
Prepare

Advent Daily devotionals to prepare our hearts for Christmas.



Ryan Stratton

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Intro

The Christmas season is a busy time of year. We take time to prepare our homes. We plan and prepare for parties. We prepare gifts to be placed under a tree. With everything we do during this season, we can easily miss the true meaning of Christmas, if we're not careful.

This daily devotional is designed to help reset our minds and prepare our hearts for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ.

I pray you experience the love of God and the real presence of Him through His Son, Jesus, in a new and powerful way this year and every year.

Prepare

Day 1

Today begins the season of Advent. This is a special time of year that we prepare our hearts to receive and celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Each day up until December 24, we are taking a journey to travel along with Mary, Joseph, the Magi and many others to witness and be part of their story so this journey also becomes our journey to and with the Messiah.

Today, we begin with the genealogy found in the Gospel of Matthew.

Matthew 1:1-17 “A record of the ancestors of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac. Isaac was the father of Jacob. Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar. Perez was the father of Hezron. Hezron was the father of Aram. Aram was the father of Amminadab. Amminadab was the father of Nahshon. Nahshon was the father of Salmon. Salmon was the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab. Boaz was the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth. Obed was the father of Jesse. Jesse was the father of David the king. David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been the wife of Uriah. Solomon was the father of Rehoboam. Rehoboam was the father of Abijah. Abijah was the father of Asaph. Asaph was the father of Jehoshaphat. Jehoshaphat was the father of Joram. Joram was the father of Uzziah. Uzziah was the father of Jotham. Jotham was the father of Ahaz. Ahaz was the father of Hezekiah. Hezekiah was the father of Manasseh. Manasseh was the father of Amos. Amos was the father of Josiah. Josiah was the father of Jechoniah and his brothers. This was at the time of the exile to Babylon. After the exile to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel. Shealtiel was the father of Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel was the father of Abiud. Abiud was the father of Eliakim. Eliakim was the father of Azor. Azor was the father of Zadok. Zadok was the father of Achim. Achim was the father of Eliud. Eliud was the father of Eleazar. Eleazar was the father of Matthan. Matthan was the father of Jacob. Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary—of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Christ. So there were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen generations from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen generations from the exile to Babylon to the Christ.”

This may seem like a strange way to begin to prepare our hearts; but there is actually a richness in this passage. In the ancestral line of Jesus, we find murders, adulterers, prostitutes, women (which was very uncommon in the Jewish culture to record women's names), kings, etc.

We should also see ourselves in this mix of names. Have you ever felt like you were not worthy of Jesus Christ? This list of names should help you and I realize that God saw worthiness in the genealogy and wanted to show the world that God's plan and vision doesn't always include the "best" people; God's plan more than not includes people who are messed up, who think too highly of themselves, who feel worthless and resort to other sins. God can bring good out of any situation (Romans 8:28), we just need to have patience and allow God the time and space to work.

You are valuable to God. He has a plan for your life. Trust him. Let's take time this Advent season to get to know God, to know we are valuable and Jesus Christ came for you and me.

Merciful God, you brought life out of the chaos of the waters at the beginning of time. May we be willing to allow you to bring new life out of the chaos we call life. We anxiously, but patiently, wait for the coming of Your Son, our Savior, Jesus who is the Christ. AMEN

Prepare

Day 2

Yesterday we began the journey to the cradle. This journey will hopefully allow us the time to prepare our hearts for the coming Messiah. Here's a great truth: Jesus Christ has come and will come again! Just as we prepare to celebrate his birth, and not just go through the motions, we should also make preparations for when he comes again.

Today, we'll begin Luke chapter 1.

Luke 1:1-4 Many people have already applied themselves to the task of compiling an account of the events that have been fulfilled among us. They used what the original eyewitnesses and servants of the word handed down to us. Now, after having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, I have also decided to write a carefully ordered account for you, most honorable Theophilus. I want you to have confidence in the soundness of the instruction you have received.

We begin with this as a reminder the story and life of Jesus Christ has been carefully investigated. The purpose of these devotionals for the next 23 days is to help us carefully examine the account and preparations for the birth of Jesus Christ. How well we know they story affects how it will touch our hearts. We should be careful not to gloss over this event simply because we think we know what will happen. Each time we hear the Christmas story, our story is in there too.

