



PROMISED BEFOREHAND

Readings for Advent

EDITED BY

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INTRODUCTION

Did Our Hearts Not Burn?

On a Sunday morning around two thousand years ago, two distraught men set out for a seven-mile walk from Jerusalem to the little village of Emmaus. They were followers of Jesus of Nazareth, a man who had been executed just two days prior by a sinister collaboration of the Jewish leaders and the Roman government. Along the road this very Jesus—who, by the way, had just been raised from the dead—concealed his true identity as he asked them what was bothering them.

“Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened to Jesus of Nazareth?” they asked him.

Still hiding his identity from them, this visitor began to explain how all the things that had just happened in Jerusalem should not surprise them. It was all predicted in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Jesus wanted them to know that his ministry was not a new invention, but rather God’s plan from the beginning. After finally revealing his identity to his disciples that evening, Jesus told them, “Everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44). Apparently, Jesus expects his followers to see things concerning him in the Old Testament.

The two men who walked on the road to Emmaus with Jesus reflected on their experience afterward. They said to each other, “Did our hearts not burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” (Luke 24:32).

It is our prayer that these daily readings for Advent would pro-

duce the same effect on us even today. We want our hearts to burn as we look at the same Scriptures Jesus opened to his followers, especially as we see how they point us to the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth.

The only Scriptures that were written at that time were the part of the Bible we call the Old Testament, a collection of books that we divide into law, history, poetry, and prophets. But in Jesus' day, they were sorted into Law, Prophets, and Writings. The daily readings of this book trace the promises concerning the coming Christ through the Hebrew canon according to that arrangement.

In the beginning of his letter to the Romans, Paul introduces himself as one "set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son" (Romans 1:1b–3a). We want to find these promises.

So join us this Advent as we look at what God promised beforehand about his Son Jesus. First, we will trace the promise of a Prophet greater than Moses through the books of the Law. Then, we will explore the priesthood in the books of the Prophets, as we anticipate a greater Priest than Joshua. Next, we follow the promise of a King who will dwell with us forever, a greater Son of David. And finally, in the last few days leading up to Christmas, we will turn to the New Testament and look forward to the promise of an even greater Advent, when Jesus comes back again. May our hearts burn together.

WEEK ONE

THE LAW

The Promise of a Greater Prophet



DECEMBER 1

The Prophet Will Pray for You

Now then, return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, so that he will pray for you, and you shall live. But if you do not return her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours.

~ **Genesis 20:7**

This is the first time the word “prophet” appears in the Bible, and it’s uttered by God himself. We tend to think of a prophet as one who predicts the future. But here, God is the one telling the future, and the role of Abraham the prophet is not to predict, but to pray.

The prophet Abraham previously stood between God and the people of Sodom, praying for them and asking God to spare the town for the sake of ten righteous men (Genesis 18:32). In chapter 19, we read that Abraham returned to the place where he interceded for Sodom and looked down upon the land his prayers had failed to save. But in the very next verse, we read, “So it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the valley, God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow when he overthrew the cities in which Lot had lived” (Genesis 19:29). The prayer of Abraham for the city of Sodom may not have prevailed to save the city, but it was the occasion for the Lord to save Lot.

In today’s reading, the prophet’s prayer will succeed again, as long as Abimelech asks Abraham to pray for him. In fact, Abraham’s prayer not only saves Abimelech from death, but

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brings healing to Abimelech and his household. In the words of James 5:16, “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”

But was Abraham a righteous person? After all, Abimelech was in this predicament because of Abraham’s deception. Like all believers, Abraham was counted righteous before God on the basis of faith, but he was just as capable of sin as we are. Another praying prophet stood between God and Israel to pray for their preservation (Exodus 32–33), but even Moses himself was not without sin. The Old Testament prophets were able to intercede on behalf of others only because they were clothed in righteousness by faith (see Romans 1:16–17; 4:1–12; 2 Corinthians 5:21). Their prophetic calling pointed forward to another praying Prophet, whose perfect righteousness meant every prayer on our behalf would be answered with, “Yes, my Son.” He is the one true mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5).

DECEMBER 2

Judah Is a Lion's Cub

"Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion's cub; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down; he crouched as a lion and as a lioness; who dares rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes. His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk."

~ **Genesis 49:8–12**

Jacob was a man of action. But here, at the end of his life, he reveals his poetic (and prophetic) side. His words for Judah are something of a surprise: Judah was not the firstborn (that was Reuben), was not the heir (that was Joseph), nor even the favorite (Joseph, again). But these were not a dying father's words only. As Peter tells us, "No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21)." So here, Jacob speaks "from God."

His words for Judah and for Judah's tribe are astounding (Genesis 49:28). His words tell of this future descendant of Judah as the unconquered Lion, the everlasting King over "the peoples," here meaning all peoples of the earth. They speak of a garden so lush that the King is unconcerned about lashing his donkey within chomping distance of "the choice vine." Here, in the final

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prophecy of Genesis, Jacob's words tell of the One who would forever roll back the curse of Genesis 3. In the place of thorns and thistles, fruitful vines are the order of the day.

Would the same King also undo the greatest curse of Genesis 3, that of death itself? Revelation 5:5–14 gives us the answer. The Lion of the tribe of Judah is also the Lamb who was slain to ransom us from death.

DECEMBER 3

Who Has Made Man's Mouth?

But Moses said to the LORD, "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue." Then the LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak."

~ Exodus 4:10-12

The Lord has appointed Moses as a prophet, to be God's spokesperson and representative to Israel and to Pharaoh. Moses does not feel that he can adequately perform this task. *Speak for God? How can I speak on behalf of God when I am such a poor speaker?* You would not expect a great ruler to send someone with a lisp to be the official ambassador of the nation. So how much more would someone who is supposed to represent the Creator of heaven and earth feel the burden of speaking well! Moses' objection is a reasonable one, but it is misguided.

In his very objection, Moses has forgotten that this Creator of heaven and earth also created his lisping tongue and stammering mouth. And that same powerful Creator has called him for the role. Because Moses persists in his objections, God appoints his brother Aaron to be the speaker on behalf of Moses. So rather than God speaking to the prophet, and the prophet speaking to the people, Moses adds another layer to the process. God will speak to Moses, Moses will speak to Aaron, and Aaron will speak

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to the people. This is starting to become the most frustrating game of telephone!

