



*The Wonder
of the
Nativity*

*Reclaiming the Christmas Season
an Advent devotional*

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Luke 2:8-20 (NIV) "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

*"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."*

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told."



As we grow closer to Christmas Day, with its joyful celebration, the anticipation is building. Every year, this week before Christmas reminds me of the scene in *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*, when the clock is counting down and everyone is scrambling to obtain their final presents and treats. How divine that we get to contradict this tradition and revel in the joy and *peace* of the Nativity story—peace that transcends our understanding and overwhelms our way of life and societal expectations. Peace that enhances our foundation in Christ, prompting us to rest in His Holiness.

Enter the shepherds. They were minding their own business, watching their flocks as they may have done hundreds of nights before. We don't know the state of their hearts—we don't know if they followed religious tradition, or even attended their local temple. But here is what *Luke* tells us—when the shepherds were confronted with the angelic message of Christ's birth, they moved *with haste* to see Him. Unhindered by pride, entitlement, or bitterness, they were changed by that heavenly visit. What joy and excitement must have spilled out of them as they ran to see the King that would transform their world. Then as they stood there, gazing upon their Savior, imagine the peace that overcame them, knowing that their long wait had not been in vain.

What does this mean for us as we grow closer to this beloved day that marks Jesus' birth? To approach Christmas day with urgent anticipation - the only fitting way to celebrate this holy event - requires a sacrificial heart that is centered *first* on Jesus. Plain and simple. The shepherds dropped everything at the message of the angels to behold the birth of their Savior. As followers of Christ, we are commanded to put nothing before God (Exodus 20:3-5; 1 John 2:15). We are to choose the eternal perspective, storing up our treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19-20). This even means putting God before our spouse and before our children. God has to be supreme in our lives, in every single aspect - otherwise it is not really God we are worshipping and celebrating but rather our own adult version of Santa Claus. The shepherds were overwhelmed and made haste to experience the message of the angels. But after--after is where the heart change came in--they glorified and praised God for all that had happened, just as it has been told to them. We have these same promises. We are promised that God will be with us through the ages (Matthew 28:20; Deuteronomy 31:6). We are promised a second coming of Jesus (Matthew 24:44; Revelation 1:7). And our God, who is faithful and trustworthy, will see these promises to fruition, as He did for the people of Israel.

So if you are to make haste in doing anything this next week before Christmas, make haste to worship the Savior. Rest in His *peace* and everlasting *joy*. Observe how he is calling you to sit at His feet and listen. This is the purpose of Advent.



Good Tidings of Great Joy

Luke 2:10-12 (NIV) "But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the

Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

What an entrance. The shepherds experienced not just one angel (that would have been enough!) but a *multitude of heavenly host*. They too, like Mary, Joseph, and Zechariah, received the message, "Do not be afraid." I think we can safely say that seeing an angel would be terrifying. But here, yet again, is a picture of a perfectly righteous and gracious God - He is deserving of our fear, but quells it with His love. We are not used to experiencing the glory of God - our world is quite tame compared to heaven. And so this clash of worlds for the shepherds was understandably frightening.

And yet their response in the end was overwhelmingly eager! It seems they were almost *compelled* to go and discover the Savior. A lowly group of shepherds were privy to the most defining moment in human history to that point. This was no accident. Throughout Scripture, God chooses the humble, the unknown, the poor and lowly, the seemingly insignificant and weak to carry out His plans. After all, "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong" (1 Corinthians 1:27, NIV). God came down in a manger and the angels came down in a field. His glory is not compromised by these humble surroundings - it is merely hidden and kept for those with hearts ready to behold it.

Discuss

How have you seen God working out His perfect plan in ways that seem to contradict human logic or wisdom? In what ways is God using you, as a couple, to bring about His glory? As a couple, discuss what this story says about the character of God, the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

Pray

Together, pray that God will help you to embrace the way He is working in your lives and in your marriage, even if it doesn't make sense right now. Pray that He will give you tender hearts to behold the glory of God.



The Weary World Rejoices

Isaiah 9:6 (NIV) "For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

In week one and two, we described this era before Jesus' birth as one of silence from God. There had not been a prophet in hundreds of years. We can only imagine what the Israelites must have been feeling. Some may have been angry, some desperate, some perhaps even complacent--settled into their routine and way of life. When we think about the great stories of miracles and judgement and forgiveness that had been passed down through the generations, we can empathize with the weariness in their hearts. Did they wonder if they had been forgotten? Did their faith wane--wondering if the stories were actually true?

This story of the shepherds marks the fourth appearance of angels documented in Scripture in approximately one year's time. How exciting! Not only is the voice of God being heard in Israel again, but it also brings a message of hope and joy! The long awaited Savior has arrived. This Savior that had been prophesied by many men over many years, the one that would be the Prince of Peace. The angels were ushering in a new era--one not filled with silence, but rather with resounding joy and an invitation to come and worship the One who is the "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father." And the weary world rejoiced, and continues to rejoice. Your Savior is here, He has come, and He waits for you with open arms this Christmas.