I invite you to carefully, thoughtfully and prayerfully examine each part of the story of Jesus' birth this Advent season. Just as Luke took the careful preparations to tell the story as accurately as possible, so should we prepare our hearts and minds to make this story fresh and more real for us each year.

What will you do to make preparations for the coming Christ?

Lord, we all to often skim over your story when we read the Bible. May we allow your Word to touch each heart and make the story of Jesus Christ's birth become more real to us, intellectually and spiritually so our lives can and will be transformed with Your presence and Your power. Amen.

Prepare

Day 3

Luke 1:5-7 During the rule of King Herod of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. His wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron. They were both righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to become pregnant and they both were very old.

Now that we are on this journey to prepare our hearts for the coming Messiah, we should take some time and release any insecurities and doubt we may have that God will come to us. As we discussed on November 30, there is nothing in God's way to stop him from fulfilling his plans.

Today we meet Zechariah and Elizabeth, a priest and his wife devoted to serving the Lord. God uses Zechariah's position as a priest to meet him exactly where he is, which we will see tomorrow. So think about it, would it have made a difference if they had another position in the community? You and I are placed in our professions to be an influence to those around us, to set the example of Jesus Christ and to tell his story.

I find it very interesting how Luke describes this couple "*blameless in their observance of all the Lord's commandments and regulations.*" How would you describe yourself? Would you consider yourself to be blameless? Why or why not?

God is up to something incredible! May this Christmas bring us all into a closer relationship with Jesus Christ and we see how God is still working in the world.

Almighty God, you have put us in this place and at this time. May we use our positions in our family, community, work place, etc to be the examples of Jesus Christ You call us to be to those around us. Thank you for this opportunity! Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Prepare

Day 4

Luke 1:8-13 One day Zechariah was serving as a priest before God because his priestly division was on duty. Following the customs of priestly service, he was chosen by lottery to go into the Lord's sanctuary and burn incense. All the people who gathered to worship were praying outside during this hour of incense offering. An angel from the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear. The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John."

Zechariah is afraid, at first, of the angel! If you haven't been able to relate personally to the Advent/Christmas story, this is where we all should see ourselves.

Zechariah was performing his duties and prayer, as he was supposed to do. Many people today think that God will reveal himself in extraordinary ways and in extraordinary circumstances. This passage today reminds me that God is showing us, he is even in the ordinary aspects of life.

This is incredible! We do not have to go very far or really even change our work routine to be in God's presence or even hear a word from him. Here's the catch: we should not be so engrossed in what we're doing that we miss seeing and hearing from God. Even when we're working, we still should have our hearts prepared to listen and see the Living God.

How will you live differently in your everyday life today? What will you do to prepare your heart to hear from God? When you do hear God's voice, don't be afraid. Trust the God loves you and has something to reveal to you that will help you on your path in life.

Thank you Lord for your presence even in the ordinary parts of life. May we remember you this day in all we do and not be afraid when you speak to us. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Prepare

Day 5

Luke 1:14-20 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many people will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the Lord's eyes. He must not drink wine and liquor. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I be sure of this? My wife and I are very old." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in God's presence. I was sent to speak to you and to bring this good news to you. Know this: What I have spoken will come true at the proper time. But because you didn't believe, you will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen."

In our journey to Jesus' cradle this Advent season, we come now to the prophecy of the birth of John the Baptist. John was an interesting person; but he is very important and gives us an example of how we should prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ.

There are two things that catch my attention in these verses to help us this Advent season: 1) stand out and let God's glory shine through you, and 2) trust that what God says is true and will come to pass.

Stand out and let the glory of God shine through: How can we all the glory of God to shine through us? Be filled with the Holy Spirit and work in his power. This may look different in how each person lives their life; but the main point is to show love and compassion to those around us. So as you're out shopping and getting things ready for Christmas, let's not become agitated when things don't go our way. Let's be the people who, instead, act different and not be like tired, stressed, impatient people. Matthew 5:16 "In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven."

