



ADVENT

Guide

Recapturing the heart of the Season

MY LORD AND MY GOD

Dec. 3rd

Thomas said to him, ‘My Lord and my God!’” (John 20:28, NIV).

This season is not joyful for everyone. Some dread it. Their melancholy memories make it hard to sing. “Joy to the World!”—not really. “How Great Our Joy!”—well, maybe for you.

Before you label me “Scrooge,” come with me to meet a first-century disciple who fits this label. When Jesus planned to raise Lazarus, He invited the Twelve to accompany Him, but this downcast soul said, “Let us go, that we may die with him” (John 11:14–16). Later, as Jesus revealed His plan to leave earth, “prepare a place,” and return to His followers, that same, sad individual sneered, “We do not know where You are going. How do we know the way?” (John 14:5).

His name was Thomas. As his colleagues leaned forward, Thomas leaned back, frowning. And wouldn’t you know it? The evening after Jesus rose and brought words of assurance, Thomas missed the meeting! When the other disciples exclaimed, “We have seen the Lord!” he blurted out, “Unless I see, I will not believe” (John 20:25).

Jesus didn’t rush back to convince Thomas. For eight full days He waited. Then suddenly Jesus returned, walked through the closed door (!), and stood directly in front of him. Without rebuke, He showed His palms and side and invited the struggler to touch scars left by spikes and a spear. That did it! Bowing, Thomas exclaimed, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:27–28).

The story doesn’t end there. It continues in this season. Consider how Jesus answered the man who finally believed: “Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and believed” (John 20:28).

Are you among those who find it next to impossible to believe? Do you identify with Thomas, though you’re surrounded by Jesus’ followers? Take heart! Consider with eyes of faith the evidence. Read again the story of the Savior’s birth. Join the ranks of those who have not seen, and yet declare, “My Lord and my God!”

— Charles R. Swindoll

OUR BRIDEGROOM

Dec. 4th

“And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut”
(Matthew 25:10, NASB)

The Christmas season gives each of us the opportunity to remember, reflect upon, and celebrate the first coming of Jesus as a tiny baby and, ultimately, the Savior of the world. While He spent time on earth, Jesus spoke very clearly, not only about his impending suffering and death, but He also promised to return again a second time as a conquering King.

In the parable of the ten virgins, Jesus refers to Himself as a bridegroom who will one day return to receive His bride. All born-again believers represent His Bride as stated in other New Testament passages (Revelation 19:7, 21:9). In this parable, Jesus explains that all ten virgins thought they were prepared for His return, but only five had oil for their lamps. The oil represents the indwelling Holy Spirit.

The five virgins with the oil rejoiced to see their Bridegroom and anticipated the wonderful celebration of the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9). The other five virgins thought they were prepared, and instead received the words, “Truly I say to you, I do not know you” (Matthew 25:12). Earlier they are described as foolish (Matthew 25:2) because they thought they were prepared to meet their bridegroom, but ended up empty.

As you celebrate Christmas, are you ready for Jesus’ second coming? Have you truly accepted Him as your Savior? Is your lamp filled with oil? In other words, is your life filled with the Holy Spirit? When the Bridegroom comes to receive His Bride, are you prepared and know for certain that you are invited to the heavenly wedding feast? If so, thank God for all that He has planned for you. If you are not certain, let this Christmas be the time that you receive Jesus’ gift of love and eternal life.

— Joye B. Baker

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Dec. 5th

“And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice ... I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep” (John 10:4, 14–15, NKJV).

Growing up on a small farm in rural Canada, I recall watching my grandfather tend to the growing flock of sheep that was closely huddled together in the old, six-generation barn for winter.

There was tenderness in his calloused hands and warmth that radiated nothing less than an abiding love. Each day he would feed them grain and hay. He doctored the sick with penicillin. He woke up often in the early hours to ensure the safe delivery of a newborn lamb. If the pipes froze during a chilling snowstorm, he would be the first to hand deliver a kettle of hot water, pouring it along the rubbery, iced pipes that lined the manger.

All of us who worked alongside Grandpa knew of his love for the flock. But it was those simple sheep that knew his love most.

“Come Nannie! Come Nannie!” Grandpa would call in a firm, but gentle tone. The sheep were never startled or panicked by his beckon. They yearned for his voice of loving leadership. They followed his cadence as he would feed and lead them one day at a time.

How could they not trust such a good shepherd?

It brings comfort to know that, like my grandfather, Jesus is our Good Shepherd. He knows us by name. He gave His life for us, humbled as a babe in a manger, and, though innocent, even died on a cross.

Yes, the path on which He leads us is often winding and difficult. But how can we not trust Jesus, the Good Shepherd?

