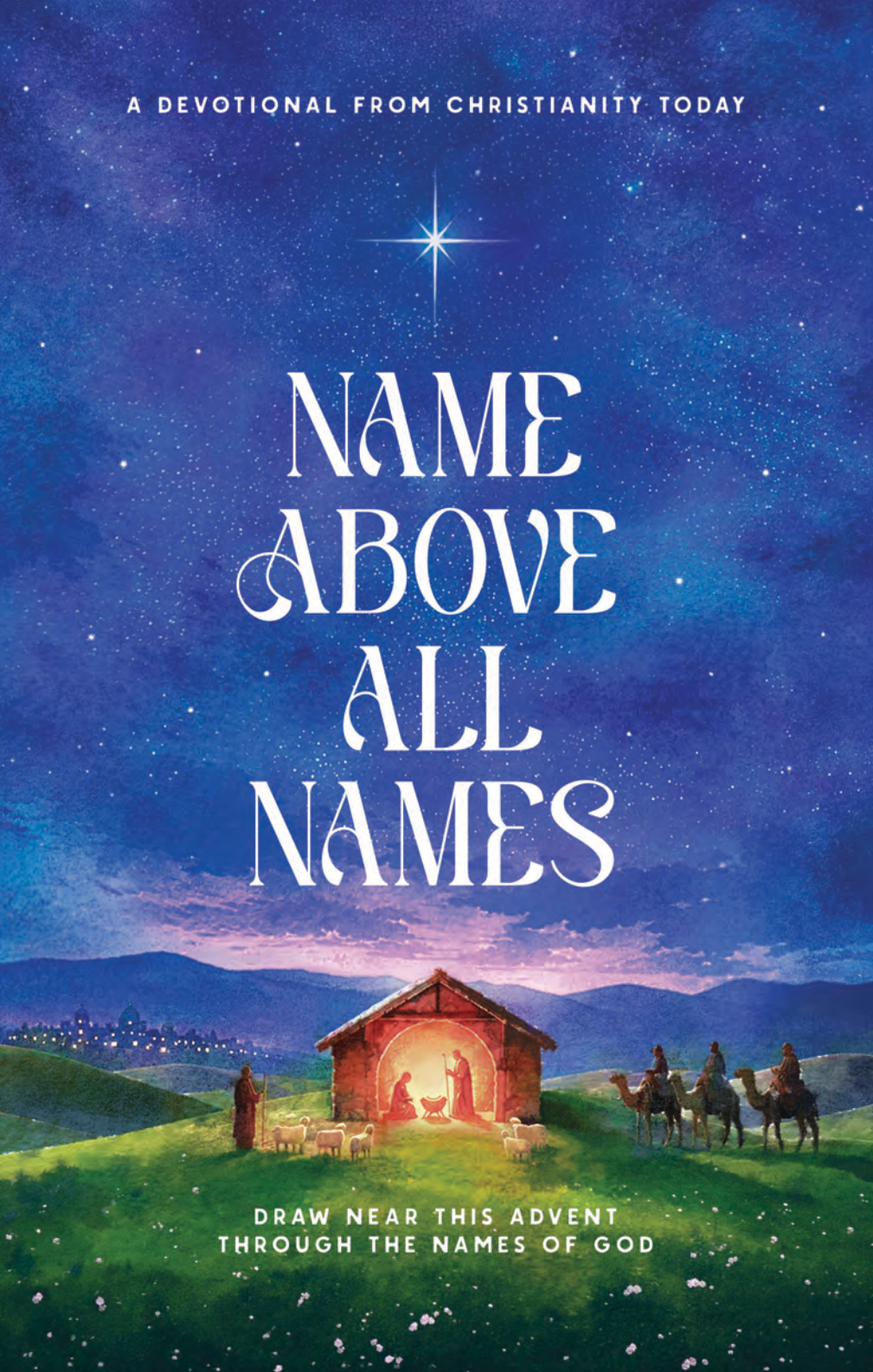
A DEVOTIONAL FROM CHRISTIANITY TODAY

NAME ABOVE ALL NAMES



DRAW NEAR THIS ADVENT
THROUGH THE NAMES OF GOD

NAME ABOVE ALL NAMES

CHRISTIANITY TODAY

NAME ABOVE ALL NAMES
Draw near this Advent through the names of God

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God Loves Us

INTRODUCTION

What's in a Name?

MONTY WALDRON

Four times my wife and I sat together in a delivery room, gazing into the face of a new Waldron baby. What a moment! A first breath, first tears, fidgeting in wide open spaces after nine months in the womb. And now for a name. Their surname was a given, but what would we call them?

It's not like you can swap a name out a week later. It goes on the birth certificate and follows that son or daughter throughout their life. As a result, parents typically name their children with intentionality. It is a way of passing on familial memory, signaling hope for a child's future, and instilling in them a sense of belonging.

More often than not, names hold a lot of significance. From the earliest moments of creation, titles were given by God to all that was made: light, darkness, earth, and seas. The first man—Adam—was called upon to name the animals, preparing him for the gift of one like him, bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh. Adam called her "woman" because she was "'taken out of man'" (Gen. 2:23). Then, together, they named their children—Abel, Cain, Seth—awestruck by the bundle of potential they held, just like my wife and I in the delivery room millennia later.

So, what is the name of the one who spoke all things into existence? And what does it tell us about our maker's makeup—identity, attributes, will, and ways?

It turns out, our Creator disclosed many names, each revealing a facet of glory that he alone possesses. Altogether, they allow us to gain glimpses of his heartfelt desire to be

seen, worshiped, and loved. In response to his revelation, not long after the biblical story was underway, we're told, "people began to call on the name of the Lord" (Gen. 4:26). For them, the name of God and the person of God were indistinguishable.

To call upon the name was to reach in faith for the presence of God, who introduced himself in a surprisingly personal way. Despite the incomprehensible grandeur of all that our creator is, he tells his people, You can call me YHWH, the most common Hebrew name used for him in the Old Testament. Interestingly enough, Jewish people refused to utter this name in its original form out of reverence, a practice that can obscure the intimacy God seemed to be offering.

If we consider the many ways God has revealed himself through the vast array of names contained in Scripture, we discover that he is intensely personal, availing himself in all the aspects of life where we are most needy and vulnerable. He is our provider and healer, along with being the way, the truth, and the life (just a few of his many titles).

Throughout the coming weeks of Advent, you are invited to sit and reflect upon who our God has revealed himself to be, culminating in the one who "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). May your time spent with this devotional prompt you to join believers throughout history who have humbly and confidently called upon the name of the Lord and put their trust in him (Ps. 9:10). ■

THE LORD IS A REFUGE
FOR THE OPPRESSED,
A STRONGHOLD IN TIMES
OF TROUBLE. THOSE
WHO KNOW YOUR
NAME TRUST IN YOU,
FOR YOU, LORD, HAVE
NEVER FORSAKEN
THOSE WHO SEEK YOU.

PSALM 9:9-10

WEEK

1

God Made Us



WI | DI

Elohim

CREATOR GOD

KELLI PETRIK



My husband and I recently road-tripped through Zion National Park in Utah, and it was absolutely breathtaking. The beautiful canyons and massive rock formations were so overwhelming that I could hardly process it all. I took a few photos through the car window, hoping to remember the experience, but they could not capture the magnitude of what my senses were taking in.

After we left the park, I eventually dozed off, leaving my husband to drive in silence. About an hour later, the crunch of gravel under the tires woke me. We'd arrived at another geological site, but this time, we had to leave the car and hike to an overlook. Shaking off my sleepiness, I pulled on my coat and sluggishly stepped onto the path.

As we crested the hill, Bryce Canyon came into view. I stood wide-eyed and suddenly very awake. Thousands of fiery orange, deep red, and white stone spires, or "hoodoos," sprawled out below me. The sunlit, spire-filled canyon was surrounded by plunging rock cliffs and dark green forest. I was speechless, and so were the other onlookers. The atmosphere was somber and reverent; we whispered and moved slowly, with quiet intentionality, across the overlook.

Were we all feeling the same thing? I was in awe and so thankful to experience this incredible work of art, a truly unexpected gift.

Over the next few months, I did some research. I discovered that a series of spectacular events combined to form the beauty of Bryce Canyon. Years of various rock sediments piled up to produce vibrant colors and

striped patterns. Tectonic plate movement forced the earth upward by 9,000 feet, creating the massive plateau and plunging canyon. Finally, continuous weathering from rain, wind, and frost carved the remaining rock pillars into intricate fins and iconic hoodoos. And to think, the masterpiece I witnessed was set in motion by a single breath (Gen. 1–2), carried along by the Creator's masterful design, and gifted to me on the day I stood at its rim as a reflection of his glory.

Imagine God creating the heavens and earth. He suspended the sun, moon, and stars in every galaxy—not one existing before and none of them alike. Land and sea emerged from the void. God set light apart from darkness. Seasons from timelessness. Fruit and vegetation from barrenness. All creatures great and small from lifelessness. Everything was perfectly designed and effortlessly crafted by Elohim, our Mighty Creator.

Now, imagine Elohim creating you and me. Ephesians 2:10 (NLT) calls us God's "masterpiece"—beautifully designed by his hand, just like Bryce Canyon. While that truth alone is awe-inspiring, God's intention in our conception goes even deeper. Unlike the rest of creation, we are made in his image (Gen. 1:26), designed to mirror the glory of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and ordained to walk in the good works he prepared for us. Breathed into existence out of divine relationship and love, we are made and empowered through Jesus to show His love to the world.

Like walking right into the surprise beauty of Bryce Canyon, I hope we can step into a hurting world this Advent and surprise someone with the magnificent gift of Jesus' love. ■

THE MASTERPIECE I WITNESSED WAS SET IN MOTION BY A SINGLE BREATH, CARRIED ALONG BY THE CREATOR'S MASTERFUL DESIGN.

