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# ADVENT

A DEVOTION BY



*John Piper*



DECEMBER 1

# The Search-and-Save Mission

*"The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."*

Luke 19:10

The word *advent* means "coming." In this season of the year, we focus on the meaning of the coming of the Son of God into the world. And the spirit of our celebration should be the spirit in which he came. And the spirit of that coming is summed up in Luke 19:10: "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

The coming of Jesus was a search-and-save mission. "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

So, Advent is a season for thinking about the mission of God to seek and to save lost people from the wrath to come. God raised him from the dead, "Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess. 1:10). It's a season for cherishing and worshiping this characteristic of God that he is a searching and saving God, that he is a God on a mission, that he is not aloof or passive or indecisive. He is never in the maintenance mode, coasting or drifting. He is sending, pursuing, searching, saving. That's the meaning of Advent.

The book of Acts is a celebration of this advent heart of God's on the move to seek and to save the lost. It's a narration of Jesus's ongoing advent into more and more peoples of the world. Acts is the story of how the early church understood the words, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you" (John 20:21). It's the story of how the vertical advent of God in the mission of Jesus bends out and becomes the horizontal advent of Jesus in the mission of the church. In us.

Jesus came into the world at the first Advent, and every Advent since is a reminder of his continual advent into more and more lives. And that advent is, in fact, our advent—our coming, our moving into the lives of those around us and into the peoples of the world.

DECEMBER 2

# Prepare Your Heart for Christ

*"How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?"*

John 5:44

God owns and controls all things. And there is nothing that he could give you for Christmas this year that would suit your needs and your longings better than the consolation of Israel and the redemption of Jerusalem, restoration for past losses and liberation from future enemies, forgiveness and freedom, pardon and power, healing the past and sealing the future.

If there is a longing in your heart this Advent for something that the world has not been able to satisfy, might not this longing be God's Christmas gift preparing you to see Christ as consolation and redemption and to receive him for who he really is? How is the heart prepared to receive Christ for who he really is? It is very simple.

First, the heart must become disenchanted with the praise of men. "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from God?" (John 5:44; 7:17-18).

Second, the heart must become disenchanted with the sufficiency of money and things to satisfy the soul. "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him" (Luke 16:14).

Then, third, alongside this disenchantment with the praise of men and the power of money, there must come into the heart a longing for consolation and a redemption beyond what the world can give.

Fourth and finally, there must be a revelation from God the Father, opening the eyes of the heart so that it cries out, like a man who stumbles onto an incredible treasure, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God, the consolation of my past, the redemption of my future. Now I see you. Now I receive you—for who you really are."

May God do this for you this Advent. May this be your gift, and your witness, and the testimony of many this Advent.

DECEMBER 3

# Draw Near to the Savior

*Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.*

Hebrews 13:20-21

One of the things pleasing in God's sight is that his people keep on drawing near to him forever and ever. And so, he is working in us this very thing. Hebrews 13:21 says he is doing this "*through Jesus Christ*," which means, at least, that Jesus has purchased this grace for us by his death and that Jesus prays and asks the Father for it on the basis of that death.

In other words, when the writer of Hebrews tells us that drawing near to God is what qualifies us for the eternal saving work of our High Priest, he doesn't mean to say that our High Priest leaves us alone in our sinful bent and natural resistance, as if we could draw near to God on our own. Rather, our High Priest intercedes for us and asks the Father to do just what Hebrews 13:21 says he will do work in us what is pleasing in his sight "*through Jesus Christ*."

This is illustrated by the way it looked when our High Priest was on the earth. In Luke 22:31-32 Jesus says to Peter, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." So already Jesus was interceding for his own when he was on the earth. And he was praying that Peter's faith—*that his faith—our faith—not fail*.

Moreover, he was so confident in his prayer for Peter that he said, "*When you have turned again*," not, "*If you turn again*." So even though Peter stumbled in denial, his faith did not fail utterly. That is what the Lord prays for us. This is one more piece of our great security and hope in this great epistle of assurance.

Is it not a wonderful thing this Advent season to know that God bids us come? That this great, holy God of righteousness and wrath says, "Draw near to me through my Son, your High Priest. Draw near to me. *Draw near to me*"?

This is his invitation in these Advent readings: "Draw near to me through your High Priest. Draw near to me in confession and prayer and meditation and trust and praise. Come. I will not cast you out." For Christ "is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25).

DECEMBER 4

# What Advent Is All About

*Even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*

Mark 10:45

Christmas is about the coming of Christ into the world. It's about the Son of God, who existed eternally with the Father as "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature," taking on human nature and becoming man (Heb. 1:3).

It's about the virgin birth of a child conceived miraculously by the Holy Spirit so that he is the Son of God, not the way you and I are sons of God, but in an utterly unique way (Luke 1:35).

It's about the coming of a man named Jesus in whom "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col. 2:9).

