



Advent

— THE AUSTIN STONE —

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This Advent season
we want to help you,
the people of Christ,
connect with Christ
and His people. To
do that, we made The
Austin Stone Advent
Devotional.

In one resource we've combined a personal devotional for you, a kid-friendly devotional for the whole family, a devotional for your community, and a mealtime devotional for your community.

The personal devotional is for you and Jesus. Each day has its own reading, its own questions, and its own space for you to think and write down all that God is teaching you.

The family devotional is all about God's stories, especially the one He's writing with your family. Along with a story from His Word, each day's installment has questions for you, questions for the kids, and space to record your answers. Use the space to remember what God was doing with your family this Advent season.

If that's not enough for your family, be sure to download the accompanying Kids Ornament Book to make these moments and these truths something your kids will never forget at austinstone.org/ornaments.

The community devotional is all about your community, and its focus is to have you and a group reading and learning from the Word of God together. Whether

it's your Missional Community or a group of friends or your family, come together, share a meal, and use these guides to come together and be centered around Jesus and His coming.

The mealtime devotional is all about your community, and it all starts with the menu. The menu is one source to outline your group's whole evening, four of them in fact. The menu includes your shopping list, cooking instructions, readings, discussion questions, and even a music selection—all so that your community can come together and be centered around Jesus and His coming.

That's it. One resource for all of us to celebrate the coming of our Lord. Use any of the sections, or use them all. Whatever you do, let this devotional serve you so you, your family, and your community can be better prepared to serve Jesus.

Personal Devotional

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. (Hebrews 1:1-4 ESV)

The Advent Personal Devotional is a 25-day curriculum of Scriptures, devotionals, and questions that starts December 1 and ends December 25.

We built this because if we aren't careful, the Christmas season can become about anything but celebrating the coming of Jesus. This devotional is a chance for you to walk through the whole of the Old Testament so that your heart's affection and mind's attention are drawn to the coming of Jesus.

To use it, simply find a quiet time and place in your schedule every day of Advent, morning or night. When that time comes, stop what you're doing, grab your Bible, and open the Advent Personal Devotional to that day's reading.

Read the Scriptures and devotional, answer the questions, and record your notes and answers in the space provided.

Before you begin

Personal Devotional

Immanuel: God with us. Each day of this Advent guide is written to stir you to know and treasure the God who has torn down the dividing wall of hostility so that we might be brought close to Him. He is the God who wrapped Himself in flesh, lived a perfect life, died a perfect death, and raised victoriously from the grave all so that His people would be saved.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14 ESV)

Not only did He forgive our sin and save us for all eternity, but He is a God who even now is walking with us through the trials of this life. He gives us faith to obey when it is hard. He cares even for the seemingly smallest of details.

The Advent season can arouse varying and complex emotions for people. For some, it is a time of great joy and happy memories. For others, it is a season marked by trials and even past memories of pain.

So, this Advent season, let's pause each day and remember how incredible it is that God is truly with us in everything. Our God, all-powerful and all-holy, would have been justified to leave us in our sin, but instead,

"God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:3-5 ESV).

Receive the miracle of Christmas: a God who has entered into this world in human form so that you would not be left alone in your sin and suffering, that He would be with you in both the significant and the small.

The Fall

Genesis 3:1-7; 2:9 & Ephesians 2:12-18 & 2 Peter 1:3-4

Just over 2,000 years ago, around this time, Mary was about to give birth, filled with anticipation. We all know the story. We’ve dressed our children up as shepherds, glued cotton balls to paper to make sheep, and set out figurines in a nativity. But the story of the birth of Jesus began long before that day, long before Mary was even born.

The story of Christmas is written in every page of the Bible. Let’s start at the beginning, the day everything went wrong.

Read Genesis 3:1-7

What three reasons led Eve to eat the fruit?

Read Genesis 2:9

What are the two qualities of every tree in the garden? How does God’s provision in 2:9 make Eve’s reasons in 3:6 even more foolish?

Genesis 2:9

Eve ate the fruit in order to fulfill desires that God had already offered to meet. Think through the sinful thoughts/feelings/actions you identified at the start of the guide.

What do you think are the core desires behind those tendencies? At the very bottom of your heart—what are your needs you are seeking to have satisfied?

Read Ephesians 2:12-18

There was a time when the world lay in sin and error, pining for love, happiness, security, and joy. No matter how much people consumed the things of the world, they were still hungry. Satisfaction was impossible. Because those cravings can only be satisfied in God and because of sin, there was a dividing wall of hostility between us and God. But at Christmas we celebrate God’s great gift of satisfaction. God sent His Son so that we might have access to Him, the fulfillment of all our desires.

Read 2 Peter 1:3-4

Consider all you have received through the gift of Christ! Now look again at those core desires behind your sin tendencies. How can those hungers be satisfied through the great and precious promises of God?

See the compassion of God in the face of Christ. God has not left you to battle your sin alone. He does not expect you to pick blind obedience over the deepest desires of your life. Instead, He has come in the flesh so that He could win back for you all the things your heart craves in Him. How do we fight sin? We fight it with superior satisfaction in Immanuel, God with us!

The Flood

Genesis 6:9–18

Before you open the Word today, pray.

Ask for help, even now, in knowing how to talk with your Father in prayer. God is with us. Christmas is God’s guarantee that you don’t have to do anything alone, ever again. God is with us even when we struggle with sin, even when we fail in our flesh. Process together with God whether you are experiencing His presence with us.

*Read Genesis
6:9-18*

The sin that rushed into the hearts of Adam and Eve back in the garden—it was now everywhere. But God saw Noah on the earth. He loved Noah and wanted to make him, his family, and all the animals safe so that the flood wouldn’t destroy them along with everything else. So God whispered in Noah’s ear a warning of the rain. He told Noah the one thing that would rescue them from the flood was an ark.

What did God see in the earth that prompted Him to send the flood? What was the goal of sending the flood? Was that goal accomplished? Why or why not?

Now, Noah was different from all the other people on the earth. While they ignored God and plugged their ears when He spoke, Noah listened carefully because he believed that everything God said was really true. If God said a flood was coming, then it would come. If God said it would be so big that it would wipe out everything and everyone, then it would. And if God said an ark was the only way he and his family would be safe, then it was.

Genesis 6:9-18

Do you ever feel like obedience to the Lord is hard? Name a specific time in your life when you felt like what God was calling you to do was difficult.

God told Noah the one thing that would rescue them from the flood was to build an ark. What is amazing for us today is that the ark has already been built for us. It is being held out to us this Christmas and it is not made by human hands. We never have to leave the safe embrace of the ark we are offered now. We are called to climb into Christ, hidden safely in Him through the storm of God’s wrath. And we are to stay firmly in Him, never walking in our own strength again. There is nothing to earn, for Christ has already finished the work. There is nothing to repay, for Christ is the gift of God.

Does your sin cause you to cling to Christ or avoid Him? Do your failures spur you to depend more on Jesus or to lean harder on yourself?

Christmas is the gift of Immanuel, God with us. Christ is with us before God the Father. Even repentance we don’t have to do alone. Christ is with us when we fail in that way we swore we never would, bringing us safely into the presence of God. He is with us the very second after we have missed the mark again, carrying us back to the Father in repentance and rest. And His is the strength we experience when we overcome temptation.

Spend some time coming before the Father today confessing and repenting of your sin, knowing that there is no reason for fear of condemnation because you are safe in Christ. Feel free to write out your prayers below.

The Promise

Genesis 9:8-17 & Hebrews 10:11-14

We know that God is with us.

We know that God loves us. We know that we are forgiven, but why then do we continue to sin? Christmas proves that God is with us even in our failures. There is no wrath left in His heart for the people of God because of our Immanuel.

Spend a few moments before we get started being honest with God about the following questions:

Are there any sin struggles you feel a lingering sense of shame over?

Have you ever wondered if struggles or sufferings that you face are a result of God punishing you?

Do you feel like God wants good for you, or do you ever feel like He's only punishing you?

Read Genesis 9:8-17

Who does God make a covenant with? What are the promises of the covenant? What is the sign of the covenant?

The flood must have been one of the most horrific events ever to be experienced. Imagine Noah, seeing God's wrath, facing the punishment. Even though he knew he was safe, it must have been terrifying.

How do you think Noah felt when he sucked in fresh air for the first time in months and heard the news from God punctuated with the rainbow in the sky? "Never again. I will never do this again."

In this life, even as Christians, we still experience failure. To live as a believer in Christ does not mean that you are free from sinning, but it does mean that you no longer live at peace with your sin. Thankfully, because Jesus bore the weight of our sin and lived a perfect life, He became the sacrifice we needed for our sin and gave us His righteousness! So when you fail, remember the promise He made with you that as long as you live you are being made more into the image of your Savior. God is not finished with you yet.

What does this text say about what Christ has already accomplished for you? What is your status before God? According to verse 14, when does that status expire?

This is the gift that caused shepherds to weep and kings to bow: a Savior who could proclaim “perfect” over people who weren’t yet perfect. It is why today you don’t have to fear punishment, irritation, or frustration from God, because Christ has already perfected you—even as you are being sanctified. How? He did it by taking the full punishment for any past, present, or future failure for you on the cross.

This is our Immanuel. He suffers with us and struggles with us, but when it comes to facing the wrath of God, He refuses to take us with Him. He goes alone. He goes before the Father for punishment not with us, but for us.

What are some sins you have struggled with that you still feel a lingering sense of shame over? Now imagine the most horrific event in history. Imagine seeing the fullness of God’s wrath poured out on Christ on the cross. Now hear the words of the new covenant ring true: “Never again. I will never do this again. It is finished.” The freedom from fear of God’s punishment is what Jesus purchased for us. We can instead receive and be motivated by His amazing love.

The Offering

Genesis 22:1-14

From our childhoods, the version of Christmas in our heads has likely been a little softer and a little fluffier than the reality. We too easily forget that Advent is the anticipation of the greatest sacrifice the world has ever known—the only perfect Father sending His only perfect Son to be destroyed. We forget that the baby at the center of that sweet nativity scene was born to die.

Read Genesis
22:1-14

Take a second to remember that this story is true. Abraham was a real man who loved his son. What feelings or confusion do you think he might have felt in this encounter with God?

This is a significant moment in Abraham’s life. He is called to do something miraculous and painful and huge, but it seems it will come at a great cost.

Read Genesis
22:2

Get as quiet as you can before God and ask Him to reveal to you the answers to two questions:

First, is there anything He is asking you to sacrifice for Him?

Second, is there anything you wouldn't be willing to sacrifice for Him? Be honest with God. How does this verse make you feel about Him? Does He seem cruel? Impossible to please?

Read Genesis 22:2 one last time, but this time, consider the gift of Christmas: Jesus, God's only begotten and beloved Son, in whom He is well pleased, was offered as a sacrifice for you.

The comfort of Christmas is that God is with us in the huge and significant things He asks us to do. God will never ask you to walk anywhere He hasn't walked already. Christ is the evidence.

It can be terrifying to walk forward in what God has asked you to do, not knowing if He's going to provide a way that doesn't cost us what we want most. Now just imagine how it must have felt for our heavenly Father to send Jesus, knowing that there would be no ram, no other provision to keep Him from having to sacrifice His own Son.

Christmas is a time of great joy, but it is also a moment of somber significance for the Father. It's the moment He sent His Son to suffer, giving Him up to be the provision for you.

Think again about what God might be asking you to sacrifice for Him. Take comfort in knowing that His tone is tender, His heart compassionate. He has walked a harder path than He will ever ask of you. He knows that sacrifice is painful and obedience is costly. When your head believes that but your heart hurts at the thought or your hands and feet hesitate to obey, ask Him for the strength to sacrifice. He promises to provide it.

*Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.
(Isaiah 41:10 ESV)*

The Choice

Genesis 29 & Matthew 1:2 & 1 Corinthians 1:26-31; 2:1-5 & Isaiah 53:1-3

The Advent season has a way of resetting us. We find ourselves reminiscing and remembering the mighty moments of our year, considering and contemplating what we want to do differently moving forward.

Before you open God’s Word today, look back to the significant moments you’re facing that you identified at the start of the guide. What kind of qualities do you think would help you meet these challenges and be used mightily by God?

Read Genesis 29

Why did Jacob want Rachel? Why did God open Leah’s womb? What were the four statements Leah said as she bore her four children? How does Leah describe her life in these statements? What is different about the fourth statement?

Read Matthew 1:2

This is the genealogy of Jesus. Whose name do you see in this lineage that you saw at the end of Genesis 29? Who did God choose to write the lineage of Jesus through? The wanted or the despised? Rachel or Leah?

Read
1 Corinthians
1:26-31

Make a list of the traits you see in the kind of people God chose. Why did He choose them? Look back to what you wrote at the start of your time with God today. How are the qualities that you listed different from or similar to what God says makes someone a good candidate for His purposes?

In the significant moments you are facing, God is with you, not primarily in your strengths but also in your weaknesses. He has written these huge and epic moments into your life not because you are qualified, but because He is qualified and He is with you.

Read
1 Corinthians
2:1-5

How is God encouraging you to face your significant moments through this text?

Read Isaiah
53:1-3

God is in the business of writing His story with unlikely heroes.

This is the gift of Immanuel, a God with us who was misunderstood, rejected, and unwanted, all to confirm in our hearts the truth. We cannot trust the world, or even ourselves, to tell what makes a person valuable to the kingdom of God. We must trust God.

The Dreamer

Genesis 37; 39

Christmas is a time for reflection. Think back across your year. Think back even further. Do you remember what you used to dream for your life? What had you planned for yourself?

Take a second to write out some of the things that you had planned for your life. Then take a second to write out the things that have occurred that are definitely not what you had planned for your life.

*Read Genesis
37 & 39*

Make a list of the events that happened in Joseph’s life. Then, as you read chapter 39, make a note every time you notice the phrase ‘the Lord’ and what you observe about it.

Joseph's life clearly didn't go as he planned, but where was God when everything was going wrong? The Lord was with him.

The story took a sudden turn. Joseph became Pharaoh's right hand man and enabled Egypt—and his entire family—to survive a severe famine in the land. God used all the tremendous suffering in Joseph's life to get Joseph to the right place and time to save God's people.

Thousands of years later, Mary probably felt a lot like Joseph. If God had called her to bear the Messiah, then surely he could have prevented a census forcing her to leave her home at the last moment of her pregnancy. But that stressful transition happened because God was with Mary, moving her to Bethlehem so that Christ could be born in the right place and the right time to fulfill the prophecy.

Thirty-three years after that, the disciples probably felt a lot like Joseph as well. If God had called Jesus to save the world, then surely He wouldn't need to go to the cross! But that devastating day happened because God was with them, and with us. What we didn't know was that He was working to save us.

Think about your current pain and sufferings. Pray and ask God to give you faith to believe that even when things aren't going as you might want, God is there. These things are not happening in your life because God has abandoned you, but because He is Immanuel, God with you. Cling to His plan, and cling to His heart. Because our God has taken on human form, we can trust Him and be honest with Him in our suffering. He has walked through pain. He knows what it is like to have your life turned upside down for the purposes of God. This is the gift of Immanuel. Feel free to write down your prayer requests below.

The Plagues

Exodus 7:14-10:29; 9:14-16; 10:1-2 & Galatians 4:1-7

Imagine what it must have been like that first moment Mary laid eyes on Jesus. Seeing her Son must have given her great joy, but surely the tears spilling down her cheeks were part of an even deeper joy—seeing her God. Finally, the people of God had been given back the greatest gift they had ever known. They could behold the face of their Father.

Read Exodus
7:14-10:29

Mark down every time you see ‘hardened.’ What do you notice about the hardening of hearts? Why does that happen?

If God is powerful enough to send all seven of these plagues, why doesn’t He just destroy the Egyptians? If He has power over Pharaoh’s heart, why doesn’t He just soften it? Obviously He wants the people to be free, so why not just make them free?

Read Exodus
9:14-16 & 10:1-2

Why does God save His people this way?

God sees all situations with perfect clarity. We often have only a small understanding of our trials.

God was working toward setting His people free from slavery, but even more that, He was working that His people would be set free to be with Him. He was orchestrating this all so that when they were set free they would know the God who is with them. This is eternal life, to know God (John 17:3).

Read Galatians
4:1-7

Praise be to God that we can know Him now through Christ Jesus. We are not slaves to sin any longer. We are sons and daughters of God and co-heirs with Christ. We are free from sin to worship our gracious Father in Heaven.

That is, after all, what we celebrate at Christmas. Unlike the Israelites, we don't have to figure out who God is by watching Him work miracles. Unlike Moses, we don't have to figure out who God is by watching His glory as it passes by. God has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

The Passover

Exodus 12:1-7, 12-13 & Hebrews 9:22; 5:1-3; 9:13-14; 10:4, 11-14

What does it mean for someone to be “with you?” When was the last time it felt like God was with you? What elements of the situation helped you feel that way?

Christmas is the gift of a Partner who doesn’t just stand beside us as a shoulder to cry on, but who says, “I will enter into the hardships you face. I will take the weight of your burden upon my shoulders.” There is no other friend like Jesus, no other partner like Him. No one else has both the ability and the inclination to help us in the way we really need.

*Read Exodus
12:1-7, 12-13*

What kind of lamb needed to be sacrificed? What did God need to see in order to pass over?

*Read Hebrews
9:22*

What do you see about blood? Why do you think the Passover lamb needed to be without blemish?

For someone to be with you in the way you truly crave, they need to have the ability to help you. They need to be free of their own sin issues and have the power to change things for you.

Read Hebrews
5:1-3

What are earthly priests beset with, and what are the implications of their weakness?

Read Hebrews
9:13-14

Jesus is able to be with us in our sin because He has no sin issues of His own and because He actually has the power to fix our problems with sin.

Read Hebrews
10:4, 11-14

The cost to be paid for the freedom of God’s people was the death of Egypt’s first-born sons. God wanted us to see what it would take for a harsh master to release his slaves. God tells us that we are born as slaves to sin, the harshest of all masters.

Sin had us. We belonged to it as much as the Israelites belonged to Pharaoh. We couldn’t escape its hold on our hearts. God always knew what it would cost for Him to set us free. He knew He was going to send His anger down against us for our sin and that there was only one way He could protect us from Himself. For us to be safe, God put His Son to death and painted His blood over us. He gave us His best and perfect Lamb to make us safe and free from sin, our horrible and evil master. He set us free from sin so that we might come and worship Him forever.

Spend some time reflecting on ways you may have rejected God’s perfect provision, then praise Him for giving you the Jesus who is both able and inclined to take on your sin. Write your prayer below.

The Journey

Exodus 14; 16:1-3 & Matthew 4:1-4 & Hebrews 2:17-18; 4:14-16

December 25th is a *big* day.

But what about December 26? What about January 2? How does Christmas affect us on those “normal” days? The moments of significance in our lives remind us and give us the comfort and assurance that God is moving.

Read Exodus 14

In verse 31, what is the response of the Israelites to this amazing and significant moment?

Read Exodus 16:1-3

What has changed in the hearts of the Israelites?

Exodus 16:1-3

When the Israelites were in the direct presence of God’s power, they praised and feared His name, but trials were just around the corner. And when the trials came upon them, they were unsure if they could trust God to provide. Did He really love them? Was He really still with them?

Israel was like us when we’re hungry. Hunger has a way of making us doubt every meal we’ve ever had before.

Think through the trials you’re currently facing in your life. Is there a part of you that is starting to doubt God’s provision in the middle of these difficult situations? Is there a part of you that wonders if He is going to let you starve to death in the wilderness?

