



CHRISTMAS PROMISES

with A DAILY ADVENT JOURNEY *with*

RAY PRITCHARD

**This Advent devotional guide comes
from Keep Believing Ministries.**

You can find us on the Internet at www.KeepBelieving.com.

**Questions or Comments?
Email: ray@keepbelieving.com**

Christmas in Four Words

Promises made.
Promises kept.

That's not just a slogan.
That's Christmas in four words.

Thousands of years ago God made a promise to send a Savior to the world. Centuries passed, history rolled on, and God repeated his promise many times.

Parents told their children, "One day Messiah will come!"
The children told their children, "One day Messiah will come!"
Those children told their children, "One day Messiah will come!"

The word passed from generation to generation: "Get ready! God is sending a Savior to the world!" Galatians 4:4 tells us that "when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son." The phrase "had fully come" speaks of something that is complete and fully developed, like a pregnant woman feeling labor pains, ready to deliver her baby. It describes the moment in history when all things were in place, when all the pieces were on the board, that one moment when the stage was perfectly set. At that moment, not earlier and not later, God sent forth his Son.

At Bethlehem God kept his promise.
A baby was born who would be the Savior of the world.

This year's Advent journey is all about Christmas promises. *Each day we'll look at a promise that came true because Christ came to the earth.* It's important to remind ourselves of these promises because it's easy to forget our blessings.

Our journey has three parts:

Journey to New Life (December 1-8)
Journey to New Hope (December 9-20)
Journey to New Joy (December 21-25)

Each devotional ends with a prayer and a link to a YouTube video of a Christmas song. I hope you'll take time to read the prayer out loud and then watch the video. Those two things will point your heart in the right direction.

I'm going to do a Facebook Live video at 8 AM CT each morning. You can watch it on my Facebook page.

Can you really put Christmas in four words? Yes, you can.

Promises made.

Promises kept.

Let's take an Advent journey through those promises and ask God to build our faith each day.

Who knows?

This may turn out to be your best Christmas ever!

Journey to New Life



The Promise of An Anchor for the Soul

“We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain. Jesus has entered there on our behalf as a forerunner” (Hebrews 6:19-20).

Everyone has an anchor.

The only question is, how well does it hold? If your soul is anchored to your money, what will you do when the money runs out? If your soul is anchored to your spouse, what will you do when your spouse is taken from you? If your soul is anchored in your career, what will you do when you are fired? If your soul is anchored in your happiness, what will you do when hard times come?

If you put your anchor in the sand, it will never hold. You need a place for your anchor to rest so it can't be moved. Nothing in this world will ever be strong enough when your life falls apart. We need an anchor that cannot be moved no matter what happens, which means we need an anchor that is quite literally “out of this world.”

That's what we have.

Most of us think of an anchor that goes down to the bottom of the ocean, but we have an anchor that goes up to heaven. Our anchor rests in the Holy of Holies in heaven, behind the curtain, in the very presence of God himself.

Guess who's already there? Jesus!

The word “forerunner” describes a smaller boat that went ahead of a large ship to guide it into the harbor. When the storms are raging, the “forerunner” boat goes ahead of the large boat and drops the anchor in the harbor, so the large boat is safe during the storm. When the storms are past, the big boat enters the harbor also.

Jesus leads us home to heaven.

You couldn't be safer than you already are because we are already anchored in heaven. It's not as if Jesus said, “I'm going to show you the way, but then you're on your own.” It's more like this: Jesus went ahead of us into heaven, and then he became the anchor for our soul.

We're hooked up with Jesus in heaven.
We're as safe as Jesus is safe.

That's why the hope is called "firm." The word means "never failing." It comes from a Greek word that combines a word meaning "totter" or "fall" plus the word "not."

Our anchor will never fail.
Our anchor will never slip.
Our anchor will never give way.

Our anchor holds because it rests on Jesus in heaven.

*Lord, I do not pray for more faith. I ask instead for greater confidence in your faithfulness.
Amen.*

Musical bonus: Let's begin our musical journey by listening to a performance of the traditional Advent hymn [O Come, O Come, Emmanuel](#) by Forte Femme.

The Promise of No Condemnation

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

It’s hard for us to believe God loves us.
Especially when we take a good look in the mirror.

It’s easy to feel condemned when we think of our failures, our mistakes, our foolish comments, our stubborn pride, and the grudges we hold. Most of us have moments when we look at ourselves and say, “There is plenty of condemnation for you, buster!”

But that is not what God says.

God says, “No condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Are we willing to believe what God has said? We sometimes sing a [beloved invitation hymn](#) that goes like this:

Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe,
Sin had left a crimson stain,
He washed it white as snow

Do we believe what we sing?
Do we believe Jesus paid it all?
If so, there can be no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Charles Spurgeon says it quite simply:

“If our debt was paid, it was paid, and there is an end of it; a second payment cannot be demanded.”

Is Jesus enough for you? I don’t know of any truth more important, more satisfying, or more liberating than the great truth that for those who know Jesus Christ, there is no condemnation.

Why? Because Jesus paid it all.
Why? Because your sins are gone.
Why? Because Jesus condemned sin by his death on the cross.

If Jesus paid the price for your sins, God will never condemn you.
The devil whispers in our ear, “Condemned! Condemned!”
God says, “No condemnation!”

Who are you going to believe? The devil or God?

I recommend that you write out Romans 8:1, stick it where you can see it, and repeat it every day. *It's the foundation of all spiritual progress.* It's easy to believe it for someone else and harder to believe it for ourselves, so we need the constant reminder that in Christ we are eternally and always "not condemned" by God.

I can't think of a more encouraging spiritual truth. For those who are in Christ Jesus, now, today, not tomorrow, not next week, not next year, but right now, in this present moment, there is no condemnation.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for present-tense salvation. When the devil reminds me of my failures, help me to say, "I am not condemned because Christ died for me!" Amen.

Musical bonus: This carol started in France, made its way to England, and eventually spread around the world. Let's listen together as Pentatonix sings [The First Noel](#).

The Promise of Reconciliation

“When we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son”
(Romans 5:10).

Think about the phrase, “God’s enemies.”

Is there anything sadder than that? To be an enemy of the God of the universe. To stand opposed to the Lord Almighty. To mock his name. To reject his counsel. To resist his Spirit. To blaspheme his Son. To refuse his grace. Yet that is what we did, and that is what we were before we came to Christ. We were all God’s enemies. Not some of us. All of us. By nature we are born rebels. *We come into this world as the enemies of the Lord.*

The problem, of course, is sin. Perhaps you’ve seen the drawing that puts man on one side of the cliff and God on the other. In between is the gap, the chasm, the pit caused by sin. Isaiah 59:2 says, “Your sins have cut you off from God.” That’s the whole story of the human race in one sentence. We can’t find a way to bridge the gap. If God doesn’t do something, we’re sunk!