Discuss

Has there ever been a time a time when you wondered if God had forgotten you? How does this angelic message reinvigorate your faith and trust in Jesus? As a couple, discuss what this story says about the character of God, the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

Pray

Together, pray God will soften your hearts towards the magnitude of his sacrifice, causing you to pause and rest in His presence this next week. Pray that He would cast out all fear and insecurity so that you can rest with assurance in His love. Ask for an opportunity to invite others into this story with you.



Let the Wonder Linger

1 Chronicles 16:29 "Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering and come before him. Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness."

Today marks just a little over one week until Christmas. One week until we celebrate the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. As we grow closer to this much-anticipated day, we desire to become more and more like Mary, rather than Martha. As we bask in the glow of the Christmas tree, the snuggles by the fire, and the thrill of the secret presents waiting to be opened --we want to linger in the wonder of the baby in a manger. This baby is not just a sweet concept that gives us license to shower everyone we know with gifts and break the bank (or our backs) in the name of the season. No. That baby lives on -- whether we acknowledge His presence and power or not. The wonder of the child is not just in his divine birth, but in the very reason *why* his birth even happened! This is part of a much bigger story - the beginning of the culmination of God's great plan for the redemption of all mankind. The angels announced His birth to the shepherds and sang of His glory to compel them to go worship the Christ child. The lowly shepherds had no offering to bring other than their adoration. But this did not stop them from going *as they were* to worship the new King. It may have seemed a strange answer to prayer (a baby born in a barn was going to save them?), but this is what they had been waiting and longing for, and they did not want to miss it.

We need to be changed by the wonder of Christmas, lingering in the implication of its message: Jesus left His place in heaven to experience human birth, life, and death -- for you. *What kind of extravagant love is this?* He humbled himself to a simple life, sacrificing his status at the right hand of God, and even tasting death and separation from His Father, so that we might know God. Sometimes, it feels like this concept is so big that it's hard to wrap our minds around it. But today, one week before Christmas, lets linger a little in the bigness, in the extravagance, in the wonder. After all, if this hope is indeed meant for us *here and now*, we don't want to miss it.

Discuss

How does the message of Advent allow for sanctification and transformation of our hearts? How does this impact the way we approach one another as a married couple? As a couple, discuss what this story says about the character of God, the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

Pray

Together, pray for God to create an atmosphere of sacrifice within your marriage. Pray for the Spirit to be perpetually prompting selflessness and service towards each other and those in your family and in your community.



Christ Our Anchor

Matthew 6:33 (NIV) "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Matthew 18:3 (NIV) "And he said: 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'"

Our lives reflect what truly matters to us - for better or for worse. Sometimes this kind of self-reflection is painful and convicting, especially in this season. Like when "hurry" becomes more commonly spoken than "Merry Christmas" or when Santa becomes the face of the season rather than Jesus or when our schedules reflect more shopping and merry-making than serving and giving. How often do we ask ourselves, *what is truly important and do my daily actions reflect this?*

Perhaps, if we asked these questions more regularly, our lives might reflect the reality of our interim here on earth. They might embody the urgent anticipation of our Savior's second coming. If we observe a child's experience of Christmas, whether your own or your children's, we can learn so much from them about generosity, unreserved joy, and expectations unhindered by the harsh realities of life. Do you remember how excited you were (making it nearly impossible to sleep!) on Christmas Eve? The anticipation was unbearable! Most likely that excitement centered on the presents carefully stowed under the tree just waiting to be opened on Christmas morning, but what if we had this same exuberant excitement *now*, as adults, about the coming of our Savior? This is a time to remind ourselves, and show our children, that our greatest anticipation should be for Jesus! We can have this same unreserved joy and hope year-round in waiting for Him. And then how different our lives might look - how different our responses, our schedules, our priorities might look. When Christ comes first, and we become like little children waiting for the best day of the year to finally arrive, then no matter what storms may come we can rest assured that the Anchor of our souls is trustworthy and faithful. He truly does bring joy to the whole world.

Discuss

How can you adjust the priorities in your marriage, family, and/or lifestyle to reflect Jesus as your priority? As a couple, discuss what these passages say about the character of God, the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

Pray

As a couple, pray for God to make Himself supreme in your marriage. Pray for an overwhelming awareness of the Gospel in your life and clarity on how to adjust your lifestyle to reflect it.



Proclaiming Joy to the World

Luke 19:37-40 (NIV) "When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the

Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!' Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, 'Teacher, rebuke your disciples!' 'I tell you,' he replied, 'if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.'"

How often do we attempt to visualize what that most holy night 2000+ years ago was actually like? Of course, our own imaginings will be colored by our 21st century worldviews, but it is still so worth it to dwell on and *wonder* at this experience. Many have attempted it, resulting in many of the Christmas hymns we sing all through December--painting vivid depictions of the night Jesus was born. Did that bright star really light up the whole sky? Did the animals know that God was in their midst? Did Mary labor long or was it quick and pain-free? How big did the crowd actually get in that little room that night - with the animals and shepherds and holy family? It's so much to think about, which is perhaps why Mary needed time to process it all after the fact. She treasured and pondered it all in her heart. How rewarding it will be for us to do the same.

