

*a season of*  
**Advent**

A decorative sprig of holly leaves and berries is positioned below the word "Advent". The sprig features several green leaves and clusters of red and white berries.

DEVOTIONAL  
GUIDE



# *A Season of Advent*

We always hope for the “perfect Christmas.” We want all our loved ones to be present around the tree on Christmas morning. We want to snap that perfect family photo, to capture the excitement of opening brightly wrapped gifts. We hope for the best each Christmas. But when we step back from our modern take, we know that Christmas and Advent were born from a season of brokenness in the first century.

The first Christmas was anything but perfect. There were unexpected trials, surprise pregnancies, a volatile environment, unseemly guests—and yet God ordered it that way. He didn’t ordain a “picture perfect” Christmas. Instead, He wrote a story of redemption that leads us even today from brokenness to Bethlehem, where the Savior of the world made His first appearance.

This Advent Guide looks at that timeless story through this lens: God can redeem and restore all that is broken in and around us. His whole reason for coming is that He could do that for *you* too.



*“The Lord is coming... when you have ears to hear and eyes to see, you will recognize him at any moment of your life. Life is Advent; life is recognizing the coming of the Lord.” -Henri Nouwen*

week one

# Zechariah & Elizabeth

Life has a way of making us feel cynical, making it challenging to trust in the promise of good things. That is the theme of today's story about Zechariah, a priest, and his wife, Elizabeth. Set in the backdrop of a peaceful town, the couple dreamt of having children when they were younger, but years of infertility had replaced that dream with a burden of shame.

Just when it seemed their dreams would never come to pass, an angel appeared with good news. "Your prayers have been heard," the angel declared, "and a son will be born to you, to be named John." Zechariah was so unsure because of the doubt in his heart that he couldn't help but blurt out: "Are you sure? A child of promise born to us?" But the angel was sure, and because of his unbelief, Zechariah was struck mute by the angel until John's birth as a sign.

It's a rocky start to the Christmas story. But despite Zechariah's doubt, God came through to bring life to Elizabeth's childless womb. Amid their brokenness, God answered their long-awaited dream, brought hope, and brought a person into the world who would herald the coming of Jesus as Savior. Just as God used Zechariah and Elizabeth, He can use you and your broken story.

Even when we question God's good promises or lean toward skepticism, God is not swayed by *how much* faith we have: He cares that we *know Him* as the source of our faith. This Advent season, let us find hope in the assurance that God can transform our brokenness into blessing and healing, even in the face of doubt.



## **Read**

Luke 1:5-25 (ESV Below)

*In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.*

*And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.*

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*But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.*

*Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.*

*And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.*

*And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.*

*But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.*

*And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth,*

*for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.*

*And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God,*

*and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”*

*And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.”*

*And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.*

*And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.”*

*And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple.*

*And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute.*

*And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.*

*After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying,*

*“Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people”*



## ***Reflection***

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1. Zechariah and Elizabeth in Luke 1:5–25 begin their journey with a sense of longing and waiting. Have you experienced that sense of anticipation while waiting for something you deeply desire?
2. In what ways can you relate to Zechariah's skepticism among life's challenges and letdowns.
3. God often takes seemingly hopeless situations and uses them for His plans and purpose. Where have you seen this take place in your life or in the lives of others?

## ***Pray***

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Spend time in prayer asking God to help you live a life of trust and joy in Him; surrender any bitterness, criticisms, or anything holding you back from fully believing.

## ***Daily Reading***

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**27 NOV** – Genesis 26:3-5

**28 NOV** – Luke 1:5-25

**29 NOV** – Luke 1:26-38

**30 NOV** – Luke 1:39-56

**1 DEC** – Luke 1:57-66

**2 DEC** – Isaiah 7:14

**3 DEC** – Isaiah 11:1-9



## ***Family Focus*** – Finding Delight in the Waiting

Each week of Advent, spend time together reading the weekly devotional and Scripture. Then use this guide for some extra family engagement.

This week, find something fun to enjoy together—like a new board game or a puzzle or movie tickets—and wrap it. Place the item under the tree and wait until Christmas (or even New Year’s Day!) to enjoy it together.

Discuss how hard it can be to wait for something you know is coming but can’t experience yet. Parents, share some examples of times you’ve had to wait patiently for something to come through.



week two

# Mary & Joseph

When you were growing up, who did you count on to fix things whenever something broke. For many of us, the answer is invariably *Dad*: whether it's a toy with a popped-off arm or a truck that won't start, a lot of us call on Dad when we need a fix. But who do we call on for life's shattered seasons and damaged moments—the breaks and pains that take more than just replacing a few batteries?

Mary and Joseph must have been wondering, too, who was going to fix the damage of marriage plans gone so awry. Instead of making wedding arrangements, both Mary and Joseph had the surprises of angel visitations announcing a divine pregnancy and that God's plan to save the world was in full swing. Mary and Joseph must have felt shocked, unsure, and maybe even scandalized. They traded the celebrations of a traditional Jewish wedding for a discreet union and unsettled future. But God had unimaginable good in mind.