That’s where the gospel comes in.

While we were ungodly . . .
While we were sinners . . .
While we were his enemies . . .

He sent his Son to die for us.
He gave us his Word.
He sent the Holy Spirit to convict us.

To be reconciled means once you were enemies but now you are friends. It means peace has broken out where once war reigned. It means the guns have been put away, the army has been sent home, and the killing has finally stopped.

One day while we were running away from Jesus, he found us, brought us to our knees, opened our eyes, gave us new life, caused us to see Jesus, gave us a desire to reach out, pointed us to the cross, and gave us a heart to believe his gospel. And in one shining, amazing, supernatural moment,

We were enemies no longer.
We were ungodly no longer.
We were strangers no longer.

God reconciled us to himself in the death of his Son.

We who once were enemies of God are now called his friends.
We who once were far away have been brought near to God.
We who once were aliens and strangers are now part of God's family.

That's the miracle of reconciliation.

Lord Jesus, when I was your enemy, you made me your friend. Thank you for never giving up on me when I was running from you. Amen.

Musical bonus: I love the gospel-saturated words of this newer Christmas song by Selah called [Rose of Bethlehem](#).

The Promise of Adoption

“God sent his Son . . . to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Galatians 4:4-5).

Christmas tells us *how* Christ came.

This passage tells us *why* he came.

Christ came to redeem us and to adopt us into God’s family. To redeem means to set free from slavery by the payment of a price. The word comes from the slave markets of the first century. You redeemed a slave by paying the purchase price and then setting him free.

Suppose that in addition to freeing that slave, you also said to him, “Come with me to my home and live with me. I want you to legally join my family, take my name, and have an equal share in my inheritance.”

As amazing as it sounds, that’s what God did for us the moment we trusted Christ. He set us free (redeemed us) from the slavery of sin with the purchase price of the blood of Christ. Then he brought us into his family and gave us “full rights” as his own children.

In Jewish culture, young boys are considered men by going through a ritual called a Bar Mitzvah. You might say when we come to Christ, we are “Bar Mitzvahed” into God’s family. We come in as full members of the family with rights and privileges equal to those who have been there for 40 or 50 years. We can pray and claim God’s promises on the same basis as everyone else.

Let’s suppose one of my three sons does something wrong and later feels bad about it. So he comes to me and says, “Dad, I’m very sorry for what I did and I’m going to try to do better in the future. I’m going to try to be more of a son to you from now on.” When I hear those words, I’ll say something like this, “Son, I love you and I’m glad you feel bad about what you did, and I know you want to do better in the future. I want you to know that no matter what you do, you could never be ‘more of a son’ to me than you are right now. Being my son has nothing to do with what you do or don’t do. You are my son by being a part of my family. Nothing you do can ever change that fact.”

The same is true in our relationship with God. *Our standing isn’t based on our performance.* That’s good news because we all fail sooner or later. Our standing is based on God’s grace. It doesn’t depend on us. Once a child of God, always a child of God. Our standing is secure because it is based on what Christ has done for us.

Poet Robert Frost defined home as “the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in.” God is our true Heavenly Father because he chose to add us to his family. Because of adoption, when we go to him, he always opens the door and says, “Welcome home, my child.”

Our great God, when we are tempted to doubt, remind us that our standing with you does not depend on our performance but on your grace. Amen.

Musical bonus: Francesca Battistelli helps us understand why the birth of Christ is good news with a song called [You're Here](#).

The Promise of Forgiveness

“Through Jesus your sins can be forgiven” (Acts 13:38).

Can we really be forgiven, or is forgiveness just a distant dream?

If the Vegas bookies laid odds on our forgiveness, what would the odds be—50,000 to 1, or 100,000 to 1, or maybe even 1,000,000 to 1? Look in the mirror and consider your own soul. If you do, the outlook will not be hopeful. One British writer put it this way: “There is no man who, if all his secret thoughts were made known, would not deserve hanging a dozen times a day.”

Sin is real, which means you can’t get away with breaking the rules forever. But when you are ready to come clean, the Lord is right there waiting for you. It’s never easy to confess your sins, but listen to the invitation God makes in Isaiah 55:7: “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.” Maybe you don’t like that word “wicked” or the word “unrighteous.” Maybe that sounds harsh to you. But that’s God’s description of the whole human race. That’s what we are apart from God’s grace. Don’t get hung up on the negative words and miss the invitation. Turn to the Lord, and you will find mercy and pardon.

The Bible uses many images to describe how God deals with our sins:

- God removes our sins as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12).
- God puts our sins behind his back (Isaiah 38:17).
- God blots out our sins like a thick cloud (Isaiah 44:22).
- God forgets our sins and remembers them no more (Jeremiah 31:34).
- God buries our sins in the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19).

When God forgives our sins, he chooses to forget them forever. Our sins are removed, buried, and blotted out. They can never condemn us again. But how could God forgive us? Why doesn’t he look at or remember our sins?

A long time ago God fixed his gaze on the cross of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who bore our sins. When we are honest enough to admit we are wicked and evil, a stream of mercy flows out from the cross of Christ, and our sins are covered by his blood. We discover in one shining moment that with God there is forgiveness.

If you admit you are a sinner, you can be forgiven. That’s the promise God made when he sent his Son to save us from our sins.

Lord Jesus, may the grace that forgave my sins fill my heart so that I may be quick to forgive others when they sin against me. Amen.

Musical bonus: How about a little Southern Gospel music today? Let's listen to [Glory to God in the Highest](#) by Ernie Haase and Signature Sound.

The Promise of Freedom From the Power of Sin

“Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death”
(Romans 8:2).

Pay attention to that little word “free.”
It’s the key to the whole Christian life.

God always wanted to set us free. Whether we knew it or not, before we came to Christ, we were slaves to sin. That’s what Paul meant by “the law of sin and death.” We sinned because we couldn’t help it, and our sin was slowly killing us. The chains of sin were wrapped around our necks, choking off any possibility of knowing God personally.

Through Jesus Christ those chains have been broken permanently and completely. The things that held us back—our old habits of life, our rebellious nature, our self-destructive behavior, our anger and bitterness—no longer have the same power over us.

God has set us free from the obligation to obey the urges of the old life. We don’t have to live that way anymore. In place of the old life with its insatiable urge to do wrong, God has given us the “Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.”

When the Holy Spirit comes in, he brings new life with him. He replaces the old desires with entirely new ones. In place of the sin that dragged us down, the Holy Spirit begins to lead us to a brand-new way of life. In place of the self-destructive tendencies we once knew, he gives us a new moral compass.

This change is radical, complete, instantaneous, and frankly, overwhelming for most of us. One writer called her experience of coming to Christ a “train wreck conversion” because it upended everything, including her closest friendships. It’s not easy to live one way for thirty years and then suddenly find yourself going in an entirely new direction. It’s like a criminal being pardoned after living on Death Row; he hardly knows what to do with himself.

