

Advent-Christmas Devotional Guide 2008–2009

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Introducing Advent-Christmas Devotional Guide 2008–2009

This devotional guide is provided in the hope that it will encourage and help you as you experience and celebrate the Advent and Christmas season. It is also provided in the hope that it will enable you to grow in awareness of and celebrate your common heritage and relationship with fellow Baptists across North America and indeed across the world.

The readings extend from preparation on Thursday, November 27, 2008, for the first Sunday of Advent on November 30, 2008, to January 4, 2009, the second Sunday after Christmas day.

I express appreciation to each person and group participating in this project, especially the leaders of the North American Baptist Fellowship of the Baptist World Alliance, who encouraged it. Special appreciation is also expressed to the writers, our fellow Baptists from various places and walks of life, and who are affiliated with various Baptist groups.

May God bless you and your church as you use these devotionals.

— ROSS WEST
Publisher, BaptistWay Press®

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The North American Baptist Fellowship of the Baptist World Alliance

The North American Baptist Fellowship is one of six regional fellowships of the Baptist World Alliance. It represents a diverse Baptist family in the United States and Canada of approximately 18 million people of many different races and ethnic backgrounds. We are committed to working together to strengthen one another and minister around the world through prayer, networking, sharing resources, and cooperative ministry ventures. For additional information, please see www.nabf-bwa.org/.

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Preparing Our Hearts

PSALM 80:1–7, 17–19

The Sunday after Thanksgiving is always special for the children of our church. On that morning, a model of an empty nativity stable is placed on a table at the front of the sanctuary, along with the first poinsettias of the season. At the children's time in worship, the first story in preparation for Christmas is told. The story is of the prophets who promised that a Savior would come. The children add two miniature sheep and a cow to the stable, to await the coming of Baby Jesus. Each week another story is told, and more figures are added—shepherds waiting on the hillsides of Bethlehem; Mary and Joseph's journey from Galilee as they anticipated his birth. Then, on the Sunday before Christmas, the children carefully add Baby Jesus in the manger. Christmas is almost here! The following Sunday, the story of the Magi completes the set.

In today's devotional time we begin our own countdown to Christmas with Psalm 80—a plea from Israel for God to restore their favor. This psalm may have grown out of the era of Assyrian persecution of the Northern Kingdom. With the threat of defeat looming, Israel cried to God twice in this song (Ps. 80:7, 19) to restore and save them. “Restore us, O Lord God Almighty; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved” (NIV). The trouble was, they asked for favor but did not cease from the sins that had distanced them from God. They did not put away their idols, their dishonest practices, or their injustices.

The beginning of the Advent pilgrimage is a time for us to open our lives to God, to seek a closer walk, and also to be willing to repent of those things that distance our hearts from God's heart.

*Father, as we begin this wonderful season, we ask,
“Search me, O God . . . and see if there be any wicked way in me,”
so that our Christmas journey will be a time of restoration and deep joy.*

Janet Burton, a member of Woodlawn Baptist Church, Austin, Texas, is an author, Christian educator, and pastor's wife.

Restore Us, O God

1 THESSALONIANS 4:1–18 (9–12)

Talk about the baby blues! I couldn't hold back the tears and worries about our new little boy, my ability to be a mother, our future as a family, and what awaited us.

My husband, Tim, and I had learned we were going to have a baby. Two weeks after this good news, more followed. Tim received a Fulbright Fellowship to do research for ten months in England and Uganda. Then reality hit us. How would we have a baby *and* go to Africa? We finally decided that our new baby and I would remain in Indiana where I would continue serving a congregation and Tim would venture across the Atlantic.

Welcome, baby Peter! I was an emotional mess. How in the world would I be a single mom? How would I work fulltime, maintain our home in Indiana, and survive when all of our family was in Pennsylvania or Virginia and Tim was thousands of miles away?

The love offered to us during that stressful time was remarkable. Many in our church, and also our family far away, became the hands and feet of Jesus for us. Many a night Jane or Rosanne stayed at our house. After Peter was nine months old and I could no longer take him to work with me, Dena cared for him as if he were her own. Truly these folks were family for us when we faced difficult days.

When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, he knew they offered this sort of familial love to one another. He said, "Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters . . . you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another" (1 Thessalonians 4:9, NRSV). The bonds of shared faith spurred them to encourage each other with this love. As a recipient of this sort of love, I pray I might be able to love as I have been loved, to encourage others in their dark days, and to offer praise to God for the opportunity.

God of love, may this Advent season draw us closer to you and help us more willingly show love to our sisters and brothers in Christ.

Trisha Miller Manarin is associate pastor, McLean Baptist Church, McLean, Virginia, and pastor of cooperative ministry, First Baptist Church, Herndon, Virginia.

Good News in the Midst of Bad News

MICAH 2:1–13

When we hear or witness bad news, sometimes it is hard to see God in it. Micah 2:1–13 tells some bad news. The people were coveting, stealing, being greedy, taking women and children away from their homes, and paying attention to false prophets. Where was God in all of this?

Micah was in the middle of this time of doom. He protested against the people's wrongdoing. When, though, he cried out for justice, he was told not to preach, because the leaders did not like hearing about doom. They could not conceive of their nation being destroyed and did not want to hear that their sinful actions were unacceptable to God.

How is it today? Don't we still see some of the same things occurring that Micah condemned in these verses?

The news is not all bad, though. Both today and in Micah's time, God promised deliverance from the bad things. He promised to gather the people and bring them back together "like sheep in a pen; like a flock in its pasture" (Micah 2:12, NIV).

So, how does all of this relate to Christmas? During Advent, we are reminded of hope. God offered the people in Micah 2 hope that he was going to return, break the way open, and head the march of God's people back to their rightful place. God still offers us the same hope. Even in the midst of bad news, God offers good news, and God's good news offers hope. In this season, we find hope in believing that God will return and lead God's people.

Lord, during this Christmas season, may I find hope and reassurance of your love, comfort, and protection.

Lori Moody teaches preschoolers at King's Cross Church, Tullahoma, Tennessee. She and her husband, Phillip, have two children, Luke and Hannah.

By the Grace of God

1 CORINTHIANS 1:3–9

A recent book titled *Traffic* studies a problem you may experience if you take a trip by car during this season. I certainly have experienced it, and I hate it when it happens.

You're driving on a beautiful four-lane highway. Life is good. Then you see a road sign that reads like this: "Left lane closed. Merge right." If you're not an overly aggressive driver who doesn't mind road rage, you are faced with a big decision. Do you get in the right lane now and then watch cars whiz past you, putting you farther behind? Or do you get in the left lane and pass a few more cars that have already merged right? What if you keep passing cars until you realize the traffic in the right lane has stacked up so tightly that there's no space left for your car unless you engage in demolition derby tactics? What if you then repent, looking mournfully into the faces of the other drivers for one kind soul who will let you in even though you have done a grievous wrong and you know it?

At that point, what you need is grace.

Paul speaks of grace in an infinitely deeper sense in this Scripture text. As you read it, notice how often the word "grace" appears, and if not the word itself, the idea. The whole passage is about God's grace, with the emphasis on how God had graciously blessed the Corinthian Christians.

The season of Advent and Christmas is a season of grace, beginning with "the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus" (1 Corinthians 1:4, NRSV). We truly experience and celebrate this season only by the grace of God.

God's grace—who needs it? Only anyone who has gone astray from God's purposes and needs help coming home to God. That's all of us. The good news of this season is that God's grace is readily available. Let us open ourselves to God's grace that God so graciously offers.

Lord, we thank you for your grace, grace that is revealed so clearly in the gift of your Son.

Ross West is publisher of BaptistWay Press®, the publishing imprint of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

God of the Impossible

MICAH 4:1–5

In October 1995, thousands of people standing along the shore of San Francisco Bay waiting to watch the ships come in were surprised to see a huge inflatable plastic loaf of French bread being towed through the water by Greenpeace. On its side, large letters proclaimed: "MAKE BREAD NOT BOMBS." The message was a protest against nuclear testing in the South Pacific.