In what ways do you feel tempted in your trials to just provide for yourself instead of waiting on God?

Christmas is not just the evidence that God loves you. It is not just the evidence that God will provide. It is the proof that God is with you in the hunger and with you in the wandering in the wilderness.

Read Matthew
4:1-4

Where was Jesus led? How was Jesus feeling after 40 days and nights? What did Satan urge Him to do?

Read Hebrews
2:17-18 &
4:14-16

Even Jesus, the provision of God, fought the urge to provide for Himself and trusted in the Father. God has given you a Savior who not only promises that things will turn out okay, but who has walked through the very trials you experience now. He too has been hungry. He too has been tempted to provide for Himself in the pain of the wilderness. We do not have a high priest that cannot sympathize. Jesus has been tempted as we are and the Bible promises us that Jesus will help us in our time of need. Spend some time in prayer thanking Him for His willingness to walk through suffering and temptation for you. Bring your needs to Jesus and ask Him to help in your time of need.

The Ten Commandments

Exodus 20:1-22; 7:14-10:29 & Deuteronomy 5:15 & Romans 7:4-6

Advent is about anticipation.

It's about remembering and reliving what God's people felt as they waited to see a promise fulfilled. The people ached for a savior who would set them free not just from the penalty of sin, but from slavery to sin. Hallelujah, He has come!

Ask God to show you if you are living inside that great gift of freedom. Circle any of the following words that describe how you feel when you think about your fight against sin:

hopeless, indifferent, defeated, apathetic, guilty, content, ashamed, enslaved, overwhelmed, peaceful, apathetic

All of these words are symptoms of misunderstanding the truth of Christmas. Either we feel defeated, unconvinced that we can win, or we are OK with our sin. We have forgotten that God is with us. He is all-powerful, able to overcome anything, and fully holy, unwilling to make peace with our sin.

Read Exodus
20:1-22

What is the foundation for the commandments, the first thing God says before beginning them?

Read Deuteronomy
5:15

Why does God give the first commandment?

Before God asks the people to be faithful, He reminds them that He is faithful.

Read Exodus
7:14-10:29

What does Moses say over and over again about why he wants Pharaoh to let the people go?

When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt they couldn't obey God's commands. They couldn't worship the way they wanted or offer sacrifices or keep the Sabbath. Their master wouldn't allow it. Then God delivered them. Why? So that they could serve God. He set them free so that they could obey.

Read Romans
7:4-6

Why did you die to the law? How did you die to the law? What is the point of belonging to another? What does verse 6 say have you died to? Why?

God has set us free from slavery to sin and death. How? Jesus bought us from our old master by dying in our place so that we could have Him with us and dwelling in us.

Now, because you have been set free, you have God with you. When you don't feel able to fight against your sin, His Spirit tells you, "I am the God who rose Jesus from the dead. I can overcome this." When you don't care to fight, He tells you, "I am the Spirit of holiness. I will wage war on sin."

Two-thousand years ago Jesus came bursting into the world so that He could fight for us when we had neither the ability nor desire to overcome our sin. And 2,000 years later, God is still doing this for His people. He bursts into their hearts and fights for them by giving His strength and His conviction.

How could the truth that God is with you change your feelings about your battle with sin?

The Wall

Joshua 5:13-15; 6:1-7 & Romans 7:4-6

If the world really understood what Christians celebrate at Christmas, they would probably think we're crazy. We celebrate the miracle that God came to us as a baby. What kind of God would leave His throne in Heaven for a manger?

Today, pray before you open God's Word. Pray that your familiarity with the Christmas story would not keep you from the awe and wonder of such a miracle.

*Read Joshua
5:13-15*

What does the passage say that Joshua did when he saw the man standing before him? How did the man identify himself, and how did Joshua respond to this revelation?

*Read Joshua
6:1-7*

What did God command Joshua to do? What did God say to Joshua before He gave any instructions? When God says to Joshua, "I have given Jericho into your hand," why does He speak in the past tense?

Joshua 6:1-7

God’s instructions followed God’s promise.

Think about a significant task set before you. What are the promises and truths God gives us in His Word that speak to that task? What would it look like for you to hold on to these promises in faith so you could complete what God has instructed?

Read Romans
7:4-6

Do you think Joshua thought God’s instructions made sense? How precisely did Joshua obey the commands? What promises does God give us in these verses to help us obey His instructions?

Joshua trusted the Lord, did what the Lord said he should do, and the people believed Joshua and followed his instructions in faith. This was a great a victory God provided for them!

Sometimes when we face significant tasks set before us by God, we are tempted to strategize first. We strategize based on what makes the most sense to us to get the job done, but God has laid out what He wants of us in His Word. God wants us to first depend on prayer, pursue humility, love one another, and trust Him. All of these are more important than our strategies.

Because God is with us in our significant tasks, we are free to obey His instructions, knowing He will accomplish what He wants.

The amazing truth about Christmas is that Jesus, the Son of God, became a baby! This is far crazier than marching around a city to make the walls collapse. Christmas is a reminder that God accomplishes the most significant tasks in the strangest, most counter-intuitive, yet most perfect of ways.

The Shepherd King

1 Samuel 16:1-13 & 1 Corinthians 1:27-31

When we look around there is havoc on earth, including in our own hearts.

This is why the theme of the Christmas season, “peace on earth,” is so valuable. The world is in need of peace and in need of a righteous King to bring it. At Christmas we celebrate that unto us a King has been given, and by His rule there will be peace.

Yet while Jesus is always the King we need, if we’re honest with ourselves, He is often not the King we want. With our faulty vision we become nearsighted and willing to trade our perfect Savior for instant gratification, for a lesser king in our own image.

*Read 1 Samuel
16:1-13*

How many of Jesse’s sons did Samuel pass over when he was trying to anoint the king? Compare what qualities Samuel thought a king ought to have with what God was looking for.

As Samuel began his quest to anoint the next king, we see that he had the wrong idea about what the king should be like. Not only that, but Jesse didn’t even bring all of his sons to the sacrifice! David, the youngest, a dirty shepherd boy, Samuel’s least likely pick, wasn’t even invited.

Why do you think God chooses people that men would ordinarily reject?

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Look back at the significant things you identified that God might be calling you to do at the start of this guide. Now think about all the things you didn't put on the list. Are there significant things you used to dream about doing for the kingdom of God that you have tabled? Are the significant things you wrote so crazy and radical that they are only possible if God is with you? Or are they things that "make sense" based on your strengths and personality?

*Read
1 Corinthians
1:27-31*

When Jesus came, He didn't come the way His people expected Him. He came as a baby and grew up to be a carpenter. Like David, He was an unlikely King in the eyes of the world. In Isaiah 53 we see that Jesus had "no form or majesty that we should look at him," and that He was even "despised and rejected by men."

Christmas is not just a sweet story of a baby in a manger. When God opens our eyes, we see that the baby in that manger is the coming King of kings and Lord of lords. We will kneel before Him, for in that manger, God came to be with us!

Spend some time offering yourself again in prayer to our good God who came to be with us. His call is worthy and His cause is worthy because our King is worthy. Write your prayers below.

To Him be all the glory.

The Giant

1 Samuel 17 & Ephesians 6:10-18

Imagine how this season felt for Mary and Joseph.

As if becoming the parents of the Messiah wasn’t stressful enough, they faced unimaginable opposition. King Herod and the governing authorities were troubled by the wise men’s recognition of a new king and devoted innumerable resources to killing Jesus before He was even born.

If you face pain during this Christmas season, remember that you are not alone. All of God’s people, just like Mary and Joseph, face opposition. Also remember that, like God’s people, your victory is guaranteed in Jesus Christ.

Read 1 Samuel 17

The people of Israel had a real enemy, and they were very afraid. Goliath wanted to take them out, and he was a fierce warrior. Surely they did not expect that this shepherd boy would become the champion that God would use to deliver victory!

Compare what the Israelites saw when they looked at Goliath in verses 4-8 to what David saw in verse 26. Why was David so confident that God would deliver him from the hand of the Philistine?

Read 1 Samuel 17 again

What did David wear to fight the Philistine? What weapons did he take? How many of his five stones did he end up using?

Read Ephesians
6:10-18

While it is easy to focus on the opposition you can see, do not forget that, like the Israelites, you are engaged in a serious battle with a real enemy you cannot see.

Who does this passage say our battle is against? What are the weapons and armor this passage calls us to take up against our foes?

You, like David, are an unlikely warrior in this war. You have no strength against this kind of enemy. Whose strength does Ephesians 6 say you are to fight with?

If not for Christmas, where would your hope come from for life's battles? At Christmas we celebrate because through Christmas we are promised victory. We celebrate not just the gift of a Champion who could defeat sin and the enemy once and for all, but the gift of a champion who is with us in the daily fight. Jesus our Champion is in our hearts. By the power of the Holy Spirit, God gives us His own strength to persevere through whatever pain we face in life.

Consider your present significant trials again, remembering that you are in a bigger battle. What specific ways can you practice putting on the armor described in Ephesians 6?

The Healing

2 Kings 5:1-14 & Revelation 22:1-2, 17

It's the miracle of Christmas—the only independent being subjected Himself to the limitations of a human body in infant form. We've heard it so many times that it can wash right over us. Slow down to consider that our God chose to come to us as a newborn baby.

Babies are the ultimate example of dependence. Infants depend on parents. Jesus embraced dependence in His earthly life so that we could learn to depend on God. As you consider our fascinating God, pray to find the courage to embrace the infant-like trust displayed in the gospel.

*Read 2 Kings
5:1-14*

What had Naaman accomplished in his life, and how did people regard him as a result? In the midst of his success, what obstacle did he face?

Naaman was highly regarded by the King of Syria. God granted him great success in battle and he was a man of valor, but one thing plagued him—he was a leper. This ailment left him desperate. So desperate that he was willing to take a slave girl's word and travel all the way to Samaria. He found the king and then traveled with all his horses and chariots to the prophet Elisha's house.

What were Elisha's instructions to Naaman, and how did Naaman respond? How does Naaman feel about washing in the Jordan?

2 Kings 5:1-14

God would heal Naaman, but not the way Naaman expected. He thought the prophet might just wave his hand, but instead Elisha told him he needed to do something. He needed to wash in the Jordan River. “What’s so special about the Jordan?” Naman balked. “Surely, the rivers in Damascus are better.”

It seems silly that Naaman would travel so far to see Elisha and almost turn away angry at the prophet’s prescription for healing. Pride often seems silly. What was so difficult about dipping in the river seven times? Perhaps that was Naaman’s hang-up. He was a man of valor and this solution was too easy!

Read Revelation
22:1-2, 17

How do Elisha’s instructions point to Jesus?

Perhaps Naaman’s hang-up is ours as well. Washing in Jesus is so easy that it exposes our pride. Just like Naaman, who traveled a great distance and brought great riches to try to impress the king and win his favor, we spend money and time trying to get what we want from God. Or like Naaman, we expect a waving-of-the-hand type miracle from God. Because of our pride, we listen to every other voice besides the One who calls us to Jesus.

Consider again the miracle of Christmas—the all-powerful God became a baby. Jesus became helpless so that we could see our helplessness and, by His power alone, come to trust in Another for life.

The Prophecies

Luke 4:16-21 & John 1:9-13; 3:19-21 & Ezekiel 36:24-27

Raising the dead and healing the sick are miracles. They are significant.

Waking up this morning, going about the details of your day with faith in your heart, these things seem small.

At Christmas we celebrate the gift of a Savior who doesn't just deliver us out of darkness but who shines light in our hearts to help us believe, to see the miracles He is working all around us. The miracle of daily faith is evidence that God is with us in all things.

*Read Luke
4:16-21*

Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah and then rolls up the scroll. All eyes were fixed on Him as He confesses that He is the One Isaiah prophesied about. He is the Messiah.

Read John 1:9-13

Why do you think that Jesus's own people did not receive Him? Did they not have enough evidence? Were the prophets too vague?

Jesus plainly told the people that He was the Messiah of whom the prophets spoke. Not only that, His works were great enough that people could have believed on account of His works alone. Nevertheless, many did not believe Jesus.

*Read John
3:19-21*

According to this passage, why don't people believe Jesus is who He says He is?

John 3:19-21

Trusting in Jesus is truly a miracle that can only be accomplished by God Himself on our behalf. In order to believe, we need God to give us a new heart.

When you feel doubt in your heart, how do you handle it? Do you try to will yourself into faith? Do you ignore the feeling and shrug it off? Or do you remember that Christ is with you now, producing the miracle of faith in your heart?

As you go about your day today, pray that God would make you conscious of the ways He is working through the random and small tasks you face.

Read Ezekiel
36:24-27

Christmas is the fulfillment of God’s promise to give a new heart and spirit. Christmas is the gift of a new way of living. This new way is Immanuel, God with us, because Jesus was born! Jesus fulfilled the prophecies by living in holy submission to God, even to the point of death on a cross. In so doing, He purchased you for Himself. Now that God is with us and in us, He is the One causing us to cling to Him with all of our new heart.

The Protector

Daniel 6:4-27 & Hebrews 10:19-20

Cattle, shepherds, a man, and a woman: thousands of years ago they stood in the presence of God. They were the first people since Adam who were allowed that privilege without complicated rituals and priestly sacrifice.

Before you get started today, pray. Remember that your words are not meaningless sounds evaporating into the air, but that you stand in the presence of God. You get to go before Him, speak to the Almighty, and be heard because of the miracle of Christmas.

*Read Daniel
6:4-27*

What were the conditions of the petition and the consequences if not obeyed? What did Daniel do when he knew that the document had been signed by the king?

In what ways do you hide your worship of God out of fear of the consequences? Or are you kept from prayer and meeting with God, not through threats of dens filled with lions, but through distractions and gifts? What does it take to keep you from spending time in His presence? TV? Time with loved ones? Sleep? The demands of your children or your job? Are you finding it hard to be faithful in the seemingly small?

Why do we have confidence to enter into the presence of God? What is the way we enter into His presence?

This Christmas remember that we don't just thank God for the gift of Christ, but also for Christ giving us the gift of thanking God. When you kneel and pray like Daniel, remember that there was once a time that communion with God was impossible because of sin.

No earthly government was able to secure that right for you, so no government can take it from you. No suffering can undo the truth that God is with you.

No amount of discipline could make it possible for you to sit in His presence, so no amount of distractions can take that great gift away from you. You can go to God right now, with nothing between you. In all the smallest things, God is with you.

Spend some time praying to God now, entering His presence and thanking Him that you have the right and ability to do that because of Jesus. Feel free to write out your prayer requests below.

The Messenger

Jonah 1; 3; 4:1-3

The angels took the good news of Christmas to a handful of people, but after that first Christmas, God entrusted the message to His people to deliver to all the world. They were to go and spread the word that the King has come, a King for the whole world. To anyone who believes He will give the power to become a child of God.

Yet for us, Christmas sometimes becomes a time to protect time with our people, avoiding outsiders. The checkout clerk in the store is in the way of our celebration of Christmas. The annoying coworker at our Christmas party is standing between us and the celebration we want to enjoy. We often forget that Christmas is a message of great joy and good news for the very people we want to avoid.

*Read Jonah
1 & 3*

What did God ask Jonah to do? How did Jonah respond? What did that disobedience cost him? What was the message Jonah delivered to Nineveh? How did they respond to that message? How did God respond to them?

Spend some time meditating on the better-ness of our Savior. Jonah went into the darkness of the ocean depths because he disobeyed. Jesus went into the darkness of eternal depths because He obeyed. Jonah came with a message of condemnation. Jesus came with a message of salvation. The people believed God’s message and repented, so God did not destroy them. The people rejected God’s message and did not repent, so God destroyed Jesus in order to spare them.

Why did Jonah run from God’s command in the first place?

All of us have “Ninevites” in our own lives, people that deep down in our hearts we don’t think should receive the grace and forgiveness of Jesus.

Ask the Spirit of God to reveal who those people are for you. If you can’t think of specific people, contemplate the characteristics or types of people that are hard for you to love. Who are the kind of people you seek to avoid?

This Christmas we celebrate a Messiah who didn’t just die for you and the people you love, but for people from every tribe and tongue and nation. He died for His enemies. He died for mothers and murderers, aid workers and adulterers, presidents and pedophiles.

Think about the small details of your day. How has God arranged your times and places to intersect with people you would rather avoid? What would it look like to take the glorious, gracious message of Christmas to them?

The History

Nehemiah 9

Advent is like an alarm going off on our calendar, reminding us to zoom out and consider what really matters in our lives.

The danger of the small details of our days is that they can start to cannibalize our entire lives. We begin to believe we exist to rest, take vacations, sleep, eat, and work, instead of seeing all these things as the means to live out radical and significant stories with God.

Advent is a season to stop, take stock, and remember the main thing—to sit at the feet of Jesus and fall so in love again that you feel a burning urgency to give Him everything.

*Read
Nehemiah 9*

Take a second to stop and pray. Remember that the stories of God and His people in these verses belong as much to you as they did to the people in Nehemiah’s time. This is your history.

Look back at verses 9-31. Make a list of God’s actions, man’s responses, and God’s responses to those. What themes stand out to you? Why do the people want to make a covenant with God in verse 38?

Our hearts often quickly forget all the ways that God has been gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Name a few ways that God has shown His faithfulness to you.

Fast-forward hundreds of years. Take a second to imagine three kings crossing unknown lands because they had heard of a newborn baby wrapped in the arms of His teenage mom. They swore their allegiance to Christ while He was still an infant. They bowed and committed to Him, not to earn anything, but out of an overflow of hearts filled with awe and amazement at the grace of God in the form of a child.

The people in Nehemiah wanted to make a commitment of obedience to God, not to earn His love, but out of an overflow of trusting His steadfast love. It's what we do in the moments when we are most in love—whisper promises and make vows. Our hearts are too full to hold back.

If you could travel through time and stand in that stable on that cold Christmas night, if you could behold the perfect love of God in the face of that child, what would you want to whisper to Him? What vows would you feel prompted to make out of a heart of wonder and adoration?

Don't worry, you have nothing to lose. He knows that while your spirit is willing, your flesh is weak. You may fail, and that's OK. His mercy never fails.

The Genealogy

Matthew 1:1-17 & 2 Samuel 7:12-16 & Hebrews 11:39-40 & 1 Peter 1:13

The events that led to the birth of our Savior weren't splashy and seemed insignificant. They weren't all separating seas and burning bushes. In fact, most of the chapters and books of God's story are filled with the simple and seemingly small obedient acts of God's people. Israel's history is largely one of a people waiting for something significant that they never saw accomplished.

*Read Matthew
1:1-17*

*Ask God to use this simple genealogy to prepare your heart for Christmas.
Ask Him to use this family tree to speak to you today. In verse 1, what does
it say about Jesus?*

*Read 2 Samuel
7:12-16*

*In his genealogy, what point was Matthew trying to make by saying that
Jesus is the Son of David?*

Read 2 Samuel
7:12-16 again

Think about this past year and even the past few years. Is there something you’ve been waiting for God to do? Is there some promise He seems slow in keeping? Consider for a second the weight of waiting in this genealogy—all these names, all these souls who lived and died never getting to see God’s promise fulfilled.

Read Hebrews
11:39-40

Why did all these faith-filled children of God not receive what was promised? For whom had He prepared something better?