It's about the coming of the "fullness of time" that had been prophesied by the prophets of old that a ruler would be born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2); and a child would be born called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6); and a Messiah, an anointed one, a shoot from the stem of Jesse, a Son of David, a King, would come (Isa. 11:1-4; Zech. 9:9).

And, according to Mark 10:45, Christmas is about the coming of the Son of Man who "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." These words in Mark 10:45, as a brief expression of Christmas, are what I hope God will fix in your mind and heart this Advent.

Open your heart to receive the best present imaginable: *Jesus giving himself to die for you and to serve you all the rest of eternity.* Receive this. Turn away from self-help and sin. Become like little children. Trust him. *Trust him.* Trust him with your life.

DECEMBER 5

# Why Christmas Happened

*You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. . . The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.*

1 John 3:5, 8

Two times in 1 John 3:1–10 we are told why Christmas happened—that is, why the eternal, divine Son of God came into the world as human.

In verse 5, John says, “You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.” So, the sinlessness of Christ is affirmed— “In him there is no sin.” And the reason for his coming is affirmed— “He appeared in order to take away sins.”

Then in the second part of verse 8, John says, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.” And the specific focus John has in mind when he says “works of the devil” is the sin that the Devil promotes. We see that in the first part of verse 8: “Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning.” So, the works of the Devil that Jesus came to destroy are the works of sin.

So, two times John tells us that Christmas happened—the Son of God became human—to take away sin, or to destroy the works of the Devil, namely, sin. Jesus was born of a virgin by the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:18–20) and “increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52) and was perfectly obedient and sinless in all his life and ministry, all the way to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:5–8; Heb. 4:15)—in order to destroy the works of the Devil—to take away sin.

Our sin. Make this personal and love him for it. Take the very personal words of the apostle Paul and make them your own. “The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). This is how he destroyed the works of the Devil and rescued us from our sin. Don’t leave Christmas in the abstract. Your sin. Your conflict with the Devil. Your victory. He came for this!

DECEMBER 6

# God's Passion for God at Christmas

*For this purpose, I have come to this hour. Father glorify your name.*

John 12:27-28

One of the most famous Christmas scenes in the Bible is the announcement to the shepherds by an angel that the Savior is born. And then it says, "Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!'" (Luke 2:11-14).

Glory to God, peace to man. The angels are sent to make something crystal clear: The Son of God has come into his creation to display the glory of God and to reconcile people from alienation to peace with God. *To make God look great in salvation and to make man glad in God.*

So, when we come to John 12, there is no surprise when we hear Jesus praying that this would actually happen at the most important point of his earthly life, namely, his death and resurrection. That God would in fact be glorified in the rescue of sinners. Look at John 12:27-30:

*"Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? [We know he means the hour of his death, because in verse 24 he had said, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."] But for this purpose, I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not mine."*

In verse 27, Jesus says, "For *this purpose* I have come to this hour." What purpose? Answer: verse 28, "Father, glorify your name." *That is why my death approaches.*

The Father hears Jesus's prayer and answers, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." He had just glorified his name through

Jesus in the resurrection of Lazarus (John 11:4, 40), and now he will glorify it in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And don't miss the emphasis on God's commitment to glorify God. Not only does Jesus pray for God to glorify God: "Father, glorify your name" (v. 28), but God himself says, "I have glorified my name and I will again." God sent angels to say it in Luke 2. And God himself says it in John 12:28, "I have glorified [my name], and I will glorify it again."

The deepest reason why we live for the glory of God is that God acts for the glory of God. We are passionate about God's glory because God is passionate about God's glory.

And what makes this such good news, especially in the Gospel of John, is that the glory of God is full of grace and truth. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

The most glorious thing about God is that he is so completely, fully self-sufficient that the glory of the fullness of his being overflows in truth and grace for his creatures. He doesn't need us. And therefore, in his fullness he overflows for us. Such is the grace we receive at Christmas.



DECEMBER 7

# He Comes to Bless Us

*Moses said, "The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you. And it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people." And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaimed these days. You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, "And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed." God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness.*

Acts 3:22–26

What this passage teaches us is that God brought Jesus onto the scene of history to bless people. *"In your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed."*

God said to his Son in heaven, "The time is fulfilled; I have promised blessing; now is the time to make good on my promise; you will be my emissary of blessing; I want blessing to come to the world; I have so much to give; go now and bless my people, bless them; indeed bless all the families of the earth through them, bless them, bless them."

You can see this in verses 25 and 26 as God's blessing is mentioned twice. In verse 26, it says explicitly that God sent Jesus to the people of Israel *to bless* them. And when it says that God sent him to Israel *first*, it means that he will send the blessing on to others after that. Verse 25 makes plain that this was God's aim in the covenant he made with Abraham: *"In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* Blessing for the Jews and then, through them—through the Jewish Messiah—blessing for all the peoples, and that includes you.