But the Spirit who gives us life is very patient. Having set us free, he teaches us how to walk with him, how to follow his leading, and how to experience “life” instead of “death” on a daily basis.

If all this seems mysterious, remember this—We have been set free. The Holy Spirit has liberated us from our old lives.

The chains have been broken. We're free!

Lord Jesus, help me to live as a free person and not as a slave to sin today. Amen.

Musical bonus: James Taylor recorded a beautiful arrangement of [Some Children See Him](#), a modern carol written by Alfred Burt. I found a YouTube version with pictures of children from all over the world. I include this song because we desperately need to hear its message in these troubled times.

The Promise of Healing

“The Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in his wings” (Malachi 4:2).

The Old Testament ends with this beautiful picture of our Lord.

When he comes, he will “rise” as the sun rises in the sky.

When he comes, he will banish the darkness.

When he comes, his light will fill the world.

But his coming does more than bring light into the darkness. When he comes, he brings the light of God’s righteousness with him. Here is good news for those who feel the heavy weight of their own failures. In one of her books, Ruth Graham writes of a day when she felt overwhelmed by a sense of her own sinfulness:

“I am a weak, lazy, indifferent character; casual when I should be concerned, concerned when I should be carefree; self-indulgent, hypocritical, begging God to help me when I am hardly willing to lift a finger for myself; quarrelsome where I should be silent, silent where I should be outspoken; vacillating, easily distracted and sidetracked.”

Who among us could not say the same thing, multiplied many times over? Then she adds these words:

"What would I do," wrote Chalmers, "if God did not justify the ungodly?" And "What would I do," said Thomas Boston of Scotland, "but for the imputed righteousness?" There it is. All that I am not, He is; all that I am and should not be, He forgives and covers (from *It's My Turn*, pp. 104-105).

At Bethlehem a baby arrived from heaven “with healing in his wings.” John Piper applies the truth this way:

Though Jesus does not heal every disease in this life, he will heal every disease in the resurrection. In other words Jesus meets the tremendous need we all feel for hope beyond the grave—that all sickness and pain and sorrow and crying will be gone forever (From “The Sun of Righteousness Will Rise”).

Here is the good news of Christmas: Jesus came to save sinners. Are you a sinner? He came for you! Is your heart heavy today? Run to Jesus because he is all you need for everything you will face today. He heals the brokenhearted, and he sets the captive free.

Lord Jesus, we come to you just as we are. We come broken and ask you to heal us. We come guilty and ask you to forgive us. We do not come because we are worthy, but because you are the Sun of Righteousness. Heal us and help us and make us whole again. Amen.

Musical bonus: Meredith Andrews took the familiar carol *God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen* and gave it a contemporary twist. Listen to her new version called [He Has Come for Us](#).

The Promise of an Advocate

“We have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One” (1 John 2:1).

People who live in big cities understand this principle.

We deal with so many different government bodies—local, state and federal—that sooner or later we’ll get in trouble one way or another. At that moment, only one question crosses the mind: “Who can help me out?” If you know someone at City Hall, suddenly your problems begin to vanish. To survive in today’s world, you need friends in high places—someone who knows you and is willing to help you out.

Jesus is the friend we need!

He is our attorney in heaven who speaks to the Father in our defense. When the devil comes and makes a claim against us, Jesus speaks up on our behalf and pleads his own blood in our defense. The Father looks at the Son, sees his pierced hands, and says, “Case dismissed.” Let me tell you the best part of this truth: *He’s never lost a case yet.* No matter how much money you pay an earthly lawyer, you can never be certain of the outcome of your case. So many things can happen in the courtroom you can’t control. Even the best lawyers lose now and then. But because Jesus has been exalted to the right hand of God the Father, he’s in the place of highest authority in the universe. He never has to appeal a decision to the Supreme Court. He *is* the Supreme Court—and he’s there for you and me all the time. I’m sure you’ve heard the expression “24-7”—it means 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. That’s what Jesus is. He’s our 24-7 advocate in heaven.

When the world cries out, “Guilty!” Jesus says, “You are my child. My blood covers your sins. I overturn the verdict on earth. You are welcome in heaven forever. Come and enter my Kingdom.”

Jesus is not only the friend we need, he’s also our Advocate before the Father. When you stumble (and we all stumble sooner or later), ask Jesus to help you. He’s Our Man in Heaven.

We praise you, Lord Jesus, that you are our Advocate in heaven. Help us to pray boldly because we are praying in your name, Amen.

Musical bonus: This recording of [Jesus is Alive](#) by Josh Wilson is quickly becoming one of my favorite new Christmas songs.

Journey to New Hope



The Promise of a New Family

“Truly I tell you, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life” (Mark 10:29-30).

Make sure you know the true cost before you make the purchase.
That’s what Jesus is telling us in these verses.

If we take Jesus literally (as we must), he is telling us to count the cost because following him always involves a kind of “leaving.” You may have to leave behind some of your closest earthly relationships to be faithful to the call of God. I knew a young couple who felt called to the mission field. Both were supremely gifted and ready to go, but their parents did not want them to go. “How could you take our grandchildren so far from us?” they asked. “Why do you have to go to a dangerous place on the other side of the world?”

There aren’t any easy answers to questions like that.
Either you get it, or you don’t.

We will never grasp any of this if we look at it from a worldly point of view. Jesus wants us to count the cost, and then he wants us to know the payoff will be far greater than the cost. What we lose on one side will be repaid a hundred times over in new brothers and sisters when we join God’s Forever Family. We will find family members wherever we go on earth. The “hundredfold” you receive will so far outstrip what you gave up that you can’t put the cost and the benefit on the same graph.

God will be no one’s debtor.
No one who follows Jesus will ever regret that decision.
Not in this life or the life to come.

Jesus was a family man. He came to create a family of believers from every corner of the earth. One day that family will gather round the throne, a vast multitude from every tongue, tribe, nation, and from every ethnic group. Together we will lift our voices to declare, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain.”

Don’t overlook that little phrase “along with persecutions” in verse 30. Some people will oppose us no matter what we do or say. Following Jesus isn’t all sunshine and roses. But even that opposition will be worth the joy of being part of God’s family wherever we go.

A few years ago I was part of group that visited a house church in China. There were perhaps 50 people crowded into one small apartment. We began by singing and praying for 40 minutes. Then I preached. Then we sang some more along with exhortations by the pastor. By American standards, it was a long service, but the people were in no hurry to go home. When we finished, everyone stayed for lunch, laughing and talking and sharing together. Although I know very little Chinese, I felt right at home. They welcomed us as if we had known them forever. That's the way it's supposed to be.

When you follow Jesus, you meet his brothers and sisters wherever you go. Then when you die, you meet him face to face. What a deal! Nothing on earth could top that.