Moses' fear shows us that he is not the ultimate prophet from God that we are waiting for. And moreover, he did not perfectly listen to and obey God's voice (Numbers 20:11–12). But he is a living picture that points us to the need for an even greater prophet who will speak for God—perfectly.

DECEMBER 4

Prophets Hear from God

The LORD called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying, "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them ..."

~ Leviticus 1:1-2

It might seem difficult at first to see how the book of Leviticus, so concerned with sacrifices and priesthood, helps us learn about prophets. That is, until we realize that the entirety of the book is prophecy, spoken to Moses by God for Moses to speak to the people of Israel.

This is our key to understanding the prophet not only as God's herald, but also as his steward. His message is not his own, but God's. No prediction he speaks comes from some talent of his own, but God reveals what is to come to the prophet. The prophet speaks the very words of God because the prophet hears from God.

God's message through prophets is never merely a word for an individual, meant for that individual's interests. The prophet hears from God in order to advance God's plan for history. Each and every prophecy of the Old Testament served to show forth the Lord's glorious work of redeeming a people for himself. The book of Leviticus does this by showing us that if we are to approach God, who is holy, then our sin must be dealt with. Even saying "Thank you" to God required sacrifice (the peace offering of Leviticus 3). These and other words of the prophets point us to the holiness of God and our need for redemption.

Just as the sacrifices of Leviticus were but a shadow of the sac-

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rifice of Jesus Christ (Colossians 2:17; Hebrews 10:1), so also the prophets of the Old Testament pointed to something far more glorious than themselves. They heard from God and spoke his words, and in so doing revealed him to those who listened. But what if the Word revealed himself? What if the Word became flesh? No one has ever seen God, but what if God himself, who is at the Father's side, made him known (John 1:1–18)?

DECEMBER 5

The Accidental Prophet for Israel

*And [Balaam] took up his discourse and said,
“The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor,
the oracle of the man whose eye is opened,
the oracle of him who hears the words of God,
and knows the knowledge of the Most High,
who sees the vision of the Almighty,
falling down with his eyes uncovered:
I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near:
a star shall come out of Jacob,
and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;
it shall crush the forehead of Moab
and break down all the sons of Sheth.
Edom shall be dispossessed;
Seir also, his enemies, shall be dispossessed.
Israel is doing valiantly.
And one from Jacob shall exercise dominion
and destroy the survivors of cities!”*

~ Numbers 24:15–19

Balaam does not make it into many Christmas songs. And quite frankly it is pretty understandable. Balaam did not seek to align with God's redemptive plan, and he did not seek to bless Israel. In fact, Balaam was a wicked prophet who sought his own gain from wrongdoing and actually serves as prototype for false teachers in

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the New Testament (Numbers 31:16; 2 Peter 2:15; Revelation 2:14). But God does something remarkable through this “accidental” prophet that directly connects him to the Christmas story.

Balaam describes himself as someone “whose eye is open” (Numbers 24:15–16), and indeed he sees something important. Balaam introduces this vision as something that will happen in the “latter days” (verse 14), and it is specifically connected with the nation of Israel. As he looks out over the people of Israel—homeless and scattered in the wilderness—he looks past this generation to a day when a King shall come from Jacob’s line and will establish his dominion over the nations. Balaam describes this King as a “star” and “scepter”—signs of transcendence and authority. He will crush the enemies of Israel as his rule is spread over the face of the earth. This is a King who will make the nations quake and tremble before him (Psalm 2:11–12).

Balaam was not the last Gentile to catch a glimpse of this King’s star. Centuries later, wise men from the east would see the same star with eyes opened by God’s grace. Rather than plot how to overthrow the Lord’s purpose through idolatry, as Balaam did, these wise men would fall down before this King and offer him their treasures—gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These eastern stargazers would see that even though this King could barely hold a ball, one day he would hold a scepter to rule over the nations. They saw that, in this King who will one day possess the gate of his enemy, all the nations of the earth will be blessed (Genesis 22:17).

This Advent, as people from different tongues, tribes, languages, and nations remember King Jesus’ birth, we do so not like Balaam, who sought to support the enemies of God, but as those who have come under our King’s gracious rule. We do so as those who know that at the cross our King crushed the head of his chief enemy, Satan. And he will come back to destroy the last enemy, death (1 Corinthians 15:26).

DECEMBER 6

A Prophet Will Speak for God

“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’ And the LORD said to me, ‘They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.’”

~ Deuteronomy 18:15–19

Just before the people of Israel crossed over into the Promised Land, the aged Moses gave one final speech to remind the people of God’s covenant with them. This speech constitutes essentially the entire book of Deuteronomy, the last of the five books in the Hebrew Bible called the Law. Nearly the entire generation who encountered God at the mountain died during the wilderness wandering years. So at the Jordan banks, Moses is in a sense reconstituting Israel in this new generation on the brink of national conquest.

But Moses, who has been leading these people all these years, knows he will not spend many more days with them. As the prophet, he has been the one who has listened to God, spoke to God, and spoke for God to the people. Moses now prophesies an

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even greater Prophet who will come later. This greater Prophet will be an Israelite, because he will be from among their brothers. He will be like Moses, who was God's instrument for a great deliverance from tyranny and oppression. He will speak God's words because God will put his words in his mouth. And he will not fail, because he will speak all that God commands. He will not add or subtract anything from God's words, but will get it absolutely right.

In fact, the authority of this new Prophet will be so complete that God will treat people's response to this Prophet as unto God himself. This spokesman from God will demand the same obedience God does, because he does not speak on his own authority, but on God's.

Moses reminds the people of the time God spoke to them directly, and they could not handle the unmediated voice of God. They asked God to appoint Moses to be their middleman, and God thought this was a good idea. But though he served his role well, Moses could not ultimately stand between God and man as a mediator, sinful as he was. God promises to raise up a better Prophet than Moses, and it is for that Prophet the people of Israel would continue to wait.

WEEK 2

THE PROPHETS

The Promise of a Greater Priest



DECEMBER 7

Priests with Wet Feet on Dry Ground

“And when the soles of the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off from flowing, and the waters coming down from above shall stand in one heap.” So when the people set out from their tents to pass over the Jordan with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, and as soon as those bearing the ark had come as far as the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water ... the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap very far away.... And the people passed over opposite Jericho.

~ Joshua 3:13–16

When Israel entered the Land of Promise, they crossed the Jordan. It was a fitting end to the wilderness journey that began with crossing the Red Sea. Here, the Lord showed his continuing faithfulness to fulfill all his promises to his people (Joshua 3:10–17).

