

Company at Christmas

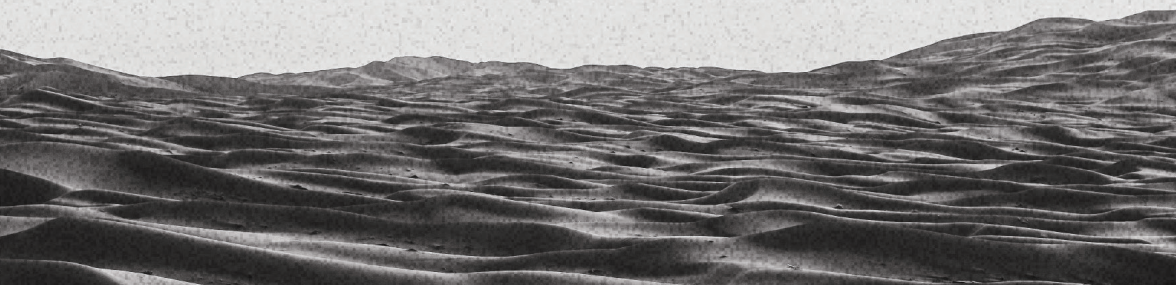
EDITOR: DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY:

NOBLE BAIRD
PATRICK BICKNELL
JAYSON COMBS
SIERRA COMBS
DEBBIE GABBARA
LARRY GABBARA
CALEB GARRISON
MITCHELL HOLMES
PHILIP PIASECKI
CALEB JONES
SYDNEY KIMBALL
WILLIAM KINNEY

JAMES MANN
PETER MASON
JOANNA MONTGOMERY
JILL OSMON
JOHN RIGG
FERDINAND SANDERS
JOHN STONE
JOSH THAYER
ROY TOWNSEND
KEATON WASHBURN
DAVID WILSON
JEANNIE YATES

DESIGNED BY: CASEY MAXWELL
FORMATTED BY: SHAWNA JOHNSON



Copyright © 2022 The River Church

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of The River Church. Inquiries should be sent to the publisher.

First Edition, December 2022

**Published by:
The River Church
8393 E. Holly Rd.
Holly, MI 48442**

**Scriptures are taken from the Bible,
English Standard Version (ESV)**



THE RIVER CHURCH

Printed in the United States of America



CONTENTS

09 LESSON ONE • THE SHEPHERDS

- 17** Devotion 1: The Unexpected
- 19** Devotion 2: The Roughnecks?
- 21** Devotion 3: Why the Shepherds?
- 23** Devotion 4: Christmas Eve at a Truck Stop
- 25** Devotion 5: Humble Beginnings
- 27** Devotion 6: It is Personal

31 LESSON TWO • ANNA AND SIMEON

- 37** Devotion 1: A Couple Sentences
- 39** Devotion 2: Faithfulness
- 41** Devotion 3: Exemplary Living for God
- 43** Devotion 4: Anticipation of Things to Come
- 45** Devotion 5: Seeds of Obedience
- 47** Devotion 6: Simeon Waits

51 LESSON THREE • WISE MEN

- 59** Devotion 1: Love Languages
- 63** Devotion 2: Giving God Our Time
- 65** Devotion 3: Our Response to God Incarnate
- 67** Devotion 4: Daniel's Influence?
- 69** Devotion 5: True Worship
- 71** Devotion 6: Worship & Gifts

75 LESSON FOUR • ANGELS

- 81** Devotion 1: Socks & Underwear Again?
- 85** Devotion 2: Angels: The Servants of God
- 87** Devotion 3: GPS Angel
- 89** Devotion 4: Difficult Decisions
- 91** Devotion 5: The Direction of Others
- 95** Devotion 6: GPS





PREFACE

The concept of company visiting at Christmas can raise immense emotions. Some people brighten the room as they enter it while others brighten a room when they leave. We all have relatives we are excited to see, enjoy their hugs, and anticipate their special recipe. They are a special part of our Christmas heritage. However, all too often there can be those guests who just talk about themselves, complain about everything, or create tension over their view on politics. They know what buttons to press.

When Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary had company. There were at least five specific groups or individuals who celebrated the very first Christmas with Jesus and His parents:

- The Shepherds
- Anna
- Simeon
- The Wise Men
- Angels

Company at Christmas consists of four study guides for group discussion and twenty-four devotions for personal growth to help you have a more fulfilling time this year during the Christmas season. Some of our guests will be planned and some will be unexpected, but both groups are designed by God. Make the most of the time. *Company at Christmas* will help you be better prepared this season as others spend time with you and you spend time with the Lord.



LESSON ONE

THE SHEPHERDS

PASTOR JAYSON COMBS

COMPANY AT CHRISTMAS

1. Do you enjoy hosting company at your home during the Christmas season? If not, who in your family generally hosts the family get-together? What are the highlights or stressors about having company over?

The Christmas season usually means company. If company is with family, friends, or co-workers, many people have a Christmas tradition of getting together with others. Many times families pack up their car, juggle some sort of Christmas food, have a car full of kids and gifts, and head to someone's house to celebrate "Christmas."

2. What does your Christmas look like? How has it changed over the years? Be honest, are you a person that enjoys company?

Along with people, we usually bring things to these gatherings. In my family, I have found we usually bring the same dishes to pass every year. My sister brings the veggie pizza or taco salad, my other sister brings the breadsticks, and my nieces bring the most delicious desserts. All of those things I love to fill my plate, but it is not the Christmas food I look forward to every year. The best food that anyone brings to my family's Christmas get-togethers is my mom's homemade fudge. I do not mean this as an exaggeration, but I could probably eat an entire plate myself.

In today's Growth Community lesson, we will focus our attention on the shepherds who were Jesus' company at Christmas. I believe what the shepherds brought to the first Christmas gathering was

something truly amazing. Yes, I think it is even better than my mom's fudge.

Luke 2:8-14 records, “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!’”

Luke 2:15-18 continues, “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.”

3. What were the shepherds doing on the night of the first Christmas Eve?

4. What did the angel proclaim to the shepherds? What did this proclamation cause with the *“multitude of the heavenly host?”*

There is such an amazing truth wrapped up in the shepherds. Angels show up to shepherds in a field. Angels, heavenly beings who are servants of God by praising Him and adoring God for who He is, show up to the “night crew” shepherds. No disrespect to those who work the third shift, but while the rest of Israel rested, shepherds had to go care for their flocks. Angels did not show up to a king, a rich ruler, or the high priests. Angels, sent by God Himself, came to proclaim the birth of our Savior and King. Shepherds were very scorned people. They were very low in the social aspect of Israel in Jesus’ time. Kent Hughes says, “Shepherds were despised by the ‘good and respectable’ people of the day. They were regarded as thieves. The only people lower than shepherds at that partial time in Jewish history were lepers.”

5. Do you find any significance in the angels showing up to the shepherds?

Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”* (Matthew 5:3). The shepherds were lowly people, but they still brought an amazing gift to Mary and Joseph, and ultimately Jesus.

To hone in on what the company of the shepherds brought in the first Christmas, below is a fill-in-the-blank. Each of these words, that

LESSON ONE | THE SHEPHERDS

are needed to fill in this statement, brings an important aspect of understanding an amazing truth about the shepherds being company at Christmas. Use Luke chapter 2 for a bit of a cheat sheet.

6. They brought the message of _____ and great _____. The message of who was just born in the city of David. A _____ who is _____ the _____.

7. What did the shepherds bring with them when they showed up at the manger of baby Jesus? (Maybe a little bit of a trick question.)

8. What do you think it meant to Mary and Joseph?

The first few words of “**Good News**” and “**joy**” are an amazing gift to bring to the first Christmas. The sense of excitement and fulfillment that any parent has upon the birth of their child is over the top. For Mary and Joseph, their child was truly one of a kind. To know all the foretelling of Christ’s birth culminated in a manger that brought about lowly shepherds coming to see what the Lord had done, is a beautiful picture of the truth that the joyous Gospel of our Lord and Savior had now come into the world.

The next three words are an amazing picture of what the company of Christ brings into our lives. These three words that describe Jesus are so important to understand and should bring comfort and joy to every believer.



The Gift of Jesus as Savior

Matthew 1:21 proclaims, ***“She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”***

Luke 19:10 adds, ***“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”***

John MacArthur observed, “Too often Jesus is presented as the one who will rescue people from the lack of fulfillment in their marriages, families, or jobs; from a debilitating habit they cannot overcome on their own or from a sense of purposelessness in life. But while relief in those areas may be a byproduct of salvation it is not its primary intent - The true Gospel message is that Jesus Christ came into the world to rescue people from sin and guilt.”

9. How is Jesus your Savior? What does that mean to you?

The Gift of Jesus as Christ

I often say this and it may sound simple, but Christ is not Jesus' last name. It is telling us who He is. He is the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament.