Look at Matthew’s genealogy again. So many generations represented. People who suffered, people who were born and died in slavery, and people who wandered their whole lives in the wilderness wondering, *Where is God taking us?*

All these people didn’t receive what God had promised them. They lived out their seemingly small lives in faithfulness, and they waited. Not one year, not ten years, but their whole lives. They waited and still they never saw the promise fulfilled. Christmas is the day we celebrate the culmination of all of the generations lived in waiting. We celebrate God making meaning out of all the simple, small steps of obedience taken by the people of God. We celebrate the great gift of living in a time when the Messiah has a name and a face, a time when you and I wake up and get to breathe in His completed work and walk in His Spirit.

Read 1 Peter 1:13

And still, we wait for more. Abraham banked everything on a promise he never saw fulfilled. What would look different in your life today if you banked everything on the grace to be brought to you on the day Jesus comes again? How would it change your dreams, your relationships, the things that matter to you? How would it change your perspective on the small things if you believed they held an eternal weight of significance?

John the Baptist

Luke 1:5-25, 57-66 & Matthew 28:18-20

To start today, ask yourself this one simple question:

When you think about the good news of Christmas, does it feel impossible to hold that good news in, or does it feel impossible to speak it out?

Now look back at the significant things you face that you wrote at the start of the guide.

When you listed out areas where God is calling you to trust Him, did you include anything about proclaiming the gospel of Jesus?

Read Luke 1:5-25

What do you notice about the kind of man Zechariah was? What did the angel tell Zechariah to name his child? How did he respond to the angel's proclamation? What did the angel do? Why did the angel do that?

Read Luke 1:57-66

What triggered the opening of Zechariah's mouth? What is the importance of Zechariah choosing the name John (Luke 1:13)? What did Zechariah say when he could speak?

Luke 1:57-66

Zechariah was unable to speak because of his unbelief. But when he finally believed what the angel said—so much that he was willing to walk in line with it by naming his son John—his lips were opened.

God has said that He will return when the gospel is proclaimed in all the world. He has come to you with that message. However, for many of us, when we contemplate the significant things we want to do with our lives, proclaiming the gospel doesn't even make the list.

Read Matthew
28:18-20

The good news is that because of Christmas, even the task of sharing the gospel is not left for us to accomplish alone.

The command to make disciples is bookmarked by two great truths. What are they? How does the truth of Immanuel equip you to complete the most significant task we have ever been given?

The Savior

Luke 1:26-38; 14:25-33 & Deuteronomy 22:20-24

Christmas reminds us to surrender to the good news of a God who is with us. It’s about trust—not a belief that God will work things out as we want, but faith that however God works things out is ultimately what we need and more, what we really want.

Look through the significant things that you are facing in your life. Take a few moments with God to honestly process through your fears about what those things might cost you. Ask Him to show you today how God being with you is going to help you face your fears.

*Read Luke
1:26-38*

Many of us have heard this story a million times, so be sure to slow down and ask yourself a few questions. What exactly is the angel telling Mary? And what will it cost her?

*Read Deuteronomy
22:20-24*

This passage is incredibly difficult to understand and stomach in our culture, but ask yourself one question.

What would it mean for an unwed teenage girl to be discovered pregnant in Mary’s culture?

Read Luke 1:38

What a great and incredible gift that Mary received, the privilege to carry our promise fulfilled and raise the Son of God! At the same time, what a great cost to Mary's own personal safety and dreams. In this moment—the first encounter with the angel—Mary already knew what this news would almost certainly cost her. She knew it compromised her hope of being married to her fiancé, the acceptance of her community, and maybe even her very life.

In spite of all these justifiable fears, what was Mary's response to the angel in verse 38?

At Christmas, we, too, receive an incredible gift. We get God's promise fulfilled, the Son of God. Like Mary, we are told that we will carry Christ inside of us through the power of the Spirit. Yet also like Mary, this great gift comes at great cost to our own personal safety and dreams.

Read Luke 14:25-33

God is going to write a story with your life that glorifies His name, but He does not pretend that it won't come at a cost.

Spend some time praying and asking God to reveal to you the places that you are avoiding His call on your life because of what it might cost.

Mary could face anything because she belonged to God. We, too, can face anything because there is one thing our obedience will never cost us, and that's God. Jesus said He will be with us always and never leave us nor forsake us. Let that truth give you the courage to tell God today the words of Luke 1:38.

Mary's Song

Luke 1:46-56; 6:20-26 & Isaiah 53:1-12

Christmas is a season of great joy for some and great sorrow for others. We celebrate gifts that God has given us, the blessings we have received, and at least for some of us, we also remember the things God has taken from us.

Make a list of the ways you have felt blessed this year.

Make a list of the things that have felt the least like blessing this year.

*Read Luke
1:46-56*

Why does Mary rejoice? What does she say people will call her? Why is it important that we understand Jesus did everything needed to save us? Who is His mercy for? How did God show His strength? Why does God exalt people? Who does He fill and who does He send away? Are you noticing a theme?

Blessed. It means favored by God. It means happy in God. So what are the indicators that we are favored by God? What are the things that will make us blissfully happy in Him? While we think God is blessing us most when we see ourselves exalted and when the world applauds us, God's worldview is different from the world's.

Read Luke
6:20-26

Who are the blessed? Why are these things they receive blessings? Who are those who receive woe? And why are these things they receive cursed?

Read Isaiah
53:1-12

Jesus was indeed blessed, but what were the indicators of that in His life? What are the things you see prophesied about Jesus that the world would call curses rather than blessings?

This is the God who is with you, the One who also has faced pain and hardship. For the joy of blessing set before Him, He moved forward in faithful obedience and endured the cross.

Christmas is written into our calendars as an opportunity to remember that the world and God see things very differently. The greatest blessing ever given arrived not in a palace, but in a stable. The greatest blessing the world would ever know was given to a teenage girl to carry in her womb.

Look back at the things you wrote at the top of the page. Think back to the areas of suffering you identified at the start of this guide.

Using Luke 6:20-26 as a guide, what are some of the upside-down blessings in your life you might have missed? Spend some time magnifying the Lord for the ways He has blessed you. Write your praises below.

The Stable

Luke 2:1-7 & Philippians 2:5-11 & 1 Peter 5:5-7

Have you ever stepped into a room or place that felt beneath you? A bathroom so dirty it made you wrinkle up your nose? A bedroom so messy you felt out of place? Imagine what it must have been like for God to leave His heavenly throne and wrap His majesty and glory in human flesh.

Consider the sins you’re currently battling that you identified at the start of this guide.

How are your struggles rooted in pride, or a view that your own desires, needs, and strengths are paramount?

Read Luke 2:1-7

How long had Mary been pregnant when they traveled away from their home to Bethlehem for the census? What about Joseph’s lineage made it so that he had to go to Bethlehem to be registered?

Most modern-day doctors tell pregnant women to stop traveling in the last month of their pregnancy. Mary surely wanted to be at home, preparing and waiting for the child she had been expecting for nine months, but circumstances forced Joseph and a very pregnant Mary to travel to Bethlehem. When Mary finally went into labor, perhaps she thought, *Here? Now? I’m going to give birth to the Son of the Most High God—the One who is to take David’s throne—in a stable?*

But God does not make mistakes. The anointed King would live a life marked by humility from His very first breath. Not a warm hospital bed, but a cold and dirty manger. Not a crown of gold, but a crown of thorns.

*Read Philippians
2:5-11*

According to the text, why has God exalted Jesus so highly?

In God's kingdom, the way up is down. Jesus humbled himself to the lowest level from His very first breath. The only uncreated being faced the lowliest of births. He left heavenly hosts for the company of sinners, left the highest throne for an old wooden cross. He, the highest and most worthy to be praised, washed the feet of the most undeserving.

Look back at those sins you listed at the start of today's devotional. Are any of your struggles a result of trying to climb up or gain higher status instead of pursuing humility?

*Read 1 Peter
5:5-7*

What does it look like to clothe yourself in humility? What are the promises in this passage that will help free you up to pursue humility?

Do you know why we have the strength and ability to humble ourselves? Because of Christmas. God, perfect and holy and without need, took on the likeness of men and became a baby. He not only died to set you free from the consequence of your pride, but His Spirit took up residence in your heart. He is now constantly with you and always urging you away from pride and toward humility.

The Good News

Luke 2:8-10 & 1 Corinthians 10:31

Turn back to the questions you answered at the start of this guide. This Christmas Eve, just consider all that you’re walking through right now.

Take a few moments, put your head down, and close your eyes. Tell God the truth about how you and He are doing this Christmas Eve. Tell Him if there are any parts of your life where you feel like you are just sleepwalking. Ask Him to break through your sleepy tasks today with glad tidings of Immanuel, God with us.

How has this year been different than what you planned with God? Have you lived out the significant life you crave? Or have the small moments cannibalized everything, leaving you feeling like an outsider in the radical stories God is writing?

Read Luke 2:8-10

What were the shepherds doing when the angel came? What did the angel say to them? What did the shepherds do after the angels left? What did the shepherds do after they had made known what had been told them?

Think of those shepherds. They were minding their own business, doing their normal daily tasks, absolutely unaware that on the other side of town, cows and sheep were witnessing the world being turned upside down. But God broke through and interrupted their everyday tasks with the truth that changed everything. So they scrambled over hillsides, set their eyes on their Savior and worshiped and celebrated God’s greatest gift. Then they went back to their mundane tasks, but they went back changed, glorifying and praising God.

Read Luke 2:8-10
again

Sometimes we want so badly for God to interrupt our lives, pull us out of the mundane, and place us in the middle of the magical, but Christmas is better than that. Christmas says God came down to be with us in the mundane, and by doing that, He made the mundane magical.

Read
1 Corinthians
10:31

God doesn't ask us to leave our small tasks in order to become significant. He comes with us into the small, making even those things significant. Because of Christmas, everything ordinary has become extraordinary. Eating, drinking, working, sleeping—we can do it all as the shepherds did, glorifying and praising God because we know that God is with us!

Think about the small tasks set before you today. What would it look like to do those things as if you had just learned that Jesus was alive and with you? What would be different in your heart, in your words, and in your behavior?

Merry Christmas!

John 3:16 & Matthew 1:22-23

Merry Christmas!

You have presents to open and children to hug and food to eat, but before all of that, do the one thing that is necessary and sit at the feet of your King. Listen to Him as He tells you the glorious message that He came 2,000 years ago to give you:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16 ESV)

Read John 3:16

How much did God love the world?

Think about all the people you love and all the presents you have wrapped for them. Think about the most expensive and most costly gift you have ever given. Now consider again the love of God showed in the cost of the gift He gave.

How much does God love you? Think about the person you love most. What would you give up for them? What would you give them up for?

Read John 3:16
again

The Father gave up the person He loved most for you. Don't let that pass by you this Christmas day.

Moments may come when you do not feel loved by God. Seasons might come when you doubt His goodness, when you question if He is really for you and if He is trustworthy.

When those seasons come, remember Christmas. Set it in your mind. God wanted to be with you so much that He gave up the most precious person in the universe. He wanted to be with you in your sin and suffering, in the significant and the small, and so He wrote the birthday of Christ into the pages of history to make a way to be with you.

Read Matthew
1:22-23

The birth of Jesus, the miracle of Christmas, took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us)."

He has come. The years of waiting and wondering are over. They have given way to the flesh-and-blood proof that our Father is faithful. And as we wait for His return, we don't wait alone, because our God is with us.

Before you do another thing today, enjoy that glorious and magnificent gift. Just spend some time sitting and being in the presence of the God who is with you.

Family Devotional

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. (Hebrews 1:1-4 ESV)

The Advent Family Devotional is a 25-day curriculum of Scriptures, devotionals, and questions that starts December 1 and ends December 25.

We built this devotional because we want to help your whole family center around specific truths found in the Old Testament and have your hearts stirred together toward the coming of Jesus.

To use this devotional, gather your family at some point each day, morning or night, read the day's Scripture and devotional, answer the questions as a family, and record your answers in the space provided.

Afterwards, if you so choose, check the ornament icon at the top of the page and color the day's corresponding ornament in the Kids Ornament Book, available at austinstone.org/ornaments. Cut it out and hang it on your Christmas tree to help your kids remember that day's message.

How to use

Family Devotional

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

Read all or part of the Scriptures aloud to your children. If your children are old enough, invite them to read part of the Scriptures.

If they are really young, refer to the bottom of the page for “The Jesus Storybook Bible” narratives that can be read instead of the Scripture passages.

DEVOTIONALS

These beautiful retellings of Scripture show how God had a plan all along to display His love to the world through His Son, Jesus. Each and every story shows us how, throughout history, God has been actively at work saving His people, loving His people, and preparing His people for the greatest gift of love the world will ever see, His very own Son.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

If you have older children, take a few moments when the story is finished to use these questions as a springboard for discussion. These questions are intended to help your children apply the story to their own lives. Pray at the beginning or at the conclusion of the discussion (or both).

MAKING MEMORIES

These questions can be used in a variety of ways, depending on the age of your kids. If your children are old enough to answer the questions, ask away, and record what they say. Maybe they are not old enough to answer for themselves, but you know the answers (i.e. in the case of a favorite book or outfit). Or maybe the question is more for you as the parent to answer. No matter who answers the questions, use them as an opportunity to record memories of the past year, events of this Christmas season, and hopes for the year to come.

COLORING ORNAMENTS

At the top of each page, an ornament picture is suggested. Your child can either draw their own picture or color one provided in the Kids Ornament Book.

You can download this book for free at austinstone.org/ornaments.

The Fall

Genesis 3:1-6, 8-15*

God loved giving gifts to His kids, Adam and Eve.

But these weren't the kind of presents that could fit in a box and be wrapped up with shiny paper and bows. No, they were better than that! God scattered stars across the sky and lit them up, like white twinkly lights. He gave them slow-moving, silly-looking, sleepy sloths and speedy, spotted cheetahs. Mighty trees with strong branches bursting with juicy fruits. See-through waters where scaly fish swam past spiny seahorses and crawling crabs. God gave Adam and Eve some good gifts to show them some important things about Himself: He was good, He loved them, He could always be trusted.

Then one day, along came Satan, who spoke lying words with his snaky tongue. He made Adam and Eve think, *Hmmm, maybe God isn't good. Maybe God doesn't love us. Maybe God can't be trusted.* Satan whispered that to really be happy, they needed the one gift that God hadn't given them—fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But instead of feeling happy after eating the fruit, Adam and Eve became very sad. Instead of being wise, they were ashamed.

Maybe you're thinking after all this, *God won't want to give Adam and Eve any more gifts.* But God had actually been waiting this whole time, until Adam and Eve had disobeyed and broken His one rule, to give them His best gift. What?! After they had disobeyed, He was going to give them His

best gift? What could it be? What could God give His children that would be better than all the world? It was the gift that Adam and Eve most needed, the gift that would take away the sin that they had brought in, the gift that would smash their enemy's head under Jesus's foot. This gift would be a person who would make Adam and Eve remember that God was good, that God loved them, and that they could always trust Him.

God promised them His best, most perfect gift—the gift He had always wanted to give them: His Son, Jesus.



1. *Can you think of a time that your mom or dad told you “no” to something that you really, really wanted? Why would your mom or dad, who love you, say “no” to something you really, really want?*

Sometimes you may want things that are not good for you. Like God telling Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, your mom or dad may need to tell you “no” to things they know are not good for you.

2. *Was there a time today that you disobeyed God? When you disobeyed, can you think of a lie that might have been whispered to your heart that made you think you’d be happier doing things your own way?*

The lie is usually, *If I could just have this/ do this/etc., then I will be happier than if I obey God.* It’s like when Satan whispered to Eve, “If you really want to be happy, you need to be wise like God and eat from the tree.” Sin is always promising us happiness if we disobey God. But like Eve found out, that happiness will never last.

3. *Do you think God was surprised when Adam and Eve ate the fruit off the tree?*

God always knew that Adam and Eve would disobey Him. His original plan, His Plan A, was always to give us Jesus (Ephesians 1:3-6).

What is one thing you want to thank God for today?

* Corresponding Jesus Storybook Bible story: "The Terrible Lie"

The Flood

Genesis 6:9-8:22*

The world was hurting.

The sin that rushed into the hearts of Adam and Eve back in the garden—it was now everywhere. It had spread like nasty germs into each and every person. It poisoned every heart so that no one trusted God or thought He was important. God was so, so sad as He looked at people throwing punches, screaming ugly words, wearing mean faces, and telling lies. God decided to scrub this world clean with rain, more rain than anyone had ever seen fall from the sky. More than any bathtub, swimming pool, or ocean could ever hold.

But God saw Noah on the earth. He loved Noah and wanted to make him, his family, and all the animals safe so that the flood wouldn't destroy them along with everything else. So God whispered in Noah's ear a warning of the rain. He told Noah the one thing that would rescue them from the flood, an ark. Now, Noah was different from all the other people on the earth. While they ignored God and plugged their ears when He spoke, Noah listened carefully because he believed that everything God said was really true. If God said a flood was coming, then it would come. If God said it would be so big that it would wipe out everything and everyone, then it would. And if God said an ark was the only way he and his family would be safe, then it was. So Noah trusted in God and built the ark. Then just as God said, for forty days and forty nights, the rains came. They hammered against the roof

and the wood creaked and groaned as the waves crashed against the sides. Only Noah, his family, and the pairs of animals inside the great ark were safe from the water that swallowed up the world.

When Noah and his family came out of the ark, everyone was gone and everything looked clean. But it would soon be discovered that all the water in all the world couldn't rinse away the sin hiding in the heart of every person. The flood didn't stop the world from all its hurting. God again needed to deal with sin, and He needed to pour out a more powerful kind of storm to once-and-for-all deal with the sins of His people. So, just as before, He looked at the earth and found children that He loved—that's us!—and He gave us an ark to protect us. But the ark that God gave us this time wasn't exactly like Noah's ark—it wasn't made out of wood and tar. In fact it wasn't an "it" at all. The ark that God gave us was a person—God's own Son, Jesus. In order to protect us, Jesus received all of God's raging storm that was heading our way. In the ark that is Jesus, we will be safe from everything God will send to get rid of sin for good.



1. *God gave Noah very specific instructions on how he would be safe in the ark —what type of wood, how big, the number of decks, etc. What kind of instructions has God given us on how we can be safe in Jesus?*

God has given us the gospel. He says if we confess that we disobey Him and trust that Jesus died on the cross for all our sins and then rose from the dead, we will be saved from all the punishment God is sending for sin (Romans 10:9).

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2. *We can see that Noah trusted God by looking at all the ways Noah obeyed Him. Noah went and got the wood, he followed all God's instructions, and he did what God said. If we trust that Jesus saves us, how will we see that show up in our lives?*

We will start to obey the things that God tells us in the Bible (e.g., being kind to others, praying to God, giving things we have to others, and being honest).

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3. *Noah believed God when no one else did. In fact, most of the people around him were probably laughing at him for building the ark. If you follow Jesus, sometimes people might laugh or make fun of you for doing it. How do you think Noah was able to keep trusting God even if people thought he was silly?*

Noah believed that what God thought about him was more important than what anyone else thought. Noah trusted that what God said was true. If God said a flood was coming and the ark would save him, it was worth doing, even if people laughed while he did it.

What is something you really want for Christmas this year?

* Corresponding Jesus Storybook Bible story: "A New Beginning"

The Promise

Genesis 9*

The flood ended.

A wind whistled across the earth and began drying everything off. The ark landed. God opened the door that He shut so many days ago and Noah peeked out into this familiar but new world. As he looked at the emptiness that used to be crowded with people, maybe Noah wondered, *Will God flood this earth again if we keep disobeying?* Maybe Noah should have run out of the ark and thrown himself on the ground yelling promises like, “God, we will never make the world so bad again! Please, no more floods!”