One of the striking, and yet mundane, details of the miracle at the Jordan on this day is that, of all the thousands and thousands of Israelites who crossed over, the only ones with wet feet were the priests carrying the ark. This is the essence of priesthood: to serve God and his people, to wade into the water for his name's sake, and for the people's benefit. The priesthood was a tremendous calling—only the priests could take a person's offerings and place them on the altar or present them to the Lord. Only the priests

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could minister in the Holy Place. But this great honor was the honor of service—a service that constantly proclaimed the Lord’s holiness to a sinful world.

In their service in the Jordan, bearing the ark as a symbol of the presence of the Lord as he fulfilled his promises, the priests perform a ministry that is at once both great and humble. This is the kind of paradox we might expect in a kingdom where, “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:26–28).

DECEMBER 8

The Priesthood Must Be Kept Holy

Samuel said, "What have you done?" And Saul said, "When I saw that the people were scattering from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and that the Philistines had mustered at Michmash, I said, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the favor of the LORD.' So I forced myself, and offered the burnt offering." And Samuel said to Saul, "You have done foolishly. You have not kept the command of the LORD your God, with which he commanded you. For then the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not continue."

~ 1 Samuel 13:11–14a

Saul's errors were many, but this is the one that cost him the kingdom. How dare he offer the sacrifices which were reserved for the priests! The entire tabernacle system was founded upon the reality that our God is a holy God and must be approached in the way he says is holy. Consider how often the word "holy" occurs in the book of Leviticus (the book that details most clearly how God expected to be worshiped). I count 92 occurrences in 27 chapters. The holy God must be approached in holiness or not at all!

Any deviation from the Lord's commands diluted the sense of his holiness. It polluted the sacrifices themselves. Aaron and his sons (and Samuel by his adoption into the Tabernacle) have been marked as separate from the rest of Israel. They were consecrated for sacrifice. Another way to say this is that they were made holy

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or sanctified for this purpose. For Saul to offer the burnt offering was to miss the whole purpose of the offerings. Did God need the bull? Of course not! The bull's spotlessness was a picture of atonement—God will accept no blemished sacrifice for sins. The priest's set-apartness likewise was intended to show us that we are separated from God. We therefore require One who has been set apart to make atonement for us. Saul did not understand this.

However, even Samuel's holiness was merely a picture, just as the bull's spotlessness was. Even the purest offerings by Aaron's sanctified sons were polluted with sin. To deal with sin finally, we need a Priest who was truly holy to offer a sacrifice that was truly perfect. He must not only be *made* holy, but he must also actually *be* holy.

King Saul had no business taking upon himself the role of priest. He was not consecrated for that task, and he certainly was not sinless. Unless God unites them, priest and king must not be merged. But God would one day merge them.

DECEMBER 9

The Worthless Priests of Eli

Now the sons of Eli were worthless men. They did not know the LORD.... Moreover, before the fat was burned, the priest's servant would come and say to the man who was sacrificing, "Give meat for the priest to roast, for he will not accept boiled meat from you but only raw." And if the man said to him, "Let them burn the fat first, and then take as much as you wish," he would say, "No, you must give it now, and if not, I will take it by force." Thus the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the LORD, for the men treated the offering of the LORD with contempt.

~ 1 Samuel 2:12, 15-17

The duty of the priests was to assist the worshiper with the worship sacrifices and ceremonies. They lived and worked in the place of meeting and did not work in the fields or provide food for themselves like an average Israelite. But because their role was an indispensable part of the way God arranged for people to worship, he built into their occupation certain perks that would enable them to serve in the tabernacle and still survive.

In the days when Eli was the high priest, his sons were not content to receive the portion allotted for them, but became greedy and worthless priests. They abused their authority as servants in the tabernacle. In order for a faithful member of Israel to worship God, he must participate in the ritual of sacrifice, and to abstain from this would be sinful. So it was a great evil for these sons of Eli to take advantage of people who were trying to be faithful to follow God's

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commands by extorting them and stealing portions of the sacrificial offering intended for the worship of God.

God punished these wicked young men, and even punished their father Eli for failing to restrain his rebellious children. As we keep reading God's grand story, we are awaiting a Priest who completely trusts in God's provision through faithfully administering his duty. We are waiting for a Priest who does not abuse and extort those who come to him seeking to worship God, but who provides an opportunity for sinful people to be made right with a holy God. And ultimately, no sinful man can ever offer completely acceptable sacrifices for sinners, because even the priest needs someone to atone for his sins. If only a sinless Priest would come, then he could offer an acceptable sacrifice to God.

DECEMBER 10

The Priests: Servants in God's House

And Jehoash did what was right in the eyes of the LORD all his days, because Jehoiada the priest instructed him.

~2 Kings 12:2

Little prince Jehoash (also known as Joash) was born into strife, dysfunction, and idolatry. His grandmother Athaliah had assassinated all the royal family when Jehoash's father the king died, except for Jehoash and his nurse, hidden in a bedroom and later taken to the temple. There he stayed under the tutelage of the priest Jehoiada, until ascending the throne at age 7. As long as Jehoiada lived, Jehoash walked with the Lord. But 2 Chronicles 24:17–19 tells us that after Jehoiada's death, the king fell in with unsavory characters (the princes of Judah,) and they all abandoned the Lord.

The tragedy of Jehoash's shallow, temporary faith should not fail to challenge us. *Is my faith my own, or am I merely surrounded by influential people who love the Lord?* We should likewise consider the life and ministry of a man who risked his life to serve the Lord by rescuing and protecting the little king. Jehoiada singlehandedly orchestrated the fall of the usurper Athaliah, and remained the teacher of the king his whole life. Jehoiada would have assisted Jehoash as the young king made his own copy of the Old Testament law, and taught him how to study it (Deuteronomy 17:18–20). For those six years of hiding, the young Jehoash would have watched the priest performing his duties, making burnt offerings,

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sin offerings, and peace offerings. Because he had a good teacher, he would have been taught why the priests served in the House of God and why the offerings had to be made.

Did he also see the limitations of the priesthood? Did he see, perhaps, how the repetition of the sacrifices, day in and day out, never solved the problem of sin once and for all? Perhaps he saw the imperfection even of his hero Jehoiada. Maybe he saw that the priests were still unholy and that they too required sacrifices. The death of Jehoiada seems to have been a singularly sad moment for Jehoash.

