so experience joy in their heart every day.*

*Amen*



## ANSWERING THE CALL

MATTHEW 1:21 | BY DENNIS COTTEN

*She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus,  
for he will save his people from their sins. — Matthew 1:21*

**T**HINK OF A TIME WHEN YOU HAVE CALLED OUT for help and how thankful you became because you heard what you needed to hear. There is one source that we can depend on to come to our rescue in times of need. We Call Him Savior.

he call of God is for everyone to heed His Word and obey it. His call is for everyone. Whether we hear Him has to do with whether we are listening. We are born with the capacity to hear Him, but we must choose to listen and respond accordingly.

Mary was called by God to give birth to a son and Joseph was called to give him the name Jesus. The name Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua, which means the Lord saves. They answered the call of the Lord.

This is the season of the year in which we give thanks for God's underserved gift of his Son to live and die for us. The word "call" has many meanings and expressions and can be used as a verb or a noun. We are called to accept the gift of salvation in accepting Jesus Christ as our personal Savior from the penalty of our sin. (John 3:16)

Jesus answered the call of God to willingly give up his life in sacrifice for our sins. This sacrifice allows for our forgiveness from God when we trust in our Savior. Now, we are able to call on Jesus as our personal Savior whenever we need him and we should appropriately respond. He saves us when we are at a loss of what we should do. He shows us the way when we are lost. He is our Savior.

Not only must we call on Jesus, we are obligated to answer his call to trust and obey the direction that we receive. In doing so, we work out our salvation in our living for Him. In doing that, we must focus on how our faith leads us to become more like Jesus as the Lord calls on us to share the Good News with others.

By answering the call of the Lord for our salvation through our faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior, we receive the most precious gift ever given. Isn't it great to receive the greatest gift that we will ever need that will last a lifetime – even eternity.

### Prayer

*Our Heavenly Father, we praise you for who you are. We call on you seeking your forgiveness of our sins. We accept the gift of salvation through the life and sacrificial death of your Son Jesus Christ. We give thanks for our ability to call on Him in our time of need in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Savior.*

*Amen*

# BLESSED TO BE HIGHLY FAVORED

LUKE 1:26-38 | BY NITA GREEN

*The angel went to her and said "Greetings, you who are highly favored!  
The Lord is with you." — Luke 1:28*

**A**FTER READING THIS PASSAGE, I wondered how Mary was “chosen” with such a high honor. Mary was probably a teenage girl with hopes and dreams like other girls she knew. But God had a special calling on her life to be the woman to bear the Son of God in her womb.

This calling wasn’t something she had planned or aspired to. And Mary couldn’t have earned her way to this calling. None of us would ever be worthy of such a calling... the human mother of the Son of God. But God’s plan is different from our plan and he provided a way in which we could become “blessed and highly favored” through His Son, Jesus Christ, who would later redeem us through His death on the cross.

Mary didn’t understand how God’s plan would unfold. She was afraid, a very human feeling. While it isn’t surprising that she asked the question, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” Her final decision is an impressive one and convicting for some of us! “May it be to me as you have said.” She put her complete trust in God and believed He would not fail her. This is a wonderful example for us to put our faith in him when we aren’t sure about God’s plan for us.

During this advent season, maybe you have a situation in your life that is difficult to bear daily and you wonder how you can move forward in obedience to God. Or maybe it is difficult to be joyful in this world during the Christmas season when we read and see so much evil. Go back to the Scripture and read what Gabriel said to Mary.

I’m so thankful we have the Holy Spirit inside us and we can talk to Him. We can and do know that Jesus is come through the virgin Mary to save us from our sins. We can rise above our circumstances and walk by faith as Mary did. And remember, as Gabriel told Mary, “Nothing is impossible with God”.