Trust that what God says is true and will come to pass: Very often we want things done in our way and in our time. God's time is different than ours. 2 Peter 3:8 reminds us that "with the Lord a single day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a single day." When we hear from God, our tendency is to have it happen right here right now. Remember, we are in the season of preparing for the birth of Christ and trusting he will return. Faith comes when we can learn patience and simply trust that God is love and God is truth. John will not be born for another 9 months, in this story; and Jesus is still a year and a half away. We never know what will happen, but God has our life in full view.

Thank you Lord for filling us with the power of your Holy Spirit. Help us be patient when you speak and with other people. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Prepare

Day 6

Luke 1:21-25 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they wondered why he was in the sanctuary for such a long time. When he came out, he was unable to speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he gestured to them and couldn't speak. When he completed the days of his priestly service, he returned home. Afterward, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant. She kept to herself for five months, saying, "This is the Lord's doing. He has shown his favor to me by removing my disgrace among other people."

When we hear from God, what is the first thing we should do? Just sit around and be lazy. NO! We should be the people who continue to do our job to the best of our ability.

Zechariah just had this incredible vision from God. He could have run out and immediately told everyone outside and rushed to go home and do everything he could to make sure it came to pass. But that kind of living and thinking doesn't really rely on God and his timing. Zechariah completed his work in the Temple, because that's what he was assigned to do and he would have been breaking a major rule by leaving when he should have been there.

When God speaks and gives a vision for something we should do, he may not give a time frame. God may reveal some more of his plan for our lives, but he may also be continuing to show us who he is molding us to be.

Today our task is to do our work to the best of our ability and listen for the voice of God to work in us to reshape and remold us. You and I are not as good as we think we are; but we are so much more than we could imagine. Trust God to work in you and through you.

Ever working creator, you are doing an incredible work in us so we can be the people you call us to be. Grant us strength, patience, wisdom to live out your calling to be lights on a hill so everyone can see your glory and know you. Continue to work within us to have the fruit of the spirit come to pass. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Prepare

Day 7

Luke 1:26-34 When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary. When the angel came to her, he said, "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!" She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over Jacob's house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom." Then Mary said to the angel, "How will this happen since I haven't had sexual relations with a man?"

So we finally get to Jesus' birth spoken of by the angel Gabriel. One of the things that happens is we hear this story every year and know the details. As we're going through this story segment by segment, I continue to invite you to find yourself in it and hear God speaking directly to you.

I find it interesting that every time, in the Bible, an angel appears, the first thing they say is, "don't be afraid." When your life is suddenly interrupted, how do you feel? Do you feel calm? Most likely not.

Mary was going about her day as normal, and all of a sudden her entire life is changing. God is calling her to this incredible life of being the earthly mother to the Messiah, Jesus Christ himself. I believe God is calling a person reading this today into vocational ministry. To be clear, each one of us is a minister to the world. Where we work, go out, eat, home, etc. are all places we are ambassadors to Jesus Christ.

We often have questions when God says he wants to use us. Why me? There has to be someone of better character. Someone smarter. Someone better off. But God uses people we don't expect...you and me!

Almighty God, you speak daily. Open our understanding so we know where we are already in ministry and where you are calling us to go to be in ministry. Allow us to see and live into the gifts you have given. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Prepare

Day 8

Luke 1:35-38 The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God’s Son. Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled ‘unable to conceive’ is now six months pregnant. Nothing is impossible for God.” Then Mary said, “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

Humans have limitations. God does not. We often try to say God only works in certain ways and in certain times and under certain circumstances. This is simply putting God in a box. One of the issues with this is that when we put limits on God, we are attempting to control God and create God out of our image.

“Nothing is impossible for God.”

Here is a great story of how a seminary overcame financial obstacles because of the power of God. This is taken from the Dallas Theological Seminary web site:

One year several weeks before May graduation, the leaders had a few days to decide whether the school would continue.

*Three people were awakened at 5 a.m. on a Saturday—Dr. William Anderson, a Dallas pastor instrumental in the Seminary’s founding; **Dr. Chafer**, founder and first president; and a donor. None knew the others were awakened, and each was impressed with the need to pray about the burden the Seminary faced. Only weeks later did they learn that all three had been awakened at the same time.*

It took the donor about two weeks to get the money ready. And at the time it arrived, Dr. Lewis S. Chafer, Dr. Rollin T. Chafer, Dr. C. Fred Lincoln, and Dr. Harry Ironside prayed together on a Monday morning in an office. After praying they sat for a few minutes in silence. There came a knock at the door and a government bond for \$10,000 arrived from an unknown banker in Illinois.