But Noah didn’t make any promises to God. Funnily enough, when he got off the ark, God began making promises to him. “Noah, I want to make a covenant with you.” Now, covenant is a fancy word that means a promise, but it’s bigger than just an ordinary promise, like when you say, “I promise I’ll clean my room,” or, “I promise I’ll finish my homework.” A covenant is tougher than nails, stronger than steel, big, and unbreakable. The God who created the sun, scattered the stars, and made man out of dust said that He would make this kind of promise to Noah, his family, and to all the people that would come after them. Wow! Noah opened his ears wide and listened as God promised that He would never, ever, in all the years of forever, destroy the earth with another flood. Then suddenly, across the sky, God painted a brilliant rainbow of many colors. It was a seal of this covenant—which means it was a sign that Noah

and every person ever after could look up at the sky, elbow each other in the ribs, and say, “Hey! A rainbow! Remember, that time God sent that huge gigantic flood? That was so big! That rainbow reminds us He won’t ever do that again! Beautiful!”

This covenant and many others that God made in the Bible were to help get us ready for the biggest and best covenant that ever was: the New Covenant! In this strong, unbreakable, forever promise, God says to all the people who trust in Jesus that all of His anger against all of our sin has all been poured out onto Jesus when He died on the cross. Not a drop of it is leftover for us. And because God likes to seal His covenants to make sure we know He is super serious about them, He puts the Holy Spirit inside our hearts as a seal of the New Covenant. The Holy Spirit reminds us every day for all of our lives that God loves us. We don’t have to be afraid of Him punishing us because Jesus was punished for us. The Holy Spirit is like a rainbow shining upon our hearts, pointing us to the God of the universe who has given us the strongest and the most beautiful promise in all the world.



1. *Has someone ever made a promise to you and then they weren't able to keep it? Maybe they ran out of time or money, or they got lost, or forgot, or changed their mind about it. Why is it different for God to promise you something than for a person to promise you something?*

God's promises are certain. He rules over time, He owns everything, He is all places at all times, He always remembers, and His words are trustworthy. God is not a man that He should lie (Numbers 23:19). Because He controls everything, knows everything, has all power, and can be in all places, He is able to make and keep promises in a way that people can't.

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2. *God decided to protect Noah and his family from the flood. What could be some reasons that He decided to protect Noah and his family instead of wiping them out too and simply starting over with new people?*

God had promised Adam and Eve that He would send a Rescuer through one of Adam and Eve's descendants. This Rescuer would crush Satan's head under His heel. For God to keep His promise, God had to protect a few people from the flood that were part of Adam and Eve's family line. They would continue to grow their family on and on and on until finally, one day, the family line reached to Jesus, who would crush Satan's head.

What is your favorite food to eat at Christmastime?

* Corresponding Jesus Storybook Bible story: "A New Beginning"

The Offering

Genesis 22:1-19*

Abraham looked up the tall mountain ahead.

He glanced back and watched Isaac petting their donkey that was piled high with bags for the trip. *How am I going to do this?* Abraham thought. *God wants me to give Him Isaac.* Abraham's heart hurt as he thought about it. Isaac was his son, his only son, and he loved him so much. He had waited such a long time to be his daddy and God had promised Abraham that His Rescuer was going to come through Isaac's family! Abraham scratched his head, confused. How is God going to bring the Rescuer through Isaac if he dies now as a sacrifice? Abraham didn't know the answer, but he knew God must have a plan. God always did. So with a heart that was both sad and trusting, Abraham kept going.

After much walking and climbing, they reached the spot God had told to Abraham. Abraham prepared for the sacrifice—built an altar, laid out his firewood, and brought forth his precious offering, Isaac. It was time. Abraham got out his knife, his heart beating fast and stomach fluttering with butterflies. He sucked in a breath and thought one last time, *God has a plan. I trust Him.* A tear trickled down his face. His hand clutched the knife, and he shakily raised it above his son.

A voice pierced the still air. "Stop!" Abraham's heart leapt into his throat. "Abraham!" the angel shouted, "You trust God! He sees that you trust Him! You were willing to

do whatever He said, even though it was so hard." Just then, a ram skittered in the bushes. Abraham grabbed the ram by a horn and dragged it to the wood pile. He undid the rope that bound Isaac and swooped him up into a great happy hug. God had given Abraham something else to sacrifice instead of Isaac.

Abraham was ready to give up Isaac, his most precious thing in all the world. This shows us that Abraham's heart believed God loved him and wanted good things for him. God's heart toward His children is full of love and desires good things for us. To show us His heart, God gave up what was most special to Him. He gave up His Son, Jesus, for us.

Remember when Adam and Eve ate the fruit in the garden? Their hearts asked, *Does God really love us?* That question is a big question. It's one all of our hearts ask. God wanted to answer this question once and for all so He gave up His Son, His only Son, whom He loved. You and I can look at Jesus and hear God's response, the loudest, "Yes!" in all the world.



1. *Think about something that is special to you. Maybe it's a toy you love, a best friend or sibling, or a stuffed animal or blanket you sleep with every night. What would it feel like for you to have to give that up? What do you think it felt like for God to give up His Son, His only Son, whom He loved so, so much?*

Because God the Father and His Son Jesus have always loved each other forever and ever with a perfect love, it must have been very hard for God to send Jesus to the cross to die for our sins.

2. *In the Bible, God sometimes tells His people to do hard things. He told Abraham to give up Isaac, He told David to fight Goliath, and He told Paul to go to some hard places and talk about Jesus. Is there anything hard that God has told you to do?*

Maybe God has asked you to be kind to someone who has been really mean to you. Maybe He has asked you to give away something you love to help someone else. Maybe it's hard for you to obey your mom, dad, or teacher. Because God did the very hardest thing in giving up Jesus for us, we can trust that He will help us do the hard things He tells us to do. Will you ask God to help you do the hard things He has told us to do in His Word?

What is one prayer request you remember
God answering this year?

* Corresponding Jesus Storybook Bible story: "Son of Laughter"

The Choice

Genesis 29*

Here's something you should know about God: He likes upside-down things.

Sometimes He does what doesn't make sense to us or it's the exact opposite of what we expect or want. This was the case with two sisters, Leah and Rachel, who were both married to Jacob. Now, Jacob was the son of Isaac and the grandson of Abraham. God had picked Jacob to continue the family that would lead to His promised One, but Jacob had two wives, so which one of them would God use to continue His chosen family?

Leah was not a pretty girl. Jacob didn't even want her for a wife. He was tricked into marrying her. Rachel, on the other hand, was so beautiful, like a princess, and Jacob loved her with all his heart. If you and I were to guess which one God would choose to continue the family of His Rescuer, wouldn't we pick Rachel? Wouldn't we look at the two sisters and decide with our eyes that she was the best?

Ah, but like we said earlier, God sometimes does upside-down things. God didn't make His decision based on shiny hair, fashionable clothes, and long, lovely eyelashes. God chose Leah, the girl who looked ugly and lonely and unloved to everyone else. God was showing us through Leah a little what our Rescuer was going to be like.

The people of God had been on the lookout for their Rescuer for a really long time, but they had always expected someone like Rachel. They thought the Rescuer would be

the best and look the best. Maybe He would be born in a giant stone palace with lots of servants, fancy robes, and sparkling jeweled crowns. Maybe He would have a strong, tall body and a handsome face. Surely His enemies would take one look at him and scream like little girls and hide in the haystacks. The people of God thought they would be able to look with their eyes and know, *This must be Him! He is the One who will save us!*

But God's Rescuer wasn't like Rachel. He was like Leah. Jesus was a son in a poor carpenter's family. He was born in a stable, surrounded by stinky animals. His clothes were stained with dirt and filled with little holes. Outsiders would kick dust at His town as they passed by it. Nothing about how He looked or where He came from was important in any way, but God likes upside-down things. And His Son, Jesus, though not special to human eyes, was perfect in God's eyes. Jesus would come in a way that no one expected, in a way that no one would have planned so that He could flip the world upside down.



1. *Can you think of anyone else in the Bible that God chose to use, even though they weren't the best, the most important, or the strongest?*

Moses killed a man, lived out in the desert, and was not a great speaker. God chose him to rise up against Pharaoh and then lead the Israelites for 40 years. David, the youngest of eight sons, was a shepherd boy. God chose him to defeat Goliath and be king of Israel. Peter was a simple fisherman. God chose him to be an apostle, share the gospel, and write several letters that became part of our Bible. Paul killed people before Jesus saved Him. God chose him to be the main person to take the gospel out beyond the nation of Israel.

2. *Why would God use people who are weak, small, poor, or ugly to do a lot of the work for Him?*

When people who seem unimportant in the eyes of the world do mighty things, God is seen as strong. When David, a young shepherd, defeated the giant Goliath, the people didn't look at David and think, *Wow. He was so strong!* Instead they looked at God and thought, *Wow! You are so strong! You used this little guy to defeat a great enemy! You must be powerful!*

What is your favorite Christmas song? Sing a few Christmas songs together as a family.

* Corresponding Jesus Storybook Bible story: *"The Girl No One Wanted"*

The Dreamer

Genesis 37; 41; 50:15-21*

Young Joseph had some amazing dreams that showed he would one day lead his family.

Joseph was proud of this beautiful future, so he was probably surprised when his life started falling apart. His brothers hated him because their father loved him most. Instead of just calling Joseph mean names, they sold him as a slave. Slavery?! Joseph hadn't dreamed about that. He was treated well by his Egyptian master until people told lies that sent Joseph to jail. Jail?! Again, his visions of becoming important were smashed into little pieces. Then, one day, God put dreams into Pharaoh's head that were sort of scary. He searched the land for someone to explain all the fat and skinny cows he had seen in his dream. Only Joseph could explain they were a warning from God. The dream indicated a famine was coming and there wouldn't be enough food, so Pharaoh lifted Joseph up out of jail and placed him next to the throne. Joseph now had the super-important job of making sure the Egyptians didn't run out of food.

Then when the famine came, the Egyptians had food but other people, including Joseph's family, were starving. His brothers traveled the long dirt roads to Egypt for grain to fill their bellies. Upon arriving, they were shocked and terrified to find Joseph was alive and very powerful. With wide eyes, they bent their wobbly knees before him, just like Joseph's dreams showed they would. Joseph could have spewed hateful

words at them or said, "Ha, ha! I told you I would rule over you!" Instead, Joseph gently said, "You meant to destroy my life by breaking it into pieces. But you didn't know that God was at work through you, chiseling away the rough edges of pride and hardness in my heart. God was leading me on a crooked and painful path to this seat beside Pharaoh. What you meant for evil, He always meant for good." God had always planned to use mean brothers, slavery, and jail to change Joseph and put him in the perfect place to save God's people.

The story of God's Son, Jesus, was a lot like Joseph's. Jesus had a beautiful dream of saving God's people, but to make this come true, Jesus had to watch His life fill with brokenness. He was hated by people and even sold away by one of His best friends for money. He was thrown into jail and beaten and crowned with thorns. But the most hurtful thing of all was being nailed to the cross. Jesus stayed there and took all of God's anger at sin so He could pay the full and final price for our sin. God always knew the cost for us to be His. Jesus would have His life smashed to pieces and walk the painful path to His death on the cross, all in perfect fulfillment of what God had always planned.



1. *Has God ever used something hard, sad, or hurtful to bring about something good in your life?*

Discuss and help your child apply this truth to his or her own life.

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2. *Many of Jesus's disciples were put in jail, beaten, or forced to leave their homes because they were telling people about all that Jesus had done to pay for our sin. What do you think they thought about on their hard days to help them get through the sad and hurtful things that were happening?*

They might have thought about Jesus dying on the cross and all the suffering that He had gone through. They might have thought about the family of God that they were helping to build. Maybe they thought about Heaven and seeing Jesus again. Maybe they thought about how God uses all hard things to do good for His people.

How has God asked you to obey in a hard way this year?

* Corresponding *Jesus Storybook Bible* story: "The Forgiving Prince"

The Plagues

Exodus 3:1-5:9; 7:14-10:29*

Egypt was no longer a good place for God's special people, the Israelites.

Joseph and his brothers had all died long ago, and no one in Egypt remembered them, especially the new Pharaoh. He decided these Israelites would make good slaves for his kingdom. Being a slave meant working hard for long hours, being punched and kicked by Egyptians, and barely having enough to eat or more than rags to wear. God saw His people hurting under Pharaoh's rule. Because He loved them so much, He asked Moses to tell Pharaoh that God wanted His people to go free.

This was an impossible job! Moses was an old man who spent his days hanging out with sheep. He wasn't very good at talking to anyone, much less a king, but he obeyed God and told Pharaoh, "God says His people must go free so that they may worship Him." Pharaoh sneered at Moses and began to laugh, "Ha! Never!" He wouldn't listen to Moses, but God was not done. He began to throw down heavy plagues on the Egyptians to punish them. First, God told Moses to make the Nile River run red with blood. Yuck! No one could get a drink or take a bath. Surely that would make Pharaoh listen to God, but he didn't. God sent a great crowd of frogs that came and ribbited all day and night, but Pharaoh didn't care. Then gnats and other insects swarmed the land, buzzing in ears day and night, yet Pharaoh still wouldn't

let the Israelites go. So God killed all the horses, donkeys, sheep, and camels of the Egyptians. Pharaoh looked out at the dead animals, held his nose to keep the smell away, and then plugged up his ears to not listen to God. Next Moses watched as God filled the Egyptians' skin with itchy, oozy sores that made them wail like babies. It wasn't enough for Pharaoh. Neither was the hammering hail that came next or the leaping locusts that gobbled up the last of the food. Pharaoh wouldn't even listen when a horrible darkness crept over the land, as if God had turned off all the lights in the sky. "No!" Pharaoh shouted. "My slaves cannot leave to worship God!"

What would it take? These plagues weren't enough. What would God have to do for Pharaoh to finally let His people go free? Pharaoh was a hard and mean master of his slaves and wanted them to worship and obey him, not God. God made Pharaoh ruler over the Israelites to show us what sin is like. Sin is the hardest and meanest master of all. Sin wants us to obey what it wants all the time, and it tells our hearts where to go and what to do. Sin doesn't want us to be set free to worship God. What would it take for God to fight sin and beat it once and for all? What would it take for God to set His people free?



1. *God created Pharaoh and raised him up to be one of the most powerful men in the world. What did it show about God when He destroyed the land that Pharaoh ruled and Pharaoh was unable to stop Him?*

It showed how powerful God was. Pharaoh ruled over many people and had many subjects and slaves. No one rose up against Pharaoh, but God demonstrated His power as Pharaoh was unable to stop the frogs, the insects, the darkness, or any of the other plagues. God is the most powerful ruler of all.

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2. *Think about what it would have been like to be a slave to Pharaoh. Every day you could only get up and do exactly what Pharaoh commanded. Think about the sin that is in our hearts. If the sin in our hearts is like Pharaoh, then what do we do every day, unless God gives us a new heart?*

All we can do or want to do every day is sin, unless God gives us a new heart to worship Him. Sin rules over our hearts and, like Pharaoh, it is our master unless God sets us free.

What is your favorite thing to do outdoors during the Christmas season?

* Corresponding *Jesus Storybook Bible* story: "God to The Rescue!"

The Passover

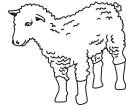
Exodus 12:2-7, 12-13*

One last plague was coming, the final straw that would finally make Pharaoh give up his slaves.

Moses leaned in to hear what God was planning. The words took Moses's breath away. "Every firstborn son in the land of Egypt will die." Death. God had to kill the firstborn sons for Pharaoh to free God's people. Moses's heart began to beat quickly. God had said death was going to come to all the firstborn sons living in the land of Egypt, but that's where all of God's people lived, too. Still, Moses remembered all the other plagues and thought, *God protected us from the gnats that swarmed and the boils that festered and the darkness that overwhelmed. Surely He will keep us safe from the death that is coming. We are His people.*

Moses was right. God had a plan to protect His people if the Israelites obeyed exactly as He told them. Every family had to paint the blood from a perfect lamb across the top and sides of the door of their house. When God sent His angel to kill the firstborn sons in Egypt, the angel would see the blood and pass over these houses. The lambs' deaths would take the place of the firstborn sons of Israel, but the Egyptians did not cover their doors with the blood of lambs. In the houses of the Egyptians, great cries arose in the night as they found their firstborn sons dead, even Pharaoh's firstborn. He called for Moses and yelled in his face, "Go! Take all your people and all your animals and all your things and leave!" God's people were free to go and worship Him.

The cost to be paid for the freedom of God's people was the death of the firstborn sons. God wanted us to see what all it would take for a harsh master to release his slaves. God tells us that we are born as slaves to the harshest of all masters, sin. Sin had us. We belonged to it, as much as the Israelites belonged to Pharaoh. We couldn't escape its hold on our hearts. God always knew what it would cost for Him to set us free. He knew He was going to send His anger down against us for our sin and that there was only one way He could protect us from Himself. For us to be safe, God put His Son, Jesus, to death and painted His blood over us. He gave us His best and perfect Lamb to make us safe and happily free from sin, our horrible and evil master. He set us free from sin so that we might come and worship Him forever.



1. *For God's people to be safe from the death of their firstborn sons, they had to obey exactly what God said. What does God say we have to do in order to be safe inside Jesus?*

God has given us the gospel. He says if we confess that we disobey Him and trust that Jesus died on the cross for all our sins and then rose from the dead, we will be saved from all the punishment of God that is coming for sin (Romans 10:9).

2. *Think about how silly it would have been for the Israelites to have been set free and then to just have stayed in their houses, gotten up the next morning, and gone back to their work like they had every day before! If God has set us free from sin, then what should our lives start to look like?*

We can hope that God will keep helping us to say no to sin and not let it rule over us anymore. Whenever we listen to the lies of sin in our hearts that tell us not to trust God or worship Him, we are like the Israelites, just going back to work for Pharaoh like nothing had changed.

What is your favorite thing to do inside during the Christmas season?

* Corresponding Jesus Storybook Bible story: "God to The Rescue!"

The Journey

Exodus 14-15*

Moses shaded his eyes as he peered over his shoulder at the swarm growing larger on the horizon.

The ground shook and the waters rippled as angry Pharaoh and his army moved closer and closer. Moses gazed at the huge sea in front of him. The Israelites were packed like sardines around him, their terrified eyes full of questions. *Where do we go now? Why would God bring us out here to die? Does He love us?* Though Moses, too, felt the fear crawling in his belly, he knew the answer to all their questions. “Everyone! Listen to me! Your God does love you. He isn’t surprised that we are stuck here. God is planning to rescue us. Do you know what He wants us to do? Nothing! Just zip your lips and open your eyes. Watch and see your God save you.”

Hoofbeats pounded behind them as the Egyptians closed in. The Israelites were trapped. Moses took a step forward, lifted up his old wooden staff, and stretched out a shaky wrinkled hand over the sea. Gasps rose from the mouths of the Israelites as the waters of the Red Sea split in two and dry earth appeared before them. “Go!” yelled Moses. And the Israelites went. Some stared at the walls of water and tiptoed through, worried that at any moment they might come crashing down and drown them all. Others ran through, skipping and hopping with happiness, confident that God would hold the water back until they were across. Whether they cautiously crept or

rapidly ran, every single Israelite made it to safety. The Egyptians saw the Israelites exit the floor of the sea, so they tried to follow them. Instead of holding back the curtains of water, God let go and Pharaoh and his army disappeared beneath the waves. Their enemies were gone. God’s people were saved.