Proclaiming and spreading joy, as the angels and shepherds did, requires knowledge and understanding first. We have to know *what* we are proclaiming and *why*. Taking time to ponder the wonder of that special night is a good way to acknowledge Jesus' holiness and to understand the significance of what happened. When we truly understand what the shepherds understood that night so long ago, how could we not also be amazed and eager to proclaim the good news to everyone we meet? This is the One who brings goodness and light, the One who brings peace on earth, the One who will save His people from their sins. *This is the news* worth proclaiming to our spouses, to our families, and to the world with joyful abandon. Even heaven and nature itself will sing His praises forevermore!

Discuss

Describe past experiences sharing the Gospel story. What was it like for you to share this with people around you? How is the Gospel reflected in your marriage In your family? As a couple, discuss what these passages say about the character of God, the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

Pray

As a couple, pray for an overwhelming love of the Gospel message. Pray for opportunities to share this message with those around you who do not know the love of Jesus. Pray for a tenderness towards your spouse in light of this same message.



Good News For All the World

Isaiah 49:5-6 (NIV) And now the Lord says— he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord and my God has been my strength— he says: ‘It is too small a thing for you to be my

servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.’”

Psalms 96:3 (NIV) “Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples.”

It is easy to get so caught up in the here and now that we forget what we are here *for*. Marriage, in particular, can become mindless as we go about our daily tasks of working, playing, and living. Or the opposite can happen - we can get so focused on each other and meeting our earthly needs that we forget that the whole purpose of marriage is to make us *holier*. Francis Chan noted “this is the mistake a lot of couples make. They spend a lot of time looking at themselves and each other but very little time staring at God. [. . .] These people live as though they are not dying. They live as though the King is not returning.” The good news of Jesus’ birth and death is for us, now, and it can have a great impact on our marriages - if we are thoughtful and intentional about how we approach each other in the daily grind.

When we embrace the joy and peace that is ours in Jesus, it takes the pressure off of our spouses to be our everything - because, quite frankly, this is too great a task for any human. It’s quite unfair to expect any one person to make us happy or fulfill us in this life. When we accept this reality, and only then, can we rest in *His* joy that transcends circumstances and allows us to enjoy each other and glorify God at the same time! Focus on Christ, and not each other or ourselves, allows us to serve Him together in unity of mind, body, and spirit. We can obey His call to be a light to the world - and what better way to do this than by reflecting the extravagant and sacrificial love of Christ for the church in our very own marriages? In doing so, we prove, in one of the clearest ways possible, the wonders of His love.

Discuss

How do you depend on one another for happiness or satisfaction? Brainstorm ways to encourage one another to rely on Jesus for these things. As a couple, discuss what these passages say about the character of God, the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

Pray

Together, pray for a renewed (or new) reliance on Jesus for happiness, satisfaction, and purpose. Pray for gentle prompting from the Spirit to encourage each other in this way.



Shepherds, Why This Jubilee?

1 Corinthians 1:26-30 (NIV) "Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame

the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption."

Have you ever wondered why the first people to whom God chose to announce the birth of His Son were *shepherds*? Beyond the fact that this may seem a bit random to us in our modern culture, even back then shepherds were considered to be of a much lower class, with no power or influence or wealth. Why entrust the greatest truth of all time to a group of *nobodies* in the middle of *nowhere*?

First, God repeatedly identifies Himself as the Good Shepherd for His people and this imagery is powerful. He tenderly cares for us, protects us, and is even willing to lay down His life for us. This announcement to shepherds is perhaps meant to remind us of *our* Shepherd who will never stop pursuing us. Second, the very reason why we might think this news *should not* be proclaimed to shepherds (namely, their lowly social status) is why they make the perfect audience. Their insignificance reminds us of our own insignificance. The absurdity of it all reminds us that God's ways are higher than our ways. God chose the shepherds on purpose so that none of us can boast. It is all about Him, and it always has been. None of us are loved by God because of our unique talents or accomplishments or goodness. In fact, it was while we were still sinners that He laid down His life for us (Romans 5:8). Our Shepherd looks for us - no matter how lost or forgotten or despised by the world -, and when he finds us, He brings us home rejoicing. Our Shepherd was born so that we would never have to die.

So why the shepherds' joyful jubilee that night? Perhaps they understood that this truth was *for them*, and perhaps for the first time in their lives they felt *significant*. In the same way, Jesus is willing to search high and low for us, to lead us and gather us close to His heart all of our days. May we follow the shepherds' example on that Christmas night and receive the Lord Jesus with humility and gratitude and awe. And may our own joyous strains ring out without ceasing.

Discuss

When have you felt insignificant or insecure or forgotten? How does the shepherds' experience affirm that you are loved and known? How can you reflect this truth to one another in your marriage? As a couple, discuss what this story says about the character of God, the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

Pray

Together, pray that this truth will ring true in your hearts and that you will be able to rest in the assurance of His love and in your eternal future with Him. Pray that you would rely on Him as your everything and accept your weaknesses because when you are weak, He is strong.