If only there were a truly perfect Priest, who offered a perfect sacrifice, whose teaching would be truly transforming. If only there were a Priest who would live forever.

DECEMBER 11

The Priests Must Be Clothed

“When [the priests] enter the gates of the inner court, they shall wear linen garments. They shall have nothing of wool on them, while they minister at the gates of the inner court, and within. They shall have linen turbans on their heads, and linen undergarments around their waists. They shall not bind themselves with anything that causes sweat. And when they go out into the outer court to the people, they shall put off the garments in which they have been ministering and lay them in the holy chambers. And they shall put on other garments, lest they transmit holiness to the people with their garments.”

~ Ezekiel 44:17–19

From Genesis to Revelation, the authors of Scripture repeatedly use the image of putting on and putting off clothing in symbolic ways. The clothing of the priests is a major thread in this trajectory.

The Lord gave Adam the same charge to “work and keep” the garden as he later gave the priests of Israel in the tabernacle, making Adam the very first priest of God (Genesis 2:15; Numbers 3:7–8). Yet unlike the priests of Israel, Adam was naked in God’s presence—a state unthinkable for any priest of Israel (Exodus 20:26). He did not have a need for physical clothing until he entered the shameful state of lacking (or falling short of) the glory of God, which he exchanged at the fall (Romans 1:23; 3:23).

After this tragic exchange, God took the initiative to clothe Adam, and God has since required all his priests to be clothed.

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Entering the glorious presence of a holy God requires clothing with garments that reflect and transmit that holiness and glory (Exodus 28:1–43). Ultimately, these garments are symbolic of spiritual garments, which God alone can provide his human priests (Zechariah 3:4–5; see also the reading for December 13).

In Isaiah, we are told the Messiah will give his people beautiful garments accompanying their salvation, because he himself has been clothed as a priestly bridegroom by God (Isaiah 61:1–3, 10). The Bride will one day be fully clothed in spiritual garments of glory that reflect the glorious garments of her Messiah. In Revelation 19, John says the clothing of the Bride is the righteous deeds of the saints (Revelation 19:8).

Before this final clothing day, God commands his priestly nation to clothe themselves with the Messiah (1 Peter 2:9; Romans 13:14). This is Paul's shorthand way of saying that believers who are already righteous in Christ (Romans 5:1–2) must daily clothe themselves with the righteousness of Christ (Colossians 3:12–14). Thankfully this is not a task we are left to do alone. The Holy Spirit is constantly active in conforming us into the image of Jesus (Romans 8:26–29). This process of being clothed with the glory-image of Jesus, God's perfect Priest, will not be complete until the day when our sinful flesh is finally dead. On that Day God will clothe us with the image of the last and greater Adam and give us spiritual bodies of resurrection life (1 Corinthians 15:35–58).

DECEMBER 12

The Fork-Tongued Priests of Israel

*"I will stretch out my hand against Judah
and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem;
and I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal
and the name of the idolatrous priests along with the priests,
those who bow down on the roofs
to the host of the heavens,
those who bow down and swear to the LORD
and yet swear by Milcom,
those who have turned back from following the LORD,
who do not seek the LORD or inquire of him."*

~ Zephaniah 1:4-6

The Lord appointed the priests as the guardians of true worship. They were supposed to "guard and keep" the tabernacle/temple and the ceremonial worship that happened there. But in the generations leading up to the exile of Judah, the priesthood had grotesquely failed in their God-appointed task. Unlike many of the examples in these Advent readings, this is not merely a failure of not fully living up to the expectations of the office. God's wrath burns hot against the priests of Israel because they are completely contradicting their intended roles. Rather than protecting the purity of Judah's worship, they have actually become servants of idolatry.

The temple priests of Judah have mixed themselves with priests of foreign idols, like Baal and Milcom, grossly polluting the wor-

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ship of the Lord. Priests are bowing down in feigned worship to the Lord, but they are doing so swearing by Milcom, the idol god of the Ammonites (1 Kings 11:5). They are fork-tongued. They say they worship the Lord while they also worship idols.

This is the same kind of syncretism that kindled God's wrath at Sinai, when the high priest Aaron fashioned an image of a young bull with melted gold and told the people to worship this statue alongside a feast to the true God (Exodus 32:4–5). This idolatry in the midst of the Lord's worship so kindles God's wrath that he declares he will treat the false worshipers themselves as a sacrifice—he will destroy and consume them (Zephaniah 1:7–8). Their punishment is that God will treat them just as they are doing with the animals they offer in their idolatrous worship—he will slaughter them, pour out their blood, and burn them (1:8–18).

God hates idolatry.

He utterly refuses to let blasphemous worship continue in his name. But even for rebels, God amazingly offers hope. There is a Day coming when he will remove all pride (Zephaniah 3:11). The Lord himself will reign with Israel as their King (3:15). He will rejoice and sing over his redeemed people (3:17). But how can idolaters be saved, when God has promised to make them his ultimate sacrifice? Another must be sacrificed in their place. Another Priest—a true Priest—must have his blood poured out instead.

DECEMBER 13

I Will Bring My Servant, the Branch

Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments. And the angel said to those who were standing before him, "Remove the filthy garments from him." And to him he said, "Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments." And I said, "Let them put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments.... And the angel of the LORD solemnly assured Joshua, "... Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men who are a sign: behold, I will bring my servant the Branch. For behold, on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven eyes, I will engrave its inscription, declares the LORD of hosts, and I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day."

~ Zechariah 3:3-6, 8-9

What happens when the means for dealing with sin is exposed as defiled? How can God's plan for redemption be completed when the institutions set in place for that purpose appear ruined? The days after the people of Judah returned from exile were hard, especially for those who remembered the glory days. They were rebuilding Jerusalem and the temple, but they were not free. They had spent seventy years without a temple, without sacrifices. Their exile had been a consequence of their sins, which included idolatry, the corruption of the priesthood and its sacrifices, and, indeed, empty religious "observance" without any actual repentance.

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Now chastened, they were once again in the Land of Promise. The demolished city and temple were reminders of their sin. They were surrounded by enemies. And Joshua, the priest, presided over their sacrifices and offerings (Ezra 3:1–7). But how could he, as much a sinner as his countrymen, presume to do so? The Lord must deal with his sin.