Some folklore has developed around this narrative. There was this story about a cattleman or a rancher. Somebody retelling it probably preached that “God owns the cattle on a thousand hills,” and that’s where cattle and a Texas rancher came in. But the real story had nothing to do with a cattleman or a rancher. In reality, it had everything to do with “the God who owns all” sovereignly working in the hearts of a pastor, a president, and a donor. Three men prayed, and one had the financial means to give what the school needed to survive. In obedience, he sent it.

That story has been a faith-builder for many of us throughout the years. The prompting of the Spirit and the Lord’s provision at that time constituted a God-moment in our school’s history. Stories of answered prayer and God’s provision have continued across the decades.

God can overcome any limitations we place upon ourselves: education, finances, or anything else. Today we are invited to wholeheartedly trust God and see how big God truly is...so much bigger than we might imagine or can conceive.

Great God, we often place you under limitations. Help us trust you and help us see how grand you actually are. Guide us and break us free from lack of trust and movement on our part because of our limitations. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Prepare

Day 9

Luke 1:39-45 Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her."

Remember yesterday's passage. Mary just heard she would be the mother of the Son of God and she accepted. Now, she is off to be with people who she may believe to give her peace and walk with her on this journey she is beginning. Mary went to trusted people.

When you have good news (or need to sort out your thoughts) who do you go to? We tend to want to work through ideas and things on our own and privately; but we can get an even greater realization and understanding if we go to people we can trust. Sometimes, the people we go to will even have a word from God to help us, encourage us. We all need encouragers. Life is not always easy and we need to confidence of having people we can trust and go to.

This Advent season, as we are preparing our hearts for the coming of Christ, we are encouraged and invited to be around people we trust and friends who will be there for us (like Elizabeth was for Mary and vice versa).

Almighty and gracious God. Thank you for the people you place in our lives to help us work through life and hear from you. Guide us as we prepare our hearts, and help us be encouragers and be encouraged about the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Prepare

Day 10

Luke 1:46-56 Mary said, "With all my heart I glorify the Lord! In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior. He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant. Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored because the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name. He shows mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next, who honors him as God. He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations. He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed. He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy, just as he promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever." Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months, and then returned to her home.

How do you think you would respond if you were in the situation Mary was in? Remember she faced stoning, ridicule, being thrown out of the family, anything like that. But she still found it in her to praise the Lord even in the midst of knowing what could happen to her.

Whatever it is you face today, it may look grim and you don't know how it will turn out; but God can still be praised! Here's why:

- ¥ God has never left you.
- ¥ You are held tight in the grip of God.
- ¥ You have the power of the Holy Spirit within you.
- ¥ You have not lost your salvation.

I hope you can remember that this day and give praise and thanks to God in any situation you're in.

Lord, Thank you for this time. Thank you for your presence. Thank you for giving way more than we deserve or realize we have. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Prepare

Day 11

Luke 1:57-66 When the time came for Elizabeth to have her child, she gave birth to a boy. Her neighbors and relatives celebrated with her because they had heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy. On the eighth day, it came time to circumcise the child. They wanted to name him Zechariah because that was his father's name. But his mother replied, "No, his name will be John." They said to her, "None of your relatives have that name." Then they began gesturing to his father to see what he wanted to call him. After asking for a tablet, he surprised everyone by writing, "His name is John." At that moment, Zechariah was able to speak again, and he began praising God. All their neighbors were filled with awe, and everyone throughout the Judean highlands talked about what had happened. All who heard about this considered it carefully. They said, "What then will this child be?" Indeed, the Lord's power was with him.

What stands out to you when you read these verses? If we remember what has happened before this time, Zechariah and Elizabeth have been prepared for this day their son would be born, They were given a glimpse of how the child's life would be and what he would stand for. They trusted the Lord to provide in their circumstance and that his word would come true. Zechariah and Elizabeth's heart was prepared and ready for this day.