“Watch and see,” God had said to the Israelites when they were trapped in an impossible spot, unable to save themselves. We also were trapped in our impossible sin that ruled our hearts. We couldn’t save ourselves, but Jesus came into our world and said, “Watch and see.” At the cross, Jesus took all the punishment that we should have had for our sins. He held back the curtain of God’s anger so that we could safely cross into God’s arms. Some of us look at Jesus with small faith, wondering, *Is He too good to be true?* Others of us look at Jesus with big faith, trusting that He is even better than what our brains can understand. Whether we hope in Jesus with small faith or with big faith, every single one of us who trusts in Him will be saved.



1. *Why do you think God trapped the Israelites between the Red Sea and the Egyptians? Why didn't He take them a different way or somehow stop the Egyptians from coming after them?*

God set up this situation so that only He would get the glory. Only God could get all the credit for saving the Israelites. They would know that they had been powerless but their God had been mighty to save them.

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2. *When we look at all that God had to do to save us—that His own Son had to die on the cross—what does that say about our sin?*

The sacrifice of Jesus shows us how serious our sin is and how impossible it would be for us to try to save ourselves. Our sin against God is so big that *only* Jesus could pay for it with His death and resurrection.

What is one thing God has taught you this year?

* Corresponding *Jesus Storybook Bible* story: "God Makes A Way"

The Ten Commandments

Exodus 20:1-21*

Back in Egypt, the Israelites always had to listen to the words that Pharaoh said.

“Make those bricks!” “Build that wall!” “Feed those animals!” Day in, day out. Whatever Pharaoh said, they did. His words made their lives hard and unhappy. Then Moses came and said that God wanted them to be free so they could worship Him. Worship? Hm-mmm. They only knew slavery. What would worship look like? It had been months since the Israelites crossed the Red Sea. Life was rough. Arguments arose over which sheep was whose. Bellies grumbled for meat.

Moses couldn’t grant all their wishes. God had said He wanted His people to go free so they could worship Him—but was this what He meant? Surely not! They reached the rocky base of Mount Sinai and watched Moses climb to the cloud-covered top and wondered what secrets God would share way up there.

The Israelites stared at the two weighty stone tablets that Moses had lugged down the mountain. Carved into each of them were ten important rules, or “commandments.” As Moses read them aloud, the people thought, *These seem like good rules to live by! Not killing or stealing from each other. Being respectful to mommies and daddies and taking a nice rest once a week.* Moses banged his staff on the ground to get their attention.

“God loves us, so He gave us these rules!

He rescued us out of our terrible slavery in Egypt. This is how we can worship Him! We can love Him by obeying what He says

is best!” God had been waiting until now to explain worship. He hadn’t come to Egypt and whispered in their ears, “Obey, obey and I’ll come whisk you away. Pharaoh will be no more.” Instead, God had made the river bleed and the locusts swarm and He had torn open the sea. In mighty and miraculous ways, God had wrapped His strong hand around His people and plucked them out of Egypt. His great love for His people could not be questioned, and now that His great rescue was complete, He shared all the ways to obey. Freedom first. Obedience after.

This is what our story looks like. God didn’t come to us while we were still slaves to sin and say, “Do this! Do that! If you obey, then I’ll set you free!” Instead, while we were slaves to sin, He sent Jesus to save us. God made His Son bleed, let His enemies swarm, and then tore Him apart on the cross and raised Him back to life. With this mighty work, He set our hearts free and *then* He came to us and said, “Now, let me show you what it looks like to worship me.” Obeying God isn’t something we have to do so that God will save us. Obeying God is something we get to do because He saved us.



1. *Think about what it was like to serve Pharaoh in Egypt. Are there any ways that it was the same as serving God? Are there any ways that it was different from serving God?*

Slavery to Pharaoh was miserable. The work was hard and there was no joy in it. Pharaoh didn't care about the people and didn't want good things for them. Disobedience was severely punished. Obeying God is the same in the sense that we should follow all that He commanded and often the work will be hard. What should be different is that instead of making us miserable, serving God should produce joy in our hearts. God is a different Master because He loves us and wants what is best for us. When we disobey, instead of facing punishment, we look to Jesus, knowing that all of our punishment was poured on Him and we receive forgiveness from God.

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2. *Jesus tells His followers, "If you love me, you will keep My commandments" (John 14:15 ESV). Why do you think He said this?*

To obey God means to trust Him. In the garden, Adam and Eve didn't obey. They questioned God's love for them and whether they would be happiest if they obeyed all He said. When we sin, it's because we think there is something else that we need to make us happy outside of God. When we obey, we are saying to God, "I trust you. You love me and will make my heart happiest."

If you got the chance to go anywhere next year, where would you go?

* Corresponding Jesus Storybook Bible story: *"Ten Ways to Be Perfect"*

The Wall

Joshua 3; 6*

Jericho towered over the land with its tall walls, but sat quiet as a mouse.

News had come that God had walled up the waters of the Jordan River so the Israelites could cross, just like the Red Sea! Inside Jericho, fear melted the hearts of those living there like hot wax on a candle. Outside the walls, Israel waited for words from their wise leader, Joshua. Joshua was strong and very courageous. It wasn't because he had bulging muscles or never quivered with fear. It was because his heart overflowed with trust in God. If God said He loved Israel, Joshua knew they were loved. If God promised them a land, then Joshua knew it would be theirs.

But now, as Joshua craned his neck to look at Jericho's walls, his eyebrows knitted together and he wondered, *What are we gonna do?* God's voice spoke into his thoughts, "I have given you Jericho." Joshua's eyebrows shot up and his eyes widened. *He's already given it to us! But wait, why are we still out here?* God continued, "Give seven of the priests loud horns. March behind them around Jericho, once a day for six days. And no talking!" Joshua scrunched his eyebrows and squinted his eyes at these odd instructions. *No spears? No war cries?* And God wasn't finished yet. "On day seven, march around the city seven times. After the last lap, tell the priests to sound those horns to the skies! Tell everyone to shout until their breath runs out! Those walls will crumble in a pile at your feet! Jericho is yours." Though

this battle plan was pretty strange, Joshua had already seen God do crazy things. He had watched God rip open the Red Sea. Joshua had munched on mysterious manna that floated down from Heaven. He drank crisp, cool water that gushed from a rock. Joshua reassured himself in his heart, *God loves us. Everything He does is best.* Joshua's big faith went to work doing all God had said. Sure enough, seven days later, Jericho was theirs.

A lot of God's plans seem odd: Passover, the Red Sea, Jericho. His plans ask people to trust that He is good and does what is best. His biggest and most important plan was the strangest of all. To rescue His people, Jesus would leave Heaven, putting His crown away for a short time, and become like us. He was God, but would cover Himself with skin and put on our weaknesses, because only then could He die in our place. God become man? God die on a cross? How crazy is that? This plan couldn't be carried out by Moses or Joshua. The One who would do this would need the biggest, strongest, most perfect faith of all. He would have to trust in God's love more than any person ever had. He would have to believe God's way was best more than any of us ever could. Only Jesus could carry out the greatest plan in all the world.



1. *How can we tell that Joshua trusted God's plan to conquer Jericho?*

We see that he did everything God told him to do. The actions that he did showed us the faith in his heart.

2. *How do we know that Jesus always trusted God perfectly?*

Jesus never sinned. In every action that Jesus did, He always obeyed God perfectly. The things He did showed us the perfect faith in His heart.

3. *What are some things that we could look for in our lives to show us that we are trusting God in our hearts?*

We can look at the things we are doing. The actions we are carrying out show us what our hearts are believing about God and all that He tells us to do.

What was the most difficult thing your family faced this year? How was God faithful during that time?

* Corresponding Jesus Storybook Bible story: "The Warrior Leader"

The Shepherd King

1 Samuel 16*

Samuel's heart was sad as he walked toward Bethlehem.

He had hoped that Saul would be a good king, but Saul's actions quickly showed that his heart didn't trust God. Without faith he could never lead Israel well, so Samuel was going to find the new king God had chosen. A man named Jesse lived in Bethlehem. One of his sons would soon wear the crown. Samuel went to meet them, but when they arrived he nearly passed out! Jesse had so many sons! How would he know the right one?

Samuel examined them with his eyes. King Saul had been really tall and super strong. Samuel searched for a son that was built like an ox. Ah, Eliab. The oldest. *Easy peasy*, thought Samuel. *That's what kings look like!* God interrupted Samuel's thoughts. "I'm not like you, Samuel. I don't look at the outside of a person. I look where no one else can, the heart. Eliab doesn't have the right heart. I want My king to have a heart that trusts me." So Jesse's other sons came forward, one by one, to be inspected by Samuel. He tried to look past their handsome hair and strong shoulders and peer into their hearts, but Samuel didn't have those kind of eyes. Seven times, he heard God whisper, "That's not him." Finally, Jesse sent to the fields for his youngest son, David, who was tending the smelly sheep. David was a small boy with pink cheeks and bright eyes, and when he arrived, the excited voice of God told Samuel, "This is him! What a beautiful

heart he has!" Samuel tilted his head and eyed the boy, trying to imagine a crown on his head and a sword in his hand. All he saw was a shepherd boy in need of a bath. Still, he trusted that when God looked at David, He saw a king. Samuel lifted his horn, spilled oil on David's head, and said, "You will be king of Israel."

When Jesus came to this world, no earthly eyes could look at him and see a king. People's eyes could only see what he looked like on the outside, which wasn't anything special. In His human body, He was the poor son of a carpenter. His clothes weren't clean, He wasn't tall, He wasn't especially handsome, but when God looked at Jesus, He saw His heart, the heart of His precious Son that trusted completely in His Father. When God looked at Jesus, He saw His perfect King, a King that would rule for the good of all His people. And when God gives us faith to believe all He has promised, the way we see Jesus changes. We no longer see a sad, helpless man nailed to a cross. We see Jesus as He truly is, our beautiful and mighty King of all kings.



1. *If we make decisions about a person based on what our eyes can see, will that always tell us the truth about them?*

No, because the outside of a person and even the actions they are doing never tell us the whole story. Only God knows what is true about every single person because only He can see what is inside their hearts. He knows who believes in Him and who doesn't. He always knows if we are acting from faith or from sin.

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2. *Why didn't God make Jesus look like a king so that everyone would know who He was?*

Right now, we live by faith. We have to believe all the things that God says are true, and most of them we don't get to see right now with our eyes. God has told us Jesus is His Son, the King of all kings, and we believe it is true, but one day Jesus will return in glory and He will look like the conquering King that He is!

What is something your family plans to do this Christmas season that you have never done before?

* Corresponding Jesus Storybook Bible story: *"The Teeny, Weenie...True King"*

The Giant

1 Samuel 17:1-50*

A battle was brewing in the valley of Elah.

God's people were on one side, nervously eyeing the Philistines opposite them. David came running up to the valley, looking for his brothers. He was wiggling his way through soldiers when a voice thundered in his ears. A giant Philistine, as big as a bear, had stepped forward. "I am Goliath!" he roared. "I am the fighter for the Philistines. Send out a fighter, Israel! One man! If I beat him, you become our slaves!" A cheer rose from the Philistines while groans rumbled through the Israelites. David stared at Goliath, thinking, *How dare he! This is God's army! He will not get away with this.*

David found King Saul and said, "I will be the one man to fight for Israel!" Saul examined young David and snickered. "Goliath is an enormous warrior! You're a kid!" David knew this, but this wasn't the first time David had faced a scary enemy. "Once, I was with the sheep, and a bellowing bear came to steal one for dinner. God helped me kill the bear. Another time, a lurking lion crept up on my herd. Again, God helped me. I killed the lion. Today, I will face Goliath. God will help me, like He always does. I will kill the giant." So David went to face Goliath, one person fighting for all the people of Israel. Goliath wore a mean smile on his face. "Ha! You? Will you hit me with sticks? Come here! I will crush you!" David didn't shake at these rude words but shouted, "This battle is God's, and you are finished!" David slung his smooth stone, and

it whizzed like a rocket through the air. It sunk deep into the forehead of the laughing Goliath, and he slumped to the ground like a sack of potatoes. David had killed Goliath.

There's another enemy of God's people so giant he makes Goliath seem like a little-bitty ant. You remember our old enemy from the garden, don't you? Satan stands screaming to God about how bad we are. He reminds God of all the ways we have sinned. "Your people are so bad! They don't ever obey You! They deserve to die and be *my* slaves!" With shaking hearts, we stand there, knowing all that Satan says is true. Every single sin that he reminds us of, we did. Every single punishment he says we deserve, we do. Our only hope is for God to give us a champion like David. One man who could smash our enemy. And God has given us a champion! To beat Satan, Jesus had to take away his power over us. He went to the cross and took our bad things as His own. When He died, all of those horrible things died, too. Satan was crushed. He had nothing left to say to God about our sin because Jesus washed it all away.



1. *Why do you think God would use small, young David and his little slingshot to kill such a giant warrior?*

When God uses things that look weak to the world, it shows how powerful He really is. He likes to use what seems small or maybe even silly to our eyes because the result is that His power is seen clearly, and He is glorified.

2. *You are a kid, right? You are probably small in the eyes of the world. Are there things you can think of that you would want to ask God to do through you so that His power could be seen?*

If this is difficult for your child to answer, ask some leading questions, like, “What are some broken or bad things that you see happening in our neighborhood/city/world?” Pray with your child to ask that God would use them to do mighty things and that His power would be seen through them.

What is one of your favorite games to play right now?

* Corresponding Jesus Storybook Bible story: *The Young Hero And The Horrible Giant*

The Healing

2 Kings 5*

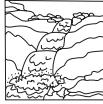
Naaman, the mighty soldier of Aram, looked sadly out his window.

You would think Naaman would be the happiest guy around. He was the king's man, a hero to the people, and they all thought, *Naaman is awesome!* There was this one thing—Naaman had leprosy. He looked down at his arm and noticed an oozing cut but didn't feel any pain. That's how leprosy works. Inside Naaman, things were broken. Instead of telling his brain, "Hey, you're hurt! Put some medicine and a band-aid on that!" there was only silence. Naaman's skin was full of bruises, cuts, and other ouchies, but he couldn't feel them. Those hurts would slowly grow until his flesh would rot and his fingers or toes would fall off.

More than anything Naaman wanted to be free of his leprosy, but he was out of ideas. There just wasn't any hope until, one day, a slave girl living in his house had an idea. She said, "Go to Israel and see the prophet of God. He will heal you." Naaman was ready to try anything, so he went. Elisha the prophet saw him and said, "Go wash in the Jordan River if you want to be clean." What?! Just wash in the river? That made Naaman angry. After travelling so far, he wanted the prophet to shout to God or wave his hands in an abracadabra way, but Elisha just said wash. Maybe it seemed like a simple order, but it was hard to obey. Naaman would have to make his proud heart low. He would have to stop commanding and instead obey a command. For Naaman to do these

things, it would take a miracle in his heart. "Fine!" Naaman finally shouted. "I'll wash in this stinky river!" He lowered his heart, obeyed Elisha's command, and washed. As he rose from the water, his skin gleamed beautifully in the sun. Inside Naaman, God fixed the broken parts. Outside of Naaman, everyone could see the changes.

Our sin is a lot like leprosy. It's hidden inside where our eyes can't see but it shows up on our outsides—when we don't listen to God, when we are mean to our siblings, or when we steal or lie. Like leprosy, sin wants to kill us. It doesn't want us to feel anything as it slowly rots our hearts. We may try to fix it on our own, to heal ourselves, but we can't. Only Jesus could. "Come, I will wash you and make you clean," He says. It seems simple, like it would be an easy thing to obey, but to come to Jesus takes a miracle. It means our high and mighty hearts have to come down low. It means we have to stop being in charge of ourselves and instead obey all that God says. When we do, God cleans the brokenness inside of us and on the outside, we shine and begin to look like Jesus.



1. *Pride in our hearts often says to us, “I can do this all by myself—I don’t need God.” Has there ever been a time that your heart has said something like that to you?*

Discuss and help your child apply this truth to his or her own life.

2. *Why do you think pride is the opposite of trusting in Jesus?*

Pride says, *I can do it myself!* Trusting in Jesus means we realize that we could not pay for our sin, that we couldn’t do it ourselves, and that we can only be right with God because Jesus did everything for us.

Who is someone you want to pray for next year? What do you want to pray for them?

* Corresponding *Jesus Storybook Bible* story: *"The Little Servant Girl And The Proud General"*

The Prophecies

Isaiah 9:6-7; 53:1-12*

Before you were born, before the world was made, God had a plan.

He would send His Son, Jesus, to save His people and become the treasure of their hearts, but it was going to be a really long time before He came. God looked at His Israelites that He specially loved. When Jesus arrived, He didn't want them to be surprised or confused. God wanted them to be ready, but how?

Some people had a special job God had given them. They were called prophets. Now prophets had to have open and ready ears tuned into God's words. Then they used their mouths and spoke whatever God had told them, like they were God's mouth speaking to the world. Often, God would tell His prophets what would happen in the future, and they would tell everyone, "Hey! God said get ready for this!" Of all the secrets God would whisper to His prophets, He most loved giving them hints about what His Son would be like.

Isaiah was one of God's prophets, and he got to hear God talk about Jesus a lot! Isaiah would shout, "Get ready! A Son is going to come. He won't be a very handsome guy. His life won't look very pretty, either. There will be a lot of pain for Him, and in the end, a very sad, but special, death." God was giving the Israelites all these clues to lead them to His treasure. If they had these prophecies with them, then they could be on the lookout. When Jesus arrived, they

could look at their checklist: is He going to His death quietly? Yes. Check. Is He being pierced on the cross? Yes. Check. When all the clues matched up with the person, they would know—it's Him! The Rescuer is here! But sadly no one paid attention to the hints God gave. When Jesus came, they didn't know. When He did everything God said He would, they didn't realize.

When Jesus came to earth, He reminded people of the prophecies. He said, "I am the One that Isaiah was telling everyone about. Do you remember? He said to get ready for me." But even when He pointed to each clue, people ignored Him. Their eyes were blind to the treasure that God had given them. God was showing us that even if we have every single clue, even if we know all the prophecies backward and forward, without His help we could never see that they all point to Jesus. We would be blind, we would be deaf, and our hearts would not treasure Jesus, but God knew that. Because He knew that, He whispered other promises to other prophets. He said He would give His children new hearts to believe, new eyes to see, and new ears to hear. God told us what the future would hold—all of His children treasuring Jesus as the One who was promised to come.



1. *Why is it important to us that the prophecies God gave through His prophets came true?*

It grows our trust in God and His promises. There are many more promises that haven't been fulfilled, like that Jesus will return and there will be a new Heaven and a new earth. When we read these promises, we can look back on God's faithfulness to do all that He said He would do, and our hope in the promises of what is coming can grow.

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2. *Any time you share the good news about Jesus—that He was the Son of God, that He came to earth and died on the cross to pay for our sins, and rose three days later—why is it important to pray?*

We can share all the facts about Jesus, point to all the prophecies, and explain what they mean, but people can hear all of that and still not believe in Jesus. We ask God to give the person a heart to believe all these things about Jesus are true and that they need Jesus to rescue them.

What is your favorite
book right now?

* Corresponding *Jesus Storybook Bible* story: "Operation 'No More Tears!'"

The Protector

Daniel 6*

Daniel was one of God's people, but he was living in a strange place where hardly anyone knew God.