WI | D2

Yahweh

I AM WHO I AM

DELANEY BAKER



Long before the angels and shepherds of the first century inspired our Nativity scenes, the angel of the Lord appeared to another shepherd in the wilderness. And, like the birth of Jesus, Exodus 2 and 3 recount God drawing near to his people with a message of hope.

God heard and saw the Israelites enslaved in Egypt. Being faithful to his covenant and sympathetic to their suffering, he descended to Mount Horeb to bring good news of deliverance through an unlikely ambassador: Moses. When his message was met with brokenness and self-doubt, as it often is, God was glad to offer reminders and revelations of who he is. "'I am the God of your father'" (3:6), he says to Moses, "'I Am who I Am'" (v. 14), and "'I will be with you'" (v. 12). This reassurance of his nature and character gave Moses confidence to serve in the promise of God's presence. It is comforting to know that when we walk in the will of God we do not walk in our own power and authority.

In saying "'I am the God of your father" (3:6) and "I will be with you'" (v. 12), God reveals his willingness and desire to be known for his nature, his works, his word, and the testimony of his people. God emphatically declares that he is a covenant maker and keeper, a deliverer, holy, and sufficient. The creator of the universe, all-powerful and enthroned in heaven, makes himself accessible to Moses and the Israelites.

God continued offering reminders and revelations of his nature and character hundreds of years later: He had not changed and his mission was still the same. When an

angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds in Luke 2, it came bearing "'good news that will cause great joy'" (v. 10). It arrived accompanied by a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, for he was again drawing near to his people to provide deliverance. This time from slavery to sin, and this time through another unlikely ambassador, a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes.

Jesus entire ministry was a revelation of who he is. He forgave sins, he gave sight to the blind, and he even raised the dead; these all offer us confidence in the new covenant he established with his people, a covenant of grace. His life gives us reassurance of his presence, and because of his accomplishments on the cross, we have access to the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

I'm thankful the great I Am is still at work. It is good news for me personally, as God's deliverance isn't just from the power of sin but also from its consequence, death. I have faith in the future, final, and full restoration to the presence of God when he draws near again to finally put an end to our suffering. I have reassurance from a trustworthy God that my hope in the promised resurrection, my hope for eternal, abundant life, is well-placed because he is who he is. ■

GOD EMPHATICALLY
DECLARES THAT
HE IS A COVENANT
MAKER AND KEEPER,
A DELIVERER, HOLY,
AND SUFFICIENT.

WI | D3

El Elyon

GOD MOST HIGH

JIM TAYLOR



Something in us wants to ascend. It isn't wrong to want to be exalted. We were made to rule (Gen. 1:26–28). But sin begins when creatures reach for a height that belongs only to God.

That is why the name El Elyon matters. It means "God Most High." It is a name of supremacy. God is not merely high, he is the highest—the Creator of all. He is not one power among many, one ruler among other rulers, or one being competing for the throne. He is above all.

Some lesser beings desire a height that belongs only to the Most High. Isaiah 14 gives voice to this ancient pride: "'I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne above the stars of God . . . I will make myself like the Most High'" (vv. 13–14). This is the heart of rebellion: seeking to take God's place.

When Satan tempted Jesus, he showed Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world" and said, "'All this I will give you . . . if you will bow down and worship me'" (Matt. 4:8–9). In exchange, he wanted the Son of God to bow before him. But that act would have elevated Satan to be the most high.

Jesus refused. "'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only'" (Matt. 4:10). The Son would inherit the nations but not by worshiping a false most high. He would reclaim them by becoming low.

This is the wonder of Christmas: The Most High became the lowest.

The one exalted above all gods was laid in a manger. He was rich, but he became poor. The Lord of glory wrapped a towel around his waist and washed filth from his disciples' feet (John 13). The eternal Son was "*despised and*

rejected," "pierced for our transgressions", and "crushed for our iniquities" (Isa. 53:3, 5). "He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8).

He did this so that we might become like him again. "Now we are children of God," John writes, "and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him" (1 John 3:2).

Children resemble their families. They learn the family likeness. They grow into the image they were made to bear. And Jesus shows us what that likeness looks like. He stooped. He descended. He did not grasp onto status. He stepped into a world of pain and willingly took it upon himself. He became poor so we could become rich. He became low so we could be lifted up. He became like us so that we might become like him again.

This Advent season, here is what I remember: I do not have to spend my life climbing. I do not have to grasp for control, defend my little kingdom, or prove my worth by positioning myself above someone else. El Elyon is God Most High. That throne is eternally occupied. ■

HE IS NOT ONE
POWER AMONG MANY,
ONE RULER AMONG
OTHER RULERS, OR
ONE BEING COMPETING
FOR THE THRONE.
HE IS ABOVE ALL.

WI | D4

El Qanna

THE JEALOUS GOD

JOHN JAY ALVARO

My father knows El Qanna, the Jealous God. Right before my birth, El Qanna grabbed my dad by the collar and shook him awake.

My father grew up in an abusive orphanage, having been rejected by fiercely racist (and fiercely poor) Appalachian grandparents for being too brown-skinned. A mixed-race Pacific Islander born into a broken home, the second of five kids, whip-smart and naturally charming, he grew up under harsh conditions. All metrics pointed toward his generational trauma passing to his own children in a cycle of despair.

And yet, I am the firstborn son of a new story, one in which blessings abound where curses once hung heavy.

While I swam in my mother's womb, my dad made a commitment directly to God and indirectly to his growing family. He would forsake all other ways and walk only in the light of God's love. He bowed before El Qanna, the Jealous God, and promised fidelity and faithfulness. He had known about God already and, years before, had prayed for Jesus to save him. But Sunday School can only bring a child so far; El Qanna's expectations are fierce, passionate, all-consuming. This divine passion is both warning and invitation. For those who are brought into covenant with El Qanna, intense expectations are held in tension by overwhelming goodness. This can go very poorly or very well.

El Qanna is both a proper name ("Jealous God") and descriptive (God is experienced as jealous, zealous, and ardent in his love). The first usage of El Qanna in the Bible is in Exodus 20:2–6, a section of Torah containing the Ten Commandments. They begin with warnings

against idol worship and include El Qanna's demands for singular faithfulness.

I am YHWH your God.
Don't bring some other god into this relationship.
Don't even bring a picture or a trinket
from another god into this relationship!
Don't lay your body before some other god;
don't serve another god.
I am YHWH your God—El Qanna.
The sins of the father I will lay on his kids
and grandkids and great-grandkids for those
who hate me. But to the ones who love me
and watch over my instructions, I will show
them love and kindness, for them and for
their kin for as long as you can imagine!

My dad experienced the fierce consequences of his ancestors' failure to keep faith with the living God. He was among the generations haunted by the sins of their fathers. He also saw another side to El Qanna, an abundance of promised love and protection. By placing his life, and thereby his family's future, under the protection of El Qanna, he broke an ancestral curse. El Qanna no longer stood over our family as a warning. Now the Jealous God was the protection around our home, the fire that warmed our affections, the love that helped our family weather many storms.

Every time I look at my own children, every time I count their blessings until I run out of breath, I feel surrounded by El Qanna, whose fierce love has held us for so long. ■

NOW THE JEALOUS GOD WAS THE PROTECTION AROUND OUR HOME, THE FIRE THAT WARMED OUR AFFECTIONS, THE LOVE THAT HELPED OUR FAMILY WEATHER MANY STORMS.

WI | D5

El Roi

THE GOD WHO SEES

JUDY LEWIS



Nothing has shaped my apprenticeship to Jesus quite like waiting. Decades of unwanted singleness have perhaps shaped me more than anything else. I have found that waiting, along with suffering and silence, is among God's most effective means in forming Christlikeness. All three persistently surface some of life's biggest questions: Does God see me? Is he out to do me good? Do my desires matter to him?

Many days, I remember wrestling with those questions in quiet despair. The silence echoed. Yet somehow, in those barren moments, a hushed reminder came: Hagar knew these questions intimately. Though our stories were worlds apart, God's name and gaze also found me.

Abandoned and betrayed, Abraham's concubine caught sight of the living God, El Roi: "'I have now seen the One who sees me'" (Gen. 16:13). The only person in the Scriptures to name God, she didn't just proclaim "he sees" but "he sees *me*." The mutuality of that gaze is astonishingly intimate.

Most eye-to-eye encounters recorded in Scripture detail the creature on their face before the Lord. The Creator shielded Moses with his hand as the prophet set eyes on God's back (Ex. 33:22). The disciples famously fell on their faces in utter overwhelm (Matt. 17:6). Paul was blind for three days following his encounter with Jesus (Acts 9:9). And the apostle John collapsed as dead in Revelation (1:17). On each occasion, eyes were averted or covered.

But not Hagar's. "'No one may see me and live,'" God himself says in Exodus 33:20. And yet he seems

to have made an exception for the refugee woman. She seems to behold him beholding her. "If we live in beholding we continually live in a new creation," says author Maggie Ross.

The God who sees Hagar, and me, invites resurrection life, particularly in seasons of waiting. Each Advent, we join the church universal in remembering the liminal, or threshold, space between the first and second comings of Christ.

We ache and we groan. And God welcomes us to practice again the gift and grit of waiting. Each year, we're mercifully invited to ask the big questions and occupy the generous space that is necessary to wrestle them to the ground again.

In Genesis 32, Jacob took God up on the struggle to be reborn and renamed. He, like Hagar, beheld God, was brought to silence, and emerged a limping, albeit new, creation. Jacob renamed the land Peniel "'because I saw God face to face'" (v. 30).

When waiting feels stagnant, we can be assured that meeting God's gaze always creates something new. Like the work of seeds and yeast, slowly but surely, in the dark and hidden places where we feel unseen and unknown, Holy Saturday always births Resurrection Sunday.

There it is again, the gift and grit of waiting. Advent silence invites us to die and become new, even expanded to hold more hope. Find yourself in the waiting story today.

Behold him as he beholds you. ■

LIKE THE WORK
OF SEEDS AND YEAST,
SLOWLY BUT SURELY,
IN THE DARK AND
HIDDEN PLACES WHERE
WE FEEL UNSEEN AND
UNKNOWN, HOLY
SATURDAY ALWAYS
BIRTHS RESURRECTION
SUNDAY.