— D. Scott Barfoot

POWERFUL BABY!

Dec. 6th

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David” (Luke 1:68–69, ESV).

When you think of “baby,” a synonym or an adjective that accompanies it is rarely, if ever, “powerful!” Yet, that is precisely what Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist, uses to describe Jesus who would be born in three months.

The exact Greek words he uses are normally translated “horn of salvation.” The term “horn,” referring to the pointed projection on the head that an animal uses to attack and defend, is used as a figure of speech in the Old Testament to signify power and authority (1 Samuel 2:10; 1 Chronicles 25:5; Psalms 75:4–5; 92:10 etc.). This power would be used to bring salvation. It is an unusual expression to use of a baby soon to be born to Mary and Joseph, but it is an absolutely true one since the coming Messiah would be powerful in word and in deed.

In 2 Samuel 22:3, David describes God Himself as his rock, his shield and “the horn of my salvation” (see also Psalms 18:2). Yet Jesus could be accurately described as “the horn of salvation” since He would be a man exhibiting the power of God, being in reality divine—the God-Man.

However, in the New Testament there is just a single occurrence of this term. It is found as part of the “Christmas story” when Zachariah, before he speaks of his own son, describes the Messiah for whom his son will be the forerunner.

Apparently, as the old priest looked at his newborn son, John (who would one day go preaching and baptizing, preparing the way for the Messiah), he saw by faith the Messiah who would come and so declared Him to be the “Powerful One.” He would be powerful in His healing; He would be powerful in His forgiveness; He would be powerful in delivering and defending His own from the power of evil.

So this Christmas, as you think of the sweet, helpless-looking babe in the manger, remember too that this babe is the Powerful Savior who can save, protect, and defend those who are His own.

— Stephen J. Bramer

THE TRUTH

Dec. 7th

“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’” (John 14:6, ESV).

Throughout history, many theories of truth have been suggested. The pragmatist claims that “truth is what works.” The empiricist states that “truth is what we can experience or observe.” The rationalist says that “truth is what can be proved by reason.” The emotivist believes that “truth is what I feel.” Jesus simply said, “I am the truth!” As God, Jesus Christ is the self-existent One, who is the Creator of all that exists (Colossians 1:16). He is truth and all truth is God’s truth (Psalms 31:5; Isaiah 65:16). Because truth resides in the God-Man, Jesus, His message and His revelation are truth (John 17:17; Psalms 119:89–92). Jesus told Pilate, “For this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me” (John 18:37). Pilate then asked Jesus, “What is truth?” (v. 38). Standing in front of Pilate was Jesus, “The Truth.” But Pilate walked away rejecting the truth and eventually condescending to Jesus’ death, even though he knew Jesus was innocent.

Truth is not a theory. It is not a concept to be defined in human terms. Truth is God. Truth is a person.

Truth is not a plan, it’s a person.
Truth is not a lifestyle, it’s a person.
Truth is not a principle, it’s a person.
Truth is not a list of rules, it’s a person.
Truth is not inner sincerity, it’s a person.
Truth is not a philosophy, it’s a person.
Truth is not a religion, it’s a person.
Truth is not a feeling, it’s a person.

The search for truth begins and ends with God, His Word, and His Son, Jesus Christ. The truth of the Christmas season is that Jesus brings us the truth about the way to God, and the truth about eternal life. Jesus, God in flesh, is “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). We celebrate today the coming of grace and truth in The Word, Jesus (John 1:1–3). Trust Him today—He is the Truth given to us by grace.

— Larry J. Waters

MY SON

Dec. 8th

“Then he got up, took the child and his mother during the night, and went to Egypt. He stayed there until Herod died. In this way what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet was fulfilled: ‘I called my Son out of Egypt’” (Matthew 2:14–15, NET).

The aftermath of the first Christmas was not pretty. Herod was bent on killing the newborn “king of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2), so the Lord warned Joseph to flee with his family to Egypt. This turn of events fulfilled Hosea 11:1, where God declared: “I called my Son out of Egypt.” Hosea referred to how God brought Israel out of Egypt under Moses, only to have his people rebel (Hosea 11:2). So how did Jesus’ journey to Egypt fulfill Hosea’s words? Sometimes, as here, prophetic fulfillment involves the completion of a pattern that was established in the Old Testament and realized fully in Jesus. Israel’s early history set a pattern for Jesus’ experience. Just as Israel, God’s “son,” went down to Egypt and then returned, so Jesus, God’s greater Son, did the same. This repetition of history signals the fact that Jesus is the ideal Israel who, as prophesied by Isaiah, would succeed in carrying out God’s purposes, where the blind and exiled nation Israel had failed (cf. Isaiah 49:3–6).