In today's reading, the Lord uses Joshua as a symbol for the people of Judah: As he gave Joshua clean garments, so would he remove the iniquity of the land in a single day. But Joshua also serves as a symbol for the One who would remove that iniquity—the Branch. Later, in Zechariah 6:12, the Lord uses a symbolic action to show this. The Branch would unite the kingship and priesthood—Joshua the priest is given a golden crown. “And there shall be a priest on his throne, and the counsel of peace shall be between them both” (6:13b). The Branch, who also appears in Isaiah 4 and 11, Jeremiah 23 and 33, and Ezekiel 17, is the Messiah, the Christ. But where Joshua received clean garments to replace filthy ones, the Branch will have no need for a change of clothes. Whereas Joshua received a symbolic crown but no kingship, the Branch will be crowned first with thorns and then with glory. He will be enthroned first on Golgotha, and then at his Father's right hand.

WEEK 3

THE WRITINGS

The Promise of a Greater King



DECEMBER 14

Kiss the Son

Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

~ *Psalm 2:12*

Early into the Writings we get a glimpse of the focus of this section of the Old Testament. Here we have a psalm that paints a picture far beyond the borders of Israel. Psalm 2 portrays a global gathering of the nations, who take counsel in order to rebel against Yahweh and his anointed King. Much like the tower-builders of Babel, they combine their earthly powers in order to rule as their own kings—as their own gods.

But is God afraid? Does God assemble his angelic army and develop a defense strategy? Hardly. He mocks them—he holds them in derision (verse 4). These earthly kings may have their petty kingdoms, but the Lord's King has a Kingdom that extends to the ends of the earth, and he will inherit the nations. These kings may seek to shatter the Lord's cords of rule over them, but the Lord's King will shatter them to pieces like a clay pot. And God terrifies them with the sound of his voice as if to say, "Do you want to know what true power is? Then look at my Son—he has authority; he has might; he has dominion."

Then God does something surprising. He does not crush these rebellious kings; he warns them. He shows them that, though they have rebelled against him, there is mercy for them if they serve him—if they kiss the scepter of his King. See the mercy and

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kindness of God! The very one who brings judgment against sinners for breaking his good commands now offers refuge for them. The ones who are being told to kiss the Son—a sign of submission and honor—are the ones who have raged against him.

This is what makes the Advent of our King such good news: In King Jesus there is mercy for sinners! This is the unexpected twist of God's redemption. Our King, who has the power and authority to crush the nations, is himself crushed for the sake of the nations so that we don't have to bear the penalty of our sin. "He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

Christmas is good news because in his first coming, our King did not come to crush his enemies, but to be crushed for his enemies, so that we might find refuge in him. And so we kiss the Son, not with the terror of a frightened prisoner, but with the anticipation of a bride kissing her bridegroom.

DECEMBER 15

The King Who Is a Priest

A Psalm of David. The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool." The LORD sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your enemies! Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power, in holy garments; from the womb of the morning, the dew of your youth will be yours. The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." The Lord is at your right hand; he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath.

~ *Psalm 110:1-5*

In the reading on December 8, King Saul illegitimately tried to perform priestly duties. But on December 13, we read Zechariah's prophecy about the Branch, the Priest-King who would take away the iniquity of the land in a single day. Only the LORD could bring these two roles of Priest and King together, or perform such a deed as to remove iniquity. But what would the Priest-King do? What would he be like?

Early in the story of the Bible, there was another priest-king, named Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18). The one foretold in Psalm 110 is a king—he has a scepter and rules (verses 1-3). He is also a priest like the priest-king Melchizedek (verses 3-4). But unlike Melchizedek—or even David—he shares the throne room with God himself. His wrath is dispensed by God rather than the other way around. The Old Covenant priests were symbolically holy (that is, they were set apart for a specific ceremonial task),

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and they ceremonially cleansed God's rebellious people. But this Priest-King's people offer themselves completely to him, and they are all holy! And get this: When they bow before their Priest-King, they are entering the very presence of the Holy God—the Lord is at his right hand (verse 5)! How could that be, unless the Priest-King has dealt with their sin once and for all?

This marks something drastically different and shockingly new when compared to the Old Covenant system. It is no wonder that this is the most frequently quoted psalm in the New Testament. This new Priest-King will be greater than any king and greater than any priest who had ever lived. What man could possibly fulfill this role? It would seem that only God himself could accomplish this.

DECEMBER 16

Salvation He Brings to His King

*Great salvation he brings to his king,
and shows steadfast love to his anointed,
to David and his offspring forever.*

~ Psalm 18:50

The Psalms are obsessed with the kingship of David. If you were not a very careful reader, you might be tempted to think that the Psalms care more about David than about God. This might seem even stranger when you consider that David wrote the majority of these songs and poems about God's love for David. Does David just have a big ego? In Psalm 18 the superscript tells us that these are the very words David sang to God on the day the Lord rescued him from his enemies, especially Saul. So David is singing to God about God's love for David. There must be something deeper going on.

Saul knew the Lord had anointed David as king, and in rivalry and bitterness set himself against this shepherd boy. And David realizes that Saul was not merely opposing him, but by attacking David, Saul was essentially attacking God. So David uses cataclysmic language to describe the anger of the Lord against Saul and his kind. When the Lord heard David's cry for help, "smoke went up from his nostrils" (Psalm 18:8) and "he bowed the heavens" (18:9). The Lord's voice is accompanied with images of thunder, hailstones, and coals of fire (18:13).

Who does David think he is? Why would David's enemies elic-

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it such an apocalyptic response from God? In the final verse he explains that God shows steadfast love “to his anointed” (18:50). To anoint someone is to appoint them for a purpose. God chose David! Thus to reject David is to reject God. And whenever someone attempts to rebel against the king God has chosen, and even appears to have surrounded and defeated him, God always brings great salvation to his king.

Even so, David knows he is a mere human king and will someday die. But God promised that one of David’s sons would sit on the throne forever. So even in the final words of this psalm, “and his offspring forever,” we find ourselves looking forward to another King, like David, who will be delivered from his enemies—even the great enemy of death.

DECEMBER 17

The King Searches the Things of God

It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out. As the heavens for height, and the earth for depth, so the heart of kings is unsearchable. Take away the dross from the silver, and the smith has material for a vessel; take away the wicked from the presence of the king, and his throne will be established in righteousness. Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great, for it is better to be told, "Come up here," than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.