WI | D6

Jehovah Jireh

THE LORD WILL PROVIDE

CARRIE HENRY

I've been learning a lot about loss and grief in recent days. Empty spaces. Quiet rooms. Familiar traditions that now feel different. Memories that surface without warning. A deep sorrow for moments that will never come again.

Advent meets us in the tension of hope and sorrow, of darkness and light. It does not deny sorrow, it gently reminds us that sorrow is not the story's end. My belief that joy will triumph over sorrow is tied to one of God's most comforting names, Jehovah Jireh—"The Lord Will Provide."

This name first appears in Genesis 22 during a profound moment of testing in Abraham's life. God asked Abraham to trust him completely, without understanding the path ahead. As Abraham walked up Mt. Moriah with Isaac, he carried both obedience and anguish. No father could fully understand God's command for Abraham to sacrifice his own son. Yet Abraham trusted the character of God instead of his own reasoning.

At just the right moment, God provided a ram to be sacrificed instead of Isaac. And Abraham named that place Jehovah Jireh,"The Lord Will Provide."

This name reveals more than God's ability to supply material needs. It reveals the loving, attentive heart of the Father who sees the way ahead and prepares provision for his children even before they recognize their need. He is not rushed by anxiety nor delayed by our need. Jehovah Jireh means God's provision is perfectly timed and revealed according to his perfect wisdom.

There are seasons when we wonder how things will

come together. We question whether God truly sees our circumstances. Yet Jehovah Jireh reminds us that the provision we most need is rooted not in our situation but in God's unchanging character.

In a three-year span, I gently carried the grief of losing my father, my father-in-law, and my mother-in-law. My daughter's family moved over two thousand miles away for seminary. In addition, I became an empty nester and, after two decades, left a formative women's ministry leadership role.

Each of these experiences involved significant loss. Grief marked the value of what had been. And even while trusting the fruitfulness of what comes next, it was right to grieve—to grieve with hope (1 Thess. 4:13).

That is often how God provides: Not only in visible ways, but in the hidden places of the heart. He provides strength for weary souls, wisdom for tough decisions, comfort in sorrow, and grace for weakness. Sometimes what we need most is not a change in circumstance but assurance that God is present in the middle of it. Jehovah Jireh provides not only solutions but his sustaining peace.

Genesis 22 points us to God's greatest provision. Just as he supplied a substitute for Isaac and Abraham, he provided salvation for us through Jesus Christ. The incarnation stands as the clearest evidence that God sees humanity's deepest need and responds with redemption, mercy, provision, and hope.

Jehovah Jireh invites us to live with open hands and surrendered hearts because faith does not require our full understanding of God's ways, it only requires trust in him when we cannot yet see his plan. ■

ADVENT MEETS US IN THE TENSION OF HOPE AND SORROW, OF DARKNESS AND LIGHT. IT DOES NOT DENY SORROW, IT GENTLY REMINDS US THAT SORROW IS NOT THE STORY'S END.

WI | D7

Jehovah Rapha

THE LORD WHO HEALS

BRIAN BOECKER



Imagine you have dropped into the crowded street depicted in Luke 8 and the healing of the hemorrhaging woman. What would your conversation be like with the "One who heals"?

Me: Hey, Rapha. Got a minute?

Jehovah Rapha: Always. What do you need?

Me: This healing thing—it always wrecks me. I just watched you heal the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years. The crowd, the noise, the immediate and physical cessation of pain. And then the word that took my breath away: "daughter."

Not unclean. Not unwanted. Not outcast. You wanted everyone to hear: *"You are mine!"*

Jehovah Rapha: I feel like there's a "but" coming.

Me: It probably is a "but." I wish it was an "and."

Jehovah Rapha: And what?

Me: I've got questions. I don't get the waiting thing. Why 12 years of suffering? And all the money spent—resources depleted, cast out from her community. If I'm honest, it really makes me mad. It just doesn't make any sense. Why did you allow such a long, unending barrage of futility?

Jehovah Rapha: Take a breath . . . a deep one . . . now tell me more.

Me: There is just so much pain and suffering around me and in me. I deeply resonate with the futility of those 12 years—she begged for answers, she poured out her resources, only to hit a dead end. Nada! How did that accomplish any good? I don't understand how you can just sit by for that long? Get up and get in there sooner!

Jehovah Rapha: I hear a lot of ache there. A lot of pain.

Me: Yeah. It is hard to handle it all. I can barely sit still. I just want to get away from it—numb out or distract myself. It feels like this tension will end me.

I don't get all the waiting, the slowness, and the suffering, and really struggle to also hold the wonder and mystery of healing. I don't know how to hold the ache and the awe. And to be honest—the ache seems more like a clanging alarm going off in my head.

Jehovah Rapha: You know that ache? That's me. In you.

That's you longing and aching for what I long and ache and wait for: wholeness. Restoration. The knitting back together of that which was torn asunder. The desire to see all that is fragmented and broken be made whole again.

It's such a good part of you that aches and laments and grieves and wrestles and wants something different for this world and for all those who are precious to you. It is actually knitting something back together in you. Thank you for bringing all of your heart to me.

Maybe we should talk some more.

Me: Yeah. There is so much here. Maybe we should.

Jehovah Rapha: You can bring everything, and I do mean everything—you don't have to edit your language for me.

Me: You knew I was doing that?

Jehovah Rapha: Yeah—most people do.

Me: Where do you want to meet?

Jehovah Rapha: Let's go back to that place where the ache started. I'll meet you there . . . I am already there. ■

IT'S SUCH A GOOD
PART OF YOU THAT
ACHES AND LAMENTS
AND GRIEVES AND
WRESTLES AND WANTS
SOMETHING DIFFERENT
FOR THIS WORLD AND
FOR ALL THOSE WHO
ARE PRECIOUS TO YOU.
IT IS ACTUALLY KNITTING
SOMETHING BACK
TOGETHER IN YOU.

WEEK 1

Reflection

I PRAISE YOU BECAUSE I AM FEARFULLY AND WONDERFULLY MADE; YOUR WORKS ARE WONDERFUL, I KNOW THAT FULL WELL.

PS. 139:14

There was a moment when you began to exist, just like every other part of creation that was spoken into being by the Living Word. Though created like everything else, you bear a distinctiveness not shared with anything else.

You bear God's image, his likeness, a limited but recognizable reflection of the beauty and glory of your maker. And he not only displays his magnificence through you, he longs to live in intimate relationship with you. It is his ultimate desire that he would dwell with you like family.

What do you notice about your divine design that prompts you to praise and gratitude? When have you recently felt most like yourself—least like you were performing or proving yourself in some way? How might you surrender in this season to the creative masterpiece of God that is your life? *Selah*.

WEEK

2

God Leads Us



W2 | DI

Jehovah Go'el

THE LORD OUR REDEEMER

DAVE GIBSON



In the early '70s, a rock musician, who would eventually be inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, lost his favorite guitar in a smash-and-grab theft in Los Angeles. He was devastated. Though he was already rich and famous with many other guitars, this one was his favorite.

Two years later, the musician found his lost instrument in a pawn shop near the location of the theft, intact and unharmed! Shocked and full of joy, he bought it back. He redeemed it—so to speak—out of pawn shop bondage, paying the owner for his own guitar in order to get it back.

The Bible is full of similar stories: God redeemed Israel out of Egypt (Ex. 6:6). God redeemed Isaac from death (Gen. 22:11–14). Boaz redeemed Ruth out of poverty and isolation (Ruth 4:9–10). Hosea redeemed his wife out of prostitution (Hos. 3:1–2). All of these examples prefigure the pinnacle redemption anticipated throughout the Old Testament.

In that redemption story, Jesus bought us out of the slave market of sin with his precious blood (Eph. 1:7, 1 Pet. 1:18, 19). The core message hangs on just four themes: sin, separation, substitution, and trust. I spent many years of my life painfully learning how I broke God's law and how that sin separated me from him. Even after 50 years, I can still remember the sadness and hopelessness I felt.

In God's kindness, I came to see that Jesus had died in my place and paid for my sin. I made a simple decision to place my trust in him and he rescued me! Now, Jesus is my Plan A; I have no Plan B. If Jesus' death for me did not accomplish my redemption, then I am lost.

Like the musician's guitar in the pawn shop, we cannot deliver ourselves. Someone must buy us out of our bondage or we are doomed. To our great fortune, one of God's names is Jehovah Go'el, "The Lord Our Redeemer." This name reminds me that one of God's great habits is buying back the people he created! This is a cause of remarkable joy and relief for me. After almost 20 years of works and striving and anxiety, the truth of grace through trust in Christ became clear to me and I was joyfully cast into an ocean of grace.

Never forget that God is incurably for you. There is a great deal of evidence for this, the best of which is the fact that Jesus poured out his blood and gave his life on the cross to pay for your sins. Through his sacrifice he bought us back! We could not afford our own redemption, but Jesus could and he did. Having already given his son for our redemption, we can be confident that God will continue helping us until he brings us home (Rom. 8:32). ■

AFTER ALMOST 20 YEARS OF WORKS AND STRIVING AND ANXIETY, THE TRUTH OF GRACE THROUGH TRUST IN CHRIST BECAME CLEAR TO ME AND I WAS JOYFULLY CAST INTO AN OCEAN OF GRACE.

W2 | D2

Jehovah Nissi

THE LORD OUR BANNER

NICOLE MARTIN

"I can't do this. I'm scared." My 5-year-old daughter stood quietly behind the large stage, wearing her favorite pink leotard, iridescent tutu, and soft pink ballet shoes. She was nervous, having glanced beyond the curtain to the gathered audience of people waiting for their children to perform.

"Don't worry," I said, looking into her tear-prone eyes. "God is with you. We love you. You'll do great. And if you get nervous, just look for Daddy. You'll see him in the crowd." Feeling my own heart pound for the sake of my daughter, I gave her a quick hug and resumed my place in the auditorium. My husband knew I was going to comfort her and had already planned to give her his assurance as well.