This is part of the journey we are in this Advent (season of preparation and expectation) as we examine our hearts to see how the story of Jesus' birth will continue to shape and transform us. Zechariah and Elizabeth were different after the meeting with the angel, and we should be different (being able to stand out from the crowd) after any meeting we have with God.

They were able to confidently tell the people around what their child's name would be even though it did not make sense to the rest of the crowd. What is God asking you to do that seems other people don't understand? Will you be bold and confident in your faith and the calling God has placed on your life?

Dear God, You have guided us to this place and this time. Help us in any unbelief we might have so we can celebrate this season of Christmas with boldness and confidence of your presence and your calling in our lives. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Prepare

Day 12

Luke 1:67-80 John's father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, "Bless the Lord God of Israel because he has come to help and has delivered his people. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in his servant David's house, just as he said through the mouths of his holy prophets long ago. He has brought salvation from our enemies and from the power of all those who hate us. He has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and remembered his holy covenant, the solemn pledge he made to our ancestor Abraham. He has granted that we would be rescued from the power of our enemies so that we could serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness in God's eyes, for as long as we live. You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way. You will tell his people how to be saved through the forgiveness of their sins. Because of our God's deep compassion, the dawn from heaven will break upon us, to give light to those who are sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide us on the path of peace." The child grew up, becoming strong in character. He was in the wilderness until he began his public ministry to Israel.

How do you view your life? Do you like to be the one getting recognized, or are you comfortable being the one behind the scenes for another person? It is important to know roles we play in our lives.

Here, we find Zechariah giving a prophecy about his son. No doubt he is extremely proud of being a father and excited to watch his son grow up. But if we read this prophecy carefully, it is really about the Messiah to come (Jesus Christ) and the role of John to play in the people recognizing and following Christ. So in reality, this prophecy is saying that John is actually going to play a part behind the scenes for the fulfillment of God's plan with Jesus.

No doubt, this shaped his upbringing and how he was treated. John became the "pointer" to Christ. This is how our lives should be. Everything John did in his ministry, while alive, pointed people to the Messiah. Even to the point of bowing out when it was his time saying, "He must increase and I must decrease."

Our challenge today is to see if we are the ones trying to be out front, or if we are doing everything we can behind the scenes to let Christ be known.

Thank you God for the opportunity to be lights in this world so people can see you through us. Help us be the brightest lights we can be and remember this season is about Jesus and not gaining material goods. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen

Prepare

Day 13

Matthew 1:18-19 This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly.

Even though we are still over a week until Christmas and celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, we have come to the part in the Christmas story that causes us to think about societal views and how we treat people. We are called to be people who show love to everyone, even when it is difficult.

Joseph had every reason to call off his engagement to Mary since she was pregnant with a child who wasn't his. He even had every right to have her stoned to death or have her go through life as a disgrace as a symbolic "scarlet letter." He did none of that. The text says, "Joseph...was a righteous man."

Would this be the same description of you and I? I do not always do what I know needs to be done; and if you're honest, neither do you. But we have this example of Joseph. Even though he thought about calling off the marriage quietly, he still saved her life.

How can you show love to those you do not enjoy, or those who have caused you embarrassment? This is where we can continue to prepare and consecrate our hearts for the coming Messiah. God is using you, as he used Joseph, a couple thousand years ago, to be an example to the world of the better path we should take when we interact with people, even those who did us wrong.

God, thank you for the opportunities to practice humility and to show love to those who embarrass us or wrong us. Guide us this day. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Prepare

Day 14

Matthew 1:20-25 As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled: Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, And they will call him, Emmanuel. (Emmanuel means "God with us.") When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he didn't have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus.

How do you make decisions? Do you only look at the facts, or so you allow God the opportunity to speak to you? I tend to have quick reactions, but then I try to take time to think about and assess the situation from different angles.

Joseph was about to dismiss Mary from the marriage contract, but I imagine there was still something in his heart that was questioning the decision. This is where God had an opening to prepare Joseph for what was about to happen in the birth of Jesus. After he heard from God, he obeyed and was confident he had an encounter with an angel of God.

I hope we all take time to think and pray about our decisions. God is preparing each one of us for something bigger than ourselves and we should allow him the opportunity to speak, and then obey.