God’s “Son” Jesus, the ideal Israel, faced testing in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1–11) in the form of physical hunger, just like God’s ancient “son” Israel. But unlike the nation, which grumbled and tried the Lord’s patience, Jesus refused to let His hunger get the best of Him and maintained His loyalty to God. In combating Satan, He even quoted passages from Deuteronomy where Moses recalled Israel’s failure in the wilderness (6:13–16; 8:2–3). In Jesus the ideal Israel had arrived. He would save Israel from bondage, establish a new covenant community, and take the light of God’s salvation to the nations.

— **Robert B. Chisholm**

THE PRINCE OF PEACE

Dec. 9th

“For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called ... Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6, NASB).

This year has been unusually chaotic—earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, tornadoes, wars, revolutions, skyrocketing national debt, economic hard times, and widespread unemployment.

At the end of such a year, it’s especially comforting to remember that God promised to provide us with a Prince of Peace, a ruler who would epitomize peace and bring peace to our troubled world. Isaiah described this One as a Prince, a ruler under the authority of another, even God the Father. An outstanding mark of His rule would be peace. The Hebrew word translated “peace” is “shalom,” which means the fullness of well-being, freedom from anxiety, goodwill, and harmony in relationships—not just the absence of hostility. “Shalom” comes from a root meaning “to be whole or complete.” The Prince of Peace would Himself possess a perfectly integrated, well-rounded personality, and be at peace with God and man.

When Jesus Christ came to this earth, He provided peace with God by bearing the sins of humankind and dying in our place (Romans 5:1). He made peace through the blood of His cross, and His self-sacrifice reconciled all things to God—all creation, including people (Colossians 1:20). When Christ returns to the earth, He will bring global peace, having done the work necessary to establish it when He died. Then the nations “will hammer their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they learn war” (Isaiah 2:4). Having removed the cause of war—sin and enmity between God and man (Romans 5:11)—people will live in peace with God and with one another forever (Isaiah 9:7).

Peace has come and will come to us because a Child was born. We must go to Him to find peace. Come, Lord Jesus!

— Thomas L. Constable

THE BRIGHT MORNING STAR

Dec. 10th

“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony . . . I am . . . the bright Morning Star” (Revelation 22:16, NIV).

When I was a child, we topped off our tree with a star that glowed, especially when lights were low. Twinkling, glistening, that tree and its star were the focal point of our holiday. Growing up without Christ, I did not understand the significance of the star, that wise men from the East followed it to the place where the Christ child lay. I did know that Christmas trees were incomplete without the crown of a star.

Today sparkly stars don our tree. But, for me, this Christmas season has been enriched as I meditate on another star in His story. In Revelation 22:16, the last page of the Bible, Jesus refers to Himself as the bright Morning Star. What an unusual term! And, who needs a star in the morning? But wait. He’s talking about the end of earth’s story when the world as we know it will be replaced with a new heaven and a new earth. In Revelation 21:23, we learn that the new heaven and earth do not need the sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.

There are two stars in Jesus’ story. The evening star pointed to His coming to earth as a man to shed His blood for the sins of the world. But He will return as the Morning Star to make everything new. So this Christmas, as the sun breaks over a crisp December horizon, let’s celebrate not just the beauty of His birth two millennia ago, but also the glory of His returning. He’s coming back as the Morning Star to usher in a bright new day of peace, justice, and joy. We won’t need stars to top our trees then because the bright Morning Star will be with us forever in all His glorious radiance.

— Sue G. Edwards

MY MASTER

Dec. 11th

“Throwing aside his cloak, he jumped up and came to Jesus. And answering him, Jesus said, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ And the blind man said to Him, ‘Rabboni, I want to regain my sight!’” (Mark 10:50–51, NASB).

Mark tells us of a poignant moment in our Savior’s ministry. Just outside the city of Jericho, only days before the Lord Jesus would enter Jerusalem for the last time in His earthly ministry, sat a blind beggar. His plaintive cry, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me,” was heard above the din of the crowd and intensified as the Lord passed by. Becoming aware of the man, Jesus stopped, and asked, “What would you have me do for you?”—a question with a seemingly obvious answer for the Messiah to ask a blind man. The blind beggar’s response was equally obvious, as he threw off his garment and jumped to his feet saying, “Master, I want to regain my sight.”

What seems like only a lesson in the obvious is designed to uncover an undergirding truth found in the name by which Bartimaeus addresses Jesus: “Rabboni” or “my Master.” To call Jesus “Master” or “Teacher” carries with it a confession of trust in His Lordship and yet a tone of warmth as in a personal friendship. There are hints here of a deeper relationship born out of a child-like trust in this One whom he first called “Son of David” or “Messiah” and now calls “My Master.”