Spirit of God, thank you for making me part of a family so large that it will take eternity to meet all my brothers and sisters. Amen.

Musical bonus: Let's listen as Penny and Sparrow sing this beautiful arrangement of [Away in a Manger](#).

The Promise of Rest

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

Are you ready for Christmas?

Maybe you’re not ready to answer that question. After all, we’ve got two weeks to buy gifts, wrap presents, make candy, decorate the tree, put up the lights, go to parties, watch a thousand holiday specials on TV, and otherwise do the things we have to do to be ready for Christmas.

Not everyone gets excited this time of year. Many people feel exhausted and stressed out as the big day approaches. Start with all the things I just mentioned, then add big meals to plan, special services at church, and long trips to visit our kids and grandkids. It quickly becomes overwhelming.

We need some rest.

That’s where the words of Jesus become so crucial. “Come to me,” Jesus says. Note how personal it is. He does not say,

“Come to a meeting.”

“Come to an organization.”

“Come to a retreat.”

He is not asking us to add yet one more thing to our already overcrowded schedule. Because his invitation is personal, it demands a personal response.

There is nothing vague here.

There is no room for hesitation.

We need to be reminded that the Lord knows all about our troubles. We can say it more forcefully than that. *Jesus knows what others do not know about us.* He knows all the hidden secrets, the inner fears, and the unspoken doubts about what tomorrow may bring. He knows the whole truth about you and me, and he loves us anyway.

What is it that weighs you down today? What makes you weary and in need of rest? Is it pain or sickness or a failing marriage? Is it worry about your future? Is it a burden for your children? Is it a searing temptation or crippling bitterness? Is it the demands of others that never seem to end?

I saw this question on Facebook: How many times a day do you say, "I'm so tired I can't keep going"? There were four choices:

- A. 1
- B. 5
- C. 10
- D. A thousand times a day.

I smiled when I saw that 77% of people chose D because that's the way most of us feel.

Here's the good news for today: *Jesus knows who you are and where you are.* He knows how tired you feel. You are not lost or forgotten.

These words of Jesus are for you.

When old-time preachers gave the invitation at the end of a sermon, they would often say, "Won't you come? Won't you come to Jesus?"

He has already come for you.
He is waiting for you to come to him.

Won't you come? Won't you come to Jesus?

Lord Jesus, thank you for coming from heaven to earth for me. I pray for faith to come to you that I might find rest for my soul today. Amen.

Musical bonus: Lauren Daigle is a rising star in Christian music. Let's enjoy her performance of a song called [Light of the World](#).

The Promise of Hope

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11).

Some versions say, "to give you an expected end."

That's actually a good way to translate the last phrase of Jeremiah 29:11. God is not giving a vague promise that things are going to be better sometime, somewhere, in some situation. That's true, of course, but this verse has a very specific focus. *God has an appointed end for his people, and nothing will hinder them from reaching that appointed end.* Though the Jews could not see it, held as they were under total Babylonian domination, seventy years down the road the same God who raised up a pagan king (Nebuchadnezzar) to judge them will raise up another pagan king (Cyrus) to deliver them. Neither pagan king was aware of his part in God's plan. Each man acted according to his own free will, and God worked through those kingly decisions to bring his children home.

The end they expect will come, though not exactly as they expect it.

And not for 70 years.

They will see the end God always intended.

God has no unfinished plans!

They will see what God intended from the beginning.

Seen in this light, Jeremiah 29:11 becomes a great comfort, especially when we are going through hard times. It teaches us that God thinks of us, that his thoughts toward us are good, and that when his purposes have been completed, he will bring our troubles to their appointed end.

This is the "hope and future" we all need.

If this verse is true, then our position ought to be one of ever-increasing hope in the Lord. I admit that is hard to do when you see your child suffering from cancer or when your marriage falls apart or your career dissolves or you cannot pay your bills, or you suffer rejection from those you thought you could trust. We live in a fallen world, and we ourselves are fallen people, not yet what we could be or should be or someday will be. *There is no Bible verse that can take away the pain of this world.* But Jeremiah 29:11 leads us out of the darkness into the light.

If we know Jesus, we will have what we need, when we need it. Let that thought give strength to your heart today.

Lord Jesus, help me to remember today that your plans are always better than mine. Amen.

Musical bonus: MercyMe recorded an uplifting Christmas medley called [Joy](#).

The Promise of His Presence

“I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5).

We all have burdens and concerns that keep us awake at night:

What will tomorrow bring?

Will our health hold up or will we have a heart attack or a sudden stroke?

Will we end up in a nursing home or waste away in a hospital?

What about our children? Will they serve the Lord? What if something happens to them?

Who will take care of us in our old age?

Singles wonder if they will ever marry. Married couples look at all the divorces and wonder if they will make it.

Will we live to see our grandchildren?

We all have concerns about our career choices, and we wonder where we will be in ten years.

Here are three truths that ought to encourage us as we think about our worries over the future:

1. *Don't worry about tomorrow because God is already there.* He is the God who goes before his people.
2. *God promises to be with you no matter what happens to you tomorrow and the day after tomorrow and all the days after that.* You cannot outlive God's goodness.
3. *You can live without worry because God has you on his heart at this very moment.* He will not forget you; indeed, he cannot forget you.

To all our fears the Lord simply says, “I am with you always.”

Christians ought to be optimistic as we face tomorrow. We have a great future because we have a great God who has promised to never leave us.

Here's a simple exercise to remember this truth. Hold up your hand and repeat these five words: “I will never leave you,” touching a different finger each time. Say it and then repeat it. Let the five fingers remind you of those five words that make a grand promise to every child of God. No matter where you go this week, your Heavenly Father goes with you. He will never leave nor forsake you. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever.

He is with you when you feel his presence, and he is with you when you feel nothing at all. Don't go by your feelings because your feelings can mislead you. Remember God's promise. He is with you right now, he will be with you tomorrow, and he will be with you forever.

So chin up, child of God. *Stop staring in the soup.* Pull those shoulders back. Put a smile on your face. Take your troubles, wrap them up in a box, and give them all to the Lord.

Forgive me, Lord, for doubting your presence. Thank you for being there, in the fiery furnace, just when I need you most. Amen.

Musical bonus: The students of Fountainview Academy have produced a lovely version of [O Come, All Ye Faithful](#).

The Promise of Sufficient Strength

“I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

What does this verse mean?

What is God promising to do for us?

When I studied the last part of that verse, I discovered it means "to pour strength into." It's like pouring milk into a pitcher or water into a glass or coffee into a cup. It's the picture of something empty that is filled by an outside source. It's the picture of a believer facing the problems of life—hopeless and helpless— and in that situation, Jesus Christ pours his strength into the believer's life.