10. How do these verses explain who Jesus is?

Revelation 17:14 _____

Revelation 19:16 _____

Hebrews 3:1 _____

1 Timothy 2:5 _____

Hebrews 7:25 _____

Hebrews 1:1-2 _____

The Gift of Jesus as Lord

In 1 Corinthians 2:8, Paul states, ***“None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”***

The Luke chapter 2 narrative is the only time in the Gospels this phrase is used. It is the only time we see all the titles of Jesus brought together. He will save His people from their sins because He is Savior. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah promised to Israel. From the moment sin entered the world, God's plan for reconciliation centered around Christ. Finally, most humbly of all, Jesus is Lord. Jesus is God. Jesus is the maker and sustainer of all things. Jesus is the ruler of all. The angels not only gave the Gospel to the shepherds; they give the true identity of Christ.

11. Of these three words (Savior, Christ, Lord), which one means the most to you? Which one do you struggle with the most?

12. What will you bring this year to Christmas? What is one way you can challenge yourself to be a light to your family? How can we be like the shepherds this Christmas?





THE UNEXPECTED

THE SHEPHERDS, DEVOTION 1

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

“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.’” Luke 2:15

Do you remember hearing or seeing something that was unexpected? It caught you off guard. You might have said, “I did not see that coming.” If you were texting, you might just reply SMH (Shaking My Head). There are a lot of those events in the Bible:

- An old man and lady start a nation (Abraham and Sarah)
- A prisoner to save a nation (Joseph)
- A woman to save a nation (Esther)
- A donkey and a large fish to get someone’s attention (Balaam, Jonah)
- A prostitute to overtake a city (Rahab)
- A kid to take down a giant (David)
- A boy and his lunch to feed thousands
- A murderer to lead people to the Lord (Moses, David, Paul)
- An uneducated fisherman to preach and start the church (Peter)
- A group of shepherds being the first visitors to see and worship baby Jesus

Please think about the last one. God chose a group of shepherds to be the first visitors to see and worship Jesus when He was born. In Luke 2:11, the angels say to the shepherds, ***“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”*** It appears that the shepherds are the first ones to hear that

the Messiah has arrived. That is such an honor. It is not what one would expect.

The shepherds were not the esteemed group. However, that is who God chose to start getting the word out that the Savior had arrived. It is comforting to realize that God cares for everyone. In 1 Peter 5:7, we read, ***“Casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.”*** This is a beautiful passage because it reminds us that Jesus cares for us and is willing to be there for us in our darkest hours.

God regularly uses the unexpected to do mighty and important things for Him. It is not about ability, but availability.



THE ROUGHNECKS?

THE SHEPHERDS, DEVOTION 2

Pastor Noble Baird

Personally, I have always loved how the Lord chose to include and prioritize the shepherds in the birth of Christ. As we go over the Christmas story (the birth of Christ), it is always amazing how intentional the Lord is with whom He reveals and proclaims the birth of His Son, Jesus. In Luke 2:8-20, we have the account of the proclamation to the Shepherds of the glorious birth of Christ. It reads, ***“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.”***

One of the things I love most about the shepherds is the fact that they are just hard-working roughnecks. Day and night they work to take care of, provide, protect, and watch over their sheep. It is truly an exhausting, dirty, and labor-intensive job. They are the ones who can often be forgotten about because they are just there in the background being a seemingly small cog in a bigger picture of production and societal provision. However, the Lord sends His angels to proclaim the birth of His Son to those dirty, hardworking roughnecks who by the standards of the world are a dime a dozen and easily overlooked and simply lost in the crowd.

I am not sure about you, but man, does that bring comfort. The same Lord who intentionally sent His messengers to the shepherds, sent His Son, Jesus, for you and me! What comfort and joy we can have in this season. It is especially meaningful on those days when we may feel lost in the crowd and forgotten by the world. May we remember that the same Lord who intentionally chose to celebrate and include the shepherds in the birth of His Son, chose to include us in His story of redemption and reconciliation to Himself!

WHY THE SHEPHERDS?

THE SHEPHERDS, DEVOTION 3

Larry Gabbara

In 2017, my wife and I were privileged to travel to Israel with the church staff. It was amazing as we traveled along the road to see shepherds tending their sheep. Our tour guide said they were Bedouins, nomad shepherds, that are continually moving to look for greener pastures for their flock.

All through the Bible, we see stories of shepherds. We read of how they protected their flocks and cared for them. They watched over their flock night and day, always moving and looking for the best pastures for them.

During biblical times, families relied upon sheep to provide food and wool. Sheep were so valuable that shepherds would stay with the flock to protect them day and night. Sheep learn who their shepherd is, and they follow the shepherd for everything from food to protection. Since shepherds spent so much time in the fields, they were smelly and dirty.

In John 10:11, Jesus says that He is the Good Shepherd. He laid down His life when He died on the cross for us. This is the world's greatest sacrifice. Christ was sinless; He died for our sin. The Good Shepherd laid down His life for His sheep!

The question could be, "Why were the shepherds at Jesus' birth?"

Luke 2:8-12 records, ***"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.'"

Luke 2:15 adds, ***"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.'"***

The shepherds are considered social outcasts, so why were they at Jesus' birth? This follows the idea that it was God's design to first appear "to the least of these." Jesus was to reach all people even the lowly of low.

They immediately listened to the angel and went with a sense of urgency to see the newborn Savior. When they arrived, they saw the baby Jesus lying in a feeding trough, wrapped in swaddling clothes, with Mary and Joseph. It must have been a different-looking birth.

Could this be the Savior of the world, a baby? The angels said He is!

Now that they had seen Him with their own eyes, they got to be the ones to tell the world about this amazing birth!

Have you seen the Savior? Who are you telling about it?

CHRISTMAS EVE AT A TRUCK STOP

THE SHEPHERDS, DEVOTION 4

Peter Mason

What many of us love so much about Christmas is what causes us to miss it; the sentimentality and myth that surround it. The “story” of Christmas oftentimes is just that: a story. One that lives in a part of our childhood is *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. It is the story that Linus recites in his tender soft voice with his light blue blanket. The magic and nostalgia of Christmas that we love so much, can be the thing that distances us from the reality of the in-breaking of God’s Kingdom in Jesus’ birth.

Luke, the Gospel writer, is a researched historian and he wants us to clearly realize that this story is not a myth, but history. It involves real people in a real place at a real time in the past. It is about real, ordinary people like you and me with families, a history, dreams, and hopes for the future. The story takes place in Bethlehem, an armpit of the Roman empire, not the ancient metropolis of Alexandria or Rome itself. In modern terms: a backwater town in rural Iowa, not the glamour of L.A. or the prestige of New York.

Also, the announcement of Jesus’ birth does not come to wealthy celebrities or high-ranking politicians on TV. Instead, lowly shepherds are the ones who hear the local news first. Many of us have adopted cute images of shepherds — children wearing wash cloths on their heads held on with rubber bands. However, shepherds were dirty and rough blue-collar workers who kept to themselves. Think of a group of burly men at a truck stop in the middle of rural Iowa around midnight.

When the angel appears — we are shocked to hear that these tough men, whose job is to protect sheep from predators, are filled with terror and fear. However, deep down many of us can sympathize with this ordinary response. These men get to experience a question that every human deep down asks themselves, “How is God going to appear to me in my life?” Most of us deep down are afraid of what God will say to us because He knows about us. We are afraid of the judgment, rejection, and condemnation that will come when we have been exposed. We are afraid that God is coming to deliver us bad news.

Instead, the angel corrects them, **“Fear not”** (Luke 2:10). You do not need to fear the announcement of God. In fact, I have Good News for you, not bad news. Luke 2:11 continues, **“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”** The Good News is not that we have been given someone who can help us along, or be an example or partner with us. The Good News is that we have been given a Savior.

The joy of Christmas for real, ordinary people like you and me is that someone has come to save us, and His name is Jesus. Therefore, underneath the sentimentality of Christmas, wherever your real life takes place, hear the Good News today, **“Fear not.”**

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

THE SHEPHERDS, DEVOTION 5

Keaton Washburn

When I think of the angels coming to the shepherds, I think of it as a story. To most people, this event is just that though, a story. However, a story, by definition, is an account, true or imaginary, told for entertainment. Jesus coming as a baby, born of a virgin, is much more than a story. It is a historical event that begins the life of the most important person to ever live! Luke, telling us of this, conveys it using multiple paradoxes to point out the message that the Holy Spirit inspired him to write.

Read Luke 2:8-14.

The first paradox that we see in this section is in Luke 2:10 which says, ***“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.’”*** Verse 9 tells us that when the angel appeared to the shepherds they were ***“filled with great fear.”*** The angel specifically told them not to fear because his message was of great joy. The shepherds were fearful, but the message was joyful. Those are two contrasting emotions that are rarely felt at the same time.

The second paradox is in verses 13 and 14. A multitude of angels suddenly appeared with the original angel. The word that Luke uses for the multitude is synonymous with an army. He is conveying that an army of angels just appeared out of nowhere. However, the message the angels brought is a message of peace, ***“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”***

I am often quick to breeze past this phrase because I have heard and sung it so many times. The message is that because of this Jesus (the Messiah) that the shepherds will find in a manger, there can be peace between God and man. Luke writes this to show the paradox of an army that brought peace.