As soon as the 5-year-olds took the stage, we saw our sweet girl taking her first steps on the platform, visibly afraid as she moved to her place. Within moments, my husband stood to his feet, boldly lifting his thumbs in the air to signal his love for his baby. She was focused and attentive but lit up with a big smile when she saw her father standing among the seated participants, giving her the biggest double thumbs-up she'd ever seen. With that smile came confidence to accomplish the task before her.

Much like a father stands among the seated crowd, Jehovah Nissi, The Lord our Banner, stands tall in the midst of darkness, boldly lifting his name over our lives. The Israelites experienced this reality after the battle against the Amalekites in Exodus 17. While camped at Rephidim, having just received miraculous water, the people of Israel were attacked.

Moses—called and led by God—stood on the hill above the battle with the staff of God lifted over the troops. As the fight carried on, the people noticed a strange correlation. When his arms were lifted, the Israelites were winning. When his arms were lowered, the Amalekites were winning. Recognizing the importance of Moses keeping his staff raised high above his head, Aaron and Hur stood on either side of him, bearing the weight of the burden to elevate his arms and ensure the victory of their people.

A lifted banner during battle was both a rallying point and a declaration of victory. For Moses and his people, it became something even more: a tall and visible reminder that the victory was not won by their own power but by God alone. For these reasons, Moses built an altar and called the place "The Lord is my Banner" to remember God as their crest and conqueror, lifted high upon the hill for everyone to see (Ex. 17:15).

Where might you need to see Jehovah Nissi in your life today? Where might his banner of light and truth need to be raised to see clearly in the dark? Similar to the staff in the hands of Moses, God raised his son, our Savior, Jesus Christ, above and before us, ensuring our victory in every way.

When your vision is clouded and the darkness feels daunting, look up to see Jesus. He is your convening and conquering King, lifted higher than a proud father's double thumbs, cheering you on to victory through him. ■

A LIFTED BANNER DURING BATTLE WAS BOTH A RALLYING POINT AND A DECLARATION OF VICTORY. FOR MOSES AND HIS PEOPLE, IT BECAME SOMETHING EVEN MORE: A TALL AND VISIBLE REMINDER THAT THE VICTORY WAS NOT WON BY THEIR OWN POWER BUT BY GOD ALONE.

W2 | D3

Jehovah Shalom

THE LORD IS PEACE

TAYLOR COMBS

Two years ago, the death of a family member led to an upheaval of the life my family and I had known. Routine and predictability were tossed to the wayside, leaving only tattered remains of our former stability. In the months to come, one wave of exhaustion followed another until I felt utterly overwhelmed. My peace—my sense of stability and coherence—was gone. I felt like it would be the end of me.

During that season, lyrics from "How Firm a Foundation, Ye Saints of the Lord" gave me a glimpse of what God was doing in my life: "The flames shall not hurt thee, I only design thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine." God hadn't abandoned me; he was exposing and uprooting my idol of peace.

I had been living as though peace were a gift I needed God to give me if my life was to be worthwhile. But, as C.S. Lewis famously said, "God cannot give us...peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing." God doesn't just want to give us a *feeling* that everything is stable and coherent—he wants to bring us into *himself*, where all is truly well. In that season, God robbed me of my own version of peace, found in circumstances, to draw me into the true peace I have in him.

Something similar happened to a man named Gideon. In Judges 6, God's people had rebelled against him and, as a consequence, he handed them over to the oppression of a neighboring nation, the Midianites. God took away Israel's sense of security and stability so that they might repent, reach out to him, and find a peace that their circumstances could never provide.

In that crucible, an angel appeared to Gideon and commissioned him to deliver Israel. Gideon realized this was no ordinary angel; it was the Angel of the Lord, an Old Testament figure somehow simultaneously identical with *and* distinct from God. Gideon was terrified this encounter with God would be the death of him, but God gave him words of reassurance. In response, Gideon raised an altar and called it "The Lord Is Peace" (Judges 6:24). He learned in that encounter that his circumstances didn't have to be peaceful for his heart to have peace.

Hundreds of years later, the Angel of the Lord would come to earth again. One who is both identical with God in nature and yet distinct from him in person was born in Bethlehem. He, Jesus Christ, is the Prince of Peace who became our peace on the cross (Eph. 2:14).

If this is true, then neither your circumstances nor mine must be peaceful for us to experience the God who is peace. If this is true, your heart and mine can be tranquil even while our lives are turbulent. If this is true, we can even go so far as to thank God when he temporarily robs us of peace, because we know he is driving us to Christ, the Prince of Peace, where our dross will be consumed and our gold refined. ■

GOD DOESN'T JUST WANT TO GIVE US A FEELING THAT EVERYTHING IS STABLE AND COHERENT, HE WANTS TO BRING US INTO HIMSELF, WHERE ALL IS TRULY WELL.

W2 | D4

Jehovah Raah

THE LORD OUR SHEPHERD

PHIL HERNDON



Advent is a reminder that we are exiles on Earth and we are longing for a place where our souls feel at home, a place where we are at home with God.

My wife and I attended a family reunion recently. After leaving, she said to me, "You are never more at home than when you're with your extended family." Although we had a wonderful time with my family, I was acutely aware of the reality of being home and not yet home. This particular longing is a reminder that I am waiting for a Savior to lead me all the way home.

That Savior is Emmanuel, "God with us."

There is perhaps no better illustration of Jesus' fulfillment of that name than Psalm 23. It is known as the Shepherd's Psalm and provides comfort for the longing, mourning, and anticipation of the Good Shepherd's (John 10:11) arrival and care for his sheep until they are safely home. His Hebrew name is Jehovah Raah, "The Lord our Shepherd." David's twenty-third song is a picture of the perfect care and provision Jehovah Raah extends to his children (his sheep). As another Christmas carol exclaims, Jehovah Raah cares for his sheep with "comfort and joy!"

The Good Shepherd takes exiled sheep into comforting places of abundance and rest (Ps. 23:1-3). However, until we are home, the path inevitably drifts into dark spaces: valleys that have the shadow of death hovering over them and enemies in hiding. Death, rejection, abandonment, declining health, prodigal children, and a multitude of

other scary things lie in the lowlands. But no matter how dark the valley or how threatening the enemy, the Lord our Shepherd attends to his sheep.

I was an overweight teenager, and, as is common in adolescent circles, was mercilessly teased and ridiculed. Against that terrifying backdrop stood a 22-year-old youth pastor named Chuck. My family and I attended a small neighborhood church, which made hanging out with Chuck easy on hot summer days. I took full advantage of the access. In the midst of the dark valley of shame, ridicule, and humiliation, Chuck provided a haven. He pointed me to Jesus—the Good Shepherd—through his love, attention, and care. In Chuck's office, I found safety in my adolescent shadowlands.

In Psalm 23, the shepherd doesn't fight the enemy, curse the darkness, or run his sheep to cover. The Good Shepherd prepares a table. His enemies sit helpless as he anoints his sheep with healing oil and pours wine to overflowing. He keeps pouring and pouring—there is extravagant provision, abundant grace, and profound protection at his table in the presence of danger and darkness (Ps. 23:5).

Finally, in the midst of darkness and threat, the Lord our Shepherd assures the sheep that his covenant love and overflowing mercy will accompany them all the way home. Surely the Good Shepherd of Advent, "that great Shepherd of the sheep," is with us (Heb. 13:20), and we will dwell in his house forever (Ps. 23:6). ■

NO MATTER HOW
DARK THE VALLEY OR
HOW THREATENING
THE ENEMY, THE LORD
OUR SHEPHERD ATTENDS
TO HIS SHEEP.

W2 | D5

Jehovah Sabaoth

THE LORD OF HOSTS

BROOK CHALFANT

On June 6, 2025, I wrote in my prayer journal: "Thank you, God, that you are Jehovah Sabaoth, sovereign Commander over every army, both spiritual and earthly. You fight my battles, and in You I find refuge and rest."

It wasn't a declaration of faith or the overflow of a soul at peace. It was a flag of surrender. For months, I'd been wrestling with fear about my husband's impending surgery, anger over the injustice of a divorce drowning my daughter and her two little ones, and deep sorrow as both my mother and mother-in-law faced serious illnesses. I couldn't give enough or be enough to make any of it better. I felt exhausted and alone.

In that place of weakness, God reminded me that he is Jehovah Sabaoth, Lord of Hosts, or as it is also written, Lord of Armies. And he is always, ever fighting for me.

More than 2,000 years ago, that same mighty God showed up in a manger. Into the chaos of Roman oppression, corrupt rulers, and a people with no relief in sight, he made his entrance:

> "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." (Luke 2:11–14)

The armies of heaven gathered above a feeding trough to announce a baby as Savior of the world.

This is the paradox of Advent: The most powerful being in all creation chose the most unlikely entrance to the world he created. God's opening move in his salvific mission, as foretold by Isaiah, was to become a child—one who would be called Mighty God and carry the entire government on his shoulders (Isaiah 9:6).

That same king promises to return, not as a vulnerable infant, but as an invincible warrior. Think *Braveheart* meets The Battle of Helm's Deep from *The Lord of the Rings*—multiplied infinitely:

> I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns . . . He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses . . . On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: King of Kings and Lord of Lords. (Rev. 19:11–16)

That is our invincible Savior over suffering, sin, and death.

Whatever fear, injustice, or loss you're facing this Advent season, lift your eyes today. The God whose armies filled the sky over Bethlehem is fighting for you. Whether he moves through the quiet and unlikely or in ways that make the earth shake, he is undefeatable, his army cannot be stopped, and you are not alone. ■

THIS IS THE PARADOX OF ADVENT: THE MOST POWERFUL BEING IN ALL CREATION CHOSE THE MOST UNLIKELY ENTRANCE TO THE WORLD HE CREATED.