Daniel served King Darius and was one of his best workers. Though he was usually happy to serve the king, today was a sad day. A new law declared people could only pray to King Darius for the next month, and that wasn't the worst part. If anyone prayed to another god, they'd become food for lions! *We shouldn't pray to anyone but God*, thought Daniel. *Will I obey God, even if it means I might die?* Daniel slowly walked to his usual spot, bent his tired knees, bowed his head, and began to pray. Some of the king's servants were waiting outside. They didn't like Daniel very much and were looking for a reason to tattle on him. Skipping up the palace steps, they sang out, "King Darius! Daniel broke your law! Throw him to the lions!"

The king walked Daniel down to the lions' den with slumped shoulders and said, "Daniel, I never wanted this for you. I hope your God will protect you." The ferocious beasts growled as Daniel stepped inside. *God, even if I die, I trust You*. Daniel's heart leapt wildly as the lions licked their lips, getting ready for their dinner. One lion stepped forward to attack. Daniel sucked in his breath and closed his eyes, waiting to feel the crunch of teeth. But it never came. Daniel opened his eyes and his jaw dropped. An angel of the Lord was stopping the lions! *God! You're protecting me!* he thought. Daniel

slowly sat down with his back against the cold, hard wall. All night long, he said thank you to God while watching the angel hold the lions' mouths closed. Hours later, there was pounding on the stone door and King Darius cried out, "Daniel?! Did your God save you?" Daniel shouted back, "He did! The lions wanted to eat me, but an angel muzzled their man-eating mouths!" Daniel came out of the lions' home not torn to shreds but in one perfect piece. The king and Daniel hugged and laughed. King Darius quickly passed a new law that said, "Worship the God of Daniel! He's the true God!"

Imagine asking yourself, *Do I disobey God and stay safe, or do I obey and get thrown to the lions?* What do you think you would do? There was a night that Jesus had to make a decision like this. He was in a garden, praying to God. He bowed low to the ground with tears streaming down His face, thinking, *Do I obey God?* Except for Him, it wasn't, *Maybe I'll die*. It was certain. Not a quick death like being thrown to lions, but a slow, painful, and humiliating death on a cross. Jesus chose to obey, knowing that if He did, He would have to die. For us to be protected, He had to be torn to shreds. It was the only way that He could rescue all of God's people and we could forever cry out, "Worship God! He is the true God!"



1. *If God knew He was going to send an angel to stop the lions' mouths, why did He let Daniel be put in the lions' den in the first place?*

Daniel's faith was grown because he had to trust God in a very hard situation. God's name was made great because everyone saw that He saved Daniel from a sure death.

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2. *Daniel decided to obey God even though people around him didn't worship God and obeying was the harder choice. Have you ever had to make a decision to obey God when it was hard? What was that like? If not, what do you think you would do?*

Discuss and help your child apply this truth to his or her own life.

How have you seen God provide for your family this year?

* Corresponding Jesus Storybook Bible story: *"Daniel And The Scary Sleepover"*

The Messenger

Jonah 1-4*

God looked at Nineveh and sighed.

It was a bad place filled with bad people doing bad things. Though people there didn't love God, He still loved them. God decided to send a messenger to Nineveh. God's eyes peered into Israel and found His messenger, Jonah. God had given Jonah messages before, but this one surprised him. "Jonah, My heart is sad over Nineveh. Go there, tell them I love them and I want them to turn away from all the bad things." *Nineveh?* Jonah thought. He couldn't believe his ears! *Israel's biggest enemy?* It made Jonah's heart angry that God wouldn't just smash and destroy them, so instead of carrying God's warning to them, Jonah got on a boat that was sailing far away. *Maybe if I don't deliver the message, the people won't apologize, and then God will crush them!* But poor Jonah was a fool. Whether he ran away to the ocean or the North Pole or the moon, God's plan wouldn't fail.

Waves pounded against the boat as the storm swirled around it. Screaming sailors scrambled around, dumping boxes overboard, trying to save themselves. Jonah knew the storm was for him. God wouldn't let him run away. He told the sailors to throw him into the sea. They picked him up, prayed to God, and dumped Jonah overboard. Immediately, the wind stopped raging and the waves sat still. In the thick churning waters, Jonah gasped and cried out for God to rescue him. God heard him and pointed to a giant fish. "You, go get Jonah." The fish obeyed its

Master and swallowed Jonah whole. Gulp! For three days, Jonah waited in the belly of the fish until finally being coughed up onto a beach. Again, God whispered to Jonah, "Go to Nineveh."

Jonah walked slowly down the streets of the city, shouting the words God had said. "God loves you! He wants you to turn away from all the bad things, or He will destroy this place! Tell Him you're sorry!" All the people of Nineveh bowed their heads, fell to their knees, and cried out to God for forgiveness. God heard their apologies and smiled. He didn't destroy them.

Jonah got the attention of an entire city. They turned to God, said they were sorry, and turned away from their bad things. What messenger would ever be able to get people from every city to turn to God? God had a very special messenger for this task—His very own Son, Jesus. Jesus wasn't angry at God for trying to rescue His enemies. Jesus didn't try to run away. Just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and came out to tell the people of Nineveh God's message, Jesus went into a deeper and darker place called death for three days. When He came out, He gave God's greatest message to the whole world. "I died so you can live. Turn to God. Say you're sorry. Be rescued!"



1. *It was hard for Jonah to give God's message to his enemies. Think about someone who you don't get along with very well. Would it be hard for you to tell them that God loved them and wanted them to be rescued?*
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Discuss and help your child apply this truth to his or her own life.

2. *Why does the Bible say that we are God's enemies? What did Jesus do for His enemies?*

Because of the sin that is in the heart of every person, we are born without love for God. We don't want to listen to His words or obey anything He has to say. We constantly fight against His plans and His ways for our lives. The Bible tells us that while we were God's enemies, Jesus came and died for us.

What is one of your favorite Christmas traditions?

* Corresponding *Jesus Storybook Bible* story: "God's Messenger"

The History

Nehemiah 8–10*

For many years, God's people had been living in a strange land.

Because they disobeyed God's rules, God let the Babylonians capture them. Even in Babylon, God's eyes watched His special people, and after a while, He let His people come back home. Everyone was happy to return, but something sad had happened while they were away—they forgot how to worship God. God didn't want them stuck in forgetfulness, so He sent Ezra to help them remember.

Ezra blew the dust off the heavy book of God's laws and shouted to the crowd of people, "Let's remember how God has told us to live!" Ears leaned in as Ezra started reading. As the people listened, hearts sank at hearing how much they had disobeyed God. Smiles turned to frowns and tears began to drop. Ezra gently spoke, "God knows you haven't been obeying. Giving you these rules again shows how much He loves you! Be happy!" The people dried their eyes and wiped their noses. God still loved them?! A happy laugh sounded, followed quickly by more, and then clapping and hurrahs! Yummy food was shared as they celebrated God's great love. Their parties lasted many days until Ezra gathered them to say a few more things.

He said, "Out of all the earth, God picked Abraham and promised him a special forever home. Many years later, God invaded Egypt and rescued us from Pharaoh. Even after

all this, we chose to disobey Him. Still, He loved us! For forty years, He cared for us in the wilderness and brought us to this amazing home, but again we ignored Him and were taken as prisoners to Babylon. Even there, God didn't give up on us! He won't stop loving us!" Hearts nearly burst with happiness as Ezra told story after story of how God chased after His rule-breaking people with His powerful love. Remembering all these things, the people wanted to promise God that they would follow His rules. In their hearts, they knew they would probably fail again. Yet they weren't placing their big hopes in themselves but in their God and His forever love.

Do you ever fail to obey God? Do you look at His rules and think, *Geez, I broke another one!* What if we fail a hundred times? Or ten-thousand times? Will He still love us? Yes! During the time of Ezra, God's people looked at His rules and remembered that He loved them, but now something better than God's law has come. We look at Jesus, God's Word to us, for with His life He told us how to worship God. Jesus is the perfect worshiper who died for our failures and rose so that He could make our worship perfect, too. When we break God's rules and our hearts become sad, we can look at Jesus, trust in Him, and remember that God hasn't given up on us. He loves us with an unstoppable love. That's a reason to celebrate!



1. *Our hearts often quickly forget all the ways that God wants us to worship Him. What are some ways that God helps us remember?*

God has given us the Bible, His Word. God puts His Holy Spirit in the heart of every person who trusts in Jesus, and the Holy Spirit reminds us what Jesus said to us. God also puts other people around us who remind us.

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2. *Is it good for us to feel sad or guilty about our sin?*

When we feel sad or guilty about our sin, it is God's way of showing us how we are disobeying the good rules that He has given us. However, because we believe in Jesus, it isn't good if we stay feeling sad or guilty about our sin. Jesus paid for all of it on the cross so that we could tell God we are sorry, turn away from our sin, and praise Him!

How do you want to serve God
in a new way next year?

* Corresponding Jesus Storybook Bible story: "Get Ready!"

The Genealogy

Matthew 1:1-17

It had been 400 years since God had talked to His people.

He had spoken through Malachi, and then nothing but silence. God's people kept their ears open, hoping to hear His voice, but God had zipped His lips and no more words came. *Maybe He got tired of us breaking His rules*, they thought. *Maybe He doesn't want to rescue us anymore*. Doubts crept in, but the people would fight these thoughts by telling each other, "God made us big, tough, unbreakable promises! He won't forget them!" During all God's silence, the people clung to those promises from long ago because without them, what hope did they have? God couldn't break His promises, could He? Does that sound like something God would do?

While God wasn't speaking any words to His people, He hadn't forgotten them or His promises. God *always* remembers. In the quiet, God was actually preparing for the first Christmas. Remember, God had picked Abraham a long, long time ago and told him, "Abraham, many years from now, I'm going to use your special family to bring My Rescuer into the world." The chosen family continued through Abraham's son, Isaac, and Isaac's son, Jacob. The family tree grew to include names like David, Solomon, and Josiah. So during these years when God's mouth was silent, His hands were at work carving this family tree. No prophets received messages from God, but mommies and daddies still had babies, and those babies grew up and got married and

became mommies and daddies to more babies, and each branch of the family tree was getting closer to a man named Joseph and a woman named Mary. Each time a person in this special family tree was born, it was like God was shouting from the rooftops, "I haven't forgotten My promises! I love you! Get ready! The Rescuer is coming!" The first Christmas was almost here.

Even now, we have some promises from God that He made long ago. When Jesus went up into Heaven after He rose from the dead, God said that one day He would send His Son back a second time. We've been waiting so many years for this to happen! Our hearts may want to think, *Hmmm, did God forget? He promised Jesus would come again, but I sure don't see Him!* When worries creep in, we can peek over our shoulder back into the garden of Eden and remember God promised He would send someone to crush the serpent's head. We can point to Abraham and remind ourselves that God promised His Son would come through his family tree. Lastly, we can celebrate Christmas, remembering that Jesus came. With His birth, Jesus answered, "Yes!" to the promise that God made to Abraham. With Jesus's death, God said, "Yes!" and smashed Satan's skull. Jesus is God's "Yes!" to all His promises. So get ready, look carefully with your eyes, and listen closely with your ears, because Jesus is coming back!



1. *Sometimes we can get confused about what things God has actually promised us. How can we know exactly the things that God has said He will do?*

We look in the Bible. His promises are written down for us and the words He has given us in His Bible are the ones we can trust.

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2. *During the years that God's people had to wait for Jesus to be born, God was doing important work to get ready for Him. If we are waiting a long time for Jesus to come again, what can we trust God is doing?*

God is doing important work to get everything ready for His Son to come back. He is building the family tree of all His sons and daughters, and Jesus will come back when the family tree is complete.

What is one holiday tradition you started this year that you hope to continue in the future?

John the Baptist

Luke 1:5-25, 57-80

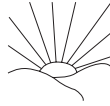
The world didn't know it, but our King was about to come. Shouldn't a kingdom get ready? Shouldn't someone tell everyone important news like this? Don't worry. God thought so, too. Announcing the King was a special job, and God needed a special messenger. His eyes roamed across the earth and settled on a man and woman, the parents He had chosen long ago to have a son named John. John would be His special messenger to share the news: the King is coming!

God had always known that Zacharias and Elizabeth would be John's mommy and daddy. These two people loved God a lot, but they were old and childless, even though they had prayed for kids year after year. Their hearts were sad and they wished their house wasn't so empty. But God had waited all this time because He wanted to give them their special child at the perfect time, right before He would give the world His Son.

Zacharias walked up to the temple to give an offering to the Lord. Once inside, he quietly stepped up to the altar and nearly jumped out of his robe! An angel was standing there! "Zacharias!" Gabriel said gleefully. "God has heard your prayers. Your wife will have a baby and he will be special. Your son, John, will tell people to get ready because the King is coming!" Zacharias shook his head. "Surely not. My wife—she's old! I'm old! How can we have a baby now?" Gabriel smiled a sad smile. "You can because God

said so, and His words are always true. Because you did not trust me, your lips will be shut tight. You won't speak until your son is born." For nine long months, Zacharias waited in silence. As he watched his wife's belly grow, the hope in his heart grew as well. Finally, the day came that a screaming baby boy entered the world. Zacharias held his precious son and his mouth burst open with praise. "This is my son John! He will get everyone ready! The King is coming!"

Imagine being Zacharias, holding this great secret inside of you. Imagine looking at your family members, at your friends, at the strangers you passed on the street, and not being able to speak the most exciting thing you had ever known. What if you knew that the King of the world was coming, but you couldn't say it? What if you had a son that would be born and would get everyone ready, but you couldn't shout it to the skies? That must have been the hardest secret that anyone ever had to keep, but you and I don't have to be silent about God's Son. God says to us, "Go! Tell the world! Tell everyone in every place about My Son Jesus!" Every day, our mouths can burst open with praise to our mommies and daddies, sisters and brothers, neighbors, friends, and strangers. "Jesus has come! He is King!"



1. *Today we aren't telling people that Jesus is coming the first time but that He is coming back. How can we tell people to "get ready" for this?*

Jesus said, to tell God that we have sinned against Him and are sorry for our sins. We trust that Jesus died to pay the full price for our sins and rose from the dead. We wait with great hope for Him to come back.

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2. *God has said that He wants His people to go to the ends of the earth to tell people about Jesus. Who do you think you might be able to tell about Jesus, our King?*

Discuss and help your child apply this truth to his or her own life.

If Jesus was sitting right here and you could ask Him anything, what would you ask Him?

The Savior

Luke 1:26-38

In the small town of Nazareth, Mary gazed at the night sky ablaze with a thousand stars.

Does God see me from way up there? she wondered. Her life seemed like a small one, not big or special. Mary imagined what her life would be like. She would soon be married to a carpenter named Joseph, who had almost finished building their new home. Their lives would probably fill up with normal things: Joseph crafting things from wood, Mary caring for their home and raising children. Mary didn't know that God's eyes were fixed on her, His daughter, whom He had chosen long ago for a spectacular spot in the great story He was writing.

Mary was out walking a few days later when the angel Gabriel appeared in her path. "Mary!" Gabriel shouted aloud. "God loves you! He has picked you for a super important job. His Son is coming soon. He will be your baby. You will be His mommy." "What?!" questioned Mary. "I'm going to have a baby? I'm not married yet!" A river of fears ran through Mary's heart. This news, if it was true, would turn her life upside down. In her town it was a bad thing for a girl without a husband to have a baby. It was possible that she would be kicked out of her family or put to death, but God said His Son was coming, and He had chosen her to be the mommy. *This isn't the story I would have dreamed for myself*, Mary thought, *but do I trust that God is a better dreamer than I am?* It seemed impossible that Mary would be the

mom to the King of the world. It seemed impossible that anyone would ever believe what Gabriel was telling her. The angel smiled gently and spoke into the doubts clouding her head. "Nothing is impossible with God." With those words, Mary's heart felt lighter and her hope grew stronger. *I belong to the Lord. Whatever He wants me to do, I will do*, she thought. Then she smiled, too.

When Jesus came into Mary's world, He made her ordinary life into something extraordinary. Everything she had planned was suddenly changed. Everything normal was gone, but what may have looked like a disaster to other people was actually God writing an amazing story into Mary's life. Her world was going to be filled with knowing and loving Jesus. The same is true for us. When Jesus comes into our hearts, He makes our ordinary lives extraordinary. The things He wants us to do may look strange or silly to other people. But we trust that God is actually doing something bigger and better than we could have dreamed for ourselves. When we believe that knowing and loving Jesus is better than anything else, we can say along with Mary, "I belong to the Lord. Whatever He wants me to do, I will do."



1. *What are some things that Jesus says for us to do that might seem strange or silly to others?*

He tells us to think of others as more important than ourselves. He tells us to forgive, even if our feelings have been hurt very badly. He tells us to give our time and money to the church. He tells us to obey our moms and dads. All our friends may not understand these things, but God says they are best.

2. *What things do you hope will happen in your life? How would you feel if God told you that your life would be different from what you want it to be?*

Discuss and help your child apply this truth to his or her own life.

What is something new you learned to do this year?

Mary's Song

Luke 1:46-56

Mary walked up to the house of her cousin Elizabeth.

The angel Gabriel had told her that Elizabeth was going to have a baby after many years of waiting! Mary was so excited to see her, but also couldn't help but think, *Will she believe me when I tell her the news about my baby?* Mary wondered as she opened the door to her cousin's house and stepped inside. "Elizabeth? Hello!" said Mary. The little ears on little baby John, growing inside Elizabeth's belly, heard Mary's words and John jumped with joy! Elizabeth's bright eyes shone as the excited baby bounced around in her belly. She laughed with glee and told Mary, "You are the mommy of my Lord!"

Mary's face glowed and she gently laid her hand across her own belly. The King of the world was growing inside of a poor, unimportant girl like her. God could have chosen anyone to be the mommy of Jesus. He could have picked a rich princess with ringlets of gold, clothed in a plush, poofy dress, with a palace of servants to help care for the baby King. He could have chosen the wife of a priest to take Jesus to serve in the temple each day. God could have chosen anyone, but He chose Mary. At this thought, a song stirred inside her heart.

It would be the kind of song God's people had always sung. It was like the song of the Israelites when God delivered them from Pharaoh's mighty army at the Red Sea.

Though they were small and weak, their mighty God had flung Egypt's horses and riders into the sea. It was the kind of song that young David sang of His powerful God, who used a smelly shepherd boy like him to slay a giant and rule a kingdom. The song growing in Mary was a song like this. She wasn't sad or mad that she needed God so much. Mary was happy as her voice sang about her God, how He was big and strong and mighty to save and how she was small and weak and needed Him.

The song that this world tells you to sing is one that says, "I am great! I am important! I am popular!" It is a song that shows that you can do everything and don't need any help from anyone, but God has always wanted His people to sing a different song. When you belong to God, you see that you were lost and lonely, unable to lift a finger to save yourself, and God, looking down at you, completely helpless, sent His Son. Jesus has done everything to save us. When our hearts see the gift God has given us in Jesus, a song rises up inside of us, just like in Mary. We open our mouths and out tumble unending words of praise to our God who is mighty to save!



1. *Why is it important that we understand that Jesus did everything needed to save us?*

Since He did everything, He gets *all* the praise. If we did any of the work to pay for our sin, then we would need to sing a little song of praise to ourselves. But if we did nothing, then He gets all the glory for rescuing us!

2. *When you look at your life, maybe it seems like you are just a kid who can't do very much. What is God showing us by doing something big through someone like Mary?*

He is showing us that He can use *anyone* to do His great work. We don't have to be big or important to be used by God.

What is one thing you want God to do in your life next year?

