



*The Wonder  
of the  
Nativity*

*Reclaiming the Christmas Season  
an Advent devotional*

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*Matthew 2:1-12 (NIV) "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.' When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. So they said to him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet:*

*'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
Are not the least among the rulers of Judah;  
For out of you shall come a Ruler  
Who will shepherd My people Israel.'*

*Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also.' When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way."*



"O come let us adore Him, O come let us adore Him, Christ the King!" The King of Kings is celebrated this week, showered with *love* and *adoration*. What does it mean to adore someone or something? Adoration is defined as "a feeling of profound love" or "to admire strongly" (vocabulary.com). This emotion is one of great depth. The Magi, our Wise Men who traveled from afar to see this new King, are described as rejoicing "with exceedingly great joy" when they saw the star alerting them to our Savior's birth. They were urgently anticipating this star's appearance--clearly they had studied it, kept watch for it, and knew what it represented. When was the last time we were so moved by something that we waited with such eagerness, planned carefully for its arrival, and kept watch for it day by day?

Maybe this was your wedding day. Here is this lover you have fallen head over heels for. You have dreamed of this day when you begin a new life with him or her. And today, the bells are ringing and you are united with your lifelong partner. Or maybe this was the birth of your child. As they grew, unseen, in the womb, you awaited their arrival with freshly washed clothes, a bed to sleep in, and more love than you ever thought could possibly fit in your heart. The star of Bethlehem held even greater anticipation for the Magi. How this stirs in our hearts--the pursuit of these Wise Men for the King of Kings. A king that would change the world, permanently. A king that would redeem the lost. How we desire to seek after, wait for, and worship our King with this same intensity.

And the day has come! This week, we get to laud the arrival of our Savior. We get to wonder at the simple and yet grand event that was His birth. Like the Magi, we too can study the Savior, learning from His words and actions, as we await His second coming. We can pursue the Holy Spirit's promptings with urgent obedience. We can rest in His joy and peace as we *love* our spouses the way He loved us. But first, we must submit our hearts to Him. There is nothing God needs from us, other than full surrender of our lives to Him. Just like the Drummer Boy, we have nothing to give, except who we are as His children. Bill Johnson once wrote, "The moment we think we have arrived, we will fall. The moment we lose that hunger to travel to find Him, the willingness to wait in line to hear Him, a humility to encounter Him in a package that offends us, we're in danger of missing His next move. Wise men still travel."

So come together, celebrate our newborn King, and worship Him in love and adoration like the Magi. Merry Christmas!



## Believing is Seeing

*John 3:16-19 (NIV) "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned,*

*but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil."*

The God of the universe became flesh and *dwelt among us*. He was *here*. How often do we wish we could have been there for that spectacular event, or for any part of His time here on earth? Of course, it is a natural longing to *see* and *know* our Savior, but we must be careful not to let this desire become a snare (like it did for Thomas - John 20:24-29, NIV). Visual proof does not always create the heart change we imagine; instead our willingness to believe without "solid proof" is indicative of a heart touched and chosen by God (Hebrews 11:1). We can still seek Him earnestly, as the wise men from the East did -- our journey will just look very different. While we don't know much about these magi - how many traveled, who they were, or where they came from, we do know they were wealthy and educated men that hailed from the East. We also know they were quite knowledgeable about the Hebrew Scriptures and traveled for a very long time to worship Jesus. So what can we learn from these wealthy Middle-Eastern scholars from the 1st century? We have found something worth pursuing and we must pursue it with everything we have--no matter how long it takes. We learn that when an opportunity presents itself (i.e. a star in the sky for these wise men), we must drop everything and go seek that thing *now*.

Every aspect of Jesus' birth models ultimate sacrifice for the purpose of true reconciliation with the Father. He became the lowest to save the many. Marriage is yet another model for sacrificial love. We get the opportunity to seek and pursue our spouses with little regard for the amount of time and energy it takes. We pursue them, regardless of feelings or inconvenience. We pursue them like the Wise Men pursued Christ. We don't have to lay eyes on Christ here on this earth to *know* that He was here, He is here now, and He will surely come again. Oh, come let us seek Him. Oh, come let us adore Him.

### *Discuss*

Talk about a time you passionately pursued something in your life--how did it change you? What would it be like to pursue Jesus together with this same passion and urgency? As a couple, discuss what this passage says about the character of God, what it says about the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

### *Pray*

Together, pray for faith to believe without seeing. Pray that the Light that dwelt among us would transform you and your marriage, from the inside out.



## Love Came Down

*1 John 4:11-19 (NIV) "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen*

*and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love.*

*Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.*

We often think of this time of year as full of warm fuzzy feelings, generosity, and good will. Sometimes it seems like the season of Christmas itself has become a platitude for goodness and love. Like Ebenezer Scrooge said at the end of *A Christmas Carol*, "I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year." While there is nothing inherently wrong with being extra loving and generous at Christmas time, if this is the only time of year when we are inclined to love those around us, we are missing the point. We are missing the Gospel. Even if our hearts *are* in the right place in all of our giving and merry making, sometimes the very people who need our love the most get lost in the shuffle.