## Prayer

*Thank you for showing us that we are all sinners and are not worthy to your calling, but you loved us so much, you made a way by coming into this world as a baby and then died on the cross to save us from our sins. We ask for faith like that of Mary to say, “May it be to me as you have said.” And the words of Gabriel will be a reminder of His faithfulness, “Nothing is impossible with God.”*

*Amen*

*Week Four*

# THE BABY THAT WAS BORN TO DIE

LUKE 2:1-7 | BY SCOTT LONG

*And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. — Luke 2:7*

**E**VERY YEAR AT CHRISTMAS, PASTORS, TEACHERS, BIBLE STUDY LEADERS, AND CHRISTIANS of all persuasions open up to the book of Luke and begin to read “the Christmas story”. They look at many different aspects of these verses: highlighting the historical accuracy of these events by mentioning the dates of the census under Caesar Augustus; discussing the Biblical significance of Nazareth, Galilee, Bethlehem and Judea; focusing on the travail of the journey that needed to be taken by Mary and Joseph to make it to Bethlehem (can you imagine travelling on the back of a donkey from Raleigh to Greensboro – which is about the same distance between Nazareth and Bethlehem – all-the-while being more than 8 1/2 months pregnant?!); or even talking about the inability of the young couple to find a suitable place to stay in order to give birth to their firstborn. There are two phrases in this passage, however, that are rarely, if ever, discussed in a Christmas message, both of which are found in verse 7.

In verse 7, Luke tells us that Mary took Jesus and “wrapped him in cloths” and then “laid him in a manger”. So why are those two phrases important? Well, if we look at the end of Luke 23, nearly the same words are used again, but this time within a very different context. In that passage, Joseph of Arimathea has just gotten permission from Pilate to take the body of Jesus down from the cross. In verse 53, we are told “...and he took it [the body] down and wrapped it in a linen cloth and laid Him in a tomb...”. In both passages, Jesus is wrapped in cloth. But in chapter 2, He is laid in a manger, while in chapter 23, He is laid in a tomb!

If we consider these two passages side by side – Luke 2:7 and Luke 23:53 – we are faced with a life-changing reality that the Christian believer must embrace: Jesus was born to die! Had Jesus not died on the cross and been raised to life three days later, there would be no forgiveness of sin (1 Cor.15:17), leaving us among all people “...most to be pitied” (1 Cor.15:19).

So, while we celebrate the wonderful truth of the birth of our Savior this Christmas, let us also remember the purpose for which He came – to die for our sins “so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor.5:21).

## Prayer

*Heavenly Father, I am so grateful that Jesus was born in Bethlehem 2000 years ago! Help me celebrate that fact with all my heart, not just during Christmas but all year long. May I never forget that the reason Jesus came was to die on the cross for my sin, so that I would not be lost, without hope of forgiveness, but rather be granted the privilege of dwelling with you forever. For this, my Lord, I am truly grateful.*

*Amen*

## JESUS — THE LAMB OF GOD

LUKE 2:8-20 | BY SCOTT LONG

*And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. — Luke 2:8*

**H**AVE YOU EVER WONDERED WHY GOD WOULD CHOOSE to send His holy angels to proclaim the greatest message ever told to humanity – the reality of the birth of His One and Only Son, Jesus, for the forgiveness of all our sins – to a group of lowly shepherds out in the fields near Jerusalem? If someone was going to share a message with that kind of importance – one that will literally change the course of the world – you would think they would choose better ambassadors than shepherds.

You see, at that time, shepherds were not simply considered unreliable; they were often considered downright dishonest. Not only were they not allowed to testify in courts of Jewish law, but as one commentator said, they also had the “unfortunate habit of confusing ‘mine’ with ‘thine’ as they moved about the country.” So why choose potentially “untrustworthy” sheep herders to be the witnesses of such a significant event?

Among the numerous conceivable answers to that question, there is one possibility that I find to be both encouraging to my heart and poetic to my soul. According to the Mishnah, (a written collection of the Jewish oral traditions), small herd animals were only to be kept in the wilderness. And if any animal were found between Jerusalem and a certain area near Bethlehem, it was presumed to be an animal that would be used as a sacrifice in the temple. Given the area outside of Jerusalem in which the shepherds were “keeping watch over their flock” (vs.8), it is likely that they were pasturing sheep which were destined for temple sacrifice.

Perhaps it might be a bit of sanctified imagination on our part, but is it not possible that in proclaiming the birth of His Son, who would one day be known as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (Jn.1:29), God was telling the shepherds, in effect, “I know you are tending the sheep whose blood is meant to *temporarily* cover people’s sins, but on this night, I am providing the **FINAL sacrifice** – a sacrifice which will *forever wash away* the sins of all who come to me in repentance!”?