W2 | D6

Jehovah Tsidkenu

THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS

DYLAN MUSSER



In the opening lines of Jeremiah 23, the prophet has a scathing rebuke for those who were called to care for God's people: Jeremiah says that they destroyed, scattered, drove away, and failed to tend to them. As a result, God said he would deal with those leaders personally, gather his people to himself, and cause them to be fruitful and multiply, echoing the promises of Genesis 1. Out of this context, God made a promise to his people through the prophet Jeremiah:

"'The days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord our Righteous Savior'" (vv. 5-6).

Israel desperately needed a king who would bring God's righteousness to his people. This coming king would uphold and embody all the covenant virtues that Jeremiah mentions like wisdom, justice, and righteousness.

The righteousness of God is more, not less, than his moral perfection and rectitude. In the New Testament, God's righteousness is deeply connected to our justification—our being made right with God. Paul writes of the free gift of righteousness (Rom. 5:17). God justifies all his people on the basis of Christ's righteousness, which is now ours through faith.

The Advent season allows us to ponder the reality that, in Christ, God has fulfilled his promises in Jeremiah 23. But the Gospel message and the thrill of the first Advent of Christ are not just that Jesus has and is the righteousness

that we lack (though he does and is). The splendor of the Gospel is that, in Christ Jesus, God actually gives us his own righteousness. Jesus has taken all of our sin, and in return we have been clothed in his righteousness. His record becomes ours, and we are not merely acquitted but positively righteous before God our Father.

This is the difference between Christianity and every other major belief system. We are welcomed and made right before God not on the basis of what we do for God but solely on the basis of what he has done for us in Christ. Blessed freedom! This news liberates us from all that often assails our conscience and assures us that we are adopted children and heirs. We can live with joyful defiance knowing that if God justifies, no one can condemn us (Rom. 8:33–34).

The Advent season invites us to ponder and meditate on the reality that God has kept his promises and has provided a solution for his people to be made right with him: That solution is Jesus Christ—our perfect, spotless righteousness. Let us never lose the wonder of declaring with Jeremiah and all of God's people the glorious truth that the Lord is indeed our righteousness. ■

WE ARE WELCOMED AND MADE RIGHT BEFORE GOD NOT ON THE BASIS OF WHAT WE DO FOR GOD BUT SOLELY ON THE BASIS OF WHAT HE HAS DONE FOR US IN CHRIST. BLESSED FREEDOM!

W2 | D7

Jehovah Mekoddishkem

THE LORD WHO SANCTIFIES

MIRIAM WALSH

The covert ways sin infiltrates my heart cause blind spots. Glaring ones. Deep within me a battle wages, rife with intention. My enemy lulls me into sin-blindness with the cloak of distraction. But my maker desires to bring me to a place where I can see what's true about me. Twice in two days, the Lord crossed my path with Psalm 135. The truth of verse 18 reverberated in my spirit like a gong: Those who make idols become like them—deaf, blind, and mute. Spiritually, my ability to hear, see, and speak had become compromised. I am my own idol.

Out of his steadfast love for me, the Spirit desires to sanctify all of me.

The Spirit desires to sanctify my ears. God brought to mind two recent situations in which my response to him was, *But I don't want to, Lord. They don't deserve it*. My distorted view of holiness repulsed me. I long to resemble Deborah or Uriah, but I seem to have more in common with Jonah lately. I eventually did what he was asking me to do, my dull hearing on full display. My heart posture had been revealed. And so I "hide my unholiness in the wounds of Christ," as A.W. Tozer puts it.

The Spirit desires to sanctify my eyes. My response to God was not moving me on a path that would make me more like Jesus. My own selfish desires were pulling me toward me. That's sin. I yearn to be more like Jesus, and Spirit-led sanctification is the only path that leads me there. But I must be willing. God, in his great mercy, reveals to us the things in our lives that we have allowed to eclipse his holiness. It is a sickness that needs immediate

and intense remedy. Repentance. Tozer explains it this way: "Quite literally a new channel must be cut through the desert of our minds to allow the sweet waters of truth that will heal our great sickness to flow in."

The Spirit desires to sanctify my mouth. Holiness grows where sin is not tolerated. Mary's example of unbridled surrender instructs us. Her response to the angel was, "'May your word to me be fulfilled'" (Luke 1:38). Through my sacrificial obedience, I will increasingly resemble him. My response to Jesus' invitations will be a resounding, unhesitant, and glad *yes*. When each of us yields to our own heart work, the Church will reflect his glory with greater brilliance.

That which is hidden in plain sight can be the most elusive. Scripture proclaims the coming of the Messiah long before he comes. In Luke 2, Jesus arrives, unearthing hope. Simeon said that, through Jesus, the "thoughts of many hearts will be revealed" (Luke 2:35). As the Spirit unearths my idolatry, it feels like tectonic plates shifting deep in my soul.

My holiest response is worship. With each shift, I join Moses in singing, "Who among the gods is like you, Lord? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?" (Ex. 15:11). ■

GOD, IN HIS GREAT MERCY, REVEALS TO US THE THINGS IN OUR LIVES THAT WE HAVE ALLOWED TO ECLIPSE HIS HOLINESS. IT IS A SICKNESS THAT NEEDS IMMEDIATE AND INTENSE REMEDY. REPENTANCE.

WEEK 2

Reflection

HE GUIDES ME ALONG THE RIGHT PATHS FOR HIS NAME'S SAKE.

PS 23:3

Do you ever feel a bit aimless? Something like walking around in the dark? Not to worry. You are in great company. As much as we are wired to sort things out and find our way, we are all profoundly limited.

We are far more likely to walk in circles than find our way on our own to a desirable destination. Thankfully, we have not been left to ourselves. We have a Good Shepherd who loves nothing more than to guide us to "green pastures" and "quiet waters" (Ps. 23:2).

Where are you most in need of a helpful nudge for your next right step? Can you, like Peter, muster the faith to step out of the boat and onto the water in the direction of Jesus? (Matt. 14:29). Where is he calling you to surrender your dependence upon your own understanding and trust unreservedly in him? This is how you will find straight paths (Prov. 3:5-6). How might you thank him for going ahead of you and devote yourself to following him with a full heart? *Selah*.

WEEK

3

God Renews Us



W3 | DI

Adonai

LORD & MASTER

MATT ERICKSON



Certain words or phrases—"I love you" or "I'm here for you"—are spoken so frequently in marriage, friendship, or other relationships that they sometimes lose their meaning, flowing in one ear and out the other. That happens with words in Scripture as well, including titles for God. A quick search reveals the word "Lord" appears thousands of times in Scripture, sometimes seeming more like an adjective than a title or name. But pause with me to consider the large territory held within this small word.

In biblical Hebrew, the word *adonai* can either refer to a human master or to God. Of greater significance is the fact that, because the personal name of God was deemed awesome and unutterable, *Adonai* served as a replacement for the Hebrew name YHWH. Far from being small, *Adonai* conveys the wide territory of a God utterly beyond us, completely holy, and profoundly worthy of honor.

This is the God who warned Moses that "'no one may see me and live'" (Ex. 33:20), yet invited Moses to a veiled encounter: "'When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand . . . and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen'" (33:22–23). In *The Life of Moses,* Gregory of Nyssa describes this as the highest divine self-disclosure, taking Moses beyond Sinai's clouds or light into the overwhelming darkness of a God both knowable and beyond knowing. This is the Lord, *Adonai*. My heart rises up in longing to know and encounter this God, while knowing this God is utterly beyond me.

When angels declare Jesus' birth to shepherds outside Bethlehem, they bring a climactic announcement: "'Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord'" (Luke 2:11). Even here, "Lord" may fall into the background behind the more conspicuous "Savior" and "Messiah." But it is no mistake that in later Christian thought Jesus is most often referred to as "the Lord" (*kurios*), the word chosen as equivalent to *adonai* when referring to God in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. The great hymn to Christ in Philippians concludes boldly: "every tongue [should] acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (2:11).

As we prepare to worship our Lord Jesus as the newborn King, that simple word "Lord" might fade into the background as another meaningless epithet. But the wonder of Advent is that *Adonai*, the ineffable and unseeable God, is now gloriously visible as "'a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger'" (Luke 2:12). The veil is taken away, and we now see the human face of God in Jesus, "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). May our Advent journey and earthly pilgrimage be infused with his glory, the Lord come near, until the day when we will see him fully. "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12). ■

THE WONDER OF ADVENT IS THAT ADONAI, THE INEFFABLE AND UNSEEABLE GOD, IS NOW GLORIOUSLY VISIBLE AS A BABY WRAPPED IN CLOTHS AND LYING IN A MANGER.

W3 | D2

Logos

THE WORD

JAMES WOMACK



Before Bethlehem, before creation itself, Jesus existed as the eternal Word. Then came the wonder of Christmas: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). The eternal Word stepped into time. The Creator entered his creation. God became a man and lived among us so that we might know him personally and experience his grace and truth.

Beyond that is another reality that has become increasingly meaningful to me over the years. The living Word provided and preserved his written word before, during, and after his brief but monumental life on earth. Thankfully, Jesus did not leave us to figure out life on our own. Though he returned to heaven after his death and resurrection, he made sure that his people were not without wisdom, guidance, truth, or hope. Through his Word, he comforts us in sorrow, directs us in uncertainty, corrects us when we wander, and points us back to himself.

Perhaps the greatest lesson my education has taught me is the difference between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge tells me what is. Wisdom tells me what to do. God's Word supplies both—revealing the character of God, exposing the condition of my heart, and equipping me for every good work (2 Tim. 3:17). As a husband, father of eight children, pastor, teacher, and leader, I need the provision of Scripture daily.

Yet the greatest value of Scripture is not simply what it does for me. The Scriptures are precious because they reveal a person. Every page points to Christ. Every promise finds its fulfillment in Christ. Every command helps

me become more like Christ. Every time I open my Bible, I am reminded that Christ is real, he is relevant, and he restores my soul through the power of his Word.