Centuries earlier, the prophet Micah made a similar proclamation. His words, however, are not phrased as mere protest; his words are a prophecy of hope and truth. He tells us not what *should* happen, but what *will*. People will stream to God's mountain for instruction; God's justice will finally bring peace to our world. People will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. We will make bread, not bombs! Weapons used for destruction will be transformed into tools for sustenance, for life. Micah's message reminds us that God makes the impossible possible, bringing life out of death.

How difficult it is, in the face of so much evidence to the contrary, to keep believing this message. The prophet's vision has not yet taken hold; some days it seems it never will. Still, the prophet's words are true. Indeed, we see in Jesus the fulfillment of these words. He came to bring peace, justice, and life out of death. Our work now, during Advent and always, is to open ourselves to this wild hope and to give ourselves to the Bringer of Hope. We yield ourselves to God, who will convert all our weapons of death into tools of life. We give God all the dark and deathly places in our hearts, to be converted towards light and life.

One day, the world will look as Micah said it would. One day, every evil shall be transformed toward God's good ends. In the meantime, we persist in hope and offer ourselves to ongoing conversion.

Gracious God, today I seek to lay down whatever in me is envious, desperate, greedy, angry, hateful, or mean. I turn it all over to you and ask you to turn it all towards your good.

Stacey Simpson Duke serves as co-pastor of First Baptist Church of Ann Arbor, Michigan, and as an American Baptist Campus Minister to the University of Michigan.

The People We Meet In Heaven

MICAH 4:6–13

The *Five People You Meet in Heaven* by Mitch Albom (2003) was an unexpected bestseller. The book tells about Eddie, an ordinary man who dies in a tragic accident. On his arrival in heaven, he encounters five people whom he did not expect to meet there. Each person either affected Eddie's life in some unseen way or was affected by Eddie without his knowing it. In each case, Eddie learns that our lives are connected and even our simplest actions can have tremendous impact on the lives of others.

Today's passage in Micah, especially verses 6–8, holds a similar surprise. In Micah 4:1–5, yesterday's reading, the prophet gave his readers a glimpse into "heaven." The vision is beautiful and stirring, familiar in its tone, and comforting in its astonishing hope.

But then Micah's vision was interrupted. A procession of motley people is ushered in—people who had been punished for their sin, exiled for their disobedience. Not only were they present, but God also made them a surprising promise. They would be a "remnant" and a "strong nation" (Micah 4:7, NIV). He would lavish these former outcasts with love and treat them like royalty.

It's easy to see here a reflection of Jesus, who said things like "blessed are the poor in spirit" and "the last shall be first," and who spent his time on earth among the poor, the sick, and the "sinners." He already saw and treated them as the royalty God would one day declare them to be!

Like Eddie, you and I may be surprised at the people we see in heaven—people we didn't expect would be there at all. Perhaps some people will be surprised to see you and me there, as well! Either way, the lesson is clear: Let's begin to see and treat each other as the royalty God has proclaimed us to be, and let's live in a way now that has eternal significance.

God of the outcasts, help us to look at others as you see them—sinners like us—but also as future royalty. Make us aware that our actions may have an impact beyond our imagination.

Jon Parks is pastor of Kenbridge Baptist Church, Kenbridge, Virginia, where he lives with his wife Tanya and their two young daughters.

What God Has in Mind

MICAH 5:1–5a

Did anyone ever taunt you with being too little, too weak, or too slow? Unfortunately, some people belittle others, attempting to make themselves look better by comparison. Over and over in the Bible, though, we read of instances in which God chooses and uses the "little ones" of this world to accomplish heavenly purposes, often in unexpected ways.

Micah records one such instance of God's unusual choosing: "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel" (Micah 5:2a, NRSV).

Who would ever have expected a little baby born in the little town of Bethlehem to be Jesus the Messiah? But, as Isaiah tells us, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord" (Isaiah 55:8, NRSV).

What does God have in mind for his children? Jeremiah puts it like this: "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jeremiah 29:11, NRSV). Hosea, too, passes along insight from God: "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6: 6, NRSV).

In what ways can contemporary Christians participate in what God has in mind? Consider these words of Jesus: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matthew 25: 40, NRSV). Whenever and wherever Christians perform good deeds for others for God, they carry out God's purposes.

Could there be any greater joy than knowing that we are doing God's work in God's world? Surely not!

Lord, keep me ever close to the center of your will for my life and ever sensitive to the needs and hopes of other members of your family, for you.

June Rose Garrott, a member of Seventh and James Baptist Church, Waco, Texas, served as a Baptist missionary in Hong Kong and Japan and taught English in Shanghai and Beijing.

Come, Let Us Return to the Lord

HOSEA 6:1–6

The Advent season is a time to enjoy the heartwarming rituals, stirring music, and beautiful decorations that assure us that God always loves us and will make everything all right. The beautiful services can help us forget for a while our fears about a bad economy and a war that drags on and on.

That may be what the people of Judah and Ephraim thought, too. God had said in the verse that precedes today's passage that he was waiting for them to acknowledge their guilt and seek him. So the people confidently sang, "Come, let us return to the Lord," remembering they had three days to get to covenant renewal services (Hosea 6:1, NASB). *We've learned our lesson, they thought. After a few days God will revive us. He is as faithful as the sunrise or the rains that ripen the crops every year. All we have to do is show up and make a sacrifice.*

To their surprise, God answered sadly, "What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah?" (Hos. 6:4, NASB). God knew their devotion to him was no more lasting than a fleeting cloud or the early morning dew. So God said he would keep on sending his powerful word through his prophets and shining his judgment on their sins. Their pious song had said nothing about acknowledging guilt or seeking to know God personally.

Well, if observing this beautiful season is not enough, what do you want of us? they must have asked. Patiently, God said again that he wanted them to acknowledge their unfaithfulness to him and to know his true character. He wanted them to show toward him the kind of loyalty and devotion that he always demonstrated. He wanted his people to demonstrate their true understanding of him by showing mercy to each other.

God, we acknowledge that we tend to act just like our spiritual ancestors and to forget what you require. Help us acknowledge our guilt, be loyal to you, and know you more fully in this Advent season.

Robert L. Lamb is dean emeritus of the School of Divinity, Gardner-Webb University. He is a member of Boiling Springs Baptist Church, Boiling Springs, North Carolina.

When Righteousness and Peace Kiss

PSALM 85:1–2, 8–13

Peanut butter and jelly; Larry, Moe, and Curly; Christmas and carols—some things just go together. But sometimes things that belong together aren't always kept together. Like that one sock in your sock drawer, or like the hex nut in your hand that is separated from the bolt that is who-knows-where in your garage.

Through the course of time things that belong together get separated. Maybe it's you and a friend, maybe it's you and your spouse. Maybe you're estranged from someone you love very much, but you find it difficult to reach out to him or her.

Advent, as it moves us toward Christmas, offers the promise of many things to come when God fulfills the kingdom that is both here and not yet. Today's Scripture reading speaks of a time when two things seemingly separated in our day will be reunited. It speaks of a day of salvation when "love and faithfulness meet together, righteousness and peace kiss each other" (Ps. 85:10, NIV).

That doesn't sound much like the world we see around us. The great news of Advent is that it points us again and again to the birth of Christ. The birth of Christ set a plan in motion whereby God intends to bring back together all the things that belong together—you and me; us and God. This psalm speaks of a day when the promise of peace and righteousness will become a reality.

As you take stock of the things in your life that belong together but are separated, may you find joy in God's promise that broken things can be made whole again. Even your separated socks.

God, help me to see my part in the broken relationships of my life and to work to mend those things. May peace and righteousness, as well as love and faithfulness, guide me to participate in bringing peace and righteousness together in Your world.

Gary Long is husband to one, father to three, and pastor to a whole herd at Willow Meadows Baptist Church, Houston, Texas.