~ *Proverbs 25:2-7*

Anyone who has read the Bible more than once has seen new treasures that were previously unnoticed. God wrote the Bible in such a way to reveal hidden truth slowly. God conceals things, but it is the glory of kings to search them out and reign in righteousness. To the degree that a king discovers the hidden things of God and reigns righteously with that wisdom, he is a good king.

These verses from Proverbs came from Solomon's hand. Solomon was a wise king, the son of David. It was Solomon's glory to search out the hidden things of God and thus reign righteously. Unfortunately, Solomon did not do this perfectly. Solomon started out his kingship well but ended atrociously (1 Kings 11). For all his God-given wisdom, he did not reign in righteousness, showing him to be very foolish.

Is there a king who will know the things of God and reign

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righteously for his people? Proverbs gives us an answer by asking a startling question:

Who has established all the ends of the earth?

What is his name, and what is his son's name?

Surely you know!

~ Proverbs 30:4

We already know from Proverbs that the LORD made all things by wisdom (3:19), so we know God established the ends of the earth. But who is his son, and what is his name? Apparently, we are supposed to know! The only other person who creates in Proverbs is wisdom, who is called a “master workman” (8:22–31). God even “brought forth” wisdom, which means that wisdom is being called God’s child. The Son of God is wisdom.

God’s Son would be a perfect ruler. He would have the most kingly glory, because he would perfectly search out the things of God, since he is God’s Wisdom himself. And because he knows all the things of God, he therefore will reign in perfect righteousness. The prophet Isaiah promises that another King—another Son of David—will reign in righteousness forever (Isaiah 9:7). It is to that Son of David, that wise and righteous King, that the Writings are pointing.

DECEMBER 18

The King's Word Is Supreme

Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed. I say: Keep the king's command, because of God's oath to him. Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases. For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, "What are you doing?"

~ *Ecclesiastes 8:1-4*

A good king speaks with authority. His word is law—or in the words of our text, “The word of the king is supreme.” No one ought to say to the king, “What are you doing?” He is the king, and so he does what he pleases. Good kings love righteousness and speak with authority to further godliness in the land.

Surely all kings have some authority, but what king can speak such all-powerful words? What king does whatever he pleases and righteousness flourishes? What king cannot be defied? Surely, this would be a great king! Is there a king with words like this?

Ecclesiastes 12:11 helps us learn who this truly great King is: “The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd.” In this summary verse, we learn that all the wisdom of Ecclesiastes comes from “one Shepherd.” Who is this “one Shepherd” giving the words we need? And how does this relate to a King with supreme, righteous words?

The phrase “one Shepherd” only occurs in three other passages

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in the Bible: twice in Ezekiel and once in John. Ezekiel 37:24 says, “My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd.” The king and the shepherd are one person, just like David, the shepherd boy who became king. But this cannot be talking about David (the son of Jesse), because he had been dead for hundreds of years by the time Ezekiel was writing. The one Shepherd must be the son of David who will be King over God’s people. That is why Jesus says that he is the “one Shepherd” (John 10:16). Jesus is the one Shepherd who is also King like David. Jesus is almost certainly the one Shepherd in Ecclesiastes who speaks the words that we need to know to live righteously.

Jesus is our King—our Shepherd. When Jesus speaks, unrighteousness flees. John repeatedly describes the words that come out of the mouth of Jesus as a sword by which he destroys his enemies (Revelation 1:16; 2:16; 19:15, 21). His word is supreme and can cut to your heart to conquer remaining rebellion, even today. Do not oppose him. Jesus is our wise King with wise words that we need to hear, because his words teach us how to live for God’s glory and our joy.

DECEMBER 19

I Will Establish His Throne Forever

“When your days are fulfilled to walk with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from him who was before you, but I will confirm him in my house and in my kingdom forever, and his throne shall be established forever.”

~ 1 Chronicles 17:11–14

When God says, “I will,” you can take that promise to the bank. David wanted to build a house for the Lord, a place for God to dwell with his people. How could David live in extravagance while God lived in a tent (1 Chronicles 17:1)? David was not wrong to want to see God’s temple built, but God had greater plans. David’s son, Solomon, would build the temple and continue the line and work of David. The very first promise God gives David is that the throne will never leave his family, and God provides tangible affirmation when Solomon completes the temple. David and his family have immediate proof that God keeps his promises. If God kept the promise that David’s son would build the temple, David’s heirs can have faith that the rest of God’s promises to David are true.

In making his covenant with David, God starts six of his statements with “I will”: “I will raise up your offspring after you . . . and I will establish his kingdom. . . . I will establish his throne forever.

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I will be to him a father. . . . I will not take my steadfast love from him. . . . I will confirm him in my house and in my kingdom forever.”

These “I will” promises pertain to David’s family, immediately and forever. The only way “forever” can be upheld is through the One who eternally stands at the right hand of God. The steadfast love between the Father and the Son is shown to David and his son! God loved David and chose his line to be the one through which he would send his beloved Son to earth. And one from David’s house will receive the consummation of all of these “I will” promises.

We have an example in David that God keeps his promises. Therefore, we have hope that every promise he has made will be fulfilled. We have his Word on which to meditate, and we see that, because God fulfilled his covenant to David, we can have hope for the future. We can anticipate that the second coming of Jesus Christ is as certain as his first coming. Because when God says, “I will,” he will. As you meditate on his faithfulness to his past promises in this season of Advent, rest on the surety of his promises yet to come.

DECEMBER 20

A King Will Dwell with Us

And [Solomon] said, "O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven or on earth, keeping covenant and showing steadfast love to your servants who walk before you with all their heart, who have kept with your servant David my father what you declared to him. You spoke with your mouth, and with your hand have fulfilled it this day. Now therefore, O LORD, God of Israel, keep for your servant David my father what you have promised him, saying, 'You shall not lack a man to sit before me on the throne of Israel, if only your sons pay close attention to their way, to walk in my law as you have walked before me.' Now therefore, O LORD, God of Israel, let your word be confirmed, which you have spoken to your servant David.

"But will God indeed dwell with man on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built! Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O LORD my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you."

~ 2 Chronicles 6:14–19

Do you know what it's like to have a big day that you have been looking forward to for a long time? It might be a special anniversary or birthday, but the anticipation for this moment makes it significant. Maybe there was a lot of work and planning that went into the big day, so when it finally arrives, you feel a sense of weight and importance around every detail. Even your words seem supercharged with meaning, and you dare not waste them

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with trivial small talk. That must be what it was like on this day for Solomon, as he stands in front of the assembly of Israel to dedicate the recently constructed temple.