Not long ago, I was on my way to a meeting and noticed my gas tank was running low. My plan was simple: attend the meeting and fill up afterward. It seemed reasonable. Unfortunately, my gas tank had a different plan. Before I could make it to the gas station, I ran out of gas.

The same thing can happen spiritually.

In the midst of seasons when I feel weary, uncertain, and depleted, I'm tempted to keep serving, leading, caring, and giving even though my tank is on "E." Perhaps you've been in similar seasons. When I'm in that situation, I have found that nothing refuels me as abundantly as God's Word. It strengthens me. It steadies me. It reminds me that I am not alone and that God is still at work, even when I cannot see what he is doing.

It's no wonder that Jesus, when tempted in the wilderness to turn stones into bread after 40 days of fasting, answered the devil, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Matt. 4:4). During this Advent season, as I think about his return, I want to follow the example of Jesus—the living Logos—feeding daily on the written word for the life he alone can provide. ■

THE GREATEST
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W3 | D3

The Bread of Life

TIM GIOIA



Whenever there's bread on the table at a restaurant, I always think of my grandma. When you go to dinner with her, she's ripping and buttering and passing as soon as the bread hits the table. You didn't ask for it, but somehow it's in your hand. As a result, I've taken home a lot of leftovers because Grandma filled me up ahead of time with bread.

Bread is not nearly the staple in our diets that it was in the days of Jesus. It was an absolute necessity. Far more than just a daily staple, it represented the very source of life and nourishment at every meal. It's no wonder then, throughout Scripture, that God is found offering bread to hungry people. In the wilderness, he provided manna for Israel every morning (Ex. 16). Elijah received freshly baked food as he ran for his life (1 Kings 17:7-16). On the hillside, Jesus multiplied loaves for a hungry crowd (John 6:1-14). God cares about our physical need for food—and he cares about our spiritual need for nourishment as well.

In John 6:35, just a day after feeding thousands with a few loaves of bread and fish, Jesus tells the crowd, "'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'" Jesus is telling them that he is nourishment, he is sustenance, and he is the constant provision for spiritual life.

It had been a full day since Jesus fed them, and already the people's stomachs were empty; they wanted more. But this time, Jesus wanted to feed the deeper hunger they possessed, one they couldn't articulate. The crowd was consumed with hunger pangs, their minds fixed on

what could fill them for a day. Jesus offered them something that sustains a person forever. He wanted them to see their greatest need wasn't filling their bellies but satisfying their souls.

Receiving what our souls need is at the heart of what we celebrate at Christmas. God saw a hungry world and sent the only bread that could truly satisfy. In the manger, God placed his son before a starving world. He didn't simply send words of encouragement or a list of tasks to complete. God gave us himself.

David declares in Psalm 34, "Taste and see that the Lord is good" (v.8). Once we've experienced the faithfulness of God, we realize the Bread of Life is not a one-time meal but daily provision for God's people. We return to him over and over to gain what the delicacies of this world cannot supply. When we neglect him, we try to fill our emptiness with the spiritual equivalent of gas station sushi—convenient but never satisfying.

Christ alone can satiate the deepest hunger of the human heart. The peace we long for, the rest we crave, and the joy we desire are ultimately found in him. This season is the perfect opportunity to pull up a chair and allow our souls to be fed and filled by the Bread of Life. ■

IN THE MANGER, GOD PLACED HIS SON BEFORE A STARVING WORLD. HE DIDN'T SIMPLY SEND WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT OR A LIST OF TASKS TO COMPLETE. GOD GAVE US HIMSELF.

W3 | D4

Light of the World

KARIE LEE



When I was a little girl, I didn't think much about the light, all I knew was that I did not like the dark. The dark was scary: Sounds were intensified, shapes were distorted, and surely there was something lurking in my closet wishing to harm me if I closed my eyes.

I recall nights I awakened in the darkness, unable to take the torment that stirred in me. I had to muster all my courage to leap far from my bed, avoiding the monster holed up beneath, and fly through the cold blackness of the house to my parents' bed. There, I experienced the safety of their protection. Nothing in the darkness had changed except that in their presence I felt safe. And so, I slept.

As I grew older, I realized I needed more than to simply escape the distress and fear of the darkness—I needed light to displace it. Light brings warmth and clarity. It removes the distortions caused by the shadows of darkness and reveals the beautiful colors of the world around us.

These days, I open the curtains to let in as much light as possible during the day and turn on lots of lights throughout the house at night. During Christmas, I add extra lights to our pre-lit tree, just for effect. I soak up the light of the summer sun and light the fireplace in the cold months of winter to be reminded of warm radiance. I am no longer afraid of the dark, but I yearn for as much light as possible to surround me.

Looking back on my childhood, I understand that what I was experiencing physically I was also experiencing spiritually. My soul sought light. Jesus—the Light of

the World—took my soul from darkness and brought me into his marvelous light! Comforting me in the darkness would have been more than I deserved, but he did so much more. Piercing the darkness with his light transformed the darkness and made that which was cloaked in the shadows visible: spiritual forces of wickedness, death, lies, hate, thieves, hidden deeds, and hopelessness. He abolished death and created life. He turned the darkness of night into the most glorious day.

If that wasn't enough, he put his light in me! I cannot be afraid of the dark any longer because, in truth, I will never be in the dark again. The darkness has no power over me. Jesus said, "'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life'" (John 8:12). I am free from the fear it caused. The little girl scared under her covers has emerged, continually filled with light!

The same can be said of every person who has trusted in Christ. What the darkness attempts to make hopeless, the Light of the World fills with abundant hope. He shines on every shifting shadow, inviting those in darkness into the brilliance of the bright Morning Star (Rev. 22:16). ■

JESUS—THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD—TOOK MY SOUL FROM DARKNESS AND BROUGHT ME INTO HIS MARVELOUS LIGHT! COMFORTING ME IN THE DARKNESS WOULD HAVE BEEN MORE THAN I DESERVED, BUT HE DID SO MUCH MORE.

W3 | D5

Lamb of God

CALEB CAMPBELL



"The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'" (John 1:29, ESV).

John the Baptist had options.

He could have said, "Behold, the King." Or, "Behold, the Savior." "The Chosen One." "The Anointed." Any of those would have been accurate. Any of them would have landed with appropriate theological heft for the Gospel of John's opening narrative.

Instead, he said "Behold, the Lamb of God." What a strange way to introduce the Savior of the cosmos—unless you know what John knew.

John grew up in a world saturated with lambs. Every Passover, his people gathered—as Jewish families had for over a thousand years—to kill a lamb and remember the night God delivered his people from slavery in Egypt (Ex. 12). A lamb without blemish. A lamb that didn't deserve death. Its life given so the people's might be spared. The blood on the doorposts. The angel passing over. When John points to Jesus and says, "*lamb*," he's announcing that everything the Passover lamb anticipated has finally arrived.

Here's what I find so captivating about this title: Every kingdom I know of in history has chosen a predator as its symbol. For example, the Roman eagle perched atop their legions' standards signaled dominance wherever they marched. Sports franchises in our day do the same thing: the Lions, the Tigers, the Bears, and the Eagles. Nobody names their team "the lambs" and expects to be taken seriously. Predator power—that's real strength, right?

When the world feels dangerous and out of control, I want someone, or something, with power to fix it, to make me feel safe. It's the same instinct that led Peter to reach for his sword in Gethsemane, terrified he was about to lose everything he loved (John 18:10). When we're afraid, we want the power of a predatory beast, not a lamb.

And yet. Into a world cowering under Caesar's eagles, a world in which the king used swords and crosses to propagate imperial terror, God shows up in the flesh as a lamb. In the Christmas story, God is delivered in a feeding trough, his birth announced to tenders of flocks. Jesus' first visitors weren't military generals. They were shepherds.

At the end of our Bibles, in Revelation, the Lamb appears again. Not in a manger, but seated on a throne "as if it had been slain" (Rev. 5:6). The Lamb of God doesn't seize power like a predator. He sacrificially gives his life for you and for me. And in that self-giving love, the sin of the world, your sin, my sin, is carried away.

So, which power can we trust to save us and the world? The power of the eagle or the power of the Lamb? John the Baptist guides our way, calling us to behold the Lamb of God. ■

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W3 | D6

The Resurrection and the Life

JON NITTA

December 7, 1941—"a date which will live in infamy," as described by FDR—devastated the U.S. with extensive damage to its military and traumatic loss of life. Among the casualties was a small segment of our society, communities of Japanese Americans who would face bitter, prejudicial backlash aimed at their ethnicity. That tragic day set the wheels in motion for Executive Order 9066, issued February 19, 1942, designating "exclusion zones," or internment camps, for all Japanese people on the West Coast, regardless of their citizenship. My grandmother was among those relocated.

Katsuko was a young girl when she immigrated from Japan to the United States to escape economic hardship. Later, as a young woman, she was exposed to virulent anti-Asian sentiment: store windows plastered with painful slogans like "Japs go home," even laws that prohibited Asians from marrying Caucasians.

Despite her Buddhist background, the one bright spot during that dark season was her conversion to Christianity. Some women in her neighborhood invited my grandmother to a prayer meeting. It was through that experience that, in her heart, she bowed to the King, Jesus Christ. Little did Katsuko know that her newfound faith would be severely tested by the events of Pearl Harbor and the relocation of Japanese Americans that followed. If that weren't enough, she lost her husband to a sudden heart attack and had to endure the ravages of wartime as a single mom to her young son.

Where do you go when you have lost not only your possessions, but also your husband, and then your freedom?

Centuries earlier, a small group of troubled people asked a similar question. Several days before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus boldly said of himself, "'I am the resurrection and the life'" (John 11:25). His disciples had been following him for three years, only to see him brutally tortured, killed, and buried. Everything seemed lost. For the disciples, Jesus' resurrection and life eternal was the ultimate "eucatastrophe," a twist in the story, as coined by J.R.R. Tolkien. Just when the story hits a dead end, the great twist happens! Similarly, when we are at the end of our own resources to curate a life, when all seems lost, God often does his best work.