A New Heart, a New Spirit

EZEKIEL 36:24–28

One of the best parts of the Christmas season is going home. That may mean going to see relatives or perhaps traveling to a hometown, or it may just mean being in the place or with the people that make you feel like you're home. As we celebrate Christmas at the end of the year, being at home (whatever that may mean to each of us) provides us with a time of renewal as we move forward into the next year.

When the Jews were in exile, surely they longed for a sense of home. Scattered from their homeland, they were not with the people or in the place where they could feel that sense of belonging. Knowing their struggle, God provided prophets like Ezekiel who assured the people that one day God would bring them back to their homeland.

But the promise of a return home included more than a geographical change; it also meant a spiritual change. God would cleanse the people of their impurities and provide them with “a new heart” and “a new spirit.” No longer would their hearts be resistant and hard like stone. The hard hearts that refused to repent and were thus sent into exile would instead be turned into soft, receptive hearts “of flesh.” Too, the “new spirit” received would be the Lord's own. The Lord's Spirit would guide God's people and encourage loyalty to God's purposes.

Have we drifted this year from a place where we feel at home with God? As we make plans to go “home for Christmas,” we can be assured that God also desires to bring us back to *his* home. Too, when we return to God, the Christ celebrated at Advent renews our hearts and provides us with a fresh sense of the Holy Spirit. There's no better way to celebrate the season than being renewed and at home with God.

*Lord, help me allow the season of Advent to draw me home to you,
so that with the new heart and new Spirit that Christ brings, I can
know that I am one of your people and you are my God.*

Meredith Stone is teaching pastor at Crosspoint Fellowship, Abilene, Texas, and recruitment coordinator at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon Seminary.

Let Me Introduce You to Jesus

MARK 1:1–8

Have you ever been called on to introduce a guest speaker? If so, you may have gathered some information that would help the audience know the speaker's background and qualifications. This information would prepare them to listen to the speaker more intelligently.

Jesus had been introduced by the prophets long before he was born, and the angels had introduced him as “a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:7, NASB). But when Jesus was ready to begin his ministry, God sent a special person to introduce him. “John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness. . . . And he was preaching and saying, ‘After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. I baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit’” (Mark 1: 4, 7–8, NASB).

When Jesus showed up, John's introduction was simple: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29, NASB). Through John the Baptist, God was preparing the people of that day—and of our day, too—to know and listen to Jesus.

During this Advent season our focus is fixed primarily on Jesus' birth. Through music, drama, sermons, and reading of Scripture, we help to recreate the wondrous event of God being made flesh to dwell among us. But that introduction is not complete unless we expand it to include the reason for this event. Jesus was coming to teach us about himself and about how we should live. Too, Jesus was coming to shed his own blood as he took the punishment for our sins. No wonder John felt he was not worthy even to untie the Savior's shoelaces!

*Lord, help me to introduce you in such a way that people will be
prepared to listen to the voice of your Spirit in their hearts.*

John Carter is retired as dean, School of Education, Samford University, and is a member of Dawson Memorial Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama.

The Lord—Our Light and Our Salvation

PSALM 27

All of us have had one of those days. We wake up brimming with confidence. We feel we can handle whatever comes our way. Then something goes wrong, and we find our confidence plummeting. Suddenly we anticipate trouble at every turn.

All of us have had one of *these* days, too. We wake up feeling anxious about something, or for some reason the day gets off to a bad start. Our confidence is low. Then something good happens or someone says something affirming about us, and things turn around. Now we find ourselves self-assured, and we end the day on a high note.

Psalms 27 is a meditation by a godly person—many scholars believe it to be King David—who has experienced this roller coaster of emotions. Verses 1–6 could refer to how David felt after defeating Goliath and becoming a national hero. But by verse 9 the mood has changed dramatically.

Perhaps this part of the psalm reflects a later, more perilous time of David's life, when he was a fugitive from King Saul. But whether it was a good/bad day or a bad/good day, the writer understood that his heavenly Father was always with him. So he could begin the psalm by proclaiming, "The Lord is my light and salvation; whom shall I fear?" (Ps. 27:1, NRSV), and he could end it in a similar fashion: "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!" (27:13–14, NRSV).

For some the Advent-Christmas season is a time of great joy. For others, especially those who have suffered loss, it can be a difficult time. The good news of this wonderful season is that God is with all of us at all times—however confident or deflated we feel.

Father, during this time of year when we celebrate the birth of the One who is your exact likeness, helps us to trust that with your help we can handle anything that comes our way.

Mark Brasler is minister for spiritual development at Westwood Baptist Church, Springfield, Virginia.

Salvation Is Coming

ISAIAH 4:2–6

We can live without many things, but we cannot live well for long without hope. In Christian experience, hope is a confidence about the future based on a present relationship with Christ.

Hope is not wishful thinking. It is confidence. Hope is something you can count on.

During a time in Judah's history when empty religious practices devoid of justice and love put the nation on a fast track toward judgment, Isaiah offered confident words about the future.

On the other side of judgment, God promises salvation. A Branch would grow up out of the stump that judgment left behind (Isaiah 11:1; 4:2; Zechariah 3:8; 6:12; Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15). God would cleanse the remnant of Israel from their guilt (Isa. 4:4). They would know the reality of God's glory among them, even as their ancestors had experienced God's presence in the wilderness (4:5). The "Branch of the Lord" would be their protection from all that might threaten them in the future (4:2, 6).

Our world contains plenty of threatening, anxiety-producing experiences. Today's newspaper likely contains news of economic and political storms that are brewing. The searing heat of terrorism and war bear down on us. World leaders make promises of peace, but we have grown skeptical. We need something we can count on.

At Christmas, God sent Christ, the Messiah, into our world, taking the first steps to undermining the violence and greed of this world's system. The kingdom of God began to dawn with the appearance of Jesus, gradually eliminating the darkness.

The full noonday brightness has not yet arrived. Shadows remain. But we have hope in the salvation God provides. God is sending his Son. And all shall be made right.

Teach me to live with confidence in the midst of my world's turmoil, knowing that you care, that you reign, and that you can be counted on, O God of hope.

R. Robert Creech is senior pastor, University Baptist Church, Houston, Texas.

God's Surprises

LUKE 1:5–17

Eddie and Susan dreamed of having a large family. Years went by. It became clearer to them that it wasn't going to happen. It looked like there would not even be one child born to this hopeful couple with enough love to go around for a dozen. Prayerfully they decided to adopt. A precious little girl came home to live with them. Their hearts were full.

A few months later, Susan realized she was pregnant. And, lo and behold, she gave birth to not one, but two babies! A boy and a girl. Isn't that just like our God of surprises?

God's calling of Zechariah and Elizabeth involved a wonderful surprise and an instruction manual! Faithful and righteous they were, according to Luke 1:6, but little did they know what God had in store for them. Their longings and prayers for a child would not only become a reality, but that child would be blessed and filled by the Holy Spirit even before he was born! (Luke 1:15). They had joined in the divine dance with a gracious, loving God who had already chosen them to be the parents of this special child! Only it would be in God's *kairos*—God's perfect time.

When we are sensitive to God's nudges and open to the Spirit's leading, we are making ourselves available not only to receive blessings but also to bless others. Zechariah and Elizabeth's story is a chapter in the narrative of Jesus' birth. Their son John would be famous! His unique lifestyle would attract attention, and through him people would have their hearts prepared to receive the Messiah, Jesus. The blessing God had for them went far beyond their expectations. A life of righteous, faithful living came with a bonus prize!

Gracious God, humble my spirit, cleanse my heart, and make me open to the leading of your Spirit so that I may faithfully serve you as Zechariah and Elizabeth did.

Jeanie McGowan is associate pastor of single adults, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, Missouri, and Leadership Team Leader, Baptist General Convention of Missouri.

Focusing Completely on Christ

PHILIPPIANS 3:7–11

After serving a two-year term in mission service in Vietnam, Jim Bobo felt sure of God's call to spend his life there. In January 1975, he returned with his wife Linda. They unpacked crates, set up housekeeping, and began their missionary careers. Just four months later, the newlyweds threw some clothes in a suitcase and traveled to Saigon, planning a brief stay until fighting died down. But Saigon fell, and the missionaries barely escaped. They lost everything. Like Paul in Philippians 3:7–11, Linda and Jim learned what it was like to lose what once seemed important "for the sake of Christ" (Phil. 3:7, NIV).