Let me put this teaching in one sentence: *Through Jesus Christ you can do everything God wants you to do today.* You can face everything he wants you to face, you can fight every battle he wants you to fight, you can obey every command, you can endure every trial, and you can overcome every temptation through Jesus Christ.

It takes more than positive thinking. You've got to have Jesus Christ on the inside.

Are we who believe better than other people? No.

Are we stronger? No.

Are we spared the problems of life? No.

Are we wiser than others? No.

Do we suffer? Yes.

Do we know heartache and disappointment? Yes.

Do we face opposition? Yes.

Do we get sick? Yes.

Do our loved ones die? Yes.

Christians are not exempt from the trials and troubles of life.

What makes the difference? Only one thing: Jesus Christ within. We have the power of the indwelling Christ, and that makes all the difference in the world.

Is it enough? Is Jesus Christ enough for the problems of life? Yes, yes, a thousand times yes, and the saints across the ages testify that Jesus Christ is enough.

You can do "all things" if you rely on Jesus Christ. Not in your own strength, not in your own power, not in your own wisdom, and not in your own ability to figure things out. But if you will

say, "Lord Jesus, I'm relying on you," he will give you whatever you need so that you can do whatever he wants you to do.

That's a promise you can rely on today, tomorrow, and for the rest of your life.

Lord of All Things, help me to place myself under your care, holding nothing back, making no excuses, but giving you all things in advance, and letting you fill in the details. Amen.

Musical bonus: Peter Hollens has recorded an amazing a cappella version of [Mary, Did You Know?](#)

The Promise of Power

“I am going to send you what My Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49).

Jesus spoke these words when he appeared to his disciples late on Easter Sunday. At first they were frightened because they thought he was a ghost. To prove he had really risen from the dead, he ate a piece of broiled fish in their presence. Affirming that everything that had happened to him was in accordance with the Scriptures, he commissioned the disciples to preach the Gospel to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem. They were to declare to others what they themselves had witnessed.

The phrase “clothed with power” describes the effect the coming of the Holy Spirit would have on them. Clothing covers human weakness. No more would the disciples have to depend on their own power; now they would be “covered” by the Holy Spirit.

Clothing also identifies the wearer. Football players wear uniforms, as do soldiers and sailors. Christ promised his disciples they would soon have a new “uniform”—the power of the Holy Spirit.

Clothing in the Bible often identifies a person as a divine representative. Just as the priests in the Old Testament had special vestments to wear that set them apart from other people, even so the disciples would now “wear” the Holy Spirit as the mark of their relationship with God.

Clothing takes up a large part of our lives. We spend money and time to find just the right shirt, skirt, blouse, or tie. Many people have an entire closet filled with clothes for every occasion. We care about our clothing because, as the saying goes, “clothes make the man.”

What does the well-dressed Christian wear? The answer is, the Holy Spirit. The moment we come to Christ, the Holy Spirit gives us a brand-new wardrobe. We exchange the tattered rags of filthy self-righteousness for the dazzling garments of a brand-new life. For hatred we receive love. For misery, joy. For bitterness, forgiveness. For cowardice, boldness. For stinginess, compassion. For pride, humility. For envy, contentment.

What happens to those “rags” of the old life? God throws them away. We don’t have to wear them any more unless we go dig them out of the trash. And why would we? Through the Holy Spirit, God clothes us with the beauty of Jesus Christ.

No one is more beautiful than a Christian who is dressed in the Holy Spirit.

Spirit of God, may the beauty of Jesus be seen in me today. Amen.

Musical bonus: Casting Crowns performs an updated version of [I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day](#), a carol written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow during the Civil War.

The Promise of Possibility

“Nothing is impossible for God” (Luke 1:37).

In one of his sermons Walt Gerber mentioned a plaque hanging on his wall:

Walt, Do not feel totally, personally,
irrevocably responsible for everything.
That's my job! Love, God!

That caught my eye because it reminds me of the principle I've called the First Rule of the Spiritual Life: *"He's God and we're not."* If you understand that truth, then you don't have to take on impossible burdens only God could handle anyway.

In the movie "Rudy" there is a scene where the young man despairs of ever making the Notre Dame football team. *He is too small, too slow, too weak, and in every way fails to meet the challenge.* Totally discouraged, he goes to a priest and asks if he will ever make the team. The priest smiles and says that in 35 years he has learned only two things for certain: "First, there is a God, and second, I'm not him."

Today is December 15. *In a few days we will celebrate the central miracle of the Christian faith: the birth of Jesus Christ.* Theologians call this the "Incarnation"—which means "to take the form of human flesh." Skeptics and unbelievers have attacked our faith at precisely this point—the notion that God could ever become a man, much less a baby.

But that's precisely what happened at Bethlehem. To quote the words of Charles Wesley (from "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"):

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,
Hail the incarnate Deity.

Either you believe that, or you don't. If you don't, then Christmas is just another day to you. But if you do believe that then you shouldn't have trouble believing anything else the Bible says.

Many of us approach the end of the year with a heavy load of worries about the future. There are career questions, health issues, family problems, financial difficulties, and a host of unfulfilled dreams. *We wonder if next year will simply mean more of the same.* Sometimes we feel everything depends on us and we are "totally personally, irrevocably responsible for everything."

Christmas reminds us God is God and we're not. He can arrange for a virgin to become pregnant. He can cause a Roman emperor to order a census at precisely the right moment in

history. He can ensure the baby will be born at exactly the place prophesied 700 years earlier. He can bring together angels, shepherds and Wise Men to celebrate that miraculous birth. And he can take a tiny baby born in a stable and make that baby the Savior of the world.

Now if God can do all that, what are you so worried about?

Almighty God, increase my faith so that I might believe without wavering that you are greater than all my problems. Amen.

Musical bonus: I hope you enjoy this up-tempo version of [Somebody Talkin' About Jesus](#) by Chanticleer.

The Promise of Mercy and Grace

“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

Mercy is what gets us out of trouble.
Grace gives us what we don't deserve.

A friend gave me a tape of a speech Gary Olson made to a group of Christian coaches. Gary was a former elder of our church in Oak Park, IL and for many years was the head football coach at Oak Park-River Forest High School. He talked to the coaches about how to handle the hard times of life. He told how he collapsed during football practice and was taken to the hospital where the doctors discovered he had an enlarged heart. A few days later he had surgery to replace a defective heart valve. Not long after that his mother suddenly died of a brain hemorrhage. It seemed almost too much to bear. He said he called his pastor and asked, “How should I pray?” His pastor told him to pray “Lord, have mercy. God, have mercy. Jesus, have mercy.” I was his pastor and a very good friend. I smiled when I heard him tell the story because I had forgotten that phone call. Then it all came back to me. My answer was off the top of my head, but it was perfectly biblical.

There are many times in life when the only thing we can do is to cry out, “God, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Jesus, have mercy.” When we pray like that, we will find the mercy we need from God.