Here on a dusty road outside of Jericho a blind beggar found physical sight, but, more importantly, found the One who is the source of light and spiritual life—He who is both Messiah and Master. As Mark writes, “Jesus said to him, ‘Go, your faith has made you well. Immediately, he regained his sight and began following Him on the road.’”

As with Bartimaeus of old, may our faith grow ever deeper in an intimacy that trusts Him for our every need, and may we truly be able to say this Christmas, “He is My Master.”

— Robert J. Garippa

I AM

Dec. 12th

“I tell you the truth,’ Jesus answered, ‘before Abraham was born, I am!’” (John 8:58, NIV).

A bush burned and God revealed His name to Moses: “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM’ has sent me to you” (Exodus 3:14).

Centuries later a baby penetrated time and space to “be.” And they called him Immanuel—God with us.

After Jesus began His earthly ministry, He started many sentences with “I am”: “I am the bread of life;” “I am—the one speaking to you;” “I am the light of the world;” “I am the good shepherd;” “I am the way, the truth, and the life;” and “I am the true vine.” But one saying shocked His listeners more than any other: “Before Abraham was born, I AM” (John 8:58). In contrast with Abraham’s mortality, Jesus claimed His “being” was before and after Abraham’s. Jesus’ audacity in saying this stunned His listeners so much that they reached down into the dirt and picked up stones to throw.

The resurrected Christ identifies Himself again as the eternal One in the Book of Revelation: “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty” (Revelation 1:8).

In most of our Revelation-based praise songs, we worship the One “who was, who is, and who is to come” (Revelation 4:8). And indeed we sing true words. Yet, notice one little detail in Revelation 1:8. The elder John actually uses a different order: “who is, and was, and is to come.” Why start with present rather than past? Perhaps because he wanted to use the third-person to emphasize deity; “I am” becomes “He is.”

The switch to “is” reminds us of something about Jesus in addition to His eternity. He is because He arose. He “was dead” but is “alive forever and ever!” (1:18). A dead person exists no longer, but Jesus “is”!

The one who told Moses, “I AM” and who, after the order of Melchizedek, received offerings from Abraham, dwelled among humans in the flesh.

He came, He was, He is—Hallelujah! He is coming again soon—Maranatha!

— Sandra Glahn

SON OF MAN

Dec. 13th

“For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10 NASB).

The title, “Son of Man,” was the Lord’s favorite name. He used it of Himself eighty-four times in the four Gospels. Never does anyone else in the Gospels refer to Jesus Christ as the Son of Man. Not until Acts 7:56 does Stephen in a singular case describe Jesus this way.

Why does the Lord Jesus so guardedly name Himself the Son of Man? It seems best to say the Lord’s use of the term is based on Daniel 7:13–14, where Daniel in a vision sees a man like a “Son of Man” come to God the Father (the Ancient of Days) and this Son of Man is given an everlasting and universal kingdom. By using this title, the Lord lays claim to being the Messiah without openly saying so.

This name is very significant because it looks at the two comings of the Lord Jesus. A few illustrations prove the point. At the first coming as Luke 19:10 says, He came to seek and to save lost people. As the Son of Man, He had nowhere to lay His head (Matthew 8:20), but He did have authority on earth to forgive sins (Mark 2:10) and He was Lord of the Sabbath (Luke 6:5). Of course the “Son of Man” statements by Christ also predicted His death and resurrection (Matthew 17:12, 22–23; Mark 10:45).

But there is much more. This name of Christ also anticipates His second coming to reign as King of Kings. The Son of Man will send His angels to gather the lost (Matthew 13:41) and He will sit on a glorious throne to reign (Matthew 19:28; 25:31; 26:64). His return will be spectacular (Matthew 24:27–31; Luke 17:24).

It is perfectly appropriate at Christmastime to focus on the two comings of Christ. More is encompassed in “Son of Man” than we can imagine!

— Stanley D. Toussaint

THE ALPHA AND THE OMEGA

Dec. 14th

“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End”
(Revelation 22:13, NIV).

At Christmastime, we celebrate the first coming of Jesus Christ to earth. But we also look forward to His second coming. In Revelation 22:12, the risen Lord Jesus announces, “Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done.” Then in verse 13, he identifies Himself as “the Alpha and the Omega,” which are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. What this means is explained by the following words: “the First and the Last (cf. Revelation 1:17; 28), the Beginning and the End.” All three designations occur with the repeated article “the,” signifying someone who is “one of a kind.”

What is significant about these titles for Jesus? They are significant because the same titles belong to God the Father.