Advent calls us to remember the greatest of twists! It holds a radical promise that despite all the unexpected catastrophes in life, there is one who rose on our behalf. We, in turn, are invited to share in his life, death, and powerful resurrection.

I've often asked myself how an ordinary, young immigrant woman could possess the kind of strength to endure when she was at rock bottom and refuse to be angry or bitter. I don't think it was the stoic, Asian mindset that often stuffs feelings. Jesus' resurrection and life was the bedrock of my grandmother's life. That same faith was passed on to me. This faith in Christ's work leads to an eternal hope—not based on circumstances, but on the one who is powerful enough to deliver us from our darkest hour, and in his victory called himself the resurrection and the life. ■

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W3 | D7

Wonderful Counselor

TOM SHIRK



December brings a close to every year in the way a blind descends against a windowpane. Less sun, more shadows. The days are shorter. The nights are longer. For many of us, the darkness of winter can mirror a corresponding malaise at Christmas. Hopeful expectations strain higher, but reality falls further behind. As a flurry, or as an avalanche, despondency attends the winter solstice for many people. But when the Bible's Christmas narrative refers to the people sitting in darkness, it is less an emotional or psychological condition and more a spiritual one.

Roughly 700 years before Christ entered the world, a shout in the darkness went out from the prophet Isaiah. He declared that the child to be born on what would become Christmas would be called by a few magnificent names, one of which is Wonderful Counselor (Isa. 9:6). His prophecy introduced Jesus as the authoritative advisor to mankind, whose words, wisdom, and saving work would lift the unbearable weight of sin's consequences and provoke unparalleled wonder and astonishment. In his incarnation, he became wisdom from God in the flesh to us.

Before Jesus was born, Solomon, King of Israel, was revered as the wisest of all men anywhere on the earth. He is the author of more than 3,000 proverbs and much of the wisdom literature in our Bible. Many people turned to him for counsel and sage advice, most notably the Queen of Sheba, whose encounter with King Solomon far surpassed all that she had expected (1 Kings 10:1–13).

Centuries later, while in conflict with the religious leaders of his day, Jesus asserted that "something greater than Solomon is here" (Matt. 12:42). It was his own affirmation that he is the Wonderful Counselor. His wisdom is superior to anything that preceded him and will forever be unequaled. The eternal, self-existent, all-knowing Son of God became incarnate to reveal the unsearchable counsel of God. He loves us perfectly at this very moment. Confession results in forgiveness. Brokenness can lead to healing. Anxiety subsides through the one who is with us forever.

Today, rival counselors offer up an endless array of media-driven advice. We are bombarded with tweets, posts, and twenty-second reels from so-called experts on every imaginable subject. Awash in content overload, we are wisdom-deficient. It is obvious that saturation in media content is making us more unstable and life more complicated. We need the Wonderful Counselor.

It has been in the night—the middle of the night—that my own wrestling with worry for loved ones, or pressures of the ministry, or any number of anxieties (rational and irrational) has forced me to choose which counselor I will heed. With so many voices in my head, I want to say with David, "I will praise the Lord, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me" (Ps. 16:7). On the darkest days or in the middle of the longest night, he will keep us steady—when life is anything but. He is the Wonderful Counselor in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden. ■

AWASH IN CONTENT OVERLOAD, WE ARE WISDOM-DEFICIENT. IT IS OBVIOUS THAT SATURATION IN MEDIA CONTENT IS MAKING US MORE UNSTABLE AND LIFE MORE COMPLICATED. WE NEED THE WONDERFUL COUNSELOR.

WEEK 3

Reflection

THOUGH OUTWARDLY WE ARE WASTING AWAY, YET INWARDLY WE ARE BEING RENEWED DAY BY DAY.

2 COR. 4:16

There is a tragic moment in the creation account, one that colors and shapes every part of your life. It takes place shortly after the first couple chose personal sovereignty over glad obedience to their maker. We're told the Lord God banished Adam and Eve from the garden, placing cherubim and flaming swords between them and the tree of life (Gen. 3:22-24). It turns out, their expulsion was more an act of mercy than it was punitive.

Had the now-fallen couple eaten from that tree, they would have hopelessly remained in their sinful state. With the Tree of Life safely out of reach, God's plan to rescue humanity took its first steps alongside Adam and Eve outside the garden. They were horribly broken, but they would not walk alone. God would sustain them and ultimately provide a Savior for them through their seed.

In what ways is life outside of Eden hardest for you? Where do you most need God to intervene and renew what feels broken? This week is a priceless opportunity to notice the merciful hand of God faithfully at work on your behalf. *Selah*.

WEEK

4

God Loves Us



W4 | D1

Mighty God

DOUG POWELL

Worry has, at times, been my unwelcome companion. Anxiety has eroded my peace. I fear the uncertainty of what I don't know—or worse, what I *do* know. There have been moments when I doubted my ability to provide for my family. I become indignant when injustice goes unpunished and aggrieved when those who do evil thrive. World events often seem chaotic, giving me a sense of helplessness whether the events directly affect me or not.

The common denominator in all these things is a sense of powerlessness, an awareness that I cannot control my circumstances. Can you relate? That is at the heart of why we pray. Concerns like these drive us to the throne of God to ask for peace, provision, resolution, and justice. We need help. Not merely someone who will listen, but someone who has the power to do something. God is that powerful someone—more powerful than we could ever imagine.

God has the power to accomplish whatever he desires (Jer. 32:17). He created all things that exist outside of himself (Rev. 4:11), and he did it merely by speaking (Gen. 1). He defeated the Egyptian army without a battle (Ex. 14). He enabled a virgin to give birth (Luke 1:34–37). And he even conquered death (Acts 2:24; 1 Cor. 15:54–57).

There is only one thing God cannot do: He cannot violate his nature. He cannot be tempted by evil (James 1:13). He cannot lie (Titus 1:2). He cannot deny himself (2 Tim. 2:13). In addition, he is loving, compassionate,

merciful, gracious, righteous, holy, and just, and cannot be otherwise. His only limit is his nature. And thankfully, his powerful nature is full of great goodness and extravagant love.

We bring him our needs not merely because he is able to meet them, but because he is a loving father who protects and provides for us. In light of God's sovereignty, we can even appreciate our needs as tools God uses to drive us to him, reminding us of our dependence on him for all things. That one truth is transformative. Constantly reminding ourselves of that truth is the antidote to worry, fear, and anxiety. When I struggle with worry, it is easy to forget how God has faithfully and consistently provided for me during difficult times in the past. But this past provision is the assurance that he will be faithful now and in the future.

These days, trying to maintain control in my own strength feels like trying to build a house of cards in the wind, an exercise in futility. In the midst of that chaos, I have doubted my grip on God, but his mighty grip on me, thankfully, has never failed. God is holding us with the sure and certain security of a father holding his child close. Today is a perfect opportunity to bring all that makes us weary and burdened to him and find rest for our souls (Matt. 11:28–30). ■

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Everlasting Father

LAURIE NEWMAN

Every weekday of my childhood, my father wore a blue or yellow polo, khakis, brown leather belt, and Clarks Hush Puppies. On Sundays, it was a navy blazer, blue button-down, khakis, and said same Hush Puppies. When he served as usher, a tiny white carnation was pinned to his blue coat, which he put in my hand at the end of the service. The constancy of his rhythm was a pillar of my world. He welcomed me wherever he was: the back steps while he grilled, weekly trips to the post office, the office at his radio station, his work bench covered with unfinished repairs. I chatted and he listened, untiring in his attentiveness.

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6). When Isaiah brings this news of the coming Messiah, one of the four appellations describing the child is *Avi Ad*, Everlasting Father. Who is Isaiah referring to, God the Father or God the Son? Isaiah makes clear this promised one is a child and son. By naming him Everlasting Father, he reveals something further, something fatherly, in the Son's rule and care.

Through this Son we are brought into the family of God. As our father, he is the "perfecter of our faith" (Heb. 12:2). Matthew Henry writes, "He was, from eternity, Father of the great work of redemption: his heart was upon it; it was the product of his wisdom as the counselor, of his love as the everlasting Father." Because he is God, his fatherliness is eternal, comprehensive, unchanging. As

Mighty God, he lacks nothing in his fatherly capacity to care for us.

For as long as I can remember, my father took a thirty-minute nap every day, no matter where he was or what we were doing. Every workday, on vacation, even the day he drove me to my dorm at Ole Miss, we stopped for lunch and a short nap. At some point, I realized he required the rest. Something small inside me felt less certain, and in fact, a bit protective of him. There is a moment in every childhood which reveals the limits of an earthly father—a moment of absence, lack of wisdom, even mortality itself. It is an unmooring of security.

A few months after I married, I was living hundreds of miles away when my father died unexpectedly of heart failure. When I got home to Mississippi, climbed the steps past pink azaleas, and opened our front door that was never locked, the foyer was empty of my father's arms. My grief cannot be named in words. It cannot. Yet I do not face grief, tragedy, loneliness, even death of my most beloved, alone. Our Savior is Everlasting Father. He holds me in his hand (Ps. 139:10). Isaiah gives us a lasting promise: a Son who is coming to us in deepest darkness with the heart of a father, whose care does not diminish, whose strength does not fail, and whose love does not end. ■

BECAUSE HE IS GOD,
HIS FATHERLINESS
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W4 | D3

Prince of Peace

JAMES HOXWORTH

In 2025, after wrestling with anxiety for much of my life, I began to seek the help of a counselor. The stresses of life and ministry for a pastor can accumulate like sludge in a water line. I was driven to seek help due to the culmination of losing our adopted Ugandan daughter, absorbing the trauma of others in ministry, and wrestling with my own struggles. The fear of facing myself was something I avoided until the burden became unbearable.

The season of Advent points God's people to Isaiah 9:6, where a promised child is given some incredible titles: "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." It is this last name we focus on here: the Prince of Peace.

Peace is elusive amid the chaos that bombards us. Most days feel like a crisis as we traumatize ourselves with never-ending news cycles of tragedy. I relate to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's lyrics penned during the Civil War:

And in despair I bowed my head:
"There is no peace on earth," I said,
"For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men."