Linda and Jim were reassigned as missionaries, but Jim's heart remained in Vietnam. They offered hospitality in Hong Kong several times to Alma Hunt, executive director of Woman's Missionary Union. While Linda and Jim were on furlough, Miss Alma reciprocated by inviting the family to dinner. In her apartment, Jim felt especially drawn to two paintings of an old Vietnamese man. Miss Alma explained they had been a gift while visiting missionaries there.

On a later occasion, Miss Hunt insisted on taking Linda and Jim to a restaurant for Jim's birthday. That evening, she presented him with two items tied in newspaper—the paintings of the Vietnamese man.

Today, the pictures hang in Jim and Linda's home, a constant reminder of Paul's words in Philippians, "What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. . . ." (4:8–9, NIV). May we remember during this holiday season to concentrate on faith in Christ—first, last, and forever.

Lord, lead me to remember that faith counts, focus counts, and focusing my faith on you alone counts for eternity. Help me to focus completely on you and the miracle of your birth, death, and resurrection this Christmas season.

Kathy Robinson Hillman, former president of Texas Woman's Missionary Union, serves as associate professor and acquisitions librarian at Baylor University, Waco, Texas.

Becoming What God Planned

PHILIPPIANS 3:12–16

When my parents were expecting me, the fifth of their eight children, my mother wanted to have a son. This event was long before sonograms, when parents had to wait until the birth of a child to learn whether the child was a boy or a girl.

My mother had given birth to a son followed by three daughters. She told the Lord that if he would give her another son, she would name him for three preachers and dedicate his life to the ministry. When I came home from college nineteen years later to tell my parents I believed God was calling me to ministry, my mother told me about the dedication she had made before I was born. It was a special time of sharing with my parents.

It is an incredible thing to know that God has a plan for your life. When the Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippian Christians, he described his desire “to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Phil. 3:12, NIV). Paul described his personal struggle in verses 13–14. “Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (NIV). Paul knew he had not yet become the person God had planned for him to be, but that did not diminish his desire to become that person. It was his life’s mission.

Christmas is not just about God becoming human in the person of his Son. It is God’s announcement that because of his Son’s Advent we can all become so much more than we would otherwise. I hope my mother is proud of her fifth child and second son, but my greatest desire is to become the person God planned for me to be.

God, grant us the grace to open our lives more fully to your redemptive work during this Christmas season.

Jim Hill is executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Missouri.

Life Filled with Joy

PSALM 126

When we lived in Virginia, our house was next to the James River. Naturally I wanted a boat. My wife said, “Remember, the two best days in a person’s life are the day he buys a boat and the day he sells the boat.”

I responded, “Would you rob me of one of the two best days in my life?”

We spend time, money, and energy pursuing pleasure. We live in a society that values fun and excitement. Yet laughter and joy may last only for a season. Afterward, too often it is replaced by despair and emptiness.

Where can we find true happiness and laughter from the soul? In Psalm 126 the psalmist speaks of joy that comes from participation in God’s kingdom activity.

God’s people had been delivered from captivity. The ecstasy of freedom appeared at first as a dream. Could it be true they had been restored to their homeland? They proclaimed, “Then our mouth was filled with laughter And our tongue with joyful shouting. . . . The Lord has done great things for us; We are glad” (Psalm 126:2–3, NASB).

The psalmist then changed to the metaphor of the garden. There will be no harvest unless there has been sowing. The joy of reaping comes only after the pain and toil of planting.

Certainly Advent is a time of celebration. The Christ child has come to redeem his people. Light comes to a darkened world. Hope replaces despair.

Yet the Christmas story is also filled with sorrow. The world appeared to share the birth pains with Mary. The setting was a barn. The occasion was the registration of a repressed people.

The joy for Christ’s followers is not superficial or in blissful ignorance of the suffering of humanity. It is found in the midst of the costs and challenges of discipleship.

Truly experiencing this joy comes as we share Christ’s hope with a world hungry for him. Then joy springs from deep within us and is not temporal but eternal.

Gracious Lord, let us be filled with the joy of your presence today regardless of the challenges we encounter.

Randel Everett is executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

God's Mission in a Baby

ISAIAH 61:1–4, 8–11

God seems to prefer to act in unexpected ways. In our eyes, the first person wins the race. In God's eyes, the last shall be first. We want God to speak to us in a loud audible voice, telling us loudly and unmistakably about our life direction. God speaks in still small voices, asking us—in our busyness—to be still and know him. We expected the Messiah of the world to be a great established king. God sent a baby. Further, when we read in this passage about the work of God's Servant in bringing good news to the oppressed, healing the brokenhearted, and proclaiming freedom to captives, we recognize the expected way of success no longer holds.

Jesus said the poor will always be among you. Often, we choose to not see the poor. In our eyes, God helps those who help themselves. In God's eyes, though, we are intricately connected to one another's prosperity, in body and spirit. We've turned our world into a land inhabited by the expectation, *What's in it for me?* God definitely has another idea.

If we are to prepare the way for the coming Christ, the planting season must begin today. We must plant fields of plenty, crops of righteousness and justice.

Today let us ask, *Who are we? Are we the oppressed who will hear the good news that we will no longer face brokenness, or are we the ones responsible for their poverty? Are we the brokenhearted who will be restored to wholeness, or are we the ones who have broken their hearts? Are we the enslaved who will be freed, or are we the captors who have isolated them?*

This season let us begin our planting, drawing our living water—our life force and expectation—from the Coming Christ. He truly has the power to heal brokenness, bind hearts, and set people free.

Create in me a clean heart, O God. Help me see the injustices around me and within me and respond according to your expectation.

Angie Weston Hoff is a member of Blacksburg Baptist Church, Blacksburg, Virginia. She is an ordained minister and serves on the Board of Directors for Africa Exchange.

Be Strong in the Lord

EPHESIANS 6:10–17

Put on the whole armor of God," as Ephesians 6:11 (NRSV) states, may not be exactly what we have in mind as we approach the Christmas season. Plus all the talk in the text about "the wiles of the devil," "enemies of blood and flesh," "cosmic powers of this present darkness," and "spiritual forces of evil" doesn't seem to fit with our Christmas images of trees, caroling, and brightly-wrapped gifts.

The truth is that we want the Christmas season to be that one time in the year when things are perfect, like Camelot, a place and time where the ideal becomes the actual. Let us pray that this year Christmas is exactly that.

The reality of Christmases past forces us to recognize, however, that the chance of this Christmas being perfectly wonderful, with no intrusions otherwise, is not great. In fact, Christmas can be a hard time. For many, it's a distressing time of year. We all know what the malls are like. Family gatherings can be filled with tension as well as joy. Many people spend themselves into a financial bottomless pit at this time. People can be extra-cheerful at Christmas, but the pressure of it all can result in great grumpiness and worse, too. The "Bah! Humbug!" response of Scrooge can creep in, and sometimes Tiny Tim doesn't get helped. Unlike *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, sometimes Ebenezer Scrooge never gets the message of Christmas.

So do we need to "put on the whole armor of God" and *be strong in the Lord* this Christmas? The answer is yes. We likely will need "the belt of truth," "the breastplate of righteousness," a readiness to "proclaim the gospel of peace," "the shield of faith," "the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." Today is a good day to make sure we put them on.

Lord, let us be strong in you so we will be working with you to make this the best Christmas ever, for others as well as ourselves.

Ross West is publisher, BaptistWay Press®, Dallas, Texas.

Receive the Messiah in Repentance and Faith

ACTS 3:17—4:4

A teenager in our church brought a friend with her to Sunday School who had absolutely no background in church. The friend's father was an alcoholic, and her mother sold her body to provide some income for the family. Yet our youth embraced this guest and eventually loved her to the Lord. The week after I baptized her, I asked her to give her testimony to the church. I still remember, sitting behind her, seeing her whole body trembling with fear. She encompassed her testimony in a single sentence. "I was a nobody," she declared, "but God made me a somebody."