So, I say to you that God is moving toward you with blessing in this Advent season. You are in verse 25. It doesn't matter that two millennia have passed. With God, a thousand years is as a day (2 Pet. 3:8). With him, it is as though he made this promise two days ago. That's how fresh the blessing for you is today. If you will move toward him in faith, you will receive the blessing. That is what Christmas is all about—the greatest blessing.

DECEMBER 8

# God Can Be Trusted

*Moses said, "The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you. And it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people." And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaimed these days. You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, "And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed." God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness.*

Acts 3:22-26

From the same passage, we now learn that part of the blessing is the demonstration of the truthfulness of God.

Peter piles up the promises. In verse 22 he says that Moses predicted the coming of a prophet like himself. In verse 24 he says that all the prophets from Samuel on down proclaimed these days—the days of Jesus. In verse 25 he says that God made a promise to Abraham about these days. The point is that when Jesus comes, he confirms the truth of all these promises. He shows that God is trustworthy; he keeps his word.

Here is the way Paul put it in Romans 15:8: "Christ became a servant to the circumcised [that is, the Jews] to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs." So, there it is, stated crystal clear: Christ came to prove that God tells the truth, that God keeps his promises. Christmas means that God can be trusted.

This is part of the *blessing* that he brings—and that he offers you in this Advent season. It is a blessing because where it is forsaken, moral and spiritual life disintegrates. The foundation of moral life is God's truthfulness. A society that forsakes the centrality of the absolute truthfulness of God forsakes the foundation of truth, the foundation of morality, and the foundation of beauty.

Christmas is the reassertion of the foundation of all truth and goodness and beauty, because Christmas means: *God is truthful*. God's truthfulness is the constant in a universe of flux. God's truthfulness is the unwavering absolute. If we forsake God's truthfulness, the anchor is up, the rudder is loose, the keel is broken,

and the ship of life (*political life, social life, educational life, scientific life, family life*) is simply at the mercy of the wind of human wishes.

So, I say it with all my heart: demonstrating the truthfulness of God is a great blessing. Give that blessing to your children. Say to the next generation again and again: God is truthful; God keeps his word; God does not lie; God can be trusted! That's one blessing of Advent. Receive it as a wonderful Christmas gift, and give it to as many people as you can.

DECEMBER 9

# Why the Son of Man?

*Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.*

John 1:51

Why is Jesus called *the Son of Man* in verse 51 and elsewhere in the Gospels? It has everything to do with Advent.

It's not simply because he is human. It's because the figure of a "son of man" in Daniel 7:13 is both human and far more than human. This was Jesus's favorite designation for himself—*Son of Man*. It's used over eighty times in the Gospels, and only Jesus uses it to refer to himself.

He got the title "Son of Man" from Daniel 7:13-14:

"I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like *a son of man*, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed."

This is the language of kingship and glory and sovereignty (*John 3:13; 5:27; 6:62*). But it has a different ring than the titles *Son of God* and *King of Israel*. It sounds more lowly and ordinary. So, when he used it, his claims to kingship and glory and sovereignty didn't sound so overt. Only those who had ears to hear broke through to the exalted meaning of the term *Son of Man* when Jesus used it.

So, this time it was not the Jewish leaders who used the title to bring him to the cross. Jesus himself used it that way. The key verse is John 3:14-15: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must *the Son of Man* be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

So, you could say that the greatest glory Nathanael, or you and I, would ever see is the glory of the Son of Man, the Lord of heaven, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, lifted up on a cross to die for sinners.

So, when you see him this Advent season as *Son of God* and as *King of Israel* and as *Son of Man*, make sure that you see him dying to give you eternal life and, therefore, see him as glorious.

DECEMBER 10

# What Christmas Came to Destroy

*The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.*

1 John 3:8

The coming of the eternal Son of God into the world as the Godman, Jesus Christ, is a fact of history. Yet thousands of people say they believe this fact but then live just like everybody else.

They have the same anxieties that good things will be lost and the same frustrations that bad things can't be changed. Evidently, there is not much power in giving right answers on religious surveys about historical facts.

That's because the coming of the Son of God into the world is so much more than a historical fact. It was a message of hope sent by God to teenagers and single parents and crabby husbands and sullen wives and overweight women and impotent men and disabled neighbors and people with same-sex attraction and preachers and lovers—and you.

And since the Son of God lived, died, rose, reigns, and is coming again, God's message through him is more than a historical fact. It is a Christmas gift to you from the voice of the living God.

Thus, says the Lord: the meaning of Christmas is that what is good and precious in your life need never be lost, and what is evil and undesirable in your life can be changed. The fears that the few good things that make you happy are slipping through your fingers, and the frustrations that the bad things you hate about yourself or your situation can't be changed—these fears and these frustrations are what Christmas came to destroy.

It is God's message of hope this Advent that what is good need never be lost and what is bad can be changed. The Devil works to take the good and bring the bad.

Jesus came to destroy the works of the Devil.

DECEMBER 11

# The Celebration of God's Love

*God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

John 3:16

In John 3:16, Jesus teaches us that the God who exists loves. Let that sink in. The God who absolutely is. Loves. *He loves*. Of all the things you might say about God, be sure to say this: he loves.