In Isaiah 44:6, the Lord Almighty declares, “I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.” Earlier in Revelation, God the Father identifies Himself as “the Alpha and the Omega” (1:8; 21:6) and “the Beginning and the End” (21:6). Now in 22:13, Jesus applies these same three titles to Himself. All three expressions set Him apart from all created beings. The attributes of God the Father belong equally to Jesus Christ the Son. He is God.

In the context of His second coming, these titles confirm the eternal deity of Jesus Christ. He lives throughout eternity past as “the Alpha” and is the source of all things in the beginning (creation). He is the consummation of all things at the end (final judgment) and lives throughout eternity future as “the Omega.” Thus, He is uniquely qualified with divine authority as the righteous Judge to “give to everyone according to what he has done” (22:12).

The One whose human birth we celebrate this Christmas is the Alpha and the Omega, the eternal Son of God who is worthy of our adoration and worship.

— Jimmy Cowan

A PROPHET

Dec. 15th

“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet from among you ...” (Deuteronomy 18:15, NASB).

The nation’s religious leadership sent a contingent of soldiers to arrest Jesus. They sought to silence Him because the throngs were “hanging on his words” (Luke 19:48). Enraged by their failure, the leadership demanded an explanation. “Why did you not arrest him?” The reply was as simple as it was startling! “Never did a man speak the way this man speaks” (John 7:46). While His appearance may not have been particularly unique, the depth of His words was penetrating. The people pondered whether or not Jesus was the prophet, the One promised centuries ago by Moses? “This is certainly the Prophet (John 7:40),” they exclaimed.

Indeed, He is the prophet promised centuries past and His words ring with relevancy today. Have you heard His words? “Let not your heart be troubled; believe also in me” (John 14:6). “I will never leave you as orphans, I will come to you” (John 14:18). His words are as insightful as they are comforting. He is the prophet promised long ago; His words have greater importance, relevance, and comfort than those of any other speaker in all of human history. Why, you may ask? The answer is that He was not merely a voice about heaven; He alone was from heaven. He, alone, spoke from a perspective that no human has ever experienced. He is the Word of God that has come to live among us (John 1:14).

The words from God the Father about Him at the transfiguration are pertinent for all of us this Christmas season. “This is my beloved Son, listen to Him” (Mark 9:7). Are you listening to the greatest of all prophets? Do His words enchant you?

— John D. Hannah

LIGHT OUT OF DARKNESS

Dec. 16th

“In him was life, and that life was the light of men” (John 1:4, NIV).
DARKNESS.

Deep below the earth’s surface, lights went out as the tour guide in Carlsbad Caverns reminded us: this is total blackout. With no speck of light anywhere, all sense of direction was lost. It echoed the opening words of the Bible, “... darkness was over the surface of the deep.” No life, no growth could be sustained. Then “God said, ‘Let there be light’ and there was light” (Genesis 1:3).

No scientist can adequately explain the origin of light; we know only that we have it and it leads the thinker to ask: How? Who? What does it mean for me? Yes, I can see physically, but how do I know intuitively what is my next best move? My eyes see, but I struggle with private doubts. Is there a way to do life right, and what about the hereafter?

CHRISTMAS. The light shines in the darkness. Jesus, the babe of Bethlehem, the true eye opener, declared, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). Just as God provided light for the physical creation, He revealed His solution for spiritual blindness. John’s Gospel illuminates the core truth: this same Person who first brought physical light into the world is the same One who came to offer spiritual sight.

SOLUTION. Our spiritually dark world, groping for stability, stumbles into repeated disaster. Through His written word we see inner light. “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Psalm 119:105). No one need flounder in our world’s present insecurity. “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6).

— Howard G. Hendricks

THE LIVING DOOR

Dec. 17th

“I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved” (John 10:9, NASB).

G. Campbell Morgan was a well-known Bible teacher from Great Britain who traveled to the United States a number of times. One of his trips was made on a ship with George Adam Smith, a great Old Testament scholar. In the course of one of their conversations Dr. Smith told Morgan about an experience he had in the east. He said he was traveling in Israel and came upon a sheep fold. He said, “There was just a stone enclosure that marked the fold, and there was a simple opening into it.” He spoke to the shepherd, “Is this a fold for the sheep?” “Oh, yes,” the shepherd replied. And then Dr. Smith said, “I only see one way in.” “Yes,” said the man, “only one way, that’s the door,” as he pointed to the opening in the wall. Dr. Smith then said to him, “But there is no door there.” The shepherd replied, “I am the door.” And Dr. Smith said, “My mind went back to John’s statement when Jesus said, ‘I am the door.’” And so he asked the man, “What do you mean when you say, ‘You are the door?’” He said, “Well, the sheep go inside, and I come here and I lie down across the threshold and no sheep can get out unless it walks over me, and no wolf or wild beast can get in unless it walks over me. I am the door.”

Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the door to salvation. He is the only way into God’s sheepfold. There was only one door into the ark in which Noah and his family found refuge. There was only one door into the Tabernacle, which was God’s dwelling place on earth. There is only one door to God. Jesus is the door—the living door. He came to earth to die in our place to open wide the way of salvation to all who will come through Him. And, our “Living Door” provides security and protection for His sheep. What a comforting promise in these troubled, uncertain, and anxious times.

— Mark L. Hitchcock

THE LAMB: SLAIN FROM BEFORE THE CREATION OF THE WORLD

Dec. 18th

“You were redeemed ... [by] the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world” (1 Peter 1:18–20, NIV).

Christmas begins within the triune God—the Father’s planning, the Son’s choosing, the Spirit’s moving—before creation began. The Incarnation and sacrifice of the Savior is the final narrative that defines the purpose of earthly and heavenly history.

In biblical history, Abel cared for sheep. With Abel’s death begins a remarkable analogy that unfolds throughout the pages of the Old Testament, continuing with the Passover lamb (Exodus 12:3–27) and the Mosaic Law’s sacrifices that included “a male [lamb] without defect” upon whose head one is to lay his hand “to make atonement” (Leviticus 1:3–4). Finally, at the baptism of Jesus Christ, John the Baptist cries out, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

Of the thirty-two times the term “lamb” occurs in the New Testament, twenty-seven appear in the Book of Revelation as the primary name of the Son of God. When the glorified Christ first encounters the elder John on Patmos, “his face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance” (Revelation 1:16)—like nuclear light blazing forth from a human shell. We see the blindingly radiant Son whose presence dwarfs the earthly power of persecuting emperors.

As John is transported into heaven, we expect an even more glorified Son of God. Yet here the Savior appears as a Lamb slain (5:6). What a strange, jolting image. Then Jesus is worshiped “because you were slain and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (5:9). The Son’s glory in heaven centers in His becoming the sinner’s substitute. He paid it all. This is the soteriology of heaven.

Throughout the rest of Revelation, Jesus is “the Lamb.” The Son does create, judge, and rule, but the Son’s most astonishing work is His sacrifice as the Lamb of God. The Incarnation and the Cross reveal the deep heart of the triune God. Christmas begins before the creation of the world.

— J. Scott Horrell

JESUS IS GOD

Dec. 19th

“You should have the same attitude toward one another that Christ Jesus had, who though he existed in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped” (Philippians 2:5–6, NET).

As an exhortation to Christians to live ethically, the apostle Paul uses Christ Jesus as a model. Christians should consider others better than themselves. Christians should “look not only to their own interests but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4). In short, Christians’ attitude should be like Jesus. In his description of our Savior, Paul declares that Jesus was in the form of God. Jesus was God. He possessed all the attributes of deity. He was fully God.

Because Jesus was God, He acted like God. Specifically, Jesus demonstrated His deity by His humility. When He added humanity to His deity, Jesus humbled Himself for the sake of His rebellious creatures. He considered others to be better than Himself. He looked out for the interests of others. That’s the way God is. That’s what God does.

God created the heavens and the earth, and when His creatures rebelled against Him in the garden, He remained faithful to them. Rather than destroying or rejecting them, God provided clothes to cover their nakedness and the promise of a Redeemer to take away their shame. At the appropriate time, God the Son came to earth to reveal God and to provide salvation. And when the work of redemption is complete, the triune God will descend to the earth and make a recreated earth their home forever (Revelation 21:3).

Because He is God, Christ Jesus humbled Himself and became human. Because He is God, Jesus acts toward us in love and mercy (cf. Ephesians 2:4). In the Incarnation Jesus reveals God to us. We know what God is like because of Jesus (cf. John 1:18; 14:9). Because He is God, Jesus is the perfect image of God (Colossians 1:15). When people saw Jesus, they saw God. He is God.

In the same way, Christians ought to act like Christ. In acting like Christ, Christians reveal God. We should have the same attitude toward one another as Christ had, and has, toward us. Jesus himself taught us, “Love one another just as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

— Glenn R. Kreider

CHILD

Dec. 20th

“The Child . . . you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins. (Matthew 1:20–21; 2:11, NASB).

Last Christmas saw the release of the third movie in the Narnia series—The Voyage of the Dawn Treader. Great movie. But I missed a cool line from C.S. Lewis’s book. In it, an incredulous Eustace skeptically listens to Ramandu who claims to be a “star at rest”—a retired denizen of the skies.

“‘In our world,’ said Eustace, ‘a star is a huge ball of flaming gas.’

‘Even in your world, my son,’ replied Ramandu, ‘that is not what a star is but only what it is made of.’”

There is a difference between what something is, and what something is made of.