That teenager illustrates the transforming power of the gospel first proclaimed by Jesus' disciples. Peter's sermon to the crowd who flocked around him in the temple is a prime example. When Peter preached to the crowd that day, he did not present a doctrine to believe in. Instead, he presented a Person whose name was Jesus to whom people can relate. Jesus fulfilled God's promise to Israel that God would send a Messiah. Even more, Jesus offered what no one else could ever provide—forgiveness of sins and a new life.

How can we appropriate that forgiveness and new life? Peter told his audience that they could have their sins wiped out if they would "repent . . . and turn to God" (Acts 3:19, NIV). Peter called on his listeners to make a deliberate decision to turn from the life of sin they were following and to begin to follow Jesus. The Book of Acts reveals that Peter's message moved the crowd, for "many who heard the message believed" (4:4, NIV). Like the teenager in my church, when they repented and turned to God, God made them a "somebody." It is no wonder we call the message about Jesus *good news*.

Lord, thank you for providing for us through Jesus Christ what we could never provide for ourselves—forgiveness and new life.

Brian Harbour of Richardson, Texas, is retired as a pastor and is now president of SeminaryPLUS, a non-profit organization devoted to encouraging pastors.

Prepare Your Heart

JOHN 1:6–8, 19–26

Hong Kong was the site of the equestrian events for the 2008 Olympics. Along the routes to the events were many people dressed in coordinated shirts. Each pointed the way to the event. None of them considered themselves to be Olympians as they pointed the way.

John the Baptist never pretended to be the Light. He was not the Light. "He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe" (John 1:7, NIV). John the Baptist knew his role was to point people to Jesus.

John saw himself as "the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord'" (1:23, NIV). Many people invest hours in preparing themselves physically to meet people they consider important. John cared little, though, for the physical preparations people might make. John preached a message of preparation aimed at making straight paths in people's hearts.

The beautiful sights and sounds of the Christmas season make it easy for one to want to make physical preparations for the celebrations. However, many hearts hold secrets people do not want to admit to themselves, much less someone else.

The most important preparation for the coming of the Savior is the preparation of the heart. How can anyone with an unclean heart honor the One whom God has sent? Many who say they have pledged their whole hearts to God have allowed someone or something else, good or bad, to clutter their hearts with obstacles to the Savior's coming. Like the ancient King David we do well to pray, "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10, NIV).

Loving God, I shudder to think that my heart might be cluttered with obstacles to your coming. Forgive me my rebellion and desire to control the way you work in my life. Straighten my paths in Jesus' name. Amen.

Harry Lucenay is pastor of Kowloon International Baptist Church, Hong Kong. He has served churches in Texas and Mississippi also.

God's Message to Us

HEBREWS 1:1–4

Messages are an important part of our everyday lives. We walk more than a mile to a post office most days to get messages from friends and family as well as businesses—businesses to which we owe money as well as those who offer to lend us money!

Other important messages come into our lives by telephone. Most of these messages relate to family and close friends and bring news that just can't wait for the United States Postal Service. Messages come in many other ways, too—e-mails, television, radio, billboards, marquees, posters. The messages vary in content and method.

God's message to us in Hebrews 1:1–4 heralds the good news that we can joyfully contemplate as we celebrate Advent and Christmas. Throughout the centuries God has always sought to communicate with people. Sometimes people listened, and other times not. Perhaps these verses might be paraphrased to portray God saying something like this: *I have tried many ways of communicating my great love for all people. Now, I am sending the supreme message, my Son. Celebrate!*

The heading across the top of an e-mail includes information about the name of the sender and the subject of the message as well as the date or time. The sender of the message of Hebrews 1:1–4 is God, the Holy One, who has sought to communicate with people throughout the ages. Among all of the senders appearing in our inbox, this is the most important Sender we can imagine or hope to know.

The subject of the message from this Sender is of great importance. The subject is Jesus. Hebrews records this message about Jesus, "He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" (Hebrews 1:3, NRSV). Thanks be to God!

Lord, during this season crowded with many messages, help me be especially attuned to your messages of the awesome wonder of the birth of Jesus as the supreme evidence of your love.

Deane Langdon is a retired missionary living in Lompoc, California, with her husband, Bert.

Worshipping the Son

HEBREWS 1:5–14

If anyone would interrupt your day today with a particular question, which of these three do you think it is likely to be? *Question 1:* Have you finished your Christmas shopping? *Question 2:* Have you followed your Advent devotional readings faithfully until today? *Question 3:* Are you worshipping the Son in this Christmas season?

After stating the superiority of the revelation of God in Christ, Hebrews 1:5–14 declares the glory of Jesus the Christ above the glory of all other earthly and celestial creatures. This God-given superiority makes the Christ worthy of worship, honor, and praise.

Our lives do not always pay homage to the Son, however. In this season, often we spend more time shopping than praying, thinking of things than thinking of God, and worshiping gifts than worshiping Christ.

Worshipping the Son means living a life that brings honor and glory to the Son's name. If we call ourselves *Christian*, do we honor the way *Christ* lived?

Worshipping the Son also means engaging in a "living sacrifice" and a "spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1, NRSV). Caring for the poor, providing help to the immigrant, and siding with the weak and downtrodden of our society are also forms of worship we must not overlook.

Worshipping the Son means, over all things, devoting our lives completely to the Lord. The angels sang, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (Revelation 5:12, NRSV). All of our wealth, wisdom, might, honor, and glory belong to the Son, and only to the Son. This is true worship and adoration.

Lord, let me worship you in this Advent season, joining with the multitude of the heavenly host who sang at your birth, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" (Luke 2:13–14, NRSV).

Daniel Carro is a professor at the John Leland Center for Theological Studies, Arlington, Virginia, and Latino Kingdom Advance Ambassador with the Virginia Baptist Mission Board.

Singing of God's Greatness

PSALM 89:1–4, 19–26

A highlight for me of a meeting of the Baptist World Alliance is the singing. When Baptists from all over the world sing together, all of us singing in our own native languages, I am reminded of the account in Acts of the believers at Pentecost. I am reminded, too, of the heavenly experience that lies ahead of us in eternity as Christians.

Music is the voice of the soul. It is a source of comfort, hope, and peace no matter what the environment or circumstances of life may be. This is why the Christian faith has produced a tremendous volume of music unparalleled to anything else in history. Interestingly enough, much of it has been produced in times of sorrow, crisis, and affliction. Our heritage of singing our faith inspired the hymn writer Fanny Crosby to write, “To God be the glory, great things He has done,” even though she had lost her eyesight at a tender young age.

In our Scripture for today, we see the psalmist expressing his hope in God. He looked ahead with hope, joy, and anticipation beyond his own reign through the generations. He saw God’s plan and promises for salvation history being fulfilled and sang about it.

Each year at Advent we have an opportunity to look beyond the circumstances of an unsettled world and share the joy the shepherds, the Wise Men, and the family of the Christ child had when they saw God’s gift to the world. They saw God’s promises fulfilled! Little wonder that Christians feel moved to join in singing, “How Great Thou Art!”

Lord, lift up my spirit and soul to sing your praises as the psalmist did. You are my Rock and my salvation.

Paul Reitzer is a retired university professor who is president of the Fellowship of Baptist Educators, which is devoted to foreign missions. He is pastor of Newbern Baptist Church, Newbern, Alabama.

A Never-Ending Kingdom

LUKE 1:26–38

Prophets spoke of a day when people would hear God speak. Years passed; decades became centuries. Most people stopped listening. Their expectations waned. Their hopes dissipated.

Yet, in a small country located along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, a few people held onto the visions of the prophets.

One day, a messenger of the Lord told a teen-aged girl in the town of Nazareth, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end” (Luke 1:30–33, NIV).