Read Luke 2:15-20.

The shepherds urgently left their flocks to find this Savior. After finding Him, they told many people how the angels appeared to them. Luke tells us in verse 18, ***“All who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.”*** Immediately following this, we read, ***“But Mary treasured up all these things.”*** When reading Scripture, it is always important to notice when the writer uses the contraction ***“but.”*** Luke contrasts the difference in the response between all who heard and Mary. While many were amazed, Mary treasured all these things and pondered them.

The message of the Good News of Jesus Christ is by nature paradoxical. It is sinful people being saved by a perfect God. The same God who uses the weaknesses and shortcomings of humans shows His strength. He sent His son as an infant, to save all people. Luke, inspired by the Holy Spirit, does a marvelous job drawing out these paradoxes in his telling of the shepherds receiving the Good News. This is not just a story. It is an earth-shattering event that changed the course of all history, which begins with an infant in a manger, found by lowly shepherds, exactly as the angels told them.



IT IS PERSONAL

THE SHEPHERDS, DEVOTION 6

Caleb Jones

“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.’” Luke 2:8-15

My prayer for this devotional is that it would fall into the hands of someone who relates to the shepherds. So who are the shepherds? Why are they in the story of Jesus?

Have you ever felt disconnected? Unloved? Unwanted? Always on your own? Misunderstood? I think that is who the shepherds were. They were always on the outside of society.

So, why would they be in this story? I struggled to process this. As a kid, I saw them in every nativity set. Part of me thought the sheep wanted to go see the Messiah just as much as the shepherds wanted to. Maybe that was just the kid in me as I paid attention mostly to the

animals. Yet, as I read verse 9, I feel like I start to understand. An angel of the Lord says that he is bringing Good News of great joy to ALL people. Growing up, I knew Jesus. I grew up in a Christian home so Jesus was someone we always talked about. I never felt I should not belong to Him. Maybe that was the lack of understanding of my depravity, but I think part of it was that I was also taught at a young age that Jesus wants me - that He loves me. John 3:16 says, ***“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*** I think oftentimes we believe wholeheartedly in that verse — for other people. However, this verse, along with what the angel told the shepherds, is helping us with two things. First, it is helping us to give grace to all people knowing that Jesus came for all men. Second, it is teaching that He came for me. It is personal.

Maybe you are reading this and you feel like you are on the mountain top with Jesus. Take some time right now thanking God for His love. Thank Him for Jesus. Pray for those who need to feel and receive this same grace.

However, maybe you are reading this and you feel alone. Maybe you feel like God has not come for you. Know that Jesus felt that too when He cried out on the cross, ***“My God, why have you forsaken me?”*** (Matthew 27:46). Know that Jesus came to this world to walk where you are walking right now. He has felt your pain. He has felt your grief. He has felt your loneliness. You are the very reason Christ came. He came for the shepherds. He came for the world. He came for you.





LESSON TWO

ANNA AND SIMEON

PASTOR ROY TOWNSEND

COMPANY AT CHRISTMAS

We all know that Christmas is a time when we get together with company. This company can be co-workers, family from far away, or family who may live close by, but we only see each other once a year. Many people describe Christmas as so magical, and yet, many describe Christmas as a huge emotional drain on their lives. We know that many people struggle at Christmas.

1. Do you have company at Christmas that you only see once a year? Please describe.

2. Is Christmastime a magical or emotionally draining time of year for you? Why?

We learned last week that the shepherds were the original company at Christmas. However, this week we will look at two named individuals that we often overlook as being part of the Christmas story. Anna and Simeon were devout and God-fearing which conveys the idea of being careful to obey and honor God. Simeon reveals the purpose of why Christ is born. Simeon has the true peace that comes only when we understand that salvation is in Christ alone. This company at Christmas brings this confirmation but also tells Mary some difficult truths.

3. Please describe for the group your understanding of "salvation in Christ alone."

4. Are you the type of person who is comfortable bringing the truth of salvation in Christ alone to others?

Luke 2:22-35 reads, ***“And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, ‘Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord’) and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.’ Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, ‘Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.’ And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, ‘Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”***

The Scripture here reveals that God keeps His promise to Simeon and he praises God that he saw Jesus Christ. Simeon had been



waiting, and then got to declare the “consolation of Israel.” This is the messianic hope that God would send His Son to be the sacrifice for many.

5. How important is it that your company at Christmas sees God’s salvation before they die? Please explain.

Also, Simeon compassionately declares that God provided Jesus for salvation for the whole world. Luke 2:29-32 reads, ***“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”***

6. Why is it important to note that salvation has been prepared for all peoples?

Simeon has blessed the family with truth, and Anna joins in the truth by giving thanks and telling others.

Luke 2:36-38 reads, ***“And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.”***

Here we are introduced to Anna who joined in the truth, gave thanks, and spread the Good News to ***“all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.”*** Jesus Christ coming into this world is a Christmas miracle. The original Christmas miracle I might add.

7. Is your response similar to or contrary to Anna’s response to the Christmas miracle? (Joined the truth, gave thanks, and spread the Good News)

We often believe that Christmastime should be easy, joyous, and relaxing. However, Simeon was tasked with sharing the truth of Jesus as salvation with Mary. Luke 2:34-35 reads, ***“And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, ‘Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.’”*** Simeon was tasked with sharing the truth about Mary’s situation with her. Not only was there joy and excitement about Jesus coming into the world, but there was difficult news to share with Mary.

8. What about our circumstances make us afraid to share the truth of Jesus Christ with our company at Christmas.

In 1 Timothy 2:5-6, we read, ***“For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.”*** We cannot forget the truth that Jesus

COMPANY AT CHRISTMAS

Christ came to this world to be payment for our sin. In our celebration of Christ's birth, which is an incredible miracle, we must remember why it was necessary for Christ to be born. John 3:16 reads, ***"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."***

9. Are you prepared to spread the truth with your company this Christmas? Is it both the miracle of God coming into the world and the need that we all have for Him? Why or why not?

10. Please share with the group the names of your company that you will spread the Good News with this year. Pray that the truth of Jesus Christ will be accepted by your company.



A COUPLE SENTENCES

ANNA AND SIMEON, DEVOTION 1

Debbie Gabbara

“Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher.” Luke 2:36

Scripture only gives us three verses, Luke 2:36-38, to learn about Anna, but there is a lot packed into this short passage of God’s Word. God tells us who she was, who her father was, and even the tribe they came from. Then in the next couple of sentences, God gives us a glimpse into Anna’s entire life.

Anna was a prophetess. One definition of a prophet(ess) is “a proclaimer of the will of God.” In a time in Jewish history when God had been silent for 400 years, Scripture calls Anna a prophetess. Luke tells us that she was a widow who ***“did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day”*** (Luke 2:37).

In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NIV), Paul writes, ***“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”***

Anna never gave up. Some scholars say that Anna was 84 years old when we meet her in Scripture, and others say she had been a widow for 84 years and was about 104 or 105 years old. Either way, she was an elderly woman who had spent her entire adult life praying, fasting, and looking for God to save His people. I wonder if she was surprised that the Savior came as a tiny baby boy?

Isaiah 9:6 says, ***“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name***

shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Anna was there. I recently read a quote that said, “Being in the right place at the right time is more about the place than the timing.” Anna was in the right place at the right time. She had made seeking God her life’s work. Her devotion was rewarded and she was there when Joseph and Mary brought baby Jesus to be dedicated to the Father.

In 1 Kings 8:61, we are reminded, ***“Let your heart therefore be wholly true to the Lord our God.”***

Anna shared the news of the Savior. God blessed Anna’s devoutness and allowed her to see the baby Jesus and be there when Simeon blessed Him. Then, in that instant, she began to tell everyone about the One who had come to save God’s people.

Luke 2:38 (KJV) says, ***“And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem.”***

If your life was reduced to just a couple of sentences, what would it say about you? Would the short statement tell of your love and devotion to God?

Jesus tells us to go and tell everyone of the One who has come to save us! It is clearly commanded, ***“And then he told them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone’”*** (Mark 16:15 NLT).

FAITHFULNESS

ANNA AND SIMEON, DEVOTION 2

Jill Osmon

Having a deep, abiding faithfulness to God and His Word is what we should pursue. All over the Bible, we see examples of faithfulness but one story is hidden, like a little gem that I think we miss when we think about the story of Jesus' birth. Luke specifically highlights two people, Simeon and Anna, and if you do not really pay attention, you can miss the specialness of their enduring faithfulness to God.

Simeon and Anna devoted their lives to learning, worshiping, and serving God. They were living in anticipation of Jesus' birth. I love what Bob Deffinbaugh said, "Their faithfulness in looking for and hastening the coming of the Lord is indeed a rebuke and an encouragement to every Christian. Their goals and priorities and their persistent practice of righteousness are quite frankly in direct opposition to what our culture advocates."