Verse 16 ends with the good news that we can find “grace to help in our time of need.” One translation says we can find “grace to help in the nick of time.” I like that. The last phrase literally means “at the right moment.” *God's answers are always perfectly timed.* Not too soon and not too late. Often they do seem to come “in the nick of time.” God gives us the grace we need, but not until we truly need it.

Do you need mercy? You can have it.
Do you need grace? Ask for it.

When you come in Jesus' name, the Father will not turn you away.

Lord Jesus, thank you for mercy and grace that always arrives in the nick of time. Amen.

Musical bonus: Charles Wesley wrote today's hymn in 1739. Over the years other writers (most notably George Whitefield) changed some of the lyrics. We know it as **Hark! The Herald Angels Sing**. Let's enjoy this beautiful rendition by Celtic Woman.

The Promise of Victory in Hard Times

“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Corinthians 4:8-9).

Sometimes we don't know which way to go.

Life has a way of throwing us a curve ball now and then. Sometimes we face circumstances that are so confusing that we don't know what we need or what we want or what would be best. There have been times when I have said, “Lord Jesus, if you were here, standing in front of me, and you said, ‘Ray, what do you want me to do for you?’ I wouldn't know what to say.” Romans 8:26 reminds us that sometimes we don't know how to pray. There are moments when the pressure is so great, and we are so tired and worn out and life has become so confusing that we don't know what to say to the Lord.

Fatigue wears us all down eventually.

I have found in those moments that if all I can do is cry out, “O God, O Jesus. Have mercy, Lord, have mercy,” then that is enough. The Lord who knows all things can fill in the details. People sometimes ask for more information, so they can “pray more intelligently.” I'm all for that, but it's not like the Lord needs more information from us or that better information will somehow make our prayers “better” with the Lord.

When we are confused, Jesus is not confused.
Sometimes we are puzzled and perplexed by life.
Sometimes we are bewildered and unsure.

That's okay.

We are not driven to despair because life doesn't depend on our knowledge of the big picture. When we are at our wit's end, God is just getting started. He does his best work when we have given up completely.

More and more I am convinced our best apologetic to the watching world is not some argument we make to prove Jesus rose from the dead (as important as that is). To a large degree, our friends will judge our Christianity by how we respond when we take it on the chin. Tim Keller says we need a theology of suffering if we're going to reach this generation. He's right. If Christians are truly the light of the world, when is the light most likely to be seen? In the bright sun of midday or in the darkness of the night? The answer is obvious. And it's not as if we

must choose. We are the light of the world 24 hours a day. But our testimony given during hardship and sorrow will resonate more loudly because it comes at midnight.

Anyone can sing when the sun is shining.

If we can still sing at midnight, the world will hear us differently.

Heavenly Father, give me gritty faith so that the world may know Jesus is enough even in the hardest times. Amen.

Musical bonus: Red Mountain Music produces new music for older hymn texts. Here's an updated version of [Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus](#), written by Charles Wesley.

The Promise of Transformation

“Predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Romans 8:29).

In the year 1464 a sculptor named Agostino di Duccio began working on a massive piece of flawed marble. Intending to produce a magnificent sculpture of an Old Testament prophet for a cathedral in Florence, Italy, he labored for two years and then stopped. In 1476 Antonio Rossellino started to work on the same piece of marble, and in time abandoned it also.

In 1501 a 26-year-old sculptor named Michelangelo was offered a considerable sum of money to produce something worthwhile from that enormous block of marble called “the giant.” As he began his work, he saw a major flaw near the bottom that had stymied other sculptors, including (it is said) Leonardo da Vinci. He decided to turn that part of the stone into a broken tree stump that would support the right leg. He worked on the project for four years until he had produced the incomparable “David.” Today the seventeen-foot-tall statue stands on display at the Accademia Gallery in Florence where people come from around the world to view it. More than a masterpiece, it is one of the greatest works of art ever produced. It has been said there is no statue more perfect.

How did he do it? Here is the answer in his own words:

“In every block of marble I see a statue as plain as though it stood before me, shaped and perfect in attitude and action. I have only to hew away the rough walls that imprison the lovely apparition to reveal it to the other eyes as mine see it.”

Said in more colloquial terms, “I cut away everything that didn’t look like David.”

Let’s apply this to the spiritual life. *All of us are works-in-progress.* We’re not finished, not glorified, not perfected, not completed. But God never stops working on us because there is so much work that needs to be done.

Some days it feels like we’re not making much progress, but that’s okay because the Father knows what he is doing. Little by little he is chipping away everything that doesn’t look like Jesus.

God has ordained that his children will be made complete in the end. We’re not that way now. Most of us feel fragmented and torn in a thousand directions. We’re under construction in this life. But God intends that when we finally get to heaven, the hammers and saws will be put away, and we will stand before the Lord with every aspect of our life made perfect.

During a visit to the Billy Graham Library in Charlotte, North Carolina, we saw the spot where Ruth Graham is buried. Engraved on her tombstone are these words:

“End of construction. Thank you for your patience.”

If you hear the faint sound of hammering and sawing on the inside, do not despair. When God is finished, you will be like Jesus.

Spirit of God, make me more like Jesus today. Amen.

Musical bonus: When George Frideric Handel wrote The Messiah, he included [For Unto Us a Child is Born](#) based on Isaiah 9:6. Let's listen to this version by the Choir of King's College, Cambridge.

Day 19

The Promise of Freedom from Fear

“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery” (Hebrews 2:14-15).

Down deep in the human heart there is a fear of death that Satan uses to keep us enslaved. He plays upon our fear of death to keep us in the chains of sin. That’s why the Bible says the sting of death is sin (1 Corinthians 15:56). When the unsaved die, they die with their sins still upon them, like a heavy burden, a vast weight bearing them down to hell. They die miserable, angry, frustrated, and fearful because they don’t know what to do with their sins.

What a difference it makes to die having your sins forgiven. How many times have I heard Christians say when a loved one dies, “What do people do who don’t know the Lord?” Death is hard enough to face if you are a Christian, but it is intolerable without the Lord. And yet every day countless thousands march into eternity with the leaden weight of sin hanging around their necks.

A friend who watched a loved one die said it succinctly in just two words: “Death stinks.” Yes, it does, which is why the Bible says death is the last enemy that shall be destroyed (1 Corinthians 15:26). Some people claim death is a “natural” part of life. This is certainly true in the sense that death comes to all of us eventually. Where sin exists, death is indeed “natural.” But that is only part of the biblical picture. Death reigns because of Adam’s sin (Romans 5:12-14). Jesus Christ gave his infallible Word that “everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:26). Like most pastors I have quoted those verses often during funeral services. I like to do it when the dead person is in the casket right in front of me. After all, that’s when the full impact of Jesus’ words really hits home. Do we believe Jesus or not? John Stott comments that for the Christian, death has become a “trivial episode,” a minor inconvenience and nothing more. If we know Jesus, death is like closing our eyes and one moment later opening them in heaven.