Joseph knew the community would probably not understand his decision or even stand behind him to give him support. But he knew God was there and in that event. May we know, believe and live like this too!

Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Prepare

Day 15

Luke 2:1-7 In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.

It is easy, sometimes, to step out in faith and trust God and the calling he places on our lives. We never know what events will happen. The real question is how we will handle these events.

Joseph could have told Mary he would be back after registering, thinking the journey would be too arduous for her to travel that distance. But there must have been a sense of pride and ownership for the life and the child and his wife that Joseph felt. So, he went to Bethlehem to have his wife and child placed under his name. This act also fulfilled what God spoke through the prophet Micah saying the child will be born in Bethlehem.

When situations arise, and they do not seem to fit with the life God has called you to live, do you look at them as distractions that do not fit? Or, could we just continue to step out and look back to see how our lives and events really fit together? Often, looking back we can see how the events in our lives are actually woven together in a beautiful tapestry; but we cannot see it at the time it takes place.

Jesus, the events of your birth seem like they do not fit together; but knowing the full story, we can see God moving in your earthly parents' lives. May we live to see God moving in our lives daily and trust him unconditionally, even when it doesn't make sense. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Prepare

Day 16

Luke 2:8-10 Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people."

Now we get to an interesting part of our journey toward Christmas and celebrating Jesus' coming into the world. God sent angels to the nobodies of society – the shepherds.

This is really awesome for us today. When you and I do not feel like God would make himself (or his plans) known to us because of our past or because we do not feel like we matter; just remember that God sent his angelic messengers to the lowly, smelly, outcasted shepherds in the field. God does this today too!

What an incredible gift it was for the grungy shepherds to be the first people to see the newborn baby Jesus. This shows that the King of Glory is interested in and invites those the world looks down upon. So if you do not feel like you matter, just remember that Jesus is inviting you to witness his birth and entry into the world. AND Jesus is inviting you and I to be in his presence.

You matter to God and he comes to you!

Gracious and Holy God, thank you for coming to earth and for inviting us to be with you all the time. We do not always feel like we're worthy. Help us to see you and experience your presence daily. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Prepare

Day 17

Luke 2:11-14 Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

Our journey to the cradle of Christ is not over yet. We still have 9 days until Christmas. How is it with your soul? Do you feel like you are getting your spirit ready for the coming Savior, or is it still focused on getting the material items and gifts ready?

There are some Christmas seasons, I want Jesus to just appear before my eyes and get me into the Christmas spirit. Has this happened to you? I invite you to read again the verses above.

Did you notice that the angels were proclaiming that Jesus was born? He is on the earth when they speak to the shepherds. I find it interesting that the angels did not make Jesus appear right before the shepherds eyes. Instead, they told the shepherds were to go. The shepherds had to take some initiative to go to see and know Jesus!

That is what we are invited to do daily as well. Jesus Christ is here. Jesus Christ is within you and I. We should take the time to see him ourselves and not just wait for him to appear to us.

What steps are you taking / can you take this day to see Jesus personally? I pray we all have open eyes to see Jesus in every person we encounter and do for them as we would do for Jesus, serve and love them.

Almighty God, you sent your angels to proclaim the birth of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Guide us to show us where we can see Jesus and bring others to him as well. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen

Prepare

Day 18

Luke 2:15-16 When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened. Let's confirm what the Lord has revealed to us." They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger.

On this journey to Bethlehem, we have just encountered the angels (as the shepherds did). Here's something to think about, "how do you respond after hearing from God?"

I believe the tendency could be to try to stay right there and internalize it so we could make sense of it. This way when we do tell our friends and those we encounter, we'll be able to fully explain what we saw and what we heard and we'll have researched the event and words enough to be able to explain it so our hearers would understand.

What I find interesting is that the text does not say how long the shepherds waited before they went; but they did go "quickly." I believe this should be our reaction and response too. God does not ask us to have everything figured out before we step out in faith; he just wants us to step out in faith, trusting him.