The same writer of John 3:16 says in 1 John 4:8, "*God is love.*" Which I take to mean at least this: giving what's good and serving the benefit of others is closer to the essence of God than getting and being served. God *is* without needs. God inclines to meet needs. God *is* a giver. God is love.

So Jesus tells us more specifically what he means by love in John 3:16. "God so loved . . ." The "*so*" here doesn't mean an amount of love, but a way of loving. He doesn't mean, *God loved so much*, but *God loved this way*.

"God so loved" means "God thus loved." How? What is the way God loved? He loved such "that he gave his only Son." And we know that this giving was a giving up to rejection and death. "He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him" (John 1:11). Instead they killed him. And Jesus said of all this, "*I glorified you [Father] on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do*" (John 17:4). So when the Father gave his only begotten Son, he gave him to die.

That's the kind of love the Father has. It is a giving love. It gives his most precious treasure—his Son.

Meditate on that this Advent. It was a very costly love. A very powerful love. A very rugged, painful love. The meaning of Christmas is the celebration of this love. "*God so loved . . .*" And wonder of wonders, God gives this costly love to an undeserving world of sinners, like us.

DECEMBER 12

# The Glory of the Word Made Flesh

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

John 1:1

There have always been sectarian groups who have resisted the mystery implied in these two phrases: “the Word was with God” and “the Word was God.” They say, in their bondage to merely human conceptuality, you can’t have it both ways. Either he *was* God, or he was *with* God. If he was *with* God, he wasn’t God. And if he *was* God, he wasn’t with God.

So to escape the truth of these two sentences, sometimes they change the translation. But what this verse teaches is that the one we know as Jesus Christ, before he was made flesh, *was God*, and that the Father also was God. There are a plurality of persons and a singular God. This is part of the truth that we know as the Trinity. This is why we worship Jesus Christ and say with Thomas in John 20:28, “My Lord and my God!”

John 1:1: “In the beginning was *the Word*, and *the Word* was with God, and *the Word* was God.”

Why was he called “the Word”? One way to answer this is to ponder what he might have been called and why this would have been inadequate in relationship to “the Word.”

For example, he might have been called “the Deed.” One of the differences between a deed and a word is that a deed is more ambiguous. If we think our *words* are sometimes unclear and subject to various interpretations, our *deeds* are far more unclear and ambiguous. That’s why we so often explain our- selves with words. Words capture the meaning of what we do more clearly than the deeds themselves. God did many mighty deeds in history, but he gave a certain priority to the Word. One of the reasons, I think, is that he puts a high value on clarity and communication.

Another example is that John might have called him “the Thought.” In the beginning was the Thought. But one of the differences between a thought and a word is that a word is generally pictured as moving outward from the thinker for the sake of



establishing communication. I think John wanted us to conceive of the Son of God as existing both for the sake of communication between him and the Father and for the sake of appearing in history as God's communication to us.

A third example is that John might have called him "the Feeling." In the beginning was the Feeling. But again, I would say, feelings do not carry any clear conception or intention or meaning. Feelings, like deeds, are ambiguous and need to be explained—with words. So, it seems to me that calling Jesus "the Word" is John's way of emphasizing that the very existence of the Son of God is for the sake of communication. First, and foremost, he exists, and has always existed, from all eternity for the sake of communication with the Father.

Secondarily, but infinitely important for us, the Son of God became divine communication to us. One might say, in summary, calling Jesus "the Word" implies that he is "God-Expressing-Himself." To us.

DECEMBER 13

# Christmas Cut History in Half

*All the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaimed these days.*

Acts 3:24

There is something tremendously important to get hold of here for understanding the biblical teaching about prophecy and fulfillment.

We often think of prophecy as relating to what is yet future or to what is now beginning to happen in the world. And we easily forget that what is *past* for us was *future* for the prophets.

What we need to remember is that with the coming of Jesus Christ into the world, the days of fulfillment, proclaimed by all the prophets, began. And ever since the first Christmas we have been living in those days. The “last days” foretold by the prophets are not the twenty first century. The last days began in AD 1. This is the uniform New Testament witness. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10:11 that the Old Testament events happened

*“to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.”*

For Paul, the end of the ages was not two thousand years later in the twenty-first century. No. The beginning of the end was already present in the first century. The long-awaited Messiah had come. So, the writer to the Hebrews (1:1–2) says, “At many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.” When God sent his Son into the world, the last days began.

It is a great privilege to live in the last days because, Joel prophesied, “in the last days . . . God will pour out his Spirit upon all flesh” (Joel 2:28). All the prophets looked forward to the day when the Messiah, the Son of David, the King of Israel, would come, for that would be a day of great blessing for God’s people. And now he has come, his kingdom has been inaugurated, and we live in an age of fulfillment.