Certainly, the shepherds did not completely understand the full significance of the message about the child born that night, which they had hurried to see (vs.16). They knew he would be a “savior” and would be called “Christ the Lord”, but they likely had no idea regarding all the implications of what those words really meant. *But we do!* Jesus came to forgive us of all our sins and to bring us back into right relationship with the God of the universe. And for this, we too can proclaim with the angels from that night, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!”

### Prayer

*Thank you, Father God, for providing the only sacrifice for sin that I will ever need – Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world! Like the shepherds did on that night long ago, may I also glorify you and praise your name for what you have done.*

*Amen*

## LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

JOHN 1:1-14 | BY CHRISTINA OWEN

*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. — John 1:5*

**O**NE OF OUR FAVORITE FAMILY TRADITIONS AT CHRISTMAS is to drive around and look at Christmas lights. We always include those on Holt Road along with a few other favorites, but mostly just any lights will do. Last year, we visited Busch Gardens in December. It seemed almost magical due to the 10 million lights that they string from every corner of the park. There is just something about lights in December that make the season feel special.

John 1:1-14 describes Jesus's incarnation in a way very different from Luke. It doesn't tell of the manger birth or the shepherds coming, but rather it tells of light coming into the world. The word light appears 7 times in these verses! Something that is repeated that many times was certainly purposeful.

Jesus is described as the true light (v 9), coming into the world. Jesus calls himself the light of the world several times later in this book as well (John 8:12, 9:5, 12:46). In 1 John 1:5 the same author tells us that "God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all." I'm not a Greek scholar but I've heard it taught that the "no" and "at all" in this verse are really like two negatives, doubly emphasizing the fact that there is literally no darkness in God. *None. Not at all. Not one tiny bit.* And now, this light is coming into the world in the form of Jesus.

Lights are beautiful. There is something attractive about them. While being in the dark is usually uncomfortable, scary, or unfamiliar, light brings to the open things that were once hidden. Even as dark as the world is, John 1:5 says, "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." I love this verse and the contrast it illustrates between us and Jesus. Jesus is not like us. In fact, he is the opposite. We sin, Jesus is sinless. We are selfish, Jesus is selfless. We are born into darkness, Jesus was born as the light. And even with all the sin in the world – with all the sin in my heart – *darkness has not overcome Him.* Praise the Lord!!

The even more amazing thing is that God invites us into this light. Some did not receive Jesus then and some will choose to not receive him now. But verse 12 assures us that, "To all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God." I am so thankful to be forever bound to the true source of light. As we see the lights in our homes and neighborhoods, may we pray for others to want this light as well.

### Prayer

*Jesus, I praise you because you are the true light, so different from me. Help me to share your light with others whom I encounter during this season.*

*Amen*

## CAN THIS BE THE CHRIST?

JOHN 4:27-42 | BY JOHN SUMMERVILLE

*So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” They went out of the town and were coming to him. — John 4:28-30*

**W**HEN IN GHANA IN OCTOBER, I TOURED EL MINA, a slave castle where thousands of Africans were brutally held until a slave ship would come to take them to North America, South America or the Caribbean.

Inside the castle walls were cannons pointing out in every direction, a dungeon like room would hold 130 women. A second dungeon like room would hold 150 men. Everyone was stripped naked. There was a bucket in each corner for them to use to go to the bathroom. The floors would have been covered in feces, vomit, and blood. One-third died before even going through the “Door of no return” to get on the ships. More would die on the ships even before reaching the New World.

Two things our tour guide said stuck with me. One was that this was history. History is to be studied, remembered, and never forgotten. And the second was that the people of Ghana did not blame the West for the slave atrocities. Their own people had sold their own people into slavery and they had to shoulder the responsibility of the past too. Then our tour guide said something powerful. Although all of this happened, we must be willing to forgive.

Forgiveness. Jesus showed compassion on the woman at the well and forgave her of her sins. Jesus knew who she really was, her insecurities, her pain, and her embarrassment. When Jesus forgave her, all that washed away. In her excitement, she rushed back to the city, leaving her water jar, the reason she’d come to the well in the first place. “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?”

During this Christmas season, let’s abandon our water jar and share Jesus with someone. Like the woman at the well, there are people secretly hurting, needing a friend, and needing a Savior. The interesting thing about this story, the woman at the well may not even realized she was searching for forgiveness. Most of our unsaved friends are like that woman at the well. They too are looking for forgiveness and acceptance. Come and see. Can this be the Christ?