Another point this brings up is what to do after we hear from God. Our community (family, friends, trusted acquaintances, etc) is there to be a sounding board so we can have people to confirm/affirm/or maybe even give a new twist on what we heard. We should find ways to confirm what God has spoken. How that looks for you maybe different than me. I personally talk with trusted people to discuss what I felt God say, then we work together to continue listening for God, as we are moving in the direction sensed.

So when you hear from God our challenge is to keep the excitement and move "quickly," bringing people along with us (the shepherds went as a community) to do the work God calls us to, or even what God calls us to see.

God, you speak to us. Help us hear with excitement what you say and move quickly to where you call us. Also, Lord, guide us to the people you want us to share this calling with. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Prepare

Day 19

Luke 2:17-20 When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully. The shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told.

Yesterday, we talked about how the shepherds went as a group (community) to hear the angels said the baby Jesus would be (God's calling), and that they moved quickly (our response).

They found the family at the exact place the angels said they would be and saw Jesus. After the shepherds left the manger, they went off telling people about what they had seen. What did they say? They told about how this baby had been born, how they found out and constantly praised God. They kept the message simple and God-focused.

This is how we should tell people about what God has done today: by telling what we heard, what we saw, and then give praise to God. Sometimes people may not understand, nor appreciate, the message at first; but we should still keep the message focused on God. God coming into the world as one of the humans he created. God walking with us. God experiencing life with us.

What a great reason to celebrate and praise God!

I'm sure after the shepherds made their way home, they were different people. How are you different after encountering God?

Gracious God, you have come to us in the form of a human, Jesus the Christ. Change us and allow the time spent in your presence to make us new creations. It's because of what you have done for us that we are new people and we should allow you to make us whole. Help us remember to praise and glorify you with all of our heart, soul, mind, body, strength. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Prepare

Day 20

Matthew 2:1-2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. They asked, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him."

When we think about the Wise Men going to Jesus, we typically picture the final destination (after meeting with King Herod). In this picture, we can see the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. It is easy to picture Mary and Joseph's surprise and amazement at these men and their expensive gifts. What we typically do not focus on is the journey the men took, out of faith, to get to this newborn baby, Savior of the world, Christ the Lord.

These men (unknown number of travelers) went on a journey of faith to follow a "star" in the heavens. We do not know when this heavenly sign appeared for the men, but we do know after they saw the sign, they left on a journey that would take weeks, months to get to their destination. And they probably were not sure exactly what they would find when they arrived. They traveled over mountains, valleys, through deserts. God is giving each one of us a sign to follow.

What sign has God given you? We can easily allow life to get in the way and cloud our vision from seeing all that God is doing and showing us. This is why we pause each year at Advent (4 weeks prior to Christmas) to pause and "reset" our hearts to once again be renewed by the gift of Jesus Christ. This is the gift we seek in our journey, our life. This is the gift that will be revealed to us when we seek. This is the gift that changes us inside and out. The journey we are on is incredible!

The journey we will take, by faith, is a journey that will lead us through the hardships of life, ups and downs, alone and accompanied. How will you take this challenge of God and step into this new year? Let's take this journey to see where it ends up and we can meet the King of Kings face to face. All we have to offer is ourselves and that's all he offered when he came to earth as a baby to die on a cross over 30 years later. What a journey, but to see Him face to face...WOW!

Thank you God for walking with us through life's journey and the challenges we go through. Continue to guide and strengthen us, even when the journey seems too far or too difficult. Thank you for Jesus Christ! Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Prepare

Day 21

Matthew 2:3-6 When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They said, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote: *You, Bethlehem, land of Judah, by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah, because from you will come one who governs, who will shepherd my people Israel.*"

We have come to an interesting point in our journey this advent season. Herod trying to figure out where the "King of the Jews" would be born.

At first glance, these verses may not make sense being part of a devotional series preparing our hearts for Christmas; but if we look closely and listen we can see a couple incredible things.

First, this passage shows that Herod was not paying as close attention to his area as he should have. Have you been busy in the business of the Christmas season, that you may have missed something important? We all get caught up in our lives and become so inwardly focused that we can miss what God is doing all around us, especially if it does not directly pertain to us. I believe part of the reason for the Advent season is to remind us to be patient and expectant. This means we look for Christ is all we see, hear and do. We are patient because we take the focus off of ourselves and onto God. We are expectant because we should love to see that God is doing around and in us.