So what does he mean when he says it is in direct opposition to what our culture advocates? Our world has created this idea that we live for this moment right now. We live for our happiness (not the God-given joy that comes when living for Him), and if we do that our lives will be full and meaningful. What the world offers is anything but fulfilling or meaningful. Simeon and Anna's lives show that when our life is lived in anticipation of God's return, we live differently. As Christians, our lives should be defined by our pursuit of proclaiming the Gospel to every person and community we can reach. Our lives should look markedly different than unbelievers because we know that one day Jesus will return; and upon His return, we will be judged by our decision of accepting or rejecting the Gospel.

When Simeon saw the baby Jesus, he knew that the Messiah had come. The Bible describes Simeon as righteous and devout, and that he was promised he would see Jesus before he died. Can you imagine the complete and utter joy he experienced when he realized the Messiah had come in the flesh? His whole life was defined by waiting for the Messiah. He was righteous and devout and the anticipation helped him pattern his life to the glory of God.

Anna, in the same sense, had dedicated her life to worshiping and learning about God. When she saw Jesus immediately ***“she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem”*** (Luke 2:38).

So what can we take away from this as we celebrate Jesus' birth this Christmas season? We cannot forget. We cannot forget that Jesus will return one day and those that know Him and have accepted Him as their Savior will be with Him for eternity; but those who have rejected Him will be removed from Him forever. We need to dig deep into our faith as Simeon and Anna did. We too should learn, worship, wait, and take the news to every person and every community. When Jesus does return, it is important that everyone will recognize Him because they know and believe the Good News.

Our goals, priorities, and our persistent practice of righteousness should point everyone we know to Jesus. Only then will we be fulfilled with a meaningful life.

EXEMPLARY LIVING FOR GOD

ANNA AND SIMEON, DEVOTION 3

Sydney Kimball

Bear with me as I ask you a rather morbid question. I do promise you, however, that by the end of this, you will see my point in bringing up such a topic. My question to you is this, “What do you want people to say about you at your memorial service, or, better yet, how do you want to be remembered?” Now, many of us, when asked this question, will respond with answers that may sound genuine and inspiring, but our lives do not reflect the same notion. We will say, “I want to be remembered as a generous and kind person” or “I hope that when people think of me, they think of me as someone who truly lived for the Lord.” Unfortunately, as great of answers as they are, most often our actions do not coincide with our wishes. I want you to turn open to the book of Luke.

Luke 2:36-38 says, ***“And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.”***

You have just read about Anna, a patient and devout prophetess, who spent her life awaiting the arrival of the Savior who would redeem the people of Israel, God’s people. She did not concern herself with the things of the world, in fact, ***“She did not depart from the temple, [she spent her time] worshiping with fasting and prayer day and night.”*** She is a woman we all can look to as an example of

an honorable life of devotion and service to the Lord. She may or may not have had a memorial service, but her devotion marked her life. Her faithfulness and exemplary love for the Lord and His plans found her a place in history forever. Every person until the end of time, who reads the Word of God, will read of her God-fearing nature and her patience in waiting on the coming of the Savior. Her close relationship with the Lord allowed her to immediately recognize what others did not see. Even while looking down on Him in His mother's arms, she saw Him as the Redeemer He is and all He would do. You could see Anna's love for God through her trust in Him, her devotion to Him, and her immediate recognition of Him. She never doubted that He was coming, no matter how long she had to wait. She would keep looking because He was worth it to her. His coming gave her purpose and kept her alive.

If we want to live a life marked by devotion and love for God, then we must look to Anna as an example. We too must not allow ourselves to be concerned with the things of the world but be so fixated on Jesus' return that we are ready to recognize Him when He comes back again. We must devote ourselves to saturation in the Word with powerful times of prayer and fasting.

Take some time to reflect on the question I originally asked, "How do you want to be remembered?" Now, are you living a life that will result in your wishes coming true at your memorial service or in conversations about you after you are gone? If not, do not panic. Now is the time to make some changes. Devote yourself to the things that matter and live a life like Anna.

ANTICIPATION OF THINGS TO COME

ANNA AND SIMEON, DEVOTION 4

James Mann

Christmas is such an exciting holiday to watch everyone with their different traditions. Many people have some sort of tradition that begins before Christmas day, and it is done to build anticipation for the big day. Some people do advent calendars while others make massive paper loops that count down the days and they rip off a loop every day. All these things are building excitement for people about something that they know is coming.

In Luke chapter 2, we are presented with Simeon, who is also waiting in excitement. He is told by the Holy Spirit that ***“he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.”*** Could you imagine the type of uncontrollable joy in the anticipation that Simeon felt?

Luke 2:29-30 reports, ***“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation.”***

When I mentally think about this scene playing out, I can just imagine the massive smile and tears running down Simeon’s face knowing that in his hands, he is holding the Savior of the world. He knew this moment would come, and here it is. There was no fear in the fact that he could now die at any point, just adoration. I want you to think about why it was that he felt zero fear and only joy in this scenario. Two adjectives, righteous and devout, describe Simeon. To make this easier to understand, Simeon lived a life that was morally right in the eyes of God, and he was committed to following God. When someone is doing those two things, there can be a sense of anticipation of seeing our Lord.

I have lately been viewing the holiday season as a time to self-assess my standing with the Lord so I can have excitement in them waiting to be face to face with God. Am I showing faith like Simeon did? Is my focus on the Lord, or is it on myself? Am I committed to my relationship with God, or do I falter at the first sign of trouble? These are all things that we should be thinking through and evaluating ourselves upon. Take some time to make sure that we can share in the same anticipation that Simeon did.



SEEDS OF OBEDIENCE

ANNA AND SIMEON, DEVOTION 5

Pastor David Wilson

Pineapples can be grown by the average person in their home, but you will be committed to persevering to the end; and by persevering I mean wait anywhere between 18 to 24 months to pick and eat a pineapple the size of a softball.

In Luke 2:22-35, we are given the account of a man named Simeon who was promised to see the Messiah. He would not see death until after he saw the Messiah. He must persevere in the meantime.

We must take care to recognize important factors in the context found in Luke. Forty days had passed since the day Jesus was born and Mary was going out for the first time. Ask yourself a question, “Why did Mary wait forty days to leave her home after Jesus’ birth?” It seems kind of weird, huh? In the Law the Hebrew mothers, following the birth of a male child, had to stay in the home for forty days and with a female child, the requirement was eighty days. Mary chose to obey the law and submit to the Lord’s authority.

Place yourself in Joseph and Mary’s shoes for the moment. You are leaving home for the first time, where would you go? I know where I would go, but Joseph and Mary chose to visit the temple with Jesus, instead of visiting family or anything else. They chose to fulfill the Law concerning the birth of the first male (which was to present the first male to the Lord with an offering). Joseph and Mary’s choices displayed their faith by obeying God.

Luke 2:22-24 clearly focuses on Joseph and Mary’s devotion to honor the Lord and then we are to direct our focus upon one man:

Simeon. We are given a description of Simeon in verses 25-27. He is described as a man from Jerusalem. He is known to be righteous, devout, and awaiting the consolation of Israel (which is the coming of the Messiah). Simeon is given a promise (verse 26) that he would not see death until he saw the Messiah. The Holy Spirit is setting up Simeon to be a valid testimony, who resides outside the family connections of Jesus, so people are given the lawful testimony of Jesus as Messiah.

Here is laid out for us a perfect picture to salvation: purification which is required before God, the presentation of a soul to the Lord with sacrifices as stated in the Law, and the valid testimony for authentication before those present. Joseph and Mary's choices were based on obeying the Law. Simeon's choices obeyed the Spirit. The two parties trusted in the Lord; their faith was expressed by obedience to the Law and honoring the Lord, and the result was their testimonies which authenticated the Lord to those present.

Seeds of obedience are only grown by faith resulting in fruit to publicly present truth! What seeds are you planting, faith or fear? Obedience is an act of faith, it challenges whether you trust the Lord more than yourself. Sow seeds of faith and allow that sweet fruit to grow for all to enjoy no matter how long it takes.

SIMEON WAITS

ANNA AND SIMEON, DEVOTION 6

John Rigg

Since the very beginning of my walk with Jesus, I have sensed that Jesus would return before I would die. Maybe it is just wishful thinking on my part, but I have always felt this way in my heart. There have been times that I have shared this with others and they said that they too have felt the same; that there was something telling them that the second coming of Christ would occur before they would leave this earth.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:16–18, Paul describes the scene, ***“For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.”***

Whether Jesus returns before I die or not, it is good to eagerly await His appearance! Hebrews 9:28 reminds us, ***“So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.”***

Luke, in his Gospel, tells us that there was a man named Simeon that also awaited the coming of Jesus. However, Simeon awaited Jesus' first coming. Luke 2:25–29 records, ***“Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to***

him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, 'Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word.'"

Although I cannot say that I have heard from God through the Holy Spirit that I will see the coming of the Lord before I die, I can say that like Simeon, I await God's consolation. I hope you do as well.