### Prayer

*Father, thank you for your sending your Son Jesus to be born on earth, to live His life sinlessly, and to die for me. Thank you that Your Son rose from the dead and sits at Your right hand. Father, thank you for loving us so much! And thank you, thank you, thank you for your forgiveness.*

*Amen*

# SALVATION IS FOUND ONLY IN JESUS

ACTS 4:12 | BY MARK PRESSLEY

*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved. — Acts 4:12*

**S**ALVATION! It's a word that folks in the church are very familiar with and in general understand. Many of us probably have a much better understanding of this word compared to some of the other church“-ation” terms like sanctification, propitiation, etc.

Just so we are all on the same playing field, I'll include the Webster's definition for salvation as the church thinks about it: *Salvation: Deliverance from sin and its consequences brought about by faith in Christ*. But if you start asking people outside of the church what salvation means, you'll probably get a very different answer based on the other definition: *Salvation: The preservation or deliverance from harm, ruin, or loss*.

Considering that definition and how so many in the world don't know who Jesus really is, it's easy to see why they look in so many other places for salvation in one form or another. They look to things like drugs, alcohol, jobs, hobbies, money, etc. or to people like entertainers, athletes, friends or even spouses. As we come out of the pandemic, we can look back and see that many looked to doctors, vaccines, and even the government as sources of salvation. But all of these are temporary.

As I think about the world's approach to salvation, I begin to understand what the Bible is referring to when it talks about “darkness”. People are literally wandering around looking for something they know they need but can't see because they are looking in the wrong places. As a believer, it's sometimes overwhelming to try to figure out how I can change this mindset of those I interact with every day so that they would even consider looking to Jesus for salvation. And then I hear Jesus' words at the end of John 13 after He has warned the disciples that rough times were coming. “But take heart! I have overcome the world.” The work is already done for me! I only need to live for Him and show that He makes a difference in my life. The world will take notice and soon begin to understand the true source of salvation.

## Prayer

*Lord, help me to rely only on you for my salvation and to show that your salvation makes a difference in my life.*

*Amen*



## A PRICELESS GIFT IN A CONTRACTUAL WORLD

ACTS 13:13-52 | BY MARK THOMPSON

*Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. — Acts 13:38-39*

**WE LIVE IN A TRANSACTIONAL WORLD.** We work hard at home, at work or in school, because we hope it yields some immediate or future benefit. And on the back end of our accomplishments, we start to work towards the next one. Rinse, repeat. "It's not what have you done, but (you can probably finish it for me) what have you done for me lately."

And don't get me wrong, that mindset is not all bad. We work hard serving alongside each other in hopes that it will bring more into the family of God. The book of Proverbs is full of encouragement for work hard. But that transactional mindset is so natural to us, it can be difficult to grasp something so radically different like grace. And even when presented with it, our pride can often get in the way of us accepting even simple acts of kindness.

But this is not new. The world has always been this way. The Apostle Paul understood this as well as anyone. Prior to Paul's conversion, he was a well-educated Jewish leader – a Hebrew of Hebrews – and because of that Paul knew the law of Moses better than most. And in Paul's sermon in Acts 13, Paul's message of salvation is presented juxtaposed to the Law. Juxtaposed to that same transactional mindset of legalism we can fall into so easily.

In Acts 13 Paul and his companions sailed north from Cyprus to Pisidian Antioch (modern-day Southern Turkey), and on the Sabbath in a synagogue there, Paul delivers the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles. Paul recounts Israel's history, from its captivity in Egypt all the way through the reign of King David.

From David's lineage, we know, came Jesus, and Paul continues and discusses the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. He notes that Jesus after death did not "decay" like David did, but rather defeated death and rose from the dead.

And here in verses 38-41 we see the culmination of the message and a warning. Paul says the forgiveness of every sin is made available through faith in Jesus, a justification the Law could never fulfill. In verses 40-41, Paul warns us that the message is hard for some to grasp. Why? Because it's not about what we've done.

God's plan for salvation runs counter to the transactional nature of our world. It has nothing to do with us. And praise God for that! Because we could never earn it.

As we look to the year 2023, let us rest in the forgiveness that is freely given in Christ. May the grace of God spill out of our lives and into our neighborhoods, schools and work spaces. And may God be known in the Triangle and beyond!