Second, this passage shows that Herod had learned people around him to continue to teach him. Who do you have around you that you can ask questions to so you don't come up with your own conclusions; but you can learn from each other? Being in community is another part of the Advent season. God comes down to be with his people (community).

As we're getting closer and closer to Christmas, let's all pay close attention to what's going on around us so we don't miss God's work in the world and in our lives. Let's also continue to keep learning from each other.

Holy God, you do incredible works all around us. Thank you for inviting us to observe, yet be part of your working in this world. Help us open our hearts to see and hear from you as we prepare to celebrate, once again, the birth of Jesus the Christ. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Prepare

Day 22

Matthew 2:7-9 Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search carefully for the child. When you've found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him." When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was.

King Herod obviously has ulterior motives when he calls the magi back to his presence in secret. What he did not know is that God was using this time to fulfill his plan of the magi visiting the baby Jesus. Herod could have easily said they could not pass through; he could even have tried to stop them from going further. But Herod allowed them.

Little did Herod know that God was moving and using the situation and the people. Which brings us to today's thought. Where can you see God working in your life today? Do you realize that God is working in you and through you? There are people whom you interact with that God knows you are the right person for the task, even if you do not believe in God.

Our challenge today, and really everyday, is to be open to how God is leading. Many times we will not know or see God working, but he is. He is using ordinary people in ordinary ways to show the extraordinary. God is working through you.

Lord, thank you for choosing to work through us. Help us to see your work and give you glory. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Prepare

Day 23

Matthew 2:10-12 When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

We are now just a few days away from Christmas and celebrating once again the birth of Jesus Christ. In our passage today, we see the wise men (magi), have come to visit the toddler Jesus in his home. Even though this even took place up to two years after Jesus' birth, there is still something here for us to see and hear during this Advent season.

The magi entered the house, bowed down and gave their gifts. So what is really interesting, to me, is how these verses today end: "they went back to their own country by another route."

The magi left different. They still went back home, but they left different. After you and I celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ this year, we should leave different and not take the same path back we searched for him on. This means, we do go back into our home, work, school, life; but we are different. We do not have the same patterns, the same "rituals," the same direction. Our new purpose is that of following Christ and helping people find him. You and I have become the angels (messengers of God) to proclaim to those who feel unworthy that the God in heaven loves and adores them and is longing to be around them.

How will you be different this Christmas season?

Jesus, too often we hear the story of your birth in this world and it does not phase us. We seek for and long to be in your presence. Help us proclaim to others your reality and your love for them, even if we feel too important. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Prepare

Christmas Eve

Matthew 28:20 ".....I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age."

These past 24 days, we have been on this journey which I hope has prepared your heart for Christmas in a fresh way this year. We have traveled with Joseph, Mary, the shepherds, the angels, Herod, the magi, and many more.

How does Christmas change you? Jesus Christ's birth into the world is not just a cutesy story we hear each year. This is an incredible story that really changes everything. God, the creator of the universe, came down and became one of us in the human form of Jesus the Christ.

This birth, like ours leads to death. But there is something NEW that happens. Because Jesus Christ has risen from the grave, he has conquered death. It is great gift for God to walk among us AND it is an incredible gift that he chose to die a human death to conquer sin and death so that we can be in his presence. I heard this said, "Jesus did not die so we could go to heaven. Jesus died so we can get to God."

That's the great thing about Christmas. We remember God coming to us. God pursues us and showed he understood firsthand the human experience. We do not have a God who is aloof about what's going on; we have a God who has walked with us and continues to walk with us today.

Jesus Christ is with us each and everyday! Our challenge is to live so the truth of his presence changes us and makes us stand out.

Lord Jesus, Thank you for your presence among us. Thank you for walking with us. Help us to see you each day. Continue to mold us into the new creations you created us to be. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Prepare

Christmas Day

We have been on this journey to allow the message of the Christmas story to change our hearts. Today I invite us to read the story of Jesus' birth from the Gospel of Luke to hopefully hear it with fresh ears and a fresh heart.

In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.

Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened. Let's confirm what the Lord has revealed to us." They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully. The shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told.

~Luke 2:1-20 CEB