As you well know, families - and spouses - are sometimes the most difficult to love. Maybe there are reasons you feel your spouse is undeserving of your love, or perhaps they take a backseat to the many other people or things demanding your attention. Either way, it is tragic when this happens and it grieves the heart of God. We may be doing wonderful things in the world to love our neighbors, but if we are not willing to do the same on our own home fronts, then we are missing out on a vital truth inherent in the Christmas season and the Gospel message: love begins at home. Jesus was born into a family and that first Christmas was - we're just venturing a guess here - likely the most simple. And yet it had to be filled with the most genuine, enduring love that anyone has ever known. What does this mean for us? First, it means that we cannot let our spouses go another day without them knowing how much we love and appreciate them. We must be intentional in reflecting the extravagant and sacrificial love of God for our spouses. This is our first mission field. After all, He delights in our marital love because when we love each other, we love Him. He designed this relationship to embody the love He has for us. What a standard for us in marriage! Second, our love and celebrations this season need not be over the top in order to be genuine and life-giving. If Jesus experienced humble conditions with little more than swaddling cloths and the love of His heavenly Father and earthly parents, then why do we require so much more to make Christmas merry? This year, let's come *as we are* to love and adore Him in the most simple and practical way we can: by loving our spouses as He does.

### *Discuss*

What is it like for you to imagine your home as your first and most important mission field? How can you love each other simply this week? As a couple, discuss what this passage says about the character of God, what it says about the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

### *Pray*

Together, pray that God would give you opportunities to love and serve one another, that your eyes would be open and your hearts tender. Pray for eyes to see what truly matters and for strength to set all the "other things" aside for just a little while.



## Finest Gifts

*Hosea 6:1-3, 6 (NIV) "Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence. [...] For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings."*

*Psalm 51:16-17 (NIV) "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise."*

We do a lot of receiving this time of year. Even as we shop and purchase and wrap for others, we wonder, "What is under the Christmas tree for *me*?" We secretly hope our loved ones looked at our wish lists and honored them. We expect social courtesies and are often offended when these norms are not followed. It is difficult not to turn inward and give in to all the selfish tendencies that are just barely kept at bay the rest of the year. But if Christmas really is all about Jesus, how often do we ask ourselves what we can offer to *Him* this time of year?

In the same way, we must spend more time wondering what *Jesus* wants this Christmas. The answer is clear in both passages for today: He wants our hearts. He wants hearts changed by Him to reflect humility, generosity, and love. He wants us to sit at His feet and wonder at who He is. Seeking His presence, like the Wise Men. So often we get stressed out about getting the perfect gift for each person on our lists (speaking from personal experience here), and sometimes this translates to our relationship with Jesus. We wonder, "What can I possibly give that would be worthy of the newborn King?" Simple. Nothing. We have nothing to give that is worthy of Him, except ourselves created in His image. The popular Christmas song, *The Little Drummer Boy*, tells the story of a young boy who has nothing to give that is fit for a king, and so he does the only thing he knows to do: play his drum. He gives what he has and who he is to honor the new baby that He knows is holy and worthy of so much more. The lesson here is two-fold. We do not have anything to give that He *needs*, but He greatly desires for us to *go* to Him, *sit* at His feet, and *give* the only thing that truly matters: our hearts washed clean by His blood. So this year, plan to come and bring the finest gift you have for the King of Kings.

### Discuss

What is it that most distracts you from simply offering your heart to Him - is it more of a "me focused" attitude or is it more of an anxious insecurity that you have nothing to give? Or both? What does it mean to give Him your heart and what would this look like in everyday life? As a couple, discuss what this passage says about the character of God, what it says about the design of marriage, and what you want to do about it.

### Pray

Together, pray that you would have broken and contrite hearts to offer Him this Christmas. Pray for the Spirit to redirect your focus to Jesus with opportunities to act on this in practical ways.



## *Journey to the Light*

*John 1:4-13 (NIV) "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the*

*Light, that all through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."*

Merry Christmas! Today, we celebrate the birth that redeemed the world! We celebrate when Light cut through the darkness and lit the way home for all those willing to acknowledge and receive Him. We may not have all of the answers - the wise men certainly did not - but we need only know that Jesus has changed the world. The Magi were certainly educated and wise, but did they fully understand the significance of their journey? Messianic prophecies like those found in Isaiah 60:3,5 ("Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn...to you the riches of the nations will come." NIV) would have been well known to the Magi. Even if they didn't fully understand the implications of His birth, they knew that this child was the King of Kings, and they knew they would be wise to pay homage to Him. What fear of God they must have had to acknowledge these old prophecies and obey the call to go honor the one who will one day judge the whole world. We often think of Jesus as the loving Savior and caring Shepherd, but we stop there. The reality is, He is *also* the true King and just Judge who is intolerant of sin by His very nature. If we have been adopted into His family and received Him as our King and Savior, then this dual nature of God feels comforting and secure. It is only when we ignore the wisdom of old, when we ignore the Light and choose darkness instead that our world feels hopelessly scary and unpredictable.

So today, as we honor the day of Jesus' birth. We honor the One who came to give us life. His sinless life provided the perfect sacrifice to reconcile us to our God. He submitted to the will of God, allowing Himself to be sacrificed on a cross by the very people He came to save. He allowed Himself to be separated from God, His own Father, so that He could take the weight of all of our sins upon Himself. And then He restored us. *That is what Christmas is about.* May this be only the beginning of a new quest to find Him, to know Him, and to acknowledge Him in our daily lives all year long. The love of the Christ child is not relegated to one day a year, and neither should ours. So, let nothing stop us from dropping everything and beginning our journey to worship and adore Jesus, our King and Savior. After all, **wise men still seek Him.**

Merry Christmas!