So, where can we find peace?

The Hebrew word *shalom* connotes a sense of wholeness in all aspects of life: physical, mental, emotional, relational, and spiritual. Mending the fabric of our well-being is what the Prince of Peace came to offer. When Jesus came, he proclaimed: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid"

(John 14:27). Later he would add, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (16:33).

The uniqueness of Jesus' peace is not due to an absence of conflict but to his constant presence in the midst of suffering and pain. It is assurance in his ultimate victory over sin, death, and evil. This peace differs from worldly peace, which claims to be found in financial success, health, perfect relationships, performance, and power *ad infinitum*.

Could it be that much of our anxiety stems from fears we haven't yet brought to the Prince of Peace? My counselor helped me understand that mine were much deeper than what bubbled into my everyday experience. When I shared one of my biggest fears in our first session, he asked me point blank: "WHO are you most afraid of?" After a moment, I responded, "I think myself." We then went on a journey to uncover the ways I sought to cope with my fears and re-establish God's good presence and peace. I was now facing myself and rediscovering shalom.

In this Advent season, let's turn our hearts to the Prince of Peace. Longfellow continues his "Christmas Bells" poem with a word of hope, reminding us of what Christ came to do to give us true, lasting peace:

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
With peace on earth, good will to men." ■

THE UNIQUENESS OF JESUS' PEACE IS NOT DUE TO AN ABSENCE OF CONFLICT BUT TO HIS CONSTANT PRESENCE IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING AND PAIN. IT IS ASSURANCE IN HIS ULTIMATE VICTORY OVER SIN, DEATH, AND EVIL.

W4 | D4

Emmanuel

GOD WITH US

COLE HUFFMAN

They give a little more time on Christmas Day for visiting hours in the psychiatric unit. My teenage son was there. Bandaged wrists.

One of my daughters said she felt cheated, her little brother not at home to share in the family gift-exchange bonanza, a ghost of Christmas present.

Believing in God's presence isn't the same thing as feeling it. There are times I wish my faith in Jesus came with his physical hand to grip. That Christmas was one such time.

Emmanuel: The "God with us" name for Jesus. Fixture of the first advent. Facet of history. Future glory. But what about the present? What about when your Christmas lights are flickering fluorescents in an antiseptic hospital hallway? When your child is a bedraggled patient shuffling to the door of a visiting room?

That Christmas, I still read the old Bethlehem story in Matthew 1–2. I read on, past those city limits, into Matthew 4, to the beginning of Jesus' ministry years, where Isaiah's prophecy is invoked about a light dawning on "those living in the land of the shadow of death" (v. 16). That was my region. O Little Town of Bedlam.

Jesus knows such places. Before Matthew quotes Isaiah, he shows us Jesus out where the shadow of death prevails: the wilderness. The psychiatric unit doesn't have cattle skulls or sidewinders, but it felt like a kind of wilderness that Christmas. My son too, in the words of John Ames in *Gilead*, "a wilderness unto [himself]."("But" Ames added, "there must be angels there, too, and springs of water. Even that

wilderness, the very habitation of jackals, is the Lord's. I need to bear this in mind.")

My mind is "Emmanueled." I've long believed God is with me in everything. But like the *I-believe-help-my-unbelief* dad in the Gospels (Mark 9:24), desperate for Jesus to heal his convulsing son, there was no flex to my faith that Christmas. I had no feeling of God's presence. God's people were present, and he did draw near through them. That had to do.

It's been said that what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. I take the point, though I wonder if maybe it's better to say what God thinks of us is the most important thing about us. Just as my son was loved the most when he felt it the least, God's presence with me doesn't depend on my feeling it but his promising it, his incarnating it.

> Where can I go from your Spirit?
> Where can I flee from your presence?
> If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
> if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
> If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
> if I settle on the far side of the sea,
> even there your hand will guide me,
> your right hand will hold me fast.
> If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
> and the light become night around me,"
> even the darkness will not be dark to you;
> the night will shine like the day,
> for darkness is as light to you.
> (Ps. 139:7–12) ■

JUST AS MY SON WAS LOVED THE MOST WHEN HE FELT IT THE LEAST, GOD'S PRESENCE WITH ME DOESN'T DEPEND ON MY FEELING IT BUT HIS PROMISING IT, HIS INCARNATING IT.

W4 | D5

CHRISTMAS EVE

King of kings

ISAIAH 9:1-7

We stand at the threshold of Christmas having encountered the awe-inspiring attributes of the one whose birth we will celebrate tomorrow. Few passages convey the anticipation of this moment like the opening lines of Isaiah 9. Written some 700 years before the arrival of Christ, it invites us to join a people in darkness who Isaiah tells us basked in the glorious light of the promised Immanuel, God with us. After reading the text slowly and reflectively, what part of this prophecy speaks to what you most need from your Savior?

The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.
3 You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice
when dividing the plunder.
4 For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,

the rod of their oppressor.
5 Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.
6 For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
7 Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this. ■

FOR TO US A CHILD IS BORN, TO US A SON IS GIVEN, AND THE GOVERNMENT WILL BE ON HIS SHOULDERS.

W4 | D6

CHRISTMAS DAY



Christmas is a day full of immense joy but one in which we also face the faith-stretching reality of living between the first and second arrivals of our promised Messiah. Today is a day of celebration because our Savior has come, and he is all that we have come to know through his names. He did for us all that we could never do for ourselves and secured for any who would receive it the gift of forgiveness and eternal life. And yet, we still wait for another glorious day when all things will be made new once and for all. Take in the beauty of Christ's birth as recorded in Luke 2, immerse yourself in the goodness of this day, then give yourself to waiting well until God makes his dwelling place with man forever and ever, amen.

LUKE 2:1-20

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. [2] (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) [3] And everyone went to their own town to register.

[4] So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. [5] He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. [6] While they were

there, the time came for the baby to be born, [7] and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

[8] And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. [9] An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. [10] But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. [11] Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. [12] This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

[13] Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

[14] "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

[15] When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

[16] So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. [17] When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, [18] and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. [19] But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. [20] The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. ■

BUT THE ANGEL SAID TO THEM, "DO NOT BE AFRAID. I BRING YOU GOOD NEWS THAT WILL CAUSE GREAT JOY FOR ALL THE PEOPLE. TODAY IN THE TOWN OF DAVID A SAVIOR HAS BEEN BORN TO YOU; HE IS THE MESSIAH, THE LORD."

WEEK 4

Reflection

AND SO WE KNOW AND RELY ON THE LOVE GOD HAS FOR US. GOD IS LOVE. WHOEVER LIVES IN LOVE LIVES IN GOD, AND GOD IN THEM.

1 JOHN 4:16

Do you believe you are loved? More importantly, do you feel the need to somehow merit love if you are ever to receive it? Human instinct tells us love is a response. It is prompted by some kind of rationale . . . good looks, intellect, accomplishment, or a great personality. But to think of love like this is to assume one must be lovely in some way to warrant being loved.

The good news of the gospel, the real power of God's advent, is the counterintuitive idea that you were loved before you did anything to deserve it or before you could do anything to disqualify yourself from receiving so great a gift. It's scandalous, really. While you were at your worst, you were profoundly loved.

What difference might it make in your life if you were to truly rest in the steadfast love God has for you? What would it look like for your instincts to shift away from performance to a place of gratitude? May this Advent season give you a deep sense of assurance while you await the lover of your soul. *Selah*.

CONTRIBUTORS

Meet the team of writers whose dedication and passion have filled the pages of this Advent Devotional with stories of faith, hope, and love. We hope their commitment to excellence and their exploration of the goodness and glory of God reflected in his names will serve as a beacon of light during the Christmas season.



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Dr. James R. Womack, PhD, is a pastor at Destiny Church, leadership strategist, educator, and co-founder with Cynthia Womack of Maximizing Life. He equips and coaches others through biblical wisdom, organizational strategy, and AI innovation.



Tim Gioia

Tim Gioia is the pastor of Christian Fellowship Free Church in Chicago, Illinois. He is the husband to Sarah, the dad to Benjamin and Sophia, and enjoys watching a thunderstorm roll in from his garage.



Karie Lee

Karie Lee has served on the leadership team at her local church for the last seven years as Bible Study Coordinator, writing seven inductive studies with the most recent being Strongholds: Heart | Soul | Mind.



Caleb Campbell

Caleb Campbell is a pastor in Phoenix, AZ, author of *Disarming Leviathan: Loving Your Christian Nationalist Neighbor*, and founder of Disarming Leviathan Ministries (disarmingleviathan.com). He is also the founding director of the J29 Coalition.



Jon Nitta

Jon Nitta has been the Pastor of Soul Care at Calvary Church in Valparaiso, Indiana for thirteen years after lengthy stints with a church in Fullerton, CA and Campus Crusade for Christ. He has been married to his wife, Kay, for thirty-six years and they have two boys.



Tom Shirk

Tom Shirk has been a pastor for forty years. He serves today as Pastor Emeritus at Calvary Bible Church in Boulder, Colorado, where he has ministered since 1992.



Doug Powell

Doug Powell holds a Christian Apologetics MA (Biola University) and is a Systematic Theology PhD candidate. He authored *Ultimate Guide to Defend Your Faith*, writes the Graham Eliot thriller series, and has released nine albums, performing on Conan and CNN.



Laurie Newman

Laurie Newman (MLA, Harvard University Ext.) is a writer, wife, mother and Lolly. She lives in Tennessee with her husband where she serves the women's ministry of her local church.



James Hoxworth

James Hoxworth is husband to Sarah, and dad to Michael, Molly, and Brady. He has served in churches for over 20 years and currently serves as the Lead Pastor at The Bridge Church at Bear Creek in Lakewood, Colorado.



Cole Huffman

Cole Huffman is the Pastor of Missions and Church Planting at Living Hope Church in Piperton, Tennessee. He is the author of *He Made the Stars Also.*

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