One could argue that the family situation during Jesus's birth was unbefitting of a “perfect Christmas,” or what anyone would have anticipated for the long-awaited arrival of the Messiah. Unwed parents, a teenage pregnancy, an undecided father: on their own, these components don't make a “perfect Christmas.” However, with God—who loves to take broken, imperfect, doubt-ridden, mistake-filled stories of ours and fix them—all these components still worked, and they worked for good.

God is the good Father who takes broken things and fixes them again, and we can always call on Him to fix the brokenness in us. In Mary and Joseph's story, He turned the brokenness into something beautiful and new. Not only did God use them to bring Jesus into the world, but He has used them since that season as beacons to other broken people longing to be used by God. His design is not limited by disrupted plans or human expectations of what perfection looks like. He makes beautiful stories from broken characters all the time, using His own perfect story as an example.



## **READ**

Matthew 1:18-22 (ESV Below)

*Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.*

*And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.*

*But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.*

*She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."*

*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:*

*"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).*

*When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.*

## **Reflection** \_\_\_\_\_

1. Reflect on God's faithfulness in your life. Can you think of a broken moment or story in your own life that God repaired or restored?
2. The Bible is full of people who have imperfect stories and even bad behavior. Why do you think God uses broken people in such profound ways?
3. What character traits and purpose can you gather about God based on the way He sent Christ into the world?



## ***Pray***

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Take a moment to prayerfully reflect on God's lovingkindness in sending His Son. Pray for His faithfulness in transforming broken stories into something beautiful. Ask God to use the damaged parts of your life today for His glory and your good. Be specific, and keep thinking about it throughout the week!

## ***Daily Reading***

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**4 DEC** – Micah 5:2

**5 DEC** – Psalm 98

**6 DEC** – Matthew 1:18-25

**7 DEC** – 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

**8 DEC** – 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

**9 DEC** – phesians 2:14-18

**10 DEC** – Isaiah 9:6-7



## ***Family Focus*** – Finding Beauty in the Unexpected

Quick reminder: don't forget that your Gifts of Hope items are due back this week! Spend some time shopping and putting those items and tags together so you can turn them in by noon on 12/10.

Make a Christmas decoration out of something you would have otherwise thrown away this week. Get creative and put it up in your house somewhere for the rest of this season. Discuss how we can reframe our perspectives to see God's restoration in unlikely places



week three

# Herod & The Magi

We all fall short of the glory of God, but how we respond is crucial to whether we will stand outside of His glory or within it. Today's story compares two different responses to the birth of Jesus: the responses of the Magi and Herod. Upon seeing the star, the Magi ventured from the far east to find and honor the promised King of Israel. When they find Him, they fall on their faces in worship and present their finest gifts. Their response befits the true Christmas spirit—the worship and celebration of the King of all!

However, the Magi met a defiant character midway through their journey: an earthly king who viewed this new King of Israel as competition, Herod. Herod ruled over a broken nation and was desperate to keep his power. The news of another king born to fulfill the Jewish prophecies potentially spelled the end of his reign. Frightened by the possibilities and rebellious against God in his own brokenness, he later unleashed terror on Bethlehem, commanding his soldiers to hunt down the promised Child.

The Magi's response of heartfelt worship makes for a stark contrast against Herod's response of fear and evil. We read the passage and feel heartbreak even now for the brokenness in the story then. But we also know that God was still moving in the situation, from warning the Magi not to return to Herod to instructing Joseph to take his family to Egypt. His plans to bring salvation to the world would not be thwarted.

As we see from the characters in these stories, much of how God uses us depends on our response to Him. Will we draw near to Him in worship, awe, and reverence? Or, will we seek to be self-serving and independent of Him? God wants us to respond to His sovereignty, power, and plan with the same enthusiasm the Magi brought to Jesus in the manger. He wants us to trust Him, even when the world around us frightens us with its darkness. And He uses stories like the Magi's and Herod's to remind us: *nothing* will interfere with His perfect plans. Our responses are already woven into His story, so remember that He is with you and for you, and let us do our utmost to choose Him every time.



## **Read**

Matthew 2:1-18 (ESV Below)

*Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem,*

*saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”*

*When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;*

*and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.*

*They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:*

*“And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”*

*Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared.*

*And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.”*

*After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.*

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

*And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.*

*And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.*

*Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”*

*And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt*

*and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”*



*Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.*

*Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:*

*“A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.”*

## **Reflection**

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1. What do you observe about King Herod's and the Magi's response to the news of the birth of the Messiah?
2. What does this passage tell you about power, authority, and God's plan? What does it mean for your life?
3. How can today's Scripture change the way you think about God's plan to bring about His Kingdom this Christmas season?

## **Pray**

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Pray that this Christmas season, God will help you see beauty in broken stories and share His message of hope with those around you.