Unbelievers don’t have that privilege, nor do they understand our confidence as we enter death’s door. For them death is the end—or so they think. For us it is the next step in our eternal life with God.

Lord Jesus, you are the Lord of Life! Death has no power over you. Because you live, we too shall live. Set us free from fear so that we can live boldly and love freely because nothing can ever separate us from you. Amen.

Musical bonus: Sovereign Grace helps us understand how [One Still Night](#) changed the whole world.

The Promise of an Eternal Home

“We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8).

Where is home for you?

If you live long enough, and if you move around enough, the answer to that question will be a moving target. When I was growing up, home was a small town in Alabama. Recently Marlene and I moved for the 11th time in 44 years. That seems like a lot, until you realize the Census Bureau says the average American moves 11.7 times.

Moving around so much does have its benefits, such as seeing new places and meeting new people. As a result of our moves, we have friends all over the country, and for that matter we have friends around the world. But the flip side is that there is a certain rootlessness to life at this point. When you move eleven times, it’s hard to know where home is.

On a trip to Atlanta, I called Marlene and left a message saying I was looking forward to coming home. I didn’t mean I was looking forward to the house where we were living. When I got home, I didn’t hug the drapes and say, “Drapes, I’m glad to see you.” I didn’t say to the rug, “Oh, rug, I missed you so much.” The house is beautiful, but it is home because the people I love live there. Home to me is where they are, and if they are not there, it doesn’t seem like home at all.

That’s the point Paul is making in 2 Corinthians 5:8.

Our home isn’t in this world. Our home is somewhere else. We will never really be at home in this world because we are constantly saying good-bye to the people we love the most. They leave us, or we leave them. Our children grow up, they leave home, they come back for a visit, and all too soon they leave again. As the years pass, the visits grow more infrequent. If you are looking for a place where you won’t have to say good-bye, you won’t find it on Planet Earth. You’ll have to go somewhere else. The good-byes of this life are meant to make us homesick for heaven.

Adrian Rogers said it this way: “If you sometimes feel out of place, without roots, detached for whatever reason, take heart—that’s how homesickness feels! Your Chief Shepherd is preparing a permanent home for you in heaven, and he is waiting to see you there!”

If you don't feel at home in the world, that's a good sign because we are pilgrims on our way to a better place.

Keep your chin up, child of God.
We're marching toward heaven.
Soon we will be at home with the Lord.

Lord Jesus, what would we do without you? We look forward to being at home with you in heaven forever. Thank you for giving us hope death cannot destroy. Amen.

Musical bonus: Almost everyone knows Silent Night. What you may not know is that it was written in German by Joseph Mohr in 1816. Here's a beautiful version of the original German [Stille Nacht](#) by the St. Thomas Boys Choir.

Journey to New Joy



The Promise of Glory

“Glory to God in the highest” (Luke 2:14).

G. K. Chesterton said, “Whatever else is or is not true, this one thing is certain—man is not what he was meant to be.”

We were made for glory, but our glory faded a long time ago. First we disobeyed, then we died on the inside, then we started dying on the outside, then we turned to our own devices, and finally we said, “God, we don’t need you at all. Leave us alone!” And we wonder why the world is the way it is. Look in the mirror. “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”

So God came to visit us.

He came as a baby, and when he grew up, we killed him. Murdered him. Hung him on a cross. That’s the thanks we gave to God for visiting our planet. But we were wrong about everything. After we killed him, he came back from the dead—proving he was right all along and we were wrong—dead wrong about everything—and still God loved us and came from heaven to earth on the greatest rescue mission in history.

He came because we blew it so badly.
He came, and we killed him.
He died and became our Savior.

No one but God could have done something like that. What a story! What a Christ! C.S. Lewis said, “The son of God became a man to enable men to become the sons of God.” God has done it all. That’s the good news of Christmas: *God has done it all*. The only thing left to you and me is to believe. God wrapped his Son in swaddling clothes and said to the whole world, “This is my Christmas gift to you.”

Jesus came to reverse the curse we brought upon ourselves. Now in heaven he is crowned with glory and honor. One day those who believe in Jesus will share that glory with him.

Christmas matters because truth matters. And the heart of the truth is that God did not leave us alone, but he came to visit us one dark night 2,000 years ago.

The glory of God shines forth from the manger in Bethlehem.
His glory still shines today.
One day his glory will fill the earth.

For those who believe in Jesus, the best is yet to come.

O Holy Child, let your light shine in us and fill this dark world with your glory. Amen.

Musical bonus: BarlowGirl sings a medley of [Carol of the Bells and Sing We Now of Christmas.](#)

The Promise of Peace

“His name will be called . . . Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

Will there ever be peace on earth?
Most days the answer seems to be no.
But this name brings good news with it.

The phrase means “the prince whose coming brings peace.” The word “prince” means something like “General of the Army.” It speaks of his high position. The word “peace” tells us his essential nature.

All over the globe there are ethnic conflicts and tribal wars. There is turmoil in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Ukraine, North Korea, India, Mali, Nigeria, Israel, Turkey and Iran. There are even whispers of trouble in China. We’re almost immune to violence because we live in a violent world.

Peace means that the fighting is over, the killing has stopped, and the soldiers have put down their guns. It means little children can now play in the streets without fear and mothers don't have to stay up late at night worrying whether they will ever see their sons and daughters again.

But more than that, peace means the restoration of a broken relationship. It's more than just the end of fighting and bickering. It's what happens when two people who haven't been speaking become friends. Peace means that a relationship once filled with enmity now is filled with joy. Peace turns suspicion into trust and hatred into love. It's the only way to turn enemies into friends.

Isaiah 9:6 tells us God’s plan for world peace focuses on a baby asleep in a manger in Bethlehem. He is the ultimate Prince of Peace.

- *In the past, his coming made peace with God
- *In the present, those who trust in him find peace in their hearts when Christ comes in.
- *In the future, his second coming will usher in a kingdom of peace.

We live in a world marked by strife and bloodshed.
He is not a failure. We are.

God’s plan for peace rests not in treaties or education or material prosperity.

God's plan for peace starts with the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ.

To know him is to know blessing and happiness.

To live without him means a life that is restless and miserable.

He came to bring peace.

He did. He does. He will.

Lord Jesus, you came to bring peace to a world torn by sin and suffering. Make me an instrument of your peace today. Amen.

Musical bonus: Today we have a special treat: the **Star Carol** by John Rutter recorded at the Royal Albert Hall in London.

The Promise of Joy

“I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people” (Luke 2:10).

“Christmas is a delightful disruption of the way things normally go.”
That’s how William Willimon describes Christmas.