### Prayer

*God we praise you for the gift of salvation in Jesus. Please use our talents and time to share the beauty of your grace and message of Jesus with all.*

*Amen*

## WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED?

ACTS 16:25–34 | BY BRIAN JENNINGS

*Then he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”*

— Acts 16:30–31

**SILENT NIGHT IS A POPULAR CHRISTMAS HYMN**, based on the poem *Stille Nacht* by young priest Joseph Mohr. It became a song one night when Joseph’s church organ was incapacitated due to an infestation of mice. The poem was set to music and first performed on Christmas Eve 1818. The lyrics depict the peaceful and serene night of our Lord and Savior’s birth:

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

Genesis 3 tells the story of the fall of humanity and it’s a tragic one. We lived in Over fifty years later, two men who had been transformed by the arrival of that holy infant found themselves not in a stable, but a prison. For the crime of preaching the gospel and setting a girl free from an evil spirit, they were beaten and thrown into the depths of a prison. But because of the hope they had in Jesus, they were not enjoying a silent night. They spent the evening praying and singing hymns of praise to God. The noise level increased when God sent an earthquake that shook the prison and broke open the doors. The stunned jailer was prepared to kill himself at the release of the prisoners, but instead he fell down and asked Paul and Silas, “what must I do to be saved?” They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”

This Christmas Eve, maybe your life looks like *Silent Night* and all is calm and bright. Maybe your life looks more like Paul and Silas’ night in prison with difficulties pressing in all around. The good news is that whatever you face tonight, there is hope. There is a holy infant child who represents the “dawn of redeeming grace.” There is a crucified Savior who is worth believing in. There is a risen Lord who can shake prison walls and set the captives free. So, like the Philippian jailer in Acts 16, let go of your fear, fall on your knees, and turn to the One who can save — Jesus the miracle child, crucified Savior, and risen Lord.

### Prayer

*Father, thank you that whether my night is silent or noisy, you are still the Savior. This Christmas Eve, we have so much to sing about because of all you have done. Let us see your glory and rejoice in your salvation.*

*Amen*

## WE ALL DESERVED COAL

ROMANS 10:3-4 | BY MIKE COOPER

*For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. — Romans 10:3-4*

**T**HIS MORNING CHILDREN ACROSS THE WORLD are rushing out of bed to see what Santa brought them. We've all been there at some point in our life. You know the tradition. Santa Claus is said to bring children gifts during the night on Christmas Eve. Those gifts consist either of a child's most desired toys or coal, depending on whether they are on the "naughty or nice" list. Of course, Santa's list can't be wrong because he checked it twice. But what criteria is he using? How does he determine who is good? Who is right?

Throughout the book of Romans, Paul makes a great argument that none of us are good or righteous. So if Santa were to go by the criteria found in the scriptures, we would all be getting coal today. The criteria referred to is the Law of Moses. God gave his law to the Israelites in the Old Testament to reveal himself to his people. The requirements God demanded of us all reflect his own always good and always right character. However, according to the verses today, the Jewish people missed that. They were "ignorant of the righteousness of God." Instead, they used the law like a ladder to climb to get to God. In an attempt to "establish their own righteousness." But the law is not a ladder to God. You can't do enough to establish your own righteousness. Rather, the law is a mirror to look at and see that we are not at all righteous or worthy to stand before God.

The truth is, you won't be celebrating the birth of our savior today if you don't know you are a sinner in the first place. The Law shows us our need. The Law shows us that God alone is righteous. The Law is meant to exhaust us in order that we cling more closely to Jesus. Jesus is the end of the law for those who believe. God sent his only Son to completely fulfill the law and to die as a substitute for all those who hadn't. Our obedience to the law is no longer the basis for our relationship with God. Through Jesus's death and resurrection, God has done what the law could not do and made a way for us to be righteous.

We all deserved coal today, but God, in his grace and mercy, has given us a gift far greater than anything we deserved. He gave us his son. If we simply believe in the person and work of Jesus, we can be saved. It is only through faith in Christ's perfect life and sacrificial death that we can be made righteous.

## Prayer

*God, thank you for the gift of your Son and for the law which shows us our need for him. Expose our attempts to earn our own righteousness and help us to trust in Christ and his righteousness alone. In your name we pray,*

*Amen*



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