What we anticipate in the future at Christ’s second coming is not something *completely* new but rather the consummation of the

blessings we already enjoy, because the promises have begun to be fulfilled in our lives.

Christmas cut history into two ages: the age of promise and the age of fulfillment. So when Peter says in Acts 3:24, "All the prophets . . . proclaimed these days," we see that he means "these last days" (Heb. 1:2), in which God has spoken to us in his Son, the days from the first Christmas to the time of consummation yet to come.

This is where we live. The *already* of fulfillment is massive incarnation, crucifixion, atonement, propitiation, resurrection, ascension, heavenly reign, intercession, outpouring of the Holy Spirit, global missions, ingathering of the nations, church, New Testament Scriptures, prayer in Jesus's name, joy unspeakable, and purchased certainty.

But the *not yet* is real and wonderful and waiting for its time: the second coming, the resurrection of the dead, new and glorious bodies, the end of sinning, glorification, judgment on all unbelief, rewards, entrance into the Master's joy, new heavens and new earth, Jesus present among his people face- to-face, no more misery, pleasures forevermore.

Christmas split history. Foretastes of the future abound. Drink deeply on what he achieved for us. And be filled with hope for all that is coming.

DECEMBER 14

# The Mercy He Promises

*I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.*

Romans 15:8-9

God's gifts are precious beyond words, and we will sing of them forever. But the most precious gifts you can think of are not ends in themselves. They all lead to God himself. Ultimately, that is what all his gifts are for.

Take forgiveness, for example. When Christ became our servant as a ransom, he took away the curse of the law and the threat of punishment for all who believe. But to what end? That we might enjoy sin with impunity? No. That we might enjoy God for eternity! Forgiveness is precious because it brings us home to God.

Why does anyone want to be forgiven? If the answer is just for psychological relief, or just for escape from hell, or just to have more physical pleasures, then God is not honored. Romans 15:9 says that the aim of Christ's serving us is that the Gentiles "*glorify God*" for his mercy. But if we exploit God's mercy as a ticket to enjoy sin or even just to enjoy innocent things God gets no glory from that. God gets glory for showing mercy when his mercy frees us to see him as the best gift of his mercy—as the most enjoyable person in the universe.

So, it is good for us that Christ came on behalf of the truth of God, because the essence of the mercy he promised was himself. It is good for us that Christ came on behalf of the truth of God, because his coming this way shows that God is true first and foremost to himself; and he confirms the promises of God, and that the promises are promises of mercy; and he shows that the essence of the mercy he promised is himself.

This is the meaning of his coming. This is the meaning of Christmas. Oh, that God would waken your heart to your deep need for mercy as a sinner! And then ravish your heart with a great Savior, Jesus Christ. And then release your tongue to praise him and your hands to make his mercy shine in yours.

DECEMBER 15

# Our Truest Treasure

*When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.*

Matthew 2:10

Worshiping Jesus means joyfully ascribing authority and dignity to Christ with sacrificial gifts. We ascribe to him. We don't add to him. God is not served by human hands as though he needed anything (Acts 17:25).

So, the gifts of the magi are not given by way of assistance or need meeting. It would dishonor a monarch if foreign visitors came with royal care packages. Nor are these gifts meant to be bribes. God tells us in Deuteronomy 10:17 that he takes no bribe.

Well, what then do the gifts mean? How are they worship? The gifts are intensifiers of desire for Christ himself in much the same way that fasting is. When you give a gift to Christ like this, it's a way of saying something like this:

*The joy that I pursue is not the hope of getting rich with things from you. I have not come to you for your things but for yourself. And this desire I now intensify and demonstrate by giving up things in the hope of enjoying you more, not the things. By giving to you what you do not need and what I might enjoy, I am saying more earnestly and more authentically, "You are my treasure, not these things."*

I think that's what it means to worship God with gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. May God take the truth of this text and waken in us a desire for Christ himself. May we say from the heart,

*Lord Jesus, you are the Messiah, the king of Israel. All nations will come and bow down before you. God wields the world to see that you are worshiped. Therefore, whatever opposition I may find, I joyfully ascribe authority and dignity to you and bring my gifts to say that you alone can satisfy my heart, not these.*

DECEMBER 16

# Freed to Be Part of God's Family

*The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*

Mark 10:45

The reason we need a ransom to be paid for us is that we have sold ourselves into sin and have been alienated from a holy God. When Jesus gave his life as a ransom, our slave masters, sin and death and the Devil, had to give up their claim on us. And the result was that we could be adopted into the family of God.

Paul put it like this in Galatians 4:4–5:

*“When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”*

In other words, the redemption, or the ransom, frees us to be a part of God's family. We had run away and sold ourselves into slavery. But God pays a ransom and redeems us out of slavery into the Father's house. To do that, God's Son had to become human so that he could suffer and die in our place to pay the ransom.