What should we do while we wait?

Maybe we can learn something from Simeon?

Luke says that while he waited, Simeon was righteous and devout. However, we are told through Scripture that no man or woman is righteous on their own, ***"As it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one'"*** (Romans 3:10). Therefore, righteousness is a wonderful gift from God to humanity through His love. It is the God-given quality passed on to man upon believing in the Son of God.

Simeon had believed in the Son of God long before His coming; so must we.

Secondly, Simeon was devout. To be devout is to be pious, which is a reverent feeling toward God that displays itself in the way one lives his or her life. We are not told how long Simeon waited for the Lord to come, but we are told that while he waited, he was righteous and his actions were devout.

So, as we wait for the Lord to return, we too must be made righteous through our faith in God's Son and allow His righteousness to express itself in the way in which we live our lives.



COMPANY AT CHRISTMAS

Take a few minutes and honestly answer the following questions.

Am I anxiously awaiting the Lord's return?

Have I been made righteous?

Am I devout?



LESSON THREE

WISE MEN

PASTOR JAYSON COMBS

What is Christmas supposed to look like? I know in my family we have a flow of Christmas. I have a small family, just our son, my wife, and me. Christmas for us is very special on Christmas morning. We love heading off to each of the grandparents' houses, but Christmas morning is just for the three of us. We turn the fireplace on, have our cup of coffee, and my son hands out gifts.

1. What does Christmas morning look like for you and your family?

Matthew 2:1-12 records, ***“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.”

2. What is the nativity scene supposed to look like?

3. Do you have a nativity? If so, what pieces go in the nativity?

4. After reading this passage does it throw off your nativity scene? How? Why?

5. Why do you think the wise men crept into the nativity scene?

6. Do you know how many wise men there should be?

According to this passage, the answer is, “No.” The Bible never puts a number on how many wise men came to see Jesus. It does say



that they found Him in a house and some think there could have been some 50 wise men that traveled east to see Jesus. Today, we will study those things that we think should look a certain way but do not.

- **What should a king look like?**

7. How does Herod the king respond to information about the Jewish King being born?

This should not be surprising. History tells us that Herod murdered one of his wives and his sons. I know that most of us know this story so it is easy to blow past this point, but think about the pain that will soon come to Bethlehem.

8. Did the chief priests and scribes know where the Messiah was to be born?

9. Why do you think they did not run to find the King?

At the end of verse 11, it says the wise men came to the house and worshiped Him.

10. Why did they not worship Mary?

11. Why is this important?

12. What gifts did they bring to Jesus?

There is much debate if these gifts have any meaning to them.

Gold - Often represents royalty.

Frankincense - Sometimes refers to the worship or service of God (Exodus 30:34; Leviticus 2:1).

Myrrh - Can emphasize humanity. Joseph of Arimathea used myrrh to prepare Jesus' body for burial.

I find it interesting that these gifts point to the royalty, worship, and death of King Jesus. One man said it shows that Jesus was "born to die."

- **What should worshipers look like?**

This thought takes me back to the first lesson in the series. An angel of the Lord shows up to the shepherds in the field. They were the



despised and looked down upon people. This is who the Lord brings to worship the King.

Here in Matthew chapter 2, we have the wise men or magi, who come from the east hundreds if not thousands of miles, following a star that God has miraculously shown them. Gentiles, nonetheless, are who God brings to worship the true King.

I am so thankful the Lord saved me. I am one who does not deserve it. Luke 19:10 says, ***“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”***

13. How has God saved you, one who does not fit the picture of what a worshiper should look like?

“Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe.” Hebrews 12:28

“Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.” Hebrews 13:15

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Romans 12:1-2

14. How can this Christmas season be different than the others in giving Jesus the worship He deserves?





LOVE LANGUAGES

WISE MEN, DEVOTION 1

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

“When they [the wise men] 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.” Matthew 2:10-11

In 1988, Gary Smalley and John Trent published *The Language of Love*. Since then, over 500,000 copies have sold and millions of people have been helped to better communicate with those they love. The concept is that there are basically five ways in which people best receive love: words of affirmation, quality time, touch, acts of service, and gifts. It is an interesting and helpful study for couples and parents to examine.

Have you ever considered God's love language? I want to have some fun with it.

Words of Affirmation - The word “praise” is used 238 times in the Bible. Thirteen of the times it is found in Psalm 150. Verses 1-2 say, ***“Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens! Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his excellent greatness!”*** After encouraging us to use instruments, verse 6 says, ***“Let everything that has breath praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!”*** God feels loved when we praise Him. Speak of His goodness.

Quality Time - Psalm 46:10 is so powerful, ***“Be still, and know that I am God.”*** We need to slow down at times and just enjoy

the presence of God and let Him enjoy our full attention. Matthew 6:6 adds, ***“But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*** In Luke chapter 10, Jesus appreciates Martha’s actions, but He enjoyed and commends Mary for choosing to spend time with Him. God feels loved when we focus on Him.

Touch - Matthew chapter 8 describes Jesus healing a man with leprosy. One of the details is surprising, ***“And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, ‘I will; be clean.’ And immediately his leprosy was cleansed”*** (Matthew 8:3). Jesus did the unthinkable. He knowingly and intentionally touched a man with leprosy. A touch can be powerful. In John chapter 20, Jesus encourages Thomas to touch His wounds from the crucifixion. Finally, James 4:8 says, ***“Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.”*** God feels loved when we reach out to Him.

Acts of Service - Romans 12:11 tells us, ***“Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.”*** We should want to do meaningful things for the Lord as a thank you for all He has done for us. Luke 4:8 adds, ***“And Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.’”*** Both the Old and New Testaments record the command that we are to serve the Lord. God feels loved when we do things for Him or in His name.

Gifts - Psalm 76:11 says, ***“Make your vows to the Lord your God and perform them; let all around him bring gifts to him who is to be feared.”*** God does not need anything we have, but He feels loved when we choose Him over material possessions. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 9:7, ***“Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a***



cheerful giver.” Suffice to say, God feels loved when we bring Him gifts.

The wise men took a journey to see the Star. They expressed love by worshiping Him, spending time with Him, and giving gifts. These gifts probably helped meet the needs of the family as they waited for the time to return home.

Have you considered giving Jesus a gift this year?



GIVING GOD OUR TIME

WISE MEN, DEVOTION 2

Caleb Garrison

“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.” Matthew 2:11

Christmas can be one of the busiest times of the year. We have countless Christmas parties, mile-long lists of gifts we need to shop for, school performances that just seem to last far too long, church functions, out-of-town relatives visiting, and so much more. If we are, to be honest, in the business of Christmas, we can lose focus on the true beauty of this holiday season. I remember when I was a kid and the excitement I had as I thought of Christmas time; all of my family under the same roof, presents, yummy food, and that beautiful layer of white snow outside my window. Now if I am being honest, I can find myself in moments around Christmas, dreading it. It can lose its wonder in the chaos. My mind begins to race as I think of all that needs to be done, the events that still need to be attended, and the overwhelming urge to outgive my family with the best gifts (am I the only one that is competitive about gift-giving?).

Yet, this is not what God has in mind for us to feel as we celebrate the birth of Jesus. It is supposed to be a season of glad tidings and joy. God became flesh and bone, born in a manger, Emmanuel - God with us. Why can we find ourselves in a panic, instead of feeling zealous joy? I wonder if some of it comes from our priorities during the Christmas season. It can seem like God gets the scraps during the month of December. We get too busy with “this or that” to slow down long enough to spend time reflecting on the beautiful truth

of Christmas. Even worse, we can become too busy with our daily schedule to spend time with Him. Our days become so full from morning to evening that we barely have time to eat lunch, let alone sit down long enough to spend time with our Creator. Time is our greatest currency and it is being fully spent on everything besides our dearest treasure, Jesus. In this busy season, I wonder if what God wants more than anything else from us, is our time. We give time and make space for the things we love. I love playing video games in the evening; I will sacrifice an hour or two of sleep every night just so I can play. The sacrifice is worth the reward. Is the reward of Jesus worth the sacrifice of time?

Every year at Christmas, we hear about the wise men and their gifts of gold, myrrh, and frankincense. However, do we ever think about the gift of their time? How long did the trip take? How long did they stay? The gift of time is all too often overlooked.

I wonder if our dearest form of worship in such a busy time is to slow down enough to spend time with God. In fact, I think the greatest thing we could do in such a busy and overwhelming season, is to spend time with Jesus. I once heard someone say, I try to spend at least an hour with God every morning, but when I have a super busy day, I spend two hours with Him. Instead of God being a task or chore that can be postponed until tomorrow, we sometimes need to remind ourselves that God is our rock, our constant, and in every season we can find refuge in Him and Him alone. Here is what I keep reminding myself of in this busy season, "God is not after my gifts of gold and myrrh, but something much greater - my heart. He desires my full love and devotion to Him, and that involves me making space to spend with him." Make room for Jesus this Christmas, find yourself with Him often, it is far better than anything this world has ever and will ever be able to offer.