I like that phrase “delightful disruption” because it catches the spirit of Luke 2. One moment you’re tending the sheep in the middle of the night, the next you’re being scared out of your wits by an angelic choir. I don’t know how delightful that is, but it’s definitely a disruption.

Doug Goins paints a vivid picture of how shepherds were viewed in that day:

The Judean shepherds were the lowest of the low socially-common men, a despised class with a bad reputation. Shepherds were known as thieves because they were nomadic, and as they moved their sheep around the country, sometimes they got confused about what was "mine" and what was "thine." They were all tarred with the same brush-untrustworthy, dishonest. They were not allowed to give testimony in a Jewish court of law. Their work made it impossible for them to observe the Jewish ceremonial laws and temple rituals, so they were considered religiously unclean and unacceptable. It's pretty amazing to think this heavenly invasion came to such social outcasts! (From the sermon “Journeys of Joy”)

So when the angel says, “To you is born,” he’s really saying, “Christ came for lowly shepherds.” But what about those theologians in Jerusalem who knew but didn’t care? He came for them too, but they missed it.

When Christ came, his birth was first announced to the outcasts of society. They were the first ones to hear the good news of Christmas. There is a great lesson in this for all of us. Our Lord came for the forgotten people of the earth, and most of the time they are the ones who receive him with the greatest joy. Rich people often have no time for Christ, but the poor welcome him as an honored guest.

The angel said, “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior.” “Unto you.” He came for you. *This is where Christmas becomes intensely personal.* It’s not enough to say you believe Christ came. Millions of people say that and are still lost in their sins. It’s not enough to say Christ came for someone else.

You can never be saved until you say, “Christ came for me. He died for me. He rose from the dead for me.”

He came for you. Do you believe that?

In two days Christmas will be here. Families will gather around the tree to open their presents. Already children are counting the hours until that glad moment arrives.

When you receive your gifts this Christmas, what will you do? Will you not open them? What use is a gift that is never opened?

Two thousand years ago God sent a gift wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Jesus is God's Christmas gift to you. But you will never experience Christmas joy until you personally receive God's gift—the Lord Jesus Christ.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King.

Dear God, make my heart a manger where the Christ child can be born. Amen.

Musical bonus: When God wanted to save the world, he started with a baby in a manger. First Call reminds us of this truth as they sing [One Small Child](#).

Day 24

The Promise of Immanuel

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us)” (Matthew 1:23).

Of all the names of Christ, perhaps none is more significant than Immanuel because it tells us his true identity. He is God come down from heaven in the form of a tiny baby boy. Theologians call this the “Incarnation,” a term that means “to take on human flesh, to be born as a human.” John 1:14 tells us the Word (that is, Christ) became flesh and lived among us. The Word (who was God, see John 1:1) wrapped himself in human flesh. The Son of God descended from heaven to earth and wrapped himself in the frail body of a tiny Jewish baby in a stable, in the little town of Bethlehem, in a forgotten corner of the Roman Empire. Don Skinner says it very neatly: “God did not send Christ to us; God came to us in Christ.”

Jesus Christ is God in the flesh. That tiny, helpless baby is the God who created the universe. He came from “his side” to “our side” without ever leaving “his own side.” What a stupendous, mind-blowing miracle that is. No wonder when John Wesley lay dying in 1791, he roused from his sleep long to open his eyes and exclaim, “The best of all is, God is with us!” Then he closed his eyes and died.

We need that truth more than ever at Christmastime. This is a lonely time of year for many people. In the midst of the laughter, there is pain and sadness and reminders of broken relationships. Some family reunions are like war zones, and much of the drinking that is done is not so much drinking because we are happy but drinking to cover our pain. Many people feel exhausted and stressed out as the big day approaches. During this season, we need to be reminded the Lord knows all about our troubles.

We can say it more forcefully than that. Jesus knows what others do not know about you. He knows all the hidden secrets, the inner fears, and the unspoken doubts about what tomorrow may bring.

He knows the whole truth about you and me, and he loves us anyway.

Father, we thank you that when we were far gone in sin and hopelessly lost, you came to us in the person of your Son, Jesus Christ. You clothed your Son with human flesh so that he might be our Savior. May the joy of heaven fill our hearts on this happy Christmas Eve. This we pray in the name of Immanuel, God with us, the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

Musical bonus: What would we say to Jesus as he entered our world? How would we explain how much we need him? Michael W. Smith offers his answer in [Welcome to Our World](#).

Day 25

The Promise of a Savior

“Today . . . a Savior has been born” (Luke 2:11).

You will never understand who Jesus is until you realize he came to save you from your sins. This is why he lived, this is why he died, and this is why he rose from the dead. He came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). And he saves all those who trust in him.

If our greatest need had been education, God would have sent a teacher.
If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent a banker.
If our greatest need had been advice, God would have sent a counselor.

But since our greatest need was forgiveness, God sent a Savior. His name is Jesus. He is Christ the Lord, the Son of God who came from heaven to earth.

And that brings us right back to the doctrine of the Incarnation. Who is that baby born on Christmas day? As the familiar carol puts it, “This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing; haste, haste to bring him laud, the babe, the Son of Mary.” He is the divine Son of God from heaven who in his earthly birth took on a fully human nature. All that God is and all that man is meet in perfect union in Jesus Christ. *He is fully God and fully man—the God-man who came to earth to save us from our sins.*

For those who face loneliness during this season of the year, take comfort in this fact: *God’s answer is not a theory or an abstract doctrine or a book to read or a seminar to attend.* It’s not a better job, more friends, another movie to watch, or another song to sing. It’s not even the beauty of a sunrise or a sunset. God’s answer to loneliness is wrapped up in a person—Jesus Christ. He is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. He is the only one who will never leave you or forsake you. Loneliness can be overcome through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Do you know him?

All that God has to say to us can be wrapped up in one word: “Jesus.” And not just any Jesus, but only the Lord Jesus Christ revealed in the New Testament. *He alone is the Lord from heaven. He alone can save us.* All that God has for you and me is wrapped up in his Son. No matter what difficulties we face or the decisions we must make, God leads us back to that simple one-word answer: “Jesus.”

In an interview with David Frost on PBS, Billy Graham said he hoped the last word he uttered before dying was simply this: “Jesus.” We can’t do any better than that.

Dear God, fill my heart with the wonder of Mary, the faith of Joseph, the joy of the angels, the eagerness of the shepherds, and the determination of the Wise Men so that I may rejoice in the birth of Jesus, my Lord and Savior. Amen.

Musical bonus: We end our Advent musical journey with a [medley by Amy Grant](#) that starts with the upbeat “Emmanuel,” then goes to a new arrangement of “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” and ends with the powerful words of the “Christmas Hymn.” Let the joyful music lift your heart as we celebrate our Savior’s birth.

We hope you have enjoyed this journey through the Advent season
with us!

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