The Stable

Luke 2:1-7*

Joseph kicked a rock with his dust-covered sandal.

He and Mary were slowly plodding down the long road from Nazareth to Bethlehem. He glanced at his pregnant wife and saw her eyes squeeze tight in pain as she grasped her belly. It was swollen big like a balloon, ready to pop. Joseph sighed. *Why did Caesar pick now to count everyone? Why do we need to be in Bethlehem now? The baby could come any day.* Joseph closed his eyes, trying to imagine the perfect spot for this baby to be born. *Maybe a family member in Bethlehem has an extra room? Maybe there's a nice inn that will have a comfortable bed and hot water? This is God's own Son! Surely God wants Him to be born somewhere special.* Joseph was right. God did have a special place in mind, but it was very different than what Joseph imagined.

A few days later, a wrinkly, wriggly Jesus was born into the world. Of all the kings who had lived, He was the greatest. Of all the people who had walked the earth, He alone was perfect, but He would start His life in the strangest way you or I could imagine. His birth didn't take place in a palace, or even a house, but in an old, stinky stable filled with baas and moos and cockadoodle-dooos. Jesus's little body wasn't wrapped up with soft satin blankets but with simple strips of cloth swaddled tightly around him. He wasn't laid in a crib of gold that sparkled with bright gems but in a well-worn manger filled with bits of straw and hay that the an-

imals hadn't eaten during dinner. Jesus had left the highest throne in the universe to be born into the lowliest of all places.

We often think that to get to God, we have to go up to Him. We think that we have to work hard, obey our mommies and daddies perfectly, and follow every rule without messing up. Then maybe, if we get everything right, we can climb and claw our way up to Him. But God wanted to show us that for us to come to Him, it was never about us going up to Him. It was about Him coming down to us. The only way we could be with Jesus forever was if He came and got us. We couldn't keep all the rules. Jesus had to come down and keep them for us.

Just think how tough this had to be for Jesus! Everything had been so perfect in Heaven. Jesus sat right next to His Daddy on a throne that ruled over every other throne. He had all the riches and crowns and majesty that He deserved as King of all kings. Coming down meant that He would have to leave all of it, give it all up for us, all so that He could come get us. And He did! In the smallest and weakest of ways, He came down to us because He knew we could never make it up to Him.



1. *Think about your home, your family, and the things that are special to you. How hard would it be for you to give those up? How do you think it felt for Jesus to give up things that were special to Him to become a human and live in our world?*

Discuss and help your child apply this truth to his or her own life.

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2. *Why is it important that Jesus, who is God, became a human?*

Only as a human, like us, with all of our weaknesses but still without sin, could Jesus die in our place (Philippians 2:5-8). Also, this helps us know that whatever hard, sad, or scary things we face in this world, Jesus knows how we feel. We can pray to Him, knowing that He understands (Hebrews 4:15-16).

What has been your favorite thing to wear during this Christmas season?

* Corresponding *Jesus Storybook Bible* story: "He's Here!"

The Good News

Luke 2:8-20*

One night long ago, an angel, overcome with great excitement, whooshed down into a huddle of shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem.

He looked into the eyes of these tired, raggedy men, and his face glowed with warmth. The shepherds stared at the glowing angel with knees knocking and teeth chattering. Looking at them with burning but gentle eyes, the angel grinned and said, “Ah, you don’t need to be afraid! I have really good news. In Bethlehem, there is a baby that was born tonight. But it isn’t just any baby. It’s Him! The One that God promised to Adam and Eve, to Abraham, to David. The Rescuer that God promised is here! He is God’s gift to you, to everyone! Hurry, go see Him! Look for a baby in a manger, wrapped up in swaddling cloths!” The shepherds looked at each other in surprise and then shock as they found themselves surrounded by a choir of angels shouting in song, “Glory to God in the highest!” Then, just as suddenly, the voices were silent. The angels were gone. All was quiet. The shepherds glanced at each other, smiles spreading across their faces. They threw down their staffs, left their sheep, and went sprinting through the streets of the town, searching for God’s gift. They came to an old stable. Inside, wrapped up like a gift, was their King. Christmas had come! God was with them!

While most people were inside their homes snuggled up with their families in soft blankets, those shepherds had been outside, shivering in the cold. Their sheep couldn’t

be left alone or they would wander off, fall in a ditch, or be snatched away as a wolf’s supper, so the shepherds stayed with their sheep, softly stroking their heads and speaking in gentle tones. These smelly, simple shepherds were not special. They weren’t invited to celebrations. They never received special gifts from anyone. They sat out among their herds, forgotten and ignored, until this night. God had not forgotten the shepherds on the hill. The gift that He had always wanted to give to the world was finally here, and God invited these shepherds to celebrate His newborn Son, His most special gift.

Did you know that in the Bible, God calls us “sheep” and He calls Jesus the “Great Shepherd”? We were the lost sheep that wandered off from God’s care. We wandered off thinking we knew better, that we knew where the best water and the best grass to lay in was. Instead of finding what was good, we fell into the ditch and were attacked by enemies. Then Jesus, the Great Shepherd, came looking for us, the lost sheep that He loved so much. Jesus is God’s special gift to those who are in need of a Shepherd. He invites everyone who feels alone and forgotten, broken, and smelly to come to Him. Jesus is the gift that God always wanted to give to His people. He is the reason to celebrate Christmas every single day. Jesus is with us always!



1. *Sometimes we see people who don't look special in our eyes. But how do you think they look in God's eyes? How should we treat people God thinks are special?*

Discuss and help your child apply this truth to his or her own life.

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2. *How does it feel to know that Jesus is with you wherever you go?*

Discuss and help your child apply this truth to his or her own life.

Do you have any special plans for Christmas Eve or Christmas this year?

* Corresponding Jesus Storybook Bible story: *"The Light of The Whole World"*

Merry Christmas!

John 3:16

Do you remember the story we started with? In the beginning, God spoke into an empty blank space and created shining, silvery stars and a scorching sun. He built bulky-brown buffalo, lounging-lime lizards, and fast-flying falcons. He crafted a land covered with tall, trembling trees and fields of lilacs, daisies, and bluebonnets. Water ran cool and crisp to drink. This whole perfect world God made to give as a gift to His favorite creation, people. Adam and Eve walked through the garden of Eden with eyes full of wonder at the world their Father had made for them to share with Him. In every petal, every blade of grass, every squawk, every drip-drop, God was saying to His children, “I love you! This world tells you about Me. I will meet with you here. It is My gift to you.” But there was one tree that God said not to eat from, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And in telling them not to eat that tree’s fruit, God was still saying, “I love you,” but with this rule, God was also asking Adam and Eve a question: “Do you trust me? Do you trust that I love you and haven’t kept one good thing from you?”

Adam and Eve looked around at the beautiful world their Father had given them. They thought about how He walked with them there during the cool weather. They listened to His whisper through the leaves of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, “I love you. You can trust Me.” But then Satan slithered up to this tree and whispered his questioning lies to Eve. “Does God really

love you? Wouldn’t He have given you *everything* if He really loved you? Can you trust Him?” The questions that Satan asked sank deep in their hearts. Adam and Eve answered those questions by biting into the fruit that God had told them not to eat. From that moment on, sin sliced down deep into their hearts, and ours as well, where it whispers those same old questions once again: “Does God really love you? Can you trust Him?”

There was yet one more gift that God had always planned to give. God waited until that very first Christmas to give His greatest gift. This gift would be the final answer to that lying question our hearts have been asking since we were born. *Does God love me? Can I really trust Him?* Jesus, God’s only Son, is His answer. He came to cry out on the cross with painful shrieks, “I do love you!” And with His Son—His biggest show of His love for us—God is shouting, “Yes! Trust Me!” If He didn’t hold back His own Son from us, then surely He will not hold back anything that would be good for us. Yes, He loves us! Yes, we can trust Him!



1. *John 3:16 tells us God so loved the world that He gave His Only Son. He says if we believe in Him, if we trust in Him, that we have everlasting life. What does it mean to “believe” in His only Son?*

Discuss and help your child apply this truth to his or her own life.

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2. *Is there anyone who comes to your mind that needs to hear the great message of Christmas, that God has given us the greatest gift we could ever hope to receive?*

Discuss and help your child apply this truth to his or her own life.

What was your favorite thing about today?

Community Discussion Guides

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47 ESV)

Advent is a season of both reflection and anticipation.

Reflection. Our lives stand as a testament that through every storm, God is with us. He has proven His faithfulness, but tragically, so often we forget all He has done and all He has promised. Advent is a season where we get to stop, remember, and reflect on who God is and the good He has done.

Anticipation. Until Christ returns and makes all things new, we as believers are never not waiting. We're waiting for things at work to improve, waiting for the next chapter of life, waiting for anxieties to pass and suffering to end, waiting for those we love to finally trust in Christ, and waiting for Jesus to return.

Advent reminds us of the thousands of years God's people waited and longed for the coming of Jesus. Christ has come and He will come again, only this time He will complete the story He began so long ago.

How to begin

Community Discussion Guides

The three discussion guides that follow are for you and your Missional Community, a group of friends, or your family to open the Word of God through the Christmas season and rejoice together in the truth that our God is with us.

To make the best use of the time, appoint a discussion leader who can read through the guide ahead of time, assign the readings, and help keep the discussion moving.

With each discussion guide, our aim is that we might see Immanuel, God with us, in one of three ways:

Immanuel, God was with us yesterday.

Immanuel, God is with us today.

Immanuel, God will be with us tomorrow
and for all eternity.

Use these guides as a springboard to talk about the confounding truth that God redeems sinners like us and promises to be with us:

Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you.
(Joshua 1:5 ESV)

Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God.
(Isaiah 41:10 ESV)

And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.
(Matthew 28:20 ESV)

Immanuel, God with Us Yesterday

Discussion leader read or summarize aloud:

Before the discussion gets started, let's all take a few minutes to think to ourselves over this past year. Recall the different seasons and even erratic changes in weather. Picture what you were doing this time last year. How have you changed? Have you changed? Did anything that you would classify as a "major life event" occur? Think about the things that brought you great joy. What were they? How about the things that brought you sorrow?

DISCUSS

1. *What was one of the most significant things that happened in your life this past year?*
2. *Was there anything that surprised you?*

READING 1

In Joshua 3, we find the Israelites at the footsteps of the Promised Land. After being delivered out of slavery in Egypt and led through the desert for 40 years, their new home was nearly within eyesight. Yet here, at the edge of their destination, standing before them was the Jordan River—rushing and swollen from spring rains. All of the excitement and joyful shouts slowly grew silent as people began to ask, "How will we ever cross this river?" God had shown His faithfulness to His people through so much already, but how was He going to do it this time?

So when the people set out from their tents to pass over the Jordan with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, and as soon as those bearing the ark had come as far as the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water (now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest), the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap very far away, at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, and those flowing down toward the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off. And the people passed over opposite Jericho. Now the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firmly on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan, and all Israel was passing over on dry ground until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan. (Joshua 3:14-17 ESV)

DISCUSS

1. *Who or what was leading the Israelites' way across the river? Why is this significant?*

READING 2

When all the nation had finished passing over the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua, "Take twelve men from the people, from each tribe a man, and command them, saying, 'Take twelve stones from here out of the midst of the Jordan, from the very place where the priests' feet stood firmly, and bring them over with you and lay them down in the place where you lodge tonight.'" Then Joshua called the twelve men from the people of Israel, whom he had appointed, a man from each tribe. And Joshua said to them, "Pass on before the ark of the LORD your God into the midst of the Jordan, and take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever." And the people of Israel did just as Joshua commanded and took up twelve stones out of the midst of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, just as the LORD told Joshua. And they carried them over with them to the place where they lodged and laid them down there. And Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the covenant had stood; and they are there to this day. (Joshua 4:1-9 ESV)

DISCUSS

1. *Why do you think God commanded the Israelites to build a memorial? What does this say about our tendency to forget even the miraculous deeds of God?*
2. *Like when we started, let's all think again about our lives over the past year and share. What's a way or some ways that God demonstrated His faithfulness to you in the past year? Were there any big prayers that He answered?*
3. *Sometimes the most significant things that happen to us are significant because of how difficult they are. Does anyone have a story about a time in the past year, or in their life as a whole, where there was a seemingly impossible task and God showed up in a significant way?*

READING 3

The same God who was with Moses at the Red Sea is the same God who was with Joshua at the Jordan River and is the same God who is with us today. For anyone who has been walking with the Lord for any amount of time, there are countless ways that God has proven to us

that He indeed is Immanuel, God with us. It is a tragedy that we so often suffer from a spiritual amnesia, forgetting who God is and all He has done.

This Advent season, let's pause and remember the most miraculous act of all: Jesus has come to seek and save those who were lost. Let's look at the countless ways that God has moved in each of our stories and shown us that He has been with us, ordering all of our steps and giving us the grace to endure even the hardest of seasons.

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart; I will recount all of your wonderful deeds. (Psalm 9:1 ESV)

PRAY

Thinking back over the span of your whole life, what are some of the things that you are most thankful for? What are some of the times that you have seen God move in your life in a way that you did not expect? Is there anything that you had forgotten about until right now? Use the space below to write out as many as you can.

After you are done, either all together or in smaller groups, spend some time praying and thanking God for who He is and how He has shown us that He is indeed Immanuel, God with us. Let's pray that our lives would be a living and breathing memorial to the faithfulness of our God.

[illegible]

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Immanuel, God with Us Today

READING 1

Advent is a yearly reminder of the incarnation, meaning the “in-fleshing” of the eternal God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14 ESV)

Jesus, who has eternally existed, put on flesh and walked among us.

[Jesus,] though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:6-11 ESV)

Jesus became like us in every respect.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:15-16 ESV)

Jesus was with us and He was like us in every respect, and after a lifetime of temptation and suffering, His life climaxed with spectacular abandonment. No one ever deserved it less, and no one ever suffered more than Jesus. Think about that. No one has ever suffered with greater intensity than God Himself. He did this—all of this—so that He might be with us.

DISCUSS

If you have been walking with the Lord for some time, you have probably seen that sometimes what God asks you to do is hard. Advent reminds us that God never asks us to walk a path that He didn't first walk Himself. He is with us and intimately knows how it feels to carry a heavy weight.

As a Christian community working for God's mission together, it is vital that we know each other and bear one another's burdens.

1. *What are some of the significant things happening in your life right now that feel heavy to you? How could you include others God has put in your life to help you?*
2. *Remembering that Jesus intimately knows what it feels like to carry a heavy weight, how is His perfect life a model for you in your specific situation?*
3. *What in Scripture do you cling to when life feels tough?*

READING 2

We know that God is with us, but it often feels like it would be so much better if we could see Jesus face to face right now. The thing is, Jesus knew that we would feel this way, so He tells us in Scripture why it is to our advantage that He would go away.

I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, "Where are you going?" But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:4-15 ESV)

DISCUSS

1. *Since we do not see Jesus in the flesh right now, what does it look like for God to still be Immanuel, God with us, today?*
2. *Who is the Helper and what are some of the specific ways that He helps us?*

READING 3

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:3-9 ESV)

DISCUSS

- 1. *What is the inheritance being kept in Heaven for us?*
- 2. *What does it say that our trials result in? Is that sometimes difficult to believe? Why?*
- 3. *How does a hope in future glory inform how we ought to live today?*

PRAY

Read verses 8 and 9 again. Meditate on the fact that in this exact moment, our holy and perfect God is with you. He is orchestrating all things in your life so that your faith may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus.

Spend some time as a group praying for one another and the significant, heavy things that each person identified earlier. Pray that each person would be comforted by the Holy Spirit as He reminds us of the perfect life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and what that means for us today.

Use the space below to record your group’s prayer requests and any thoughts or questions from the discussion you’d like to revisit.

This image shows a single page of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Immanuel, God with Us Tomorrow & into Eternity

PRAY

Discussion leader read or summarize aloud:

When you look around during the Christmas season, everything is decorated with red and green, and little white lights line the houses. All of these things, even the Christmas music, that might have begun just a little too early for some of us, remind us of this: Christmas is now only days away!

It may be easy for our minds to be distracted in this moment, but let's take a minute and ask that God would quiet our minds and open our hearts to His Word. Pray that we would gain a greater understanding of His faithfulness and steadfast love. Pray that we would be reminded and changed by the fact that He is Immanuel, God with us.

READING 1

Scripture is bursting at the seams with the promises of God. These are our hope because if God makes a promise, then He will do it. His promises are not like ours, because even in our most sincere moments, we cannot guarantee that we will deliver on them.

*Fear not,
for I am with you; be not dismayed, for
I am your God;
I will strengthen you,
I will help you,
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41:10 ESV)*

*I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and
I will accomplish all my purpose,' calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, and
I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and
I will do it. (Isaiah 46:9-11 ESV)*

DISCUSS

- 1. From Isaiah 41:10, what emotional response should we have in light of what God promises us?
- 2. From Isaiah 46:9-11, what can we observe about the purposes of God? What can we observe about the power of God to accomplish His will? What does this tell us about the sovereignty of God?
- 3. How do the promises of God practically equip us to face each day?

READING 2

The meaning of the word “hope” may get lost in its modern English usage because we often distinguish it from the meaning of certainty. We might say, “I’m not certain what is going to happen, but I hope it happens.” However, when we read the word hope in the Bible, it is not merely wishful thinking.

Set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.
(1 Peter 1:13 ESV)

The biblical understanding of hope is that when God promises that He will do something, we put the full weight of our trust in that promise.

DISCUSS

- 1. How would you describe your feelings and thoughts about the future?

- ☐ Hopeful and confident
- ☐ Worried and anxious
- ☐ Indifferent / I try not to think about the future too much
- ☐ The feelings change depending on what season of life I am in
- ☐ In a different way? Feel free to explain

- 2. What are some specific barriers that you can identify that may inhibit you from putting the full weight of your trust in the promises of God?

3. *When you feel a sense of anxiety for the days ahead, what do you think are some of the underlying reasons for you personally?*
4. *What does Scripture say about our future?*
5. *How would our lives look different if we lived in a way that put the full weight of our trust in the promises of God?*

READING 3

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Colossians 3:1-4 ESV)

Verse 4 is a real event that is really going to happen. When Christ returns, we will be with Him.

DISCUSS

1. *What is the difference between setting our minds on things above and setting our minds on things on earth? How does this play out in our lives?*
2. *What does it mean that “Christ is our life”?*
3. *Why should it encourage us that Christ is coming again?*

PRAY

God never left us alone in our sin—He was there, taking our sin upon Himself.

God has not left us alone to face our current struggles—He is with us and intimately knows the weight of what we carry because He Himself carried it and He even now is carrying us.

God will never leave us—He has sealed us with His Spirit for all eternity and promises we will be with Him in ever-increasing joy for all eternity.

He is with us. The one, true God is with us. Don’t merely know that as true information, but meditate on it. Pray that God would let it bring you joy that overflows in such a way that you can’t help but tell others about it. Pray that He would comfort your restless heart with His promises. Pray that He would remind you that through every storm and vicious trial, He is with you and He will never leave you. Christ has come, and He will come again, only this time He will complete the story that He began.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Community Menu

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:46-47 ESV)

Breaking bread together is an opportunity for us to remember God as our great provider, to receive from Him with glad hearts, and to be reassured that He is caring for our every need. Every meal has the potential to stir our hearts toward worship and enjoyment of our Father.

Each of these menus are designed to cultivate the heart of your community to appreciate God's great provision in Jesus. Each menu has steps for preparing the meal, Scriptures to read as you cook together, and questions to discuss as you eat together.