That is the meaning of Christmas. Hebrews 2:14 puts it like this:

*“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself like-wise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death.”*

In other words, the reason Christ took on our full humanity was so that he could die and in dying pay a ransom and free us from the power of death. And free us to be included in his own family. The ransom is ultimately about relationship. Yours to God, your merciful Father.

DECEMBER 17

# He Came to Serve

*Whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.*

Mark 10:44

Jesus expects his disciples to be radically different from the way people ordinarily act. They are to serve each other and unbelievers. In that service they are to drink the cup of whatever suffering it will cost. And it will cost. But if that were the only message of Christianity, it would not be good news.

There would be no gospel. I need more than for someone to tell me what I should do and should be. I need help to be and to do. This is why Jesus says what he says in Mark 10:45:

*“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.”*

What a horrendous mistake it would be if we heard Jesus’s call to be the servant of all in verse 44 as a call to serve him. It is not. It is a call to learn how to be served by him. Don’t miss this. This is the heart of Christianity. This is what sets our faith off from all other major religions. Our God does not need our service, nor is he glorified by recruits who want to help him out. Our God is so full and so self-sufficient and so overflowing in power and life and joy that he glorifies himself by serving us.

He does this by taking on humanity and seeking us out and then telling us that he did *not* come to get our service, but to be our servant.

Here is a general truth to ponder and believe: every time Jesus commands something for us to do, it is his way of telling us how he wants to serve us. Let me say it another way: the path of obedience is the place where Christ meets us as our servant to carry our burdens and give us his power.

When you become a Christian—a disciple of Jesus—you do not become his helper. He becomes your helper. You do not become his benefactor. He becomes your benefactor. You do not become his servant. He becomes your servant. Jesus does not need your help; he commands your obedience and offers his help.  
Christmas.

He came to serve, not to be served. He came to help us do everything he calls us to do.

DECEMBER 18

# Graciously and Tenderly Frustrating

*God put [Christ] forward . . . to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*

Romans 3:25–26

The story of Martin Luther's conversion illustrates a point. He had almost been struck with lightning and made a vow to God to become a monk. But as a monk he was utterly unable to find peace with God. He sought God in every way the church of that day taught him—in good works, in the merits of the saints, in the process of confession and absolution, in the ladder of mysticism. On top of all this, they appointed him to the university to study and teach the Bible. Listen to the way Luther later described his breakthrough.

*“How was he prepared to see and receive Christ for who he really is? I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans, and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, “the justice of God,” because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore, I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant. Night and day, I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that “the just shall live by his faith.” Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise.”*

In the monastery Luther had come to the end of himself. He had despaired of salvation by his own hand. But by the grace of God he did not give up his longing and his hope. He directed his attention to the one place he hoped to find help—the Bible. He said, “I greatly longed to understand.” He said, “I had a great yearning” to know what it meant. And he said, “Night and day I pondered.”



In other words, God prepared Luther to see the true meaning of Christ and accept it, by stirring up a deep and powerful longing in his heart for consolation and redemption that could come only from Christ.

And this is what God does again and again. He may be doing it for you in this Advent season—graciously and tenderly frustrating you with life that is not centered on Christ and filling you with longings and desires that can't find their satisfaction in what this world offers, but only in the God-man.

What a Christmas gift that might be! Let all your frustrations with this world throw you onto the Word of God. It will become sweet—like walking into paradise.

DECEMBER 19

# The Gift You Cannot Buy

*The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.*

Acts 17:24–25

God does not want to be served in any way that implies we are supplying his need or supporting him or offering him something that he does not already own by right. “Who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” (Rom. 11:35). “If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine” (Ps. 50:12).

Therefore, we simply cannot negotiate with God. We have nothing of value that is not already his by right. We cannot serve him. His car never breaks down. It never runs out of gas. It never gets dirty. He never gets tired. He never gets depressed. He never gets caught in traffic so that he can't get to where he wants to go. He never gets lonely. He never gets hungry.

In other words, if you want what Jesus has to give, you can't buy it. You can't trade for it. You can't work for it. He already owns your money and everything you have. And when you work, it is only because he has given you life and breath and everything. All we can do is submit to his spectacular offer to be our servant.

And this submission is called faith—a willingness to let him be God. Trust him to be the Supplier, the Strengthened, the Counselor, the Guide, the Savior. And being satisfied with that with all that God is for us in Jesus. That's what faith is. And having that is what it means to be a Christian.

Christmas means: the infinitely self-sufficient God has come not to be assisted but to be enjoyed.

DECEMBER 20

# Receive His Reconciliation

*More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*

Romans 5:11

How do we practically receive reconciliation and rejoice in God? Answer: *through Jesus Christ*. Which means, at least in part, make the portrait of Jesus in the Bible—the work and the words of Jesus portrayed in the New Testament—the essential content of your rejoicing in God. Rejoicing without the content of Christ does not honor Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 4:4–6, Paul describes conversion two ways. In verse 4 he says it is seeing “the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” And in verse 6 he says it is seeing “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” In either case, you can see the point. We have Christ, the image of God, and we have God in the face of Christ.