OUR RESPONSE TO GOD INCARNATE

WISE MEN, DEVOTION 3

Patrick Bicknell

Have you ever been star-struck before? There was one time in my life when I was particularly star-struck meeting a famous person. I was in the 9th grade traveling with my friend's family to Florida for a cruise vacation that we were going on. Our plane landed at the airport around two in the morning and, as you would expect, I was exhausted. As we were heading to the parking garage where our rental car would be, I saw this massive human being walking in the airport. It was the Big Show from WWE. Some of you may know him, some of you may not, but to me, that was a childhood legend of mine. All I could do was walk up to him and barely mutter out the words, "Can I take a picture with you?"

This is similar to the response that the wise men had when they came to Bethlehem and found God incarnate. The response that they had is told to us in Matthew 2:11, ***"And they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh."***

Their response begs the question, how do we respond to God incarnate? I can imagine the scene in my head. As they entered the house and saw Mary holding the child, out of exceeding, uncontainable joy, they fell on their face and began to worship God incarnate. They had heard the King of the Jews had been born, but I do not think they could have imagined how magnificent seeing the Savior of the world right in front of them could have been. They had no other choice than to fall on their faces and worship Him.

Do we do the same? Every year we read this story around Christmastime because that is what we are supposed to do. I mean, how could we not read about the birth of Jesus at Christmas? However, do we take a moment to respond the way that the wise men did? Do you read the fact that God, in His great love for us, becomes incarnate to dwell with His creation, and fall on your face and worship Him? Even more than just dwelling with His creation, He goes through everything we as humans go through, remains sinless, and dies on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins so that we may have redemption through His blood. We should see that amazing grace as we read the birth of Jesus.

As we again read through the wise men coming and bringing their gifts, we should respond in the way that they responded. We should be moved with unspeakable joy reading about how God became incarnate for us so that we might have redemption of our souls through His finished work. As we read through a story we have read hundreds of times, let us take after what the wise men did, and worship our amazing God.

CityAlight wrote a song entitled, *"What Love, My God."* Their lyrics put this event into perspective for me, and I hope that will lead you to worship God even more.

*What king would take a low and lonely birth?
Yet to this dark and broken place you came
To sleep beneath the stars that you had made.*



DANIEL'S INFLUENCE?

WISE MEN, DEVOTION 4

John Stone

“And after they came into the house, they saw the Child with His mother Mary; and they fell down and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” Matthew 2:11 (NASB)

When we read the story of the birth of Christ and the part played by the wise men, or magi as they are sometimes called, it can be easy to overlook how they came to be in the Christmas story. We can easily read through it and just accept that they saw a star and then showed up to worship Jesus. However, like an incredible work of art, the beauty is in the details.

Over 500 years before Christ, Nebuchadnezzar's army captured Jerusalem and carried off treasure and captives to Babylon. Among these captives was Daniel, one of the best and brightest of the sons of Israel. We may remember him as the one in the lion's den, but God showed immense favor on Daniel and gave him knowledge and wisdom above everyone else. He was promoted by King Nebuchadnezzar to rule Babylon and be the head of all the wise men (Daniel 1-2). Daniel's great faith in God and courage are clearly demonstrated time and again. It is not too much of a stretch to imagine him sharing that faith with those around him; pointing out the hand of the Creator in all the studies of his fellow wise men. Those who believed, he disciplined and instructed them in the fear of the Lord (Psalm 111:10). His faith was passed on. Twenty-one generations later, imagine the excitement that began to build when the prophecies Daniel had taught the wise men of Babylon began to be fulfilled. Then the wonder and overwhelming joy came when the

star that marked the coming of the Messiah showed up in the sky to the west! Everything the world had been waiting for was being fulfilled before their eyes. No wonder when they saw Jesus Christ they fell on their faces and worshiped Him. They knew Him. They had been taught to search for Him until they found Him. Their faith, which had been passed down from generation to generation, had been realized (Romans 1:17).

Who invited you to know Jesus Christ as your Savior? Also, who invited that person? It is a worthy endeavor to try to trace our spiritual lineage. Sometimes it is anonymous, sometimes known, but through all the twists and turns the thread of faith in your life has been guided by the hand of God. Have you ever considered the beautiful tapestry God is creating; the interwoven demonstration of grace and mercy that you are a part of? Throughout history, the threads of people's lives are running around and through each other creating an intricate pattern that only the sovereign Lord of the universe could imagine. Hebrews refers to Him as the author and perfecter of faith, the architect of salvation. It is His design we are woven into and He will see it through until the last thread is tied off.

In the same way that He orchestrated the visit of the wise men, God is carrying out His plan in your life and my life. Like them we need to be faithful to share our knowledge of Jesus Christ; to teach and disciple others to know the Lord and be ready for His coming (Luke 21:28). One day we will get to see the completed tapestry the Lord is weaving and praise Him for His wisdom in the way He brought lives together as faith was woven through history. We will spend eternity tracing the threads but His glory will only grow brighter (Ephesians 1:5-6; 2:7). We should be thankful every day that the Lord brought someone into our life that shared the Gospel and invited us to know Jesus Christ. Now the real question is, "Who will you invite?"



TRUE WORSHIP

WISE MEN, DEVOTION 5

Josh Thayer

“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.” Matthew 2:10-12

What does true worship really look like? Is it something that we can see on the outside or does it only exist inside of us? Here in Matthew chapter 2, we see the wise men, after searching for what historians think is 1-2 years, finding Jesus! After a long journey, they meet Jesus and they fall on their knees and worship Him.

At this point in Jesus' life, He really has not done anything. He was just a child, and yet the wise men worshiped him. Here we get a small glimpse of what true worship really looks like. They decided to worship Jesus for who He is and they were willing to give Him what was valuable to them. Think about it. At this point, it is not like Jesus healed their bodies or forgave them of their sins. Jesus literally did nothing for these wise men and yet they fell on their knees and worshiped Him. They worshiped Him not because of what He did, but because of who He was.

That is true worship. It is when we are not looking to get anything out of it, but the willingness to worship Jesus for who He is. We should not have to be prompted to worship Jesus because of something. We should be willing to worship Him because He deserves it. He puts the

very breath in our lungs every day. He gave us everything we have and everyone around us. The gift is not what He has done, the gift is Him. When we realize that, we can experience true worship. True worship is to say, "Thank you, Jesus, for everything," and not expect anything in return.

The other thing you notice about the wise men is they gave Jesus something of value to them - gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. At this time in history, those gifts were very valuable. What is something valuable to you? I know, for me, one of the most valuable things is time. It is something you can never get back and you get a fixed amount every day. It is very easy for me to fill my time with other things that do not help me grow spiritually. Maybe I do not need to watch one more episode on Netflix and I can choose to read my Bible instead. Maybe I do not need to play video games late into the night and I can do a Bible study. There are many options on how to manage your time. Have you looked at how you manage your time lately?

So, this Christmas, try to bring Jesus true worship every day. Try praying and not asking for anything. Try reading your Bible to learn more about who Jesus was and not simply to check off a task on your to-do list. Try and sing a worship song to God with the intent to give Jesus all the praise and glory He deserves. Try giving Jesus more of your time. That is true worship and that is a gift we can give this Christmas season.

WORSHIP & GIFTS

WISE MEN, DEVOTION 6

Mitchell Holmes

The news of Jesus' birth caused emotions all across the land. For some, the birth of this child meant hope. For others, it meant fear and political unrest. Both are represented in today's passage of Scripture.

Please read Matthew 2:1-12.

King Herod, upon hearing about the birth of Jesus, King of the Jews, was troubled. Herod was paranoid and desperate to keep his seat on the throne. This child, despite being an infant, presented a challenger to his rule. He heard about wise men that were traveling from the East to worship this new King. Herod met with them and tried to trick them into revealing information about Jesus. Specifically, I want you to recognize that Herod's intent here is to find and kill Jesus. He tells the wise men that he wants to worship Jesus, but when he talked to his advisors, he did not care about the details or the significance of Jesus' birth, he only asks his advisors where Jesus will be born (Matthew 2:4). Herod had no intentions of worshiping, he had only the intention of finding out how best to locate, identify, and kill Jesus.

The wise men leave and travel to Bethlehem to see Jesus. Matthew 2:10-11 reads: ***"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."*** A lot of significant things happen in these two verses.

I want us to first recognize that the “star” mentioned in the Scripture is far more significant than a ball of fire in space like we normally think of when considering stars. This was something sent specifically by God that led the wise men and then came to rest above the building that housed the Son of God. We often think of a bright star in a constellation when considering the nativity scene but this was something of far more than a mere star. The Greek word here “aster” is sometimes translated to star but other times, like in Revelation 12:4, it refers to angels. What this star was is not known to us but it was not an ordinary star like the stars we normally think of.