Whether this is your immediate family, your Missional Community, a group from your workplace, a neighborhood group, or a service team at church, it will prove to be a time to share in one another's lives and grow in your affections toward God together.

There are four menus your community can choose from and share together.

How to begin

Community Menu

Please read through the menus and ask your group about any dietary restrictions that should be considered as the meal is prepared. They will be able to help advise changes to the menu based on their specific restrictions.

preferred method

LEADER

Gather a group of 6-10 people and invite them to share in this four-meal experience for the month of December. Decide which night during the week you have the most time available to both cook and eat a meaningful meal together.

READ AHEAD

Read through each menu to understand the amount of time each item will take to prepare and cook. In some instances, you or someone in your group may need to start preparations earlier in the day.

DIVIDE

Divide the grocery shopping up among the group, or have one person do all the shopping and simply divide the costs after.

STEPS

1. Divide the ingredients in the kitchen based on each menu item and assign people different tasks. Not everyone needs a task, but everyone should be in or around the cooking to hear the readings and participate in the conversation.
2. Follow menu instructions, and when cued to pause and read, have an appointed leader stop the group and read the selection for that moment. Continue cooking after the reading is done and use the time between readings to discuss the content and its implications on your life.
3. The reading times are suggested based on natural low points in the cooking process and are, therefore, flexible. However, the order of the readings is carefully arranged based on the content. So while you may cook the dishes in any order, make sure to follow the specified order of the readings.
4. When the meal is ready, set the table and sit down as a group to enjoy.
5. As you eat, answer the questions provided in the “Table Talk” section of the menu.

optional method, if there are time constraints that don't allow for the preferred method

LEADER

Gather a group of 6-10 people and invite them to share in this four-meal experience for the month of December. Decide which night during the week you have the most time available to eat a meaningful meal together.

You have a couple of options:

- Read through the menu and divide up the various items among those who will be coming and have them prepare their item before arriving to the dinner.
- One person/couple in the group prepares the entire meal, the entire group gathers at their home, and then rotate who prepares the meal each week.

STEPS

1. Take time to gather in the kitchen and read aloud the “Readings” provided with the menu. Just a suggestion, you may want to have something to snack on while reading the Scriptures and quotes.
2. Set the table together and sit down as a group to enjoy the meal.
3. As you eat, answer the questions provided in the “Table Talk” section of the menu.

Rosemary Chicken, Sweet Potatoes, & Spinach Salad

SERVES 9-10

chicken ingredients

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 pieces (est. 1 lb) bone-in/skin-on chicken breasts | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 tbsp fresh rosemary |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 5 pieces (est. 2 lb) bone-in/skin-on chicken leg and thigh | <input type="checkbox"/> ¼ cup butter |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 whole lemons, halved | <input type="checkbox"/> salt and fresh cracked pepper |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 tbsp extra virgin olive oil |

spinach salad ingredients

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 large containers of pre-washed spinach | <input type="checkbox"/> ¼ cup parmigiano reggiano, shaved into salad |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4 medium-sized radishes, very thinly sliced | <input type="checkbox"/> balsamic vinaigrette dressing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 medium-sized apples, cored, quartered, and thinly sliced | <input type="checkbox"/> ½ cup slivered almonds |

sweet potatoes with bacon ingredients

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 6 medium sweet potatoes, diced | <input type="checkbox"/> salt and pepper |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ½ lb bacon, diced | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 tbsp extra virgin olive oil |

chicken cooking instructions

Preheat oven to 500 degrees.

In a large oven-proof dish, place all chicken skin side up in pan. Drizzle 3 tbsp olive oil on chicken. Season both sides of chicken generously with salt and pepper. Chop 3 tbsp fresh rosemary finely and coat both sides of chicken.

READING 1 *on page 132*

After seasoning, place chicken skin-side up in pan, and with halved lemons, squeeze juice on all pieces of chicken. Place halved lemon pieces in pan with chicken. Cut ¼ cup butter into small pieces and place sporadically on top of chicken pieces and throughout pan.

Place in oven for 15 minutes to crisp skin.

READING 2 *on page 132*

chicken cooking instructions, continued

After 15 minutes, turn temperature down to 400 degrees to cook through.

Cook for another 25-35 minutes (depending on your oven strength). Check chicken at around 25 minutes by cutting into thickest part of breast. If juices run clear, chicken is ready. Let sit for 8-10 minutes to rest and for juices to draw back into chicken. This is key for flavor.

salad cooking instructions

In a large salad bowl, combine all ingredients.

Dress salad to desired dressing level. Serve on plates so that salad can breathe.

READING 3 on page 133

sweet potato cooking instructions

Dice ½ lb bacon and sauté in heavy-bottom pan on medium-high heat for 3-4 minutes or until ½-way cooked and a decent amount bacon fat has developed in the pan. While bacon is sautéing, dice the sweet potatoes and toss with olive oil. Season with salt and pepper and combine with bacon.

READING 4 on page 133

When bacon is starting to look cooked-through, turn heat to medium. Cook sweet potatoes, tossing regularly for 10-12 minutes or until desired tenderness.

The longer you cook sweet potatoes, the more of their natural sugars come out, so don't be afraid to cook them until they have a little burnt crust.

READING 5 on page 134

READING 1

When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground, and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground—then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (Genesis 2:5-9 ESV)

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. (Genesis 2:15-25 ESV)

READING 2

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the

READING 2
CONT.

garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”
(Genesis 3:6-13 ESV)

READING 3

Someone or something whispered that they could become as gods.... They wanted some corner in this universe of which they could say to God, “This is our business, not yours.” But there is no such corner.
—C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, page 59

Or for example, Ephesians 2:3 “Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.” The key phrase is “by nature” we are children of wrath. In other words, something happened to us in the sin of Adam that altered our human nature. We do not just do sins; we are by nature sinners, corrupt, depraved, bent, rebellious. —John Piper in sermon, “Adam, Christ, and Justification Part 5,” August 27, 2000

READING 4

I mean, you hear that very wildly popular Bible verse that says, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” That verse makes you not a victim of Adam’s rebellion but a participant in his rebellion. Are you tracking with me? You are not just a victim of Adam’s rebellion; you have gladly joined him in his rebellion against God, so that every time you go, “I’ll fix it myself,” your declaration is, “I don’t need you, God. I’m a better god than you. I’m smarter than you. My way is better than yours.” —Matt Chandler in sermon, “The Remedy: The Gospel of Jesus Christ,” August 25, 2013

And a terrible pain came into God’s heart. His children hadn’t just broken the one rule; they had broken God’s heart. They had broken their wonderful relationship with him. And now everything else would break. God’s creation would start to unravel, and come undone, and go wrong. From now on everything would die—even though it was all supposed to last forever. You see, sin had come into God’s perfect world. And it would never leave. God’s children would be always running away from him and hiding in the dark.

readings

READING 4 CONT.

Their hearts would break now, and never work properly again. God couldn't let his children live forever, not in such pain, not without him. There was only one way to protect them. "You will have to leave the garden now," God told his children, his eyes filling with tears. "This is no longer your true home, it's not the place for you anymore." — Sally Lloyd Jones, *The Jesus Storybook Bible*, pages 33-34

READING 5

For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. (1 Corinthians 15:21-22 ESV)

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come. But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 5:12-21 ESV)



table talk questions to answer as you eat

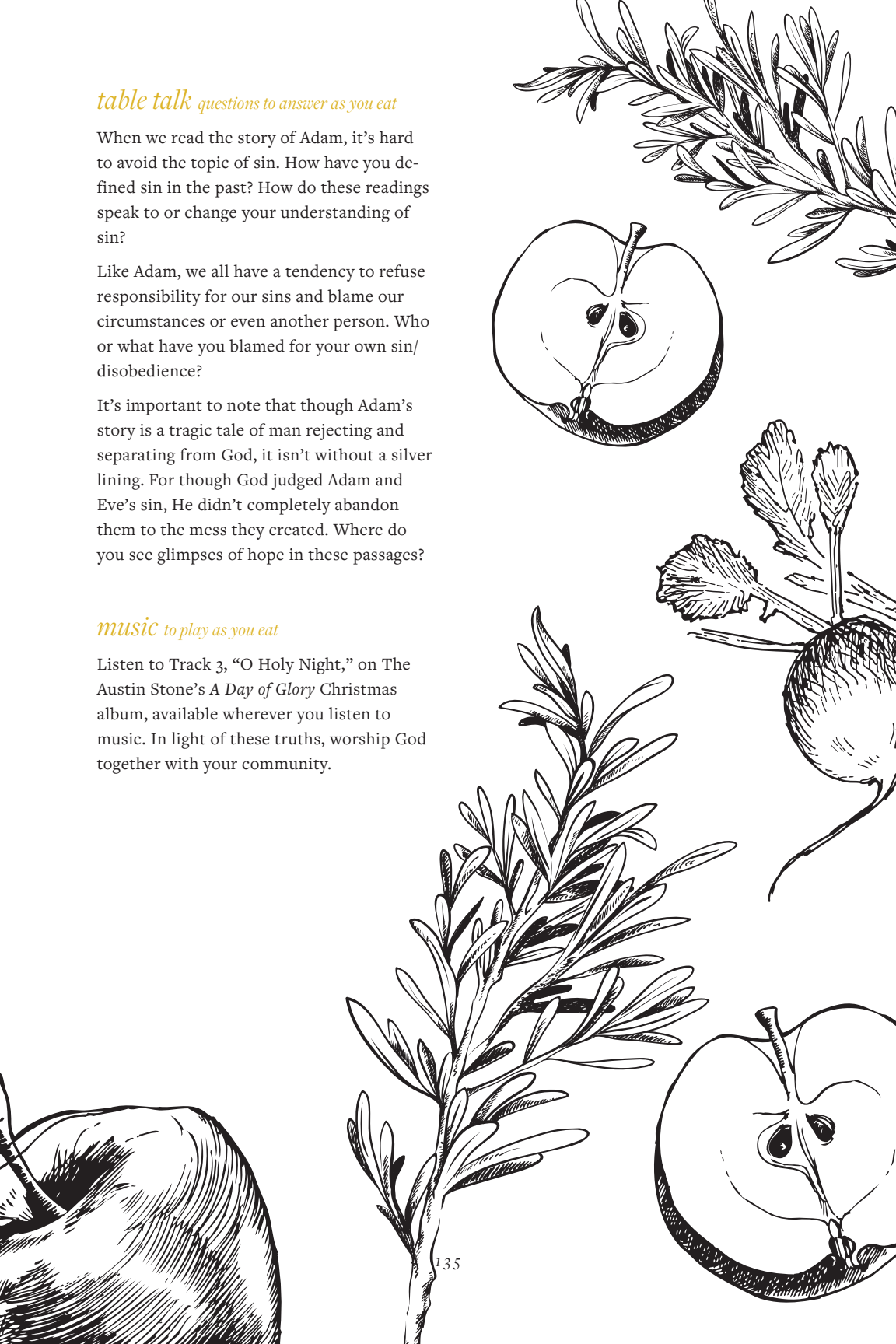
When we read the story of Adam, it's hard to avoid the topic of sin. How have you defined sin in the past? How do these readings speak to or change your understanding of sin?

Like Adam, we all have a tendency to refuse responsibility for our sins and blame our circumstances or even another person. Who or what have you blamed for your own sin/disobedience?

It's important to note that though Adam's story is a tragic tale of man rejecting and separating from God, it isn't without a silver lining. For though God judged Adam and Eve's sin, He didn't completely abandon them to the mess they created. Where do you see glimpses of hope in these passages?

music to play as you eat

Listen to Track 3, "O Holy Night," on The Austin Stone's *A Day of Glory* Christmas album, available wherever you listen to music. In light of these truths, worship God together with your community.



French Onion Soup

SERVES 12

ingredients

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4 tbsp unsalted butter | <input type="checkbox"/> 12 cups beef stock |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 ½ tbsp extra virgin olive oil | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 cups red wine (merlot recommended) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4 lbs medium yellow onions, thinly sliced | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 cups cubed and toasted baguette |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 ¼ tsp sugar | <input type="checkbox"/> 6 ¾ cups shredded gruyere cheese |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 ¼ tsp salt | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 tsp minced fresh thyme |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 tbsp all-purpose flour + ¼ tbsp flour | |

cooking instructions

In a large heavy-bottom pot, heat butter and oil over medium-low heat. Add onions, cover and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened and translucent, about 20 minutes.

READING 1 *on the next page*

Increase heat to medium-high and add sugar and salt. Sauté, scraping up any brown bits from the bottom of the pot, until onions are softened and a deep, rich brown, about 15 minutes.

READING 2 *on the next page*

Reduce heat to medium, sprinkle in flour and cook, stirring constantly, for 2-3 minutes. Gradually whisk in 2 cups of stock, then add the remaining stock and wine. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Simmer for about 30 minutes to blend the flavors.

READING 3 *on the next page*

Taste and adjust seasoning with salt and pepper, if necessary.

Preheat oven to 425 degrees.

Divide baguette cubes among 8 individual oven-proof bowls. Fill bowls with onion soup and sprinkle each with a thick layer of cheese. Set bowls on a large rimmed baking sheet. Bake until cheese is browned, about 8 minutes.

READING 4 *on the next page*

Garnish with thyme and serve hot.

readings

READING 1

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. (Genesis 12:1-4 ESV)

READING 2

The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’ Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot’s length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child. (Acts 7:2-5 ESV)

READING 3

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. (Hebrews 11:8-10 ESV)

READING 4

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” (Romans 4:1-3 ESV)

table talk questions to answer as you eat

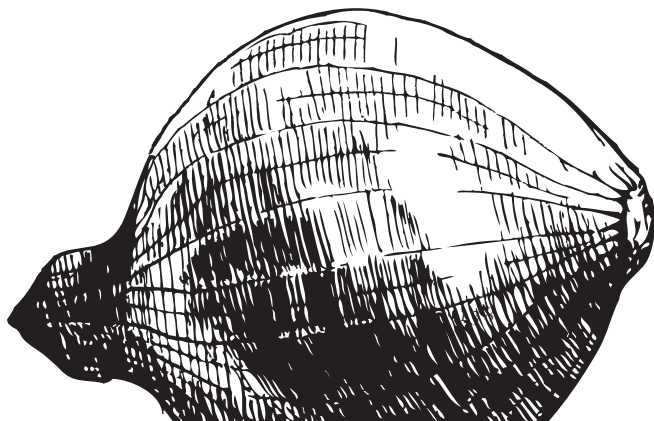
In what areas of your life do you sense God calling you to follow Him in ways that require deep faith? Are there places you're hesitating until you see more of a 'plan' before you step out in faith with God?

Where have you seen the Lord be faithful this week? This year? The past five years? How do these times help build your faith to continue trusting God in the future?

Abraham obeyed God by leaving his home, country, and comforts in order to be blessed. But there was someone else coming who would do all this and more to become a blessing to others. How can you see glimpses of Jesus in the life of Abraham?

music to play as you eat

Listen to Track 1, "A Day of Glory," on The Austin Stone's *A Day of Glory* Christmas album, available wherever you listen to music. In light of these truths, worship God together with your community.





Lamb Kebabs & Baked Eggplant

SERVES 12-16

lamb ingredients

- ☐ 3 cups finely chopped onions
- ☐ 2 tbsp grated lemon zest
- ☐ ½ cup fresh squeezed lemon juice
- ☐ ½ cup chopped fresh parsley
- ☐ ½ cup chopped fresh cilantro
- ☐ 4 tsp salt
- ☐ 2 tsp ground cumin
- ☐ 2 tsp sweet paprika
- ☐ 2 tsp fresh ground black pepper
- ☐ ½ cup extra virgin olive oil
- ☐ 4-4 ½ lbs boneless leg or shoulder of lamb, cut into 1 inch cubes w/ some fat still attached
- ☐ 16-20 bamboo skewers
- ☐ 16 pita breads, warmed for serving
- ☐ feta spread (recipe follows) for serving

feta spread ingredients

- ☐ 8 ounces feta cheese crumbled
- ☐ 8 ounces cream cheese, at room temperature
- ☐ 1 cup of greek-style yogurt
- ☐ 4 tbsp minced green onion tops or chives
- ☐ 2 tbsp minced fresh mint
- ☐ 4 tbsp fresh squeezed lemon juice
- ☐ 3 tsp minced garlic
- ☐ 2 tsp extra virgin olive oil
- ☐ 2 tsp finely grated lemon zest
- ☐ 1 tsp salt
- ☐ ¼ tsp cayenne pepper

baked eggplant ingredients

- ☐ 8 eggplants (use asian/smaller eggplants)
- ☐ extra virgin olive oil
- ☐ salt and pepper
- ☐ 4 small onions, thinly sliced
- ☐ 12 cloves garlic, thinly sliced
- ☐ 4 medium fresh red chiles, halved, seeded and thinly sliced
- ☐ juice of 1 lemon
- ☐ 8 ounces of feta cheese, crumbled
- ☐ 1 ½ cup of greek-style yogurt
- ☐ a handful of fresh mint leaves, torn

lamb cooking instructions

Soak the skewers in warm water for about 1 hour before assembling the kebabs.

In a large bowl, combine the onion, lemon zest, lemon juice, parsley, cilantro, mint, cumin, salt, pepper, paprika, and olive oil. Stir well. Add the lamb and toss to coat it with the marinade. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 2-4 hours.

READING 1 on page 142

lamb cooking instructions, continued

Preheat your grill / flat top / heavy-bottom pan (grill is preferred) to high and lightly oil the grill / flat top / pan.

Thread the lamb on the soaked skewers, and place them on the grill / flat top / pan. Cook, turning frequently to promote even browning, for 12-14 minutes.

READING 2 *on the next page*

Wrap a pita bread around the meat on a skewer, and while holding the bread firmly around the meat, twist the skewer out of the meat. Drizzle the meat with the feta spread to your liking. Repeat with the remaining pitas and skewers and enjoy!

feta spread cooking instructions

Combine all the ingredients in a bowl and stir to blend well.

Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 1 hour or overnight.

READING 3 *on the next page*

baked eggplant cooking instructions

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees.

Halve the eggplants length-wise and then cut a diamond pattern into the flesh of each half of the cut surface (be careful not to cut all the way through). Pour about 10 tbsp olive oil over them and season with salt and pepper. Turn them over to make sure they are well coated. Roast for 40-45 minutes.

READING 4 *on page 143*

While the eggplants are cooking, sauté the onion in $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of olive oil until soft and golden. Add the garlic and chiles and cook for another 2 minutes, until soft.

READING 5 *on page 143*

When the eggplants are tender, put them on a serving plate, cut side up, and squeeze lemon juice over them. Gently press the cooked flesh down to make a bit of room for the onions. Fill the eggplant cavities with the onions and sprinkle the feta on top.

Daub the yogurt over the eggplants and throw on the mint leaves. Drizzle with more olive oil over the top before serving. These can be served warm or at room temperature.

readings

READING 1

By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict. By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them. (Hebrews 11: 23-28 ESV)

READING 2

At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God's sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father's house, and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds. "When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. And on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them, saying, 'Men, you are brothers. Why do you wrong each other?' But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons." (Acts 7:20-29 ESV)

READING 3

And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Then the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. (Exodus 3:6-8 ESV)

READING 4

Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord: "I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob." And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. Then the Lord said to him, "Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt." (Acts 7:30-34 ESV)

READING 5

Say therefore to the people of Israel, "I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD." (Exodus 6:6-8 ESV)

table talk questions to answer as you eat