Mary must have often reflected on the phrase, “his kingdom will never end.” Prior to Mary’s life, many kingdoms had come and gone. Mary lived during the kingdom of the caesars in the long-standing Roman Empire. Could it be true? Would her son reign over a never-ending kingdom?

As a young family in our church welcomes a newborn into their home, we celebrate with them. After a few months, these parents bring the child before the congregation, and we affirm the parents’ commitments to nurture the child under the Lordship of God as revealed through Jesus Christ.

So, yes, Mary, Jesus continues to reign. Parents continue to nurture their children in his kingdom. Children, youth, and adults continue to live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We baptize new believers who have entrusted their lives to be disciples of the Lord, and every commitment is a living echo of the voice of God who spoke to you that afternoon in Nazareth.

Every time we hold a baby, we are reminded of the essence of the kingdom of God. As we live in relation with God and one another with humility, vulnerability, authenticity, and compassion, we bear witness of the never-ending kingdom of God promised through a baby named Jesus.

Lord, let us rejoice in and bear witness to Jesus’ never-ending kingdom.

Dennis W. Foust is pastor of Shades Crest Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama. He and his wife, Paula, are parents of three young adults.

In God's Timing

1 SAMUEL 1:1–18

My wife teaches pregnant and parenting teens in the public schools. Her primary tasks are to help the girls have a healthy pregnancy, learn how to be good parents, and stay in school. She does more than that. She helps them learn to believe in themselves and find faith for the future. Almost all of them are scared, confused, and struggling with the stigma of a teen-age pregnancy.

Mary was more like the girls my wife teaches than was Hannah. Mary was an unmarried teenager in Nazareth. Her pregnancy with Jesus was unexpected and inconvenient. Family, friends, and neighbors did not believe her story about Gabriel. Her greatest support came from her mother's cousin, Elizabeth, and from Joseph after God got his attention in a dream.

Babies always change things. Hanna's baby, Samuel, became the spiritual leader of Israel and anointed David as king. Mary's baby, Jesus, changed everything. Just as Hanna prayed for Samuel, the prophets looked forward to Jesus. Isaiah wrote, "For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us . . . and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6, NASB).

God chose to answer Hanna's prayer in his timing, and God sent Jesus in the "fullness of the time" (Galatians 4:4, NASB). Today, all of history is defined by Jesus. Every event is dated in reference to Jesus' birth. When God formed the baby Jesus in Mary's womb, God bridged the gap between God and humanity. ". . . The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory" (John 1:14, NASB).

Some babies are longed for, like Hanna's son, Samuel. Some come as interruptions. Jesus is both. We may long for Jesus, but we cannot truly know Jesus unless we allow him to interrupt our lives on his terms. When we do this, the baby of Bethlehem changes everything!

Father, as we approach this Christmas, we long for your Son, Jesus.

We open our hearts to let you interrupt our lives and change us.

Bill Tinsley leads WorldconneX, a missions network affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

The Baby We Asked For

1 SAMUEL 1:19–28

Two little blue lines. That's all it took for my emotions to swirl into a combination of utter joy and absolute terror. After months of praying and hoping, our new baby was finally on the way.

Hannah must have felt overwhelming joy at Samuel's birth. After years of waiting, hoping, and praying, she was finally a mother. She named him Samuel. She did so, Hannah said, "Because I have asked him of the Lord" (1 Samuel 1:20, NASB). God heard her request and answered with a son.

A common question this time of year is, *What do you want for Christmas?* Most of us can easily make a list of things we want—golf clubs, a new television, clothes, jewelry, kitchen gadgets, a new CD. Sometimes, however, the things we ask for are not the things we truly need—health, peace, freedom from fear, restored relationships, mended families, renewed joy.

We serve a God who hears our prayers, just as God heard Hannah's. He hears our requests and answers at our point of need. We asked for guidance. He sent a Wonderful Counselor. We asked for an end to conflict. He sent the Prince of Peace. We asked for healing. He sent the Great Physician. We asked for deliverance. He sent a Savior. We asked for a friend. He sent Emmanuel, God with us.

The Creator of the universe willingly confined himself to a small package weighing only a few pounds. The Son of the Most High was born in a stable, to be raised as the child of a Jewish carpenter. When Mary held Jesus in her arms, she held the Messiah. He was the fulfillment of all of God's promises and the One all the prophets longed to see. God heard our need and answered by sending himself. Jesus is the baby we asked for and the Savior we need.

Lord, you are the one who hears and answers. Help me look beyond my wants to see the things I, and the world around me, truly need.

Leigh Ann Powers is a mother of two and a member of First Baptist Church, Runge, Texas, where her husband serves as pastor.

God Has Done Great Things!

LUKE 1:46–55

Subtract the wonderful music from Christmas, and you've got one hollow holiday. Who can imagine Christmas without "Joy to the World" and "Silent Night"?

We shouldn't be surprised that music is so important to Christmas. The sound of music was yoked to Christmas even before Jesus was born.

In Luke's Gospel, the Christmas story begins not with Joseph and Mary but with Zechariah and Elizabeth. The angel Gabriel informed this elderly, barren couple that they would soon have a baby. Six months later, Gabriel made a similar announcement to a young, unmarried woman named Mary.

Later, a bewildered, pregnant Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth to ponder how it could be that a virgin could be expecting the Son of God. Immediately, Elizabeth's baby leaped in her womb, and the text portrays Elizabeth as shouting (Luke 1:42). But it's just as likely Elizabeth burst into song to praise "the mother of my Lord" (1:43, NIV).

Then it was Mary's turn to sing. Luke 1:46 (NIV) reads, "And Mary said. . . ." But most interpreters believe Mary proceeded to sing one of the most famous choruses in history. Mary began, "My soul glorifies the Lord" (1:46). We know this song as the Magnificat because the church eventually translated it from Greek to Latin, and the first word of the song in Latin is "Magnificat."

Why did Mary sing? Because she was overcome with how wonderful God is, a God who could use an insignificant girl like her to alter the course of history. "For he has been mindful of the humble estate of his servant. From now on generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me. . . . He has performed mighty deeds with his arm. . . . He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble" (1:48–49, 51–52, NIV). In other words, through Mary God would change the world!

Lord, fill my heart today with songs of praise for the great things you have done!

David Hughes is senior pastor, First Baptist Church of Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

The Great Announcement

LUKE 2:1–20

Was there a day when a good event burst into your life causing everything to appear as new? Perhaps it was the birth of a child, or the end of war, or freedom from a long-carried burden, or the offer of a great new job you always wanted.

Now let your imagination lead you to put yourself in the place of the shepherds who heard the dramatic announcement of the birth of their Savior and ours. "Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified" (Luke 2:9, NRSV). Terrified—what a shock to them! But the angel announced good news; Jesus was born. They heard a "multitude of the heavenly host" (2:13, NRSV) sing praises to God in celebration of this announcement. Then the shepherds decided they wanted to see for themselves: "Let us go now to Bethlehem, and see this thing that has taken place. . ." (2:15, NRSV).

In Genesis 1, God announced things into existence. Now God announced himself as never before into human existence. He did so to Mary and Joseph, and he did so to the shepherds. God's purpose and power in bringing the creation into existence was the same purpose and power in announcing himself into our existence in Jesus. God makes all things new in Jesus!

The announcement is still with us, resonating across history. The announcement comes into our lives today.

The shepherds did not neglect the invitation. In order for the event to abide in our lives, we too must "go" and "see" for ourselves. Christmas each year brings us opportunity to renew our visit. The visit calls for our full attention, and we can join the shepherds who "returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. . ." (2:20, NRSV).

Father, open my ears to hear the announcement of Jesus' birth again as the great announcement it is, and accept my praise to you as I glorify your name.

Joe Blair is professor of New Testament and director of the Master of Arts in Theological Studies program at Houston Baptist University.

Born for Us

ISAIAH 9:2-7

It was 4:00 A.M. on Christmas day when we were awakened by a group of carolers outside our apartment window in Hong Kong. We were there on a short-term teaching assignment, and some missionary friends had told us such a group might show up. Many of them were the only Christians in their families. Since Christmas wasn't observed in their own homes, they usually spent this time with friends at church, going out at random times to serenade.