The next thing I want to discuss is the wise men and their worship of the Lord. These men, upon seeing Jesus, fell down and worshiped Him. Jesus is the reason that we are here, it is for His glory that we are given breath. When you are finished reading this devotional, I challenge you to follow the example of the wise men and spend some time in worship. It is too easy to get tied up in the busyness of life and lose sight of what really matters. The wise men, as part of their worship, also presented gifts to the Lord. These gifts were an element of their worship, given gratefully and out of adoration. I believe it is not an accident that these men first fell and worshiped and then gave gifts. John MacArthur on this passage writes, “Giving that is generous but done apart from a loving relationship with God is empty giving.”

I challenge you, as you reflect on this devotional and as you spend time with the Lord, to worship God the way these men did. Every blessing we have comes from God. Every relationship we have cultivated is a gift from God. Every breath we take is a gift from God. Take some time today, and every day, to worship God and thank Him. When we recognize that everything we have is a gift from God, it becomes that much easier to give back to Him with a cheerful and grateful heart.





LESSON FOUR

ANGELS

PASTOR ROY TOWNSEND

COMPANY AT CHRISTMAS

The angel of the Lord appeared and gave direction to Joseph. These were directions that would keep baby Jesus and His mother safe. When the angel showed up as company at Christmas, the angel brought direction for both physical life and eternal life. These directions will keep people safe.

1. Are you good with directions when it comes to driving somewhere? Why or why not?

2. At Christmastime, there are plenty of directions to go around with assembly, gifts, games, and technology. How good are you with directions? Please explain.

3. How good are you at following the doctor's directions? These directions seem important, but often these directions are rejected by the patient. Please explain to the group.

Matthew 2:13-15 reads, ***“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.’”***

Hosea 11:1 reads, ***“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”***

When the wise men had left, the angel appeared to Joseph. These directions were going to save Jesus from King Herod who wanted to eliminate Him as a threat. He gave instructions to head quickly for Egypt. Many commentators reveal that Egypt was close, there were plenty of Jews that lived there, and the gifts from the wise men could help to pay for the trip, but most importantly the directions would save their lives. King Herod was going to kill all baby boys.

Matthew 2:16-18 records, ***“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.’”***

4. Have you ever been given some life-saving directions to give to another person? What was it?

5. Many would argue that as a Christian you have life-saving directions that can be given to your company this Christmas. What are the life-saving directions that you have?



6. Please volunteer to verbally share how you could bring up these life-saving directions.

Matthew 1:18-25 reads, ***“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.”***

In this passage, Joseph was given some very revealing information, but he was also given directions and information. Joseph was told to not be afraid to take Mary as his wife because the baby was a miracle of God through the Holy Spirit, and that he was to name the baby Jesus.

7. Are you comfortable explaining to your company that Jesus is **“God with us?”** What does that mean?

Luke 1:26-38 reads, *“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!’ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’ And Mary said to the angel, ‘How will this be, since I am a virgin?’ And the angel answered her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy - the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.’ And Mary said, ‘Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.’ And the angel departed from her.”*



COMPANY AT CHRISTMAS

8. Mary was afraid, blessed, humble, and received great news. Have you ever seen your company feel afraid, blessed, or humbled when sharing God's directions for salvation? Please explain.

9. What does the name Jesus mean?

10. Please pray about the company that we will keep this Christmas season. Please ask the Holy Spirit to direct you on giving directions to others.

To miss what we should bring this Christmas is a huge mistake. What will you bring this Christmas season? As the shepherds brought comfort, so can we. As Simeon brought the truth, so can we. As the wise men brought worship and gifts, so can we. As the angels brought direction, so can we.



SOCKS & UNDERWEAR AGAIN?

ANGELS, DEVOTION 1

Joanna Montgomery

Christmas is a wonderful time of giving and receiving gifts. Have you ever received a gift you needed, but really did not want? When I was a child, every Christmas I knew what I would be getting from my grandma, socks and underwear. Ugh! Each year I thought, “Maybe this year she will get me a doll or a board game!” However, every year, I would unwrap a gift containing five pairs of white knee socks and seven pairs of underwear. There was nothing fancy about them. I would never have picked them. Yet, they were always the right size and I really did need them. Looking back, I know my grandma gave me something I needed because she loved me. At the time, I did not think about how much I needed her gift, but what I needed was more important than what I wanted.

Joseph was given a gift his family needed, but in a sense, they probably did not want it. In Matthew 2:13-15, Joseph was visited in a dream by an angel of God. The angel told Joseph, ***“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.’”***

Although this gift of direction was definitely something they needed, I am sure the last thing Mary and Joseph wanted to do was to pack up their things in the middle of the night, take their baby boy, and run to Egypt just as fast as they could go. I wonder if Joseph thought, “Oh man, we just got Jesus back to sleep, Mary is exhausted, and Egypt?”

Really? Maybe we could wait until morning.” Instead of focusing on the inconvenience, Joseph was obedient to the gift of direction provided by the angel’s warning. The gift provided them with safety, with the life of their child, Jesus, and with their eternal lives.

The gift of direction was not as tangible or ornate as the gifts brought to the baby by the wise men, but was, perhaps, even more precious. The angel provided direction, and Joseph was obedient and thankful. Are we thankful and obedient in following God’s direction? Do we even take time to know what God’s direction is?

When we lean and trust in Jesus as our Savior, choose to follow Him, and allow Him to direct our paths, God provides us the gift of direction, just as He did for Joseph. Our gift of direction is the Bible. The Bible is a map to follow, it is the path to our hope, our eternal life, our peace, and our comfort. The Bible will lead us in (and to) God’s direction. Proverbs 3:6 states, ***“In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.”***

The Bible is one of the greatest gifts ever given. If we read the Bible daily, it reveals the direction everyone needs, but we must be careful not to take it for granted. Do we treasure the Bible, or do we wish we would receive a more “fun” gift? Maybe instead of reading the Bible, you read your horoscope to see what the “stars” say you should do. Or perhaps you just trust your gut and do what feels right. These “fun” gifts cannot lead us to real joy, peace, comfort, or eternal life. Instead, they are a path away from God’s plan for our life. Only God’s gift of the Bible will guide and direct us to the right path. Are we utilizing this gift? Are we reading the Bible? The Bible is the perfect size, the perfect fit, and the perfect answer to meet every need.

Now that I am older, I find my favorite gifts are things I really need. God provides the gifts we need. Our Savior, Jesus, is the best gift



COMPANY AT CHRISTMAS

God has ever given. The gift of the Bible provides direction to find life and know what God wants us to do, just like the angel's gift provided direction to Joseph.



ANGELS: THE SERVANTS OF GOD

ANGELS, DEVOTION 2

William Kinney

I have often wondered what it would be like to get a message from an angel; would it be in a dream, in direct conversation, or perhaps in the form of signs? How would I react if an angel approached me? Would I know it was an angel from God?

As I have pondered these questions, I thought about the birth of Jesus Christ and how the angels of the Lord directed and guarded Joseph, Mary, and the newly birthed Jesus. When we look at Mathew 2:13, ***“an angel of the Lord”*** appeared to Joseph in a dream, telling him to uproot his family immediately and escape into the land of Egypt and remain there until the angel returned because Herod is looking to destroy young Jesus.

I want to pause here for a moment to take a deeper look at the angel who warned Joseph and Joseph's response. The angel appeared to Joseph in the middle of the night, and I believe Joseph immediately shot up out of bed right after the dream ended. I do not know about you, but when I wake up in the middle of the night, I am groggy, disoriented, and downright “not all there.” Imagine being woken up by an angel having to groggily wake up your spouse and explain to them what just happened (and hope they believe you), then wake up a newborn baby (who does not dread that?), and then pack up all your belongings to travel almost 100 miles, by foot! Talk about utmost faith!

Joseph and Mary had faith that God sent that angel to guide and protect them, and more importantly, protect Jesus so He could save the world from sin and death. However, Joseph and Mary (as

humans) did not ultimately know Jesus as the Messiah yet; they were only led by the faith of what the angel in Matthew 1:21 said, ***“For He will save His people from their sins.”***

We need to realize that angels are messengers of God, and He places them in our life to protect and lead us to God’s purpose for our life. We need to have utmost faith, like Joseph, that God will provide us with messages from angels that will guide us to God’s purpose and plan for our lives.

What does that practically look like in our lives? We are called to have faith like Joseph and Mary, to trudge through the struggles of this life, and receive God’s calling in our life with a cheerful heart, no matter where or what God calls us to do. When an angel of the Lord appears to you, are you ready to hear what he has to say? Are you preparing yourself by reading the Bible daily to discern what God is trying to tell you? Most importantly, have you accepted into your heart that Jesus Christ died on the cross for your sins, was buried, and was resurrected? That is the only way to know God’s perfect plan for your life!

GPS ANGEL

ANGELS, DEVOTION 3

Jeannie Yates

Have you ever had difficulty communicating directions? Or maybe, you have been the one on the receiving end of some poor directions, especially in the early days of GPS devices! All too many times, I remember hearing a kind British voice say, “Turn around when possible; you are going the wrong way!”