Empirical observations about the world may not necessarily be all that there is to the universe. Copernican, Newtonian, and Einsteinian observations alone may not provide us with the full equation. In other words, What You See Is Not What You Get: WYSInotWYG. Things may be more than what they seem to be.

At Christmastime, on the surface, things look pretty mundane—another church festival. The same old glitz, glamour, and glim. Tinsel, trinkets, and trim.

What else could it be? Long time ago. In Bethlehem. Another child. Another teenage mom. Another stressed out dad. Nobody important. No limos all black. No coaches all gold. No gun-toting militia. No purple-clad horsemen. No throne. No crown.

Just a child in a manger. Some cows. Some oxen. Some locals. WYSIWYG, right?

Wrong! Christians claim that WYSInotWYG. This was no ordinary child, no standard-issue son, no run-of-the-mill 46XY. This was a divinely appointed Savior, as the Lord announced: a Child who came to save us from our sins.

WYSInotWYG. Another child, we could ignore. Another soul added to the world’s tally of billions, we could forget. But not the birth of this One.

And we who believe that this Child is our Savior—we can have only one response, that of the wise men: “They saw the Child . . . and they worshiped Him” (Matthew 2:11).

Come and worship the Child, our Savior, our Lord!

— Abraham Kuruvilla

KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS

Dec. 21st

“And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, ‘KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS’” (Revelation 19:16, NASB)

The theme of Jesus as King is a particular feature of the first and last book of the New Testament. Matthew records the visit of the magi from the East, seeking “the one who has been born king of the Jews. We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him” (Matthew 2:2). They found him in Bethlehem and presented their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (2:11). They were surely right to recognize him as the king of the Jews, the long-awaited Son of David, the fulfillment of Israel’s promised Messiah. He was that, but He was much more. As the voices in heaven declare in the last book of the New Testament: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 11:15).

These words have become a special part of the Christmas season as the choral refrain in Handel’s wonderful oratorio, “Messiah.” In addition to the words of Revelation 11:15, the “Hallelujah Chorus” uses the words of Revelation 19:16, “King of kings, and Lord of lords,” to great effect. The pitch rises as the choir sings the fourfold refrain, “King of kings! And Lord of lords!” and culminates in a fivefold “Hallelujah!” It is little wonder that for over 250 years audiences have risen to stand as the chorus is sung. It is the anticipation of a coming day when “a great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, tribe, people and language” will stand before the throne in celebration of God’s salvation (Revelation 7:9–10). How blessed to be a part of that company on that wonderful day. Hallelujah!

— David K. Lowery

JESUS

Dec. 22nd

“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS” (Luke 1:31, NKJV).

The angel Gabriel was sent to announce to a virgin, “you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son” who was in truth the eternal coexistent Son of the Highest (Luke 1:32). He was coming to earth in human form as the Son of Man. To emphasize His true humanity his parents were instructed, “you shall call His name Jesus” (Luke 1:31; Matthew 1:21). He was in fact both Son of God and Son of Man, undiminished deity and true humanity, God and man, but one person, God/man. The name “Jesus” stresses His humanity and His identity with the human race. He is Jesus.

Jesus spent thirty years in His father’s carpentry shop. He experienced work. He can identify with us in our work-a-day life. He understands what we face in that world. He is Jesus.

He knew what it was to be forsaken and rejected even by His “familiar friend.” He experienced the emotional stresses that we can experience. He understands our loneliness from experience. He is Jesus.

He knows what it is to be tested. He confronted the tempter in the wilderness who employed the three means at his disposal to test Jesus: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16). So trying was the conflict that when it was over “angels came and ministered to Him” (Matthew 4:11). He understands our need when we are tested and tempted and is able to provide help because of what He went through. He is Jesus.

We can say with assurance that there is no need we have, no test we endure, and no experience that comes to us that He does not understand. For as truly human, He has experienced them all. “We do not have a great High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted (tested) as we are” (Hebrews 4:15). He is Jesus.

There is added significance to the name Jesus for it is the Greek counterpart of the Hebrew Joshua, the one who succeeded Moses and led Israel out of their forty-year wilderness experience into the rich blessings of their inheritance in the Land of Promise. Jesus, as another Joshua, will bring Israel into her covenanted land to enjoy its blessings. He is Jesus.

In order to provide salvation for sinners, the accumulated debt sin incurred must be paid in full. This required that either the guilty must pay their debt, or it must be paid on their behalf by a substitute. The substitute must be identified with those for whom He is a substitute. To meet this requirement the Son of God took to Himself true humanity so as to pay sin’s debt as one of us (2 Corinthians 5:21). Had there been no Jesus, there would have been no death to pay our debt. We have a gracious salvation offered to us because the Son of the Almighty became JESUS.