We got up and invited them in for refreshments. During this time of cross-cultural (and cross-language) fellowship, we realized the difference Christ's coming had made. Some of them had escaped from Communist China, which at that time was a closed society ruled by Mao Tse Tong and the Red Guards. Their idea of *justice* and *righteousness* was to punish or kill anyone suspected of disagreeing with them; and all Christians fell into that category.

The prophet Isaiah had foretold the birth of One who would establish a kingdom with genuine justice and righteousness (Isaiah 9:7). The carolers were celebrating the birth of this promised One, who brought a new kind of justice and righteousness. This promised One, Jesus, said that his followers must have righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, the most righteous people in the whole population (Matthew 5:20)!

Before Christ came, justice among the Hebrews included the stoning of women caught in adultery. But Christ forgave the woman who was brought to him and told her to go and sin no more (John 8:11). Too, the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees consisted of keeping every detail of the law and praying and giving gifts only when others could see them. Christ spoke of a new kind of righteousness. He said to pray and to give in private rather than for show. Too, the way to serve him, Jesus said, is to serve others, for when we minister to even the least desirable of persons, we are ministering to Jesus. This is the outpouring of justice and righteousness that Isaiah foretold.

Lord, fill my life with the justice and righteousness Christ brought.

Fran Carter is professor emeritus of Elementary/Early Childhood Education, Samford University, and a member of Dawson Memorial Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama.

Proclaiming and Living

1 JOHN 1:1-9

A few weeks ago, our college community experienced what is commonly called *Dead Week*. Nestled between the end of learning new material and final exams, Dead Week is an opportunity for students to hunker down behind closed doors to prepare for upcoming finals.

The Sunday after Christmas is often like Dead Week in churches. The joyful celebrations of Christmas have come and gone, but the anticipated revelry of the start of a new year is still several days away. The week after Christmas sometimes falls into a dark abyss of in-betweens.

The focus of our Scripture reminds us that today is far removed from Dead Week. To the contrary, today is very much alive for those who have truly heard and seen the Word of Christmas.

The author of 1 John gives us no option. If we have experienced the truth of the birth of Christ, we must proclaim and live out the message. Simply put, the message is that "God is light" (1 John 1:5). We find the greatest joy in living our lives in the light and in reflecting that light. The delightful consequence is that such living inevitably draws us into meaningful fellowship with others who live in the light, too.

What a contrast to the notion of the doldrums darkening a Dead Week! A true encounter with Christmas encourages us to exhort others to new life.

What can we do during this time when so many others are in the Christmas recovery room? Proclaim the light by providing a kind word when you encounter someone in the long return line at the department store. Beam the light by giving up your parking spot when everyone else is clamoring for the end-of-year sales. Shine the light by visiting that person whom you know experienced a dark Christmas. Such small rays of Christmas illumination will continue the message of light we have so joyously received.

We have just experienced the greatest message. He is among us. He is the Light.

Father of Light, shine your light on the path so we can see your way and show it to others.

Allen Reasons is senior minister, Fifth Avenue Baptist Church, Huntington, West Virginia.

Seeing God's Salvation

LUKE 2:22–40

An unofficial rule of parenting in our home is to be careful what you promise. The request comes from one of our children: *Dad, can we go to the zoo and see the new stingray exhibit?* The response: *Yes, we can, as soon as our schedule allows.*

The next days are filled with reminders of the promise made until it is finally fulfilled. My children are tenacious in holding their parents to promises.

My children's ability to remember a promise pales in comparison to the ability of Simeon and Anna. The aged ones depicted in Luke 2 teach us all about the Advent discipline of waiting as the fulfillment of God's promise unfolds.

Picture Simeon, day after day, doing what he knew to do: believing, hoping, devoting himself to temple worship. Then, surprise, the promise is fulfilled. He declared, "My eyes have seen your salvation" (Luke 2:30, NRSV).

Picture Anna, never leaving the temple. She was a widow, fasting and praying both night and day while waiting for the Promised One. Then, in the midst of her routine, the Promised One came, and she could not help but speak of God's redemption to all who were waiting.

Simeon and Anna teach us much about the life of faith. We serve a God who makes and keeps promises to us and all creation. However, our God also fulfills those promises in God's own time. So, along with Simeon and Anna, we wait for the final redemption of creation in the Promised One, Jesus Christ.

In the meantime, like Simeon and Anna, we have work to do. We continue the journey of believing, hoping, serving, and worshiping until all of God's promises are realized.

God, help our lives to be shaped and lived according to your promises.

Thank you for the promise of redemption in Jesus Christ.

Kyle Reese is senior pastor, Hendricks Avenue Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida.

Now a Child, an Heir

GALATIANS 4:4–7

The mansion on the antebellum plantation boasted fine wooden floors and carved furniture, down mattresses, fireplaces, and eight-foot windows bathing the home in light. It was complete with plush comforts and all the amenities afforded a well-to-do Southern family, and I easily imagined joyful gatherings and children's laughter wafting through the house.

But yards away stood a slave cabin. Its size, condition, and furnishings stood in stark contrast to the master's home. Squinting into the darkness of the one-room structure, my eyes adjusted to reveal straw pallets on a dirt floor near a hollowed-out stone, which served as a fireplace and stove. The only access to the outside was the doorway in which I stood. No windows, no ventilation, no furnishings, no comforts; merely a place to eat and recuperate from daily toil. This dark emptiness epitomized slavery and its evils.

According to our focal passage, God sent Christ that we might no longer be slaves to sin but children and heirs of God. Too, "God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Galatians 4:6, NASB). "Abba," an Aramaic term, is a loving expression of intimacy used by a child assured of a father's character and provision.

Perhaps this year brought difficulties or unexpected struggles, so rather than anticipating the newness of a new year, we're living in dread of the future, enslaved by fear and uncertainty. But redemption is available! Indeed, "God sent forth His Son . . . so that He might redeem" us (Gal. 4:4–5)! We don't have to live in dark corners any longer. We are called to walk confidently as "children of Light" (Ephesians 5:8, NASB). Recognize that the enslaving chains of sin and death are gone, and walk in freedom for today and the coming year!

God, draw me deeper and closer into a trusting relationship with you, knowing that as your child I am free from all that seeks to bind me.

Julie Wood is a reading tutor, musician, mom, and pastor's wife. She is a member of First Baptist Church, Frankston, Texas.

Seeing and Receiving the Light

JOHN 1:1–14

One winter night, I went for a walk to get some fresh air and received a burst of fresh light. The trees glistened with beads of light, the stars silently twinkled in the sky, and the moon seemed to shine like the sun. I was captured by the illumination of this full moon and overwhelmed by the beauty of the night. As the moon's light pierced the darkness, God's creation around me and the stars above me radiated with life and light. For that moment, breathing was but an option, and God's majesty was all-encompassing. The afterglow revealed a lesson about faith.

As followers of Christ, we are most like how God intended us to be when we focus on being witnesses who believe that “all things came into being through him [Jesus Christ], and without him [Jesus Christ] not one thing came into being” (John 1:3, NRSV). Beyond all things coming into being, Jesus is the life that is also “the light of all people” (1:4, NRSV). As we embrace this knowledge, we must be living witnesses who testify that “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (1:5, NRSV). Furthermore, we are to share this testimony through the shining of our lives “so that all might believe” in “the true light” (1:8–9, NRSV).

When we fully receive Christ and really see him, we become authentic “children of God . . . born not of blood or of the will of the flesh . . . but of God” (1:13, NRSV). As God's children, we are to be transformed into messengers of God's love. Sent by God, we are to be living declarations of eternal hope in the midst of the hopelessness of our dark world. As the moon reflects the light of the sun, so we too are to be mirrors of life and light that reflect the “grace and truth” of God's Son (1:14, NRSV).