And oddly, this prayer almost seems to contain a sense of disappointment. The temple, God's house where he will dwell among mankind, has just been finished! And yet Solomon asks a rather obvious question, "Will God indeed dwell with man on the earth?" This temple was more magnificent and glorious than any building the world had ever seen, and yet in this dedicatory prayer Solomon points out the stark fact that if heaven cannot contain God, this temple does not even stand a chance.

Why does Solomon begin his dedication of the temple recounting God's promise to David that his heirs will sit on the throne? If Solomon's kingship is the result of God's promise keeping to David, then he can trust God's promise to set his name in this temple. Otherwise, this is a seriously extravagant waste of architecture. But what does it mean for God to set his name in the temple? Just as David and Solomon sit on their throne in the royal palace in the midst of Israel, so God will reign in the midst of his people through the house built by his servant, the King of Israel.

We know that Solomon would fail as a ruler, causing the kingdom to be ripped in two. And the temple he built, glorious though it may be, could never contain the infinite glory of the God who created heaven and earth. But another Son of David will talk of raising up another temple (John 2:19). And in this temple somehow the fullness of God will indeed dwell (Colossians 1:19; 2:9). This King, a son of David, will dwell among us, as a greater King than David or Solomon—and a greater temple than the one Solomon built.

WEEK 4

THE SECOND ADVENT

The Promise of Christ's Return



DECEMBER 21

The Beginning of the End

“For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.”

Matthew 24:7–8

Shortly before his death and resurrection, Jesus stands on the Mount of Olives and announces the pending destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. This house, which was supposed to be the place where people could encounter the living God, had frequently become an idol for children of Israel. Rather than using the temple to worship God, people quickly began to worship the temple itself. God knew from the beginning that this age of sin and idolatry would never last, and the temple was a provision of grace for a season, until he provided a more lasting solution. But now that Jesus has come, a new age has begun. The temple in Jerusalem has become obsolete because a new temple has arrived—Jesus and his church.

In his first coming, Jesus began, or inaugurated, a new era in the history of salvation. Through his death and resurrection, he dealt sin its deathblow, poured out his Spirit on all who would trust in him, and brought the kingdom of heaven to earth in seed form. All these actions were promised in the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings as happening in the “last days.” His disciples hear Jesus refer to the destruction of the temple and assume that this must mean the end of the age. But Jesus shocks his followers

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by telling them that even though he is bringing in the new age of the Spirit, the old age of sin and death is only beginning to end. The destruction of the temple, which would happen in that very generation (A.D. 70), and the many great wars and famines that would follow, are only “but the beginning of the birth pains” (Matthew 24:8).

Jesus wants to prepare his disciples for a marathon, not a sprint. The great mystery of the Old Testament was that there would not be one Advent of the Messiah, but two. Jesus came and inaugurated the kingdom, but it has not yet been consummated. The bride price of the church has been paid in Christ’s precious blood, securing his betrothed, but the wedding feast has not yet come. We live in this age of birth pains, beginning almost two thousand years ago. All the suffering, trials, and tribulation experienced by the church in these years of waiting are meant to increase our joy on that great Day of deliverance when our Bridegroom appears. Just like a mother’s childbearing pain is swallowed up in joy when she holds her precious child in her arms, we too consider that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing to the glory that is to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18). But until that day, we wait.

DECEMBER 22

Why Are You Looking into the Sky?

“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

~ Acts 1:11

I still remember the trial of waiting for my dad to get home from work as a kid. With each passing minute, I would nag my mom, “When is dad getting home? Is dad almost home?” Her response was frustrating but predictable. “He’ll be home soon. Relax! Don’t you have homework to do? Get to work!” I would take another glance at the door and sigh with exasperation before heading back to my math workbook.

The disciples have just witnessed a remarkable series of events. The crucified—and now risen—Jesus Christ was with them for forty days. He declared the present promise of the power of the Holy Spirit and the future promise of the kingdom of God in its fullness. Having witnessed the many miracles of Jesus, and his triumphant return from the grave, it is no wonder that the disciples believed the fulfillment of both of these promises to be right around the corner. “Now?” the disciples asked, “Will you restore to the kingdom right now?” (Acts 1:6).

Jesus’ response was familiar: “It’s not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority” (1:7). The timeline is God’s, not yours. Jesus has promised that he will bring the kingdom, and the Father will sovereignly determine the

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season and the time. While you cannot know the time or the season, you must know the certainty and fullness of the promise.

Mr. Beaver assured the children in Narnia as much in C. S. Lewis's novel *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*: "Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight. At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more."

Jesus gave one final statement before his departure: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (1:8). The disciples are given a promise and a command. First, the Holy Spirit will come upon them and empower them. Second, by the power of the Holy Spirit they will be Christ's witnesses across all of the earth. That means the power that you lack to be a witness of the gospel is yours by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And with that, Jesus ascended into heaven. He left a promise of the coming of the kingdom, a promise of the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, and a command to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. The awestruck disciples stood staring into the clouds, not sure what they ought to be doing next. Two angels appeared to tell the disciples just what they needed to hear. And it is what we need to hear as well: He is coming back soon, so cling to that truth and get to work.

DECEMBER 23

The Last Reveille

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.

~ 1 Corinthians 15:51–52

Who now sleeps in anticipation of that last reveille? Perhaps, like me, you await the day when your loved ones will be raised imperishable, remembering how they suffered formerly. Perhaps, like me, you long to know the children who perished before they saw the world. Perhaps you see the way the fall takes its toll on our mortal bodies, and you groan along with the rest of creation for the redemption of your body, as Paul puts it in Romans 8:23.

That day is of such great importance that Paul calls it “our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). Paul’s heart is latched on to that hope. His eyes are fixed on that horizon. The longing is so strong that it overwhelms his train of thought in 1 Corinthians 15. It is not so much an explanation as an exclamation that follows. What a glorious thought, that our destiny and that of those who sleep are to be “changed” at the last trumpet, when he returns and establishes his eternal kingdom on earth.

The mystery that Paul reveals here shows three reasons we should long for Christ’s return. The first is that “we shall not all sleep” (verse 51). There are some, perhaps alive today, who will pass

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from mortality to imperishable life without experiencing death. Second, the dead in Christ shall be “raised imperishable”— at the last reveille, they shall rise never to die again (verse 52). Third, it shall happen “in a moment” (verse 52). Death is the tragedy of the fall, which reigned until Christ dealt its mortal blow by his death, and continues to sting even today. But death will be swallowed up in victory without so much as a death knell.