## *Daily Reading*

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**11 DEC** – Isaiah 61:1-3

**12 DEC** – Matthew 2:1-8

**13 DEC** – Matthew 2:9-12

**14 DEC** – Matthew 2:13-15

**15 DEC** – John 1:1-13

**16 DEC** – John 1:14-18

**17 DEC** – John 1:29-34



## ***Family Focus*** – Finding Security in a Bigger Plan

Pick your favorite family board game to play together and make sure to go through the rules of the game before you play. Then, select someone at random to play without the rules. Afterward, discuss why the rules are important.

How can your family recognize the importance of following God’s plan and submitting to His authority? Pray a prayer of surrender together.



week four

# *The Shepherds & the Angels*

“God used a *shepherd*? You’ve got to be kidding me...” Maybe these weren’t their exact words, but that likely would have been the sentiment of the early readers of Luke’s letter. As we’ve seen from the previous Advent stories, however, God’s plans often work against popular expectations as He brings beauty from brokenness.

Shepherds didn’t hold much esteem back in the first century. At best, they were day laborers. At worst, they were thieves and vagabonds. At all times, they were lowly and unimpressive outsiders who didn’t belong anywhere near royalty. No one would have chosen a shepherd to deliver news as important as the coming of the long-expected Messiah. But God did. Like He so often does, He took “lowly and despised things” (1 Cor. 13:28) and used them for His plans.

When God calls the shepherds to worship, it starts a chain reaction of beautiful moments orchestrated to bring glory and honor to Jesus. Angels appear in the heavens and worship together, “Glory to God in the highest!” The shepherds seek the newborn King, find Him, and worship Him. Mary—still navigating her own season of brokenness—treasures the sight of the shepherds worshipping in her heart, a moment so special that even Scripture takes note.

Perhaps the most wonderful thing about this story is that when God invited the shepherds to accept the new King, He also invited the rest of us. No matter who we are, where we come from, or what mistakes we’ve made, we are all invited to come in our brokenness and worship the perfect Savior. His message of hope, salvation, and peace is for us all. If we know life with Christ and in Him to be the single most important gift ever given, how can we not share Him with those around us? Let us go confidently, worshipping God and His glory, knowing that His heart is for all people and that His plans are still working to lead broken people to Bethlehem, to the cross, and back from the grave again.





## **READ**

Luke 2:8–20 (ESV Below)

*And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.*

*And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.*

*And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.*

*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*

*And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”*

*And 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!”*

*When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.”*

*And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.*

*And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.*

*And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.*

*But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.*

*And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

## **Reflection**

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1. Close your eyes and envision the moment between the shepherds and angels. Describe what you think it was like and how the shepherds must have felt in that moment.

2. Reflect on a time when you felt unqualified for a task or calling. How does the story of the shepherds being chosen as messengers by God inspire you to step up to great things?

3. The shepherds were overjoyed upon hearing the angel say, “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. For unto you is born in this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” What is your response to that same message?

## *Pray*

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Spend time thanking God for the way He uses ordinary people with broken stories. Open with praise that He sent us the unmerited gift of Jesus Christ and His redemption.

## *Daily Reading*

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**18 DEC** – 2 Peter 3:3-10

**19 DEC** – Isaiah 52:7-10

**20 DEC** – Revelation 21:1-7

**21 DEC** – Psalms 89:1-18

**22 DEC** – Galatians 4:1-7

**23 DEC** – Luke 2:1-7

**24 DEC** – Luke 2:8-21



## ***Family Focus*** – Finding Revival through Faithful Presence

Take cookies or hot chocolate to a neighbor. Carve out a few extra minutes to spend some time and invite them to join you at church for Christmas Eve. It's the season of gift-giving, but remember that the most precious gift is the one offered by Jesus.

Think about the potential impacts of small acts of kindness carried out regularly as a way to open the door for the gospel. If your family participated in Gifts of Hope this year, talk about that potential impact too!

Pray together and ask God to use your family in big ways over the next year; pray that you wouldn't miss those opportunities to serve others all year long.



# *From Brokenness to Bethlehem:* **A LIFESTYLE OF FAITHFUL PRESENCE**

Thank you for journeying with us from Brokenness to Bethlehem this Advent! We hope you come away from this season with a deeper appreciation for the way God integrates our imperfect brokenness with His perfect plans and purpose. The centerpiece of all our characters' stories, of course, is Christ Himself. Many had waited expectantly for the promised King whom God would use to restore His people back to Himself, but to find the King of kings born in a lowly stable and lying in a manger subverted many expectations.

Thank God, He works above our expectations, and that goes for the expectation that we, our circumstances, or anything in this world is too broken for Him to use. The brokenness we've seen in these Advent stories should remind us of other brokenness we see in ourselves, but it should also give us hope. Let us remember who our King is, that He came into the world to save sinners and give them new life, and let us live confidently in the knowledge that He is coming again to restore all things.

Commit to trusting God with His perfect plan beyond this Christmas season into 2024. Commit to being a faithful presence to others so that they might know Jesus and follow Him. No matter our brokenness, we live in the hope of His perfect salvation and know we'll see the effects of it in our own lives. In the moments of uncertainty, we can look back at the characters God chose and remember how perfectly He authored their stories from brokenness to Bethlehem.