EXALT THE NAME OF JESUS

— Dwight Pentecost

THE SUFFERING SERVANT

Dec. 23rd

“For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:2, RSV).

One unusual name for Jesus Christ is Suffering Servant. We don't often associate leadership with serving, much less, service that results in suffering. And yet, Jesus said the purpose of His coming was not to be served—but to serve. Thankfully, many of our churches are filled with servants. Our Christmas “services” can become much more than stale traditions. We can inspire others in our congregation by meeting their true needs. One fellowship can enjoy a Christmas Eve service at a homeless shelter while another can celebrate a Christmas Morning time of worship at a local prison. Some churches annually highlight filling shoeboxes with gifts to the poor, while others carol at convalescent centers. These differences should be celebrated as a witness to the richness of the Christmas tradition. Often members assist other brothers and sisters in the body of Christ who are suffering during the holiday season. In this service they are adopting the model of the Suffering Servant! The apostle Paul wrote, “For I say that Christ has become a servant” (Romans 15:8). Jesus Christ led by example. He suffered while he served—but kept on serving anyway. “He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain” (Isaiah 53:3).

The little baby born in Bethlehem came to serve. He willingly left heaven and entered into true suffering service. He led in the temple by sparking debate among the learned. He served at the carpenter's shop learning the tools of the trade. He led His ragged band of disciples by patiently teaching them truth. He served His listening public by teaching in simple stories they could grasp. And, He suffered for all of humanity by laying down His life so that anyone could enter into eternal rest and protection. Now that's suffering-servant leadership! Remember, during this Lenten season, the words of the Lord Christ, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Christmas is a time of gifts. Open up that gift and serve—even if it involves some suffering!

— Paul E. Pettit

THE WORD: UNDER WRAPS

Dec. 24th

“Now the Word became flesh and took up residence among us. We saw his glory—the glory of the one and only, full of grace and truth, who came from the Father” (John 1:14, NET).

I can never sleep on Christmas Eve. The secrets I’d tucked away in the attic are now under the tree, wrapped in shiny paper with red and green bows. And the sun refuses to rise!

I imagine the apostle John had trouble sleeping on a particular night as well. Because he also had a wonderful secret to share.

Months before, Jesus had revealed to John, his brother James, and Peter a great secret. They got to see Jesus in His divine glory, His face brilliant as the sun, His clothing as white as light. And they were supposed to keep it under wraps—until Jesus was raised from the dead. Now, John could finally share the secret he had kept tucked away in his heart. The Jesus they had known as a man was truly God in human flesh. How could he sleep?

John would have lain there, wide awake, I imagine—thinking, praying, listening to the soft breathing of Mary, Jesus’s mother—now John’s “mother”—as she slept with the rest of his family in the common room. Perhaps John smiled at the thought that Mary’s breathing was one of the first sounds the Lord Jesus heard as a baby. The first night Jesus slept on earth—a world that He had spoken into being—He rested in the arms of His mother, listening to the gentle rhythm of her prayers as she held Him close. The Almighty Word of God, soothed with a whisper. And He slept—all His glory, wrapped in a tiny tent of flesh.

Christmas is a time for unwrapping secrets. For sharing God the Father’s great gift to us all—His risen Son, Jesus. The Word made flesh.

— Reg Grant

MESSIAH

Dec. 25th

“Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God’ (Matthew 16:16, NIV).

The babe in Bethlehem, whom we celebrate at Christmas, is “Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and ... his kingdom will never end” (Luke 1:32–33). “Messiah” (Hebrew) in the Old Testament becomes “Christ” (Greek) in the New Testament. The name meant “anointed one” and focused Israel’s hope on the promise of the ideal, Davidic king, who would deliver them from bondage (Psalms 89:20–29, Micah 5:2).

By the time that Mary gave birth, hope in God’s promises for forgiveness and deliverance from the empire had reached a fever pitch. Some were looking for a beneficent dictator. Others expected a high-profile miracle worker. Others hoped that a famous prophet like Elijah had come with a spectacular message.

The Gospels suggest that people were asking every important visitor, “Are you the Christ?” When Peter said, “You are the Christ,” he affirmed the fact and focused all of the hopes and names on Jesus, from suffering Servant to the Son of God and Man. “The Christ” summarizes one who can meet our needs and give us salvation from our sins. At the Feast of Pentecost, Peter underscored the resurrection and the fact that God had made Jesus both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36).

The living God has given us life by grace through faith in the death and resurrection of Messiah. In Acts 11:26, believers were first called “Christians” (followers of Messiah), so that His name became ours as well. At Christmas we should praise our King, who is “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” That is the reason for the season.

— J. Lanier Burns