*Dear God, let me see and receive with fresh eyes the light of
Jesus Christ, who truly is the “light for all people.”*

Brint Hilliard of Chickasha, Oklahoma, whose home church is First Baptist Church, Duncan, Oklahoma, is a graduate of George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Waco, Texas.

Following Jesus, the Light

JOHN 8:12–19

In this season, lights are everywhere. Electric lights, candles, and even fireworks illuminate the darkness, reigning as powerful symbols. Throughout the year, light is represented in art, in logos, on official seals, and in descriptive language. The power of light speaks to all generations and all peoples.

At the beginning of his Gospel, John summarizes Jesus' life by stating, “In [Jesus] was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:4–5, NRSV). Surely John recalled that Jesus himself boldly proclaimed, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (8:12, NRSV).

Light reveals. On New Year's Eve we tend to look back, but we do so most fruitfully by asking Jesus, the Light, to reveal our sins, leading us to true repentance. Moreover, the Light may comfort us when we recall challenges we met while following the Light.

Second, the Light illuminates who we are now. Jesus' accusers questioned who he was, evoking Deuteronomy 19:15, which required two witnesses in placing blame. However, Jesus clearly knew who he was because he consulted the Father (John 8:13–18), and that was enough! Likewise, when we follow the Light, the Light helps us see ourselves as he sees us. If we regard only the viewpoint of others or even ourselves, we may see ourselves through a distorted, dim mirror at best. The true Light knows who we now are and beckons, *Follow me.*

Finally, the Light of Christ gives us hope. He boldly promised, “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (8:12, NRSV). Darkness distorts reality, causes us to stumble, makes us fear. The Light protects us, guides us, encourages us.

Light of the World, I worship you this New Year's Eve. Illuminate me with your truth, your wisdom, and your hope. Help me to follow and trust you more.

Deborah McCollister is professor of English at Dallas Baptist University and a member of First Baptist Church, Arlington, Texas.

Inscribed on Our Hearts

PHILIPPIANS 2:5–11

The dripping of water caught his attention as he came to. He felt the bump on his head and gently probed the purplish bruises on his wrists and ribs. It took his eyes a moment to focus in the darkness. It took several more moments before he realized he was in a dank cell in Philippi. He was alone—except for a rat that ran across the dirt floor and scrambled through a crack in the wall. Unlike his fleeing companion, he was going nowhere. He tried to remember what had happened. It came back to him in foggy fragments. He rose on unsteady feet and leaned against a lichen-covered wall.

He vaguely recalled the voice of the Roman tribune with his polished and clipped Latin, *Confess. Are you or are you not a member of that cult, the one that follows the Galilean?* The tribune had leaned so close the prisoner could smell the garlic on his breath. *Remember, the tribune tossed out, your confession is either treason or freedom. You choose.* He had chosen, and now he found himself in a sunless cell.

He glanced again at the walls containing graffiti from previous occupants. Curses and obscene words were scrawled in disorder. In the darkness he could just barely make out one sentiment: “All is darkness, all is lost.” With a piece of stone he began chipping a simple Greek phrase. For the first time he smiled. It was a simple confession, but it had infuriated the representative of the empire and had landed him in this hole. Into the night, at least he thought it was night, he etched as deeply as he could into the stone: *Kyrios Christos Jesus*. When he had finished, he sat and prayed for the dawn.

The archaeologist had almost finished the day’s exploration of some fragmentary ruins when something caught her eye. They were small, worn Greek letters crudely scratched into a stone. She gently brushed away the dust and then fingered the inscription: “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Lord, in all of our days and in all of our circumstances may we keep inscribed on our hearts the confession, “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

David M. May is professor of New Testament, Central Baptist Theological Seminary, Shawnee, Kansas.

Live As God’s People

JAMES 3:13–18

In my house, the Christmas tree is usually long-gone by now. By December 25th, I’m tired of looking at it, especially since the commercialization of the season seems to get earlier every year. I want all the decorations put away and the house “back to normal.” By January, I’m ready for some peace.

This year, I realized I have completely missed the point. The Christmas season only *begins* on December 25th. December 26th should not be a day of “returning to normal,” but a beginning of a new life. The Christmas event changed the way the world works, and it should change our lives.

Have we been changed by the birth of the Christ child? Have we begun to live as people who have an Immanuel God, God with us? Or have we packed away the tree, the nativity scene, and the advent wreaths until another year with no change in the way we go about our daily lives?

I am leaving the tree up this year. Until January 6th, I will look at the lights and remember I am to be a light to the world. I will gaze at the silver globes, watching my image reflect into the room, serving as a reminder that I am to be a reflection of Christ to a hurting world. I will water the tree for an extra week, remembering that even the most beautiful things need to be nourished. I will see this act as a meditation.

I will live as a child of God. I want to be “pure . . . peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy” (James 3:17, NRSV). In so doing, I will live as a child born from above, born through a little Child in a manger more than 2,000 years ago. I will do my best to be like him. The tree will remind me I have just begun this journey.

Immanuel God, teach me to be pure, full of wisdom, as I begin this journey of a new year with you. Make me like your Son. Amen.

Erin Miller is minister of education and spiritual formation at Immanuel Baptist Church, Paducah, Kentucky.

Humble Yourselves Before God

JAMES 4:1–10

When I was a child, Christmas Day found me at Granddaddy's house feasting, singing, and playing with cousins. Granddaddy—Gordon Victor Payne—was my own personal grown-up. If he was in the room, I was in his lap. I don't ever remember hearing him call me by my name, just "Princess." "Princess, would you like another cookie?" "Princess, do you want to help me feed the cows?" "Princess, where's my hug?"

As long as my Granddaddy was around, I truly was a princess. My husband says this has skewed my worldview. No one else sees me as a princess. I am Mom, carpool driver, co-worker, customer, friend, sister—but not princess.

Long ago I memorized James 4:10, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (NIV). I didn't really understand that verse. In our culture, humility is not touted as a virtue. We are to take pride in our work. We are to build up our children's self-esteem. How does this work with God calling for humility?

James was reprimanding his readers for being selfish, for arguing over what they wanted but didn't have, for bad-mouthing each other—princess-like. So what am I to do? My grandfather's voice is in my head crowning me a princess, and God is calling me to humility.

One day a wise teacher taught me that humility means understanding my place in the bigger picture—that I am good and valuable because God created me. Humility is understanding God is always greater than I am, loves and values the people around me, and expects me to do the same. I ponder Jesus, who "humbled himself and became obedient to death" (Philippians 2:8, NIV). He knew who he was. Yet he loved others more than life. Maybe I'm not to see myself as less than a cherished daughter of the King—a princess. Plus I'm to see others as the cherished children of the King they are, too.

Dear God, may we know our place in your world—caring for all around us the way you care for them.

Cathy Payne Anderson is minister of children at First Baptist Church, Marietta, Georgia.

Hoping in Christ

EPHESIANS 1:3–14

Have you ever had to miss a televised sporting event that was important to you, perhaps a football game you really wanted to see, but a time conflict developed and you couldn't watch it? In this day of VCRs, DVD recorders, and TiVo, maybe you recorded the game for viewing later. Unless you're incredibly disciplined, you might well have found out the final score of the game before you watched the recording. So, fan that you are, you watched the recording even though you knew how the game would end.

In a sense, that's what these verses from Ephesians are like. Paul knew "how the game would end" even as he described it. Paul saw what lay in store at the end for the believer. The perspective he obtained was that those who experience the redemption of God will enter into the heavenly realm and into the presence of God. Furthermore, by being "in Christ" (a phrase he used often in these verses), Paul realized he and his fellow Christians were able to experience redemption, salvation, and all the blessings of being related to God in the here and now.

So Paul's intent for the Ephesians was that they might order their present lives according to all the good things Paul knew lay in store ultimately for them. What if we did that this year? Perhaps we would sense day by day the movement of God in our lives. We might be more hopeful. We might have a new perspective on everything. Perhaps we would be able to order our priorities more wisely. Life in Christ would blossom, and hope would abound.

Build in me, O God, a sense of expectancy and hope in your work of salvation in me. Amen.

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