Practically, to rejoice in God, you rejoice in what you see and know of God in the portrait of Jesus Christ. And this comes to its fullest experience when the love of God is poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5).

Not only did God purchase our reconciliation through the death of our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:10), and not only did God enable us to receive that reconciliation through our Lord Jesus Christ, but even now we exult in God himself through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus purchased our reconciliation. Jesus enabled us to receive the reconciliation and open the gift. And Jesus himself shines forth from the wrapping—the indescribable gift—as God in the flesh and stirs up all our rejoicing in God.

Look to Jesus this Christmas. Receive the reconciliation that he bought. Don’t put it on the shelf unopened. And don’t open it and then make it a means to all your other pleasures. Open it and enjoy the gift. Rejoice in him.

Make him your pleasure. Make him your treasure.

DECEMBER 21

# Get Your Eyes Ready for Christmas

*He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven."*

Matthew 16:15-17

The absolutely indispensable work of God in revealing the Son—both then to Peter and now to you and me—is not the *adding* to what we see and hear in Jesus himself but the opening of the eyes of our hearts to taste and see the true divine glory of what is really there in Jesus.

When people have doubts about the truth of Jesus, don't send them away to seek special messages from God. Point them to Christ. Tell them what you have seen and heard in his life and teachings. Why? Because this is where God breaks in with his revealing power. He loves to glorify his *Son*! He loves to open the eyes of the blind when they are looking at his *Son*!

God does not reveal his Son to me by coming to me and saying, "Now, John, I know that you don't see anything magnificent in my Son. You don't see him as all glorious and divine and attractive above all worldly goods. You don't see him as your all-satisfying treasure, and you don't see his holiness and wisdom and power and love as beautiful beyond measure. But take my word for it, he is all that. Just believe it." *No!*

Such faith would be no honor to the Son of God. It cannot glorify the Son. Saving faith is based on a spiritual sight of Jesus as he is in himself, the all-glorious Son of God. And this spiritual sight is given to us through his inspired Word, the Scriptures. And the eyes of our hearts are opened to recognize him and receive him not by the wisdom of flesh and blood but by the revealing work of his heavenly Father.

The apostle Paul said, "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

How shall you prepare your heart this Christmas to receive Christ? Fix your gaze on him in the Bible. Look to Christ! Consider Jesus. And pray. Look beyond your own flesh and blood and ask that God would give your eyes to see and ears to hear that you might cry out with Peter,

“You are the Christ the Son of the living God!”

DECEMBER 22

# Something Worth Singing About

There are priests who offer gifts according to the law. They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. . . Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. . .

*“This is the covenant that I will make . . . I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”*

Hebrews 8:4–10

Here we see that Christmas means two things. First, it means the replacement of Old Testament shadows with reality. The temple and sacrifices and priesthood and feasts and dietary laws were all shadows and copies of the reality in heaven. That reality is Jesus Christ and his work as our High Priest and our sacrifice and our focus of worship. Jesus fulfills and replaces the shadows of the Old Testament.

Second, it means that God makes the reality of Christ real to us personally by the work of the new covenant when he writes his truth on our hearts. God moves powerfully into our hearts and minds to overcome our resistance to the beauty of his reality. He writes his will—the truth of the reality of Jesus—on our hearts, so that we see him for who he really is and are willing and eager to trust him and follow him—freely, from the inside out, not slavishly under constraint from outside.

God is just and holy and separated from sinners—sinners like you and me. This is our main problem at Christmas—and every other season. *How shall we be put right with a just and holy God?* Nevertheless, God is merciful and promised in Jeremiah 31 (five hundred years before Christ came) that someday he would do something new. He would replace shadows with the reality of the Messiah. And he would powerfully move into our lives and write his will on our hearts so that we are not constrained from the outside but are willing from the inside—to love him and trust him and follow him.

That would be the greatest salvation imaginable—if God should offer us the greatest reality in the universe to enjoy and then move in us to see to it that we could enjoy it with the greatest freedom and the greatest pleasure possible. That would be a Christmas gift worth singing about. And that is exactly what he has done.

DECEMBER 23

# Our Deepest Need at Christmas

*He shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord,  
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell  
secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall  
be their peace.*

Micah 5:4–5

“He shall be great to the ends of the earth,” Micah prophesies. There will be no pockets of resistance unsubdued. Our security will not be threatened by any alien forces. Every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess him Lord. The whole earth will be filled with his glory. And “he will be our peace.”

Yes, in this context that includes final, earthly, political peace. Micah spoke of it already in Micah 4:3:

*“He shall judge between many peoples,  
and shall decide for strong nations far away;  
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their  
spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword  
against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”*

One day the ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords will return and make that a reality. The great Christmas carol will finally be fulfilled:

*He rules the world with truth and grace  
And makes the nations prove.  
The glories of his righteousness  
And wonders of his love.*

But there is another, deeper peace, a peace that must happen before there can be peace on earth. There must be peace between us and God. Our unbelief and his wrath must be removed. That is our deepest peace and our deepest need at Christmas.