Tether your heart to this hope. The last trumpet is the signal of final deliverance. Long with Paul for that fanfare. And pray as John does in Revelation 22:20, “Come, Lord Jesus.”

DECEMBER 24

Encourage One Another
with These Words

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

~ 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17

Christmas carols paint a peaceful scene of the birth of Jesus. A silent and holy night. All calm, and all bright. A humble baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes, laying his sweet head on a pillow in a manger. Cattle lowing amidst the scenery, but baby Jesus makes not a peep. A little drummer boy tapping away at his drum as a gift for the newborn king.

Take a moment to imagine the contrast of the second coming of Christ as described in 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17. Rather than swaddling clothes, King Jesus is robed with all manner of heavenly royal attire. No longer is he the helpless babe in a manger, but he is descending from the heights of the clouds. The peacefully quiet baby is now unleashing a roaring, victorious cry throughout the sky. The barnyard sounds of cattle are replaced by archangels, unmatched in power among the hosts of heaven, announcing his coming with thunderous booms and crashes. Rather than the *pa-rum-pum-pum-pum* of the little drummer boy, the trumpet

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of God resounds. Trees, mountains, and skyscrapers resonate as if on cue.

The contrast in the sounds and imagery of these two scenes could not be starker. Paul writes here of a contrast on a similar scale: life and death. At the return of Christ, Christians who have died will be raised to meet Christ in the clouds. Christians who are alive at the time of his return will be caught up together to meet the Lord in the sky. What a radical picture! When Christ returns to earth, he will bring the dead to life, and we will all be caught up together with him.

This future promise is not inconsistent with the way Jesus has operated in the past. When Jesus comes, he always brings the dead to life. It will be so when he returns, because it was so when he came on Christmas. Think on Paul's writings in Ephesians 2:4–6: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." This Christmas Eve, remember the purpose of Jesus' comings. Leonard Ravenhill says it well: "Jesus did not come into the world to make bad men good. He came into the world to make dead men live."

Christian, you are alive in Christ, and he will return again to bring the dead to life with him. Encourage one another with these words.

DECEMBER 25

We Will Be Like Him

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

~ 1 John 3:2

When I am about to return home at the end of a vacation, it is often difficult to zip up my suitcase because I have tried to put far too much inside. This verse from John is like a bulging suitcase that can barely contain so much in so few words. John teaches us at least four things here.

First, we are God's children already. Because of what Jesus accomplished two thousand years ago by taking on human flesh and bearing our sin, you can be God's child today by trusting in Jesus. It is altogether fitting to celebrate Christmas, because Christmas reminds us of the incredible reality that Jesus became our brother. He wrapped himself in human frailty, and God became man.

But the second thing John teaches us is that Christmas is not the end of the story in God's plan. It was not enough for Jesus to be made like us; we must be made like him. Even though we are already God's children, we await a transformation that has not yet happened. We live in a state of already and not yet. We have been adopted, but we have not been transformed.

Third, John makes a staggering claim. The object of our transformation is nothing less than the perfect Son of God. Think about this, Christian: You will be like Jesus! John isn't making a

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suggestion or even a command—but a promise. This promise is the best Christmas present you will receive this year. God promises to make you perfect, like Jesus. Consider all the times you have encountered Jesus in the Gospels and marveled at his wisdom, his purity, his love. All of these qualities will be yours, forever.

And finally, John opens the door to the economy of God and shows us how this miraculous transformation will take place: by seeing. When you see Jesus as he is, in all his perfection as your treasure, you will be changed. No one sees Jesus and walks away the same. Some see him wrongly and go away all the worse for it. They might see Jesus as simply a revolutionary teacher or a tyrannical maniac. They are not seeing Jesus as he really is, so they are not made more like him, but rather become more like the false idol standing in the true Jesus' place. Seeing Jesus *rightly* only happens when the Spirit of God opens our eyes. So ask God to send the Spirit to open your eyes every time you look upon Christ in the Word.

Even today, you can be made more like Jesus by seeing him by faith in his Word. You are already his child, and you will be transformed from one degree of glory to another by beholding him (2 Corinthians 3:18). But a Day is coming when you will no longer have to see by faith; your faith will become sight. In an instant, “we shall be like him, because we will see him as he is.”

CONCLUSION

The Alpha and the Omega

The Bible is a book authored by God. The Bible is also many books written by many different writers under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Because both of these are true, it is the most remarkable book you could ever read. There is so much diversity and yet such amazing unity. And of all the unifying themes woven throughout, one theme is clearly the most prominent: The Bible is about Jesus.

Jesus is the subject of every page of Scripture, either directly or indirectly. Sometimes, it is easy to see how Jesus is the subject, because it is a direct description or prophecy concerning the Christ. But at other times, the Bible is indirectly about Jesus. Maybe the character in a particular story is a lot like the Messiah is supposed to be (this is called a “type.”) Perhaps the portion of Scripture you are reading exposes the brokenness of humanity. In that case, it is meant to exacerbate in your mind the need for a Savior. From cover to cover, Jesus is the focus of the Bible.

In the very first pages of the story, our first parents sinned in the garden. But God does not waste any time allowing for the reader to think sin will triumph. In the curse God issues against the serpent, the instigator of this treason, God makes a promise:

*I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel.*

~ Genesis 3:15

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So begins the story of the two lines of humanity. Those who persist in their rebellion against God become identified with the offspring of the serpent. Those who put their faith in the promise of a future Savior are counted offspring of the woman. All of human history is an outworking of these two family trees. Centuries after God promised to send a deliverer, a boy was born in Bethlehem. He crushed the serpent's skull on a hill called Golgotha. And on the third day he rose from the dead, showing that for him death was only but a bruise on his heel.

This Jesus is coming back again. And when he comes this time, it will not be as a humble baby but as a conquering Ruler. He will judge each person according to this divide between offspring of the serpent and offspring of the woman. Even today, you can heed the command of Psalm 2 to kiss the son (see the reading for December 14) and ensure you are counted among his brothers and not his foes. This book is written so you would honor and treasure Jesus.

Jesus is the subject of the story of the Bible from beginning to end. He says so himself:

"Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

~ Revelation 22:12-13