I often think of angels as messengers that bring good news, but in Matthew chapter 2, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream to deliver important directions. These directions were clear and concise saying, ***“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”*** (Matthew 2:13). Just three easy steps: get everyone up, flee to Egypt, and stay there. Although I am pretty sure that it was anything but easy.

If only I would respond more like Joseph responded to the angel and follow directions right away. Joseph did not even hesitate. In Matthew 2:14, it says, ***“He rose and took the child and his mother by night.”*** He left while it was still night. Joseph could have made excuses. Maybe the donkey needed more sleep or he had not yet had his morning coffee; but instead, he heard the message from the Lord and he obeyed. You might be thinking, “Of course he obeyed right away; an amazing, celestial being appeared to him with a message directly from God!” I cannot tell you how many times I have asked God to just spell it out for me and give me step-by-step “GPS directions” for life. I too easily forget about the clear and concise directions that God has given to me, given to us: His Word. The Psalmist reminds us that God’s Word is ***“a lamp to my feet and a light to my path”*** (Psalm 119:105).

What hinders us from following God's directions? Are we waiting for a flashing sign or maybe even an angel to come and tell us what to do? Jesus, the only Son of God, came in human form, dwelt among us, and lived out an example of how we should live. What a gift we have to not only have His Word but also the Holy Spirit. We were not left in the dark. In John 16:13, Jesus says, ***"When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth."*** We have not only been given a map, but God also gave us a guide. Now the choice is ours. As you think about the directions that the angel gave Joseph, ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in the truth through His Word. Are you listening for His voice? Are you willing to follow?

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." John 10:27

DIFFICULT DECISIONS

ANGELS, DEVOTION 4

Philip Piasecki

Christmastime is one of the best times of the year. There is nothing like all the family gatherings, parties with friends, and celebrations with the church during that season. I always thought Christmas was special, but it became even more special once I had kids. The look and joy on their faces opening up presents on Christmas morning are unlike anything else. However, the one part they do not warn you about in parenting class is the dread that comes along with assembling presents. We bought my daughter one of those wooden kid's kitchens one year; and I swear, I almost had to just throw the whole thing away piece-by-piece. The directions did not make any sense, but I knew if I did not follow them, that kitchen would probably fall over on her when she finally started playing with it. I had to follow the directions so she would be safe and get to enjoy her gift.

Matthew 2:13-15 records, ***“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.’”***

Directions are there to keep us safe, even when we do not understand them. I cannot imagine what Mary and Joseph were thinking when the angel showed up telling them to flee to Egypt. We have to understand that at this point Jesus is around two years old. Mary and Joseph are dealing with a two-year-old, and they are told to uproot

their life and flee to another country. This was not just taking their family down the road, this was a major life disruption. However, they obeyed because they knew it was for the safety of their son.

We need to be honest with ourselves, following the direction of Scripture is not always easy. Many times doing the right thing can be more difficult at the moment, but we understand that it is for our own good. Even though at the moment, disregarding God's commands (sin) may seem easier, it will always make more of a mess in our life in the end. God loves and cares for us, and that is why He gives us commands in Scripture. It is not to bind us to some law, but to give us true freedom.

I am sure the time that Mary and Joseph were with Jesus in Egypt was not always a fun season of their life, but they knew that in the end, it would all be worth it. We have to understand in our own lives, that following the Lord is always worth it in the end. You may lose a relationship, lose a job, or lose out on your own desires when you follow the truth of Scripture. However, we know that in the end honoring the Lord and doing what is right is better than anything else this world has to offer us.

THE DIRECTION OF OTHERS

ANGELS, DEVOTION 5

Ferdinand Sanders

“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.’” Matthew 2:13-15

If there is one thing that truly makes it a holiday, it is getting together with the family. Whether it is across the country or across the street, there is just something unique when you have people from different generations, all with diverse interests, crammed under one roof. If there is one thing that is always heightened when the family all gets together, it is those generational differences! Though they genuinely love and care for each other, most of the time one generation has no clue what the other is even talking about, and vice versa! One thing that seems to separate the older generation from the younger is a “sense of direction.” I have always been intrigued with the fascination of questioning “which route I took,” which is inevitably followed by which route I should have or could have taken. (Seriously, who gives more thought than just throwing the address into the GPS and following the prompts!?) How many times do we see the younger generation reject or push away direction because, of course, “They are misunderstood and know better.” In the story of Jesus’ birth, we see an angel of the Lord appear to Joseph in a dream to give direction both in a literal sense and also for his protection.

I promise you this, we simply do not give Joseph enough credit. Yes, I know Jesus is the biggest and main character of all time, but put yourself in Joseph's shoes (sandals) for a second. Life is seemingly going well when all of a sudden angels are manifesting themselves in your dreams to inform you that:

1. Your significant other/wife, Mary, is with Child (and you are not the father).
2. You are to raise the child that will end up becoming the Savior of the world.
3. King Herod is plotting to destroy (kill) anything that poses a "threat" to his rule.

I cannot imagine exactly what Joseph was going through mentally and emotionally, but as a fellow guy, I can imagine it came with a lot of doubts, questions, fear, and anxiety.

The angel in this story is no more than just the messenger. He is not the originator of the plans and is not able to provide any additional context or information. I do find it humorous that these interactions take place in dreams, where dialogue is not a thing! Joseph cannot talk back or ask any clarifying questions. I do not know about you, but that is not typically how I would prefer these kinds of life-impacting conversations to go! Joseph is a great example of putting our humanity aside - our doubts, fears, preferences, anxieties - and putting faith in God's sovereign plan. Though maybe it seems that he did not have much of a choice in the matter, he heard the direction given to him and chose to listen and follow it. Does God still send messages and use messengers in the same exact way today? Maybe? I am not sure. I do, however, believe that God uses those around us to help support, encourage, guide, and ultimately "direct" us on our journey.



“Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.” Proverbs 11:14



GPS

ANGELS, DEVOTION 6

Sierra Combs

If you know me well, you certainly know that I do not like to drive. I also do not like being the navigator. Prior to iPhones and GPS, putting me in this position was absolutely useless, if not detrimental. Even with the technology, I am more than likely going to get distracted and forget to tell you where to turn. I have always wanted to go on “The Amazing Race” but my terrible sense of direction would disqualify me from the get-go. If it is up to me, I will get lost. If only someone else could take the wheel and navigate and just give me a bag of candy, a pop, and let me know when we get there. Would it not be so nice if life were like that? Unfortunately for me, that is not how it works. I cannot just coast along and end up in the right place. Fortunately though, as a child of God, He does provide direction and He is certainly more reliable than an early 2000’s Mapquest (obviously). Actually, when you listen, you will find that His navigation system will lead you to the right place every single time.

As we spend the season studying the Christmas story, you may have noticed a time when God very literally directed Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus. Matthew 2:13-15 tells us, ***“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.’”*** This is pretty straightforward navigation. God used an angel to tell them exactly what they needed to do, where they needed to go, and why they needed to do it. If it could only be that easy for us, right? Even

though we may not be led in the same literal and obvious way, God still directs our paths today in a very real way. The ways He chooses to guide us are not limited, but what matters most is that we listen and obey.

The most obvious way the Lord directs us is through His Word which was written down and bound into a book we call the Bible. We call it His Word because it is, in fact, His words! In 2 Timothy 3:16-17, we read, ***“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”*** Psalm 119:105 says that His word ***“is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”*** God has given us clear direction in His Word. Are you opening it up and hearing what He has to say? Are you listening; are you obeying? His word is evergreen and it is sufficient. If you listen, He will guide you.

The Lord has also so wondrously given His children the gift of the Holy Spirit. When we are born again, the Spirit of God comes to live inside of us. He will never leave us and will comfort, teach, and direct us if we let Him. As we give up control of our lives to God and walk in step with His Spirit, He will convict us of our sin, give us wisdom, and guide us in the way we should go. When we make it a priority to read and memorize Scripture, He will bring just what we need to our minds when we need it. He then leaves it up to us to choose to obey. While it is not always easy, His direction is always accurate and always for our good. His way is the best way!





OUR MISSION

Matthew 28:19-20: ***“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”***

REACH

At The River Church, you will often hear the phrase, “we don’t go to church, we are the Church.” We believe that as God’s people, our primary purpose and goal is to go out and make disciples of Jesus Christ. We encourage you to reach the world in your local communities.

GATHER

Weekend Gatherings at The River Church are all about Jesus, through singing, giving, serving, baptizing, taking the Lord’s Supper, and participating in messages that are all about Jesus and bringing glory to Him. We know that when followers of Christ gather together in unity, it’s not only a refresher it’s bringing life-change.

GROW

Our Growth Communities are designed to mirror the early church in Acts as having ***“all things in common.”*** They are smaller collections of believers who spend time together studying the Word, knowing and caring for one another relationally, and learning to increase their commitment to Christ by holding one another accountable.

The River Church
8393 E. Holly Rd. Holly, MI 48442
theriverchurch.cc • info@theriverchurch.cc