Micah knew it was coming. He had experienced it personally (Mic. 7:8–9). He describes it beautifully at the very end of his book, in Micah 7:18–19:



*“Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.”*

This was the great work of the Messiah yet to be done. Yes, there are enemies on earth that must be defeated if we are to have peace. But, oh, the great enemy called sin and judgment, that is the greatest and worst enemy.

The gospel at Christmas is *“Christ has trampled this enemy underfoot at the cross. So, for everyone who trusts in him, their sins are cast into the depths of the sea.”*

Therefore, we say not, “Glory to us,” but, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

DECEMBER 24

# Enjoy All the Promises of God

*But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.*

Micah 5:2-4

Christ is the “yes” of all God’s promises, so if you trust him, they will all be your inheritance. Already Micah made clear that Christ will secure for us the promises of God. How did Micah show us this?

Any Jewish person in those days, hearing Micah predict the coming of a ruler out of Bethlehem who would feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, would think immediately of two people: David the king and the coming Son of David, the Messiah.

There are at least three links with David in this text: (1) David was from Bethlehem, that’s why it was called the “city of David.” (2) David was a ruler in Israel, he was the greatest ruler, a man after God’s own heart. (3) David was a shepherd as a boy, and later he was called the shepherd of Israel (Ps. 78:71).

The point of these three links with David is this: Micah is reasserting the certainty of God’s promise to David. Recall from 2 Samuel 7:12-16 that God said to David,

*“I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever... And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.”*

The amazing thing about Micah is that he reasserts the certainty of this promise not at a time when Israel is rising to power but at a time when Israel is sinking toward oblivion. The northern kingdom is

destroyed, and the southern kingdom will come under the judgment of God. The promises of God looked impossible.

Micah's point was this: *the coming of Christ was the confirmation of the promises of God.* Here's the way Paul put it in Romans 15:8:

*"Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs."*

Or as he said in 2 Corinthians 1:20,

*"All the promises of God find their Yes in him."*

If you are "in him" by faith, you will inherit all the promises of God. Micah's prediction came true in Jesus. And thus, all the promises were confirmed. God has told the truth.

Christmas is God's great confirmation of all his promises. If Christ has come, God is true. And if God is true, all the promises will come true for all who trust him. Receive this unspeakable gift.

DECEMBER 25

# Grace: The Dominant Note of Christmas

*I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.*

John 6:51

There is no traditional Christmas story about the birth of Jesus in the Gospel of John. You remember how it begins:

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”*

Instead of putting the Christmas story up front with its explanation, John weaves the *story* of Christmas and the *purpose* of Christmas through the Gospel. For example, after saying that the Word “*was God*,” John says in John 1:14–16,

*“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth... And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”*

So, the eternal Word of God took on human flesh, and in that way the divine Son of God, who never had an origin, and never came into being, and *was* God, but was also *with* God— became man. And in doing this, he made the glory of God visible in a wholly new way. And this divine glory, uniquely manifest in the Son of God, was full of grace and truth. And from that fullness we receive grace upon grace.

That is the meaning of Christmas in John’s Gospel. God the Son, who *is* God, and who is *with* God, came to reveal God in a way he had never been revealed before. And in that revelation, the dominant note struck is grace: from the fullness of that revelation of divine glory, we receive grace upon grace.

Or as it says in John 3:16–17,

*“God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, [that’s Christmas and Good Friday all in one] that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not*

*send his Son into the world to condemn the world [Christmas is not for condemnation], but in order that the world might be saved through him [Christmas is for salvation]."*

And at the end of his life, Jesus was standing before Pilate, and Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" And Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose, I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world [this is the purpose of Christmas]—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice" (John 18:37).

What was the effect of the truth that Jesus witnessed to with his words and his whole person? He told us in John 8:31– 32,

*"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."*

So, the meaning of Christmas is this: The Son of God came into the world to bear witness to the truth in a way that it had never been witnessed to before. He *is* the way, the *truth*, and the life (John 14:6). And the aim of giving himself as the truth to the world is *freedom*. You will know the truth, and the truth will make you *free*. Free from the guilt and power of sin. Free from deadness and blindness and judgment.

How does that liberation happen? Recall from John 6 that in coming down from heaven, Jesus was planning to die. He came to die. He came to live a perfect, sinless life and then die for sinners. John 6:51:

*"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."*

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, so that he could give his flesh for the life of the world. We sinners can receive grace upon grace from his fullness because he came to die for us. Christmas was from the beginning a preparation for Good Friday.

So, throughout the Gospel of John the meaning of Christmas becomes clear. The Word became flesh. He revealed the glory of God as never before. He died according to his own plan. Because of his death in our place, he is bread for us. He is the source of forgiveness and righteousness and life.

This is the great meaning of Christmas in the Gospel of John. Indeed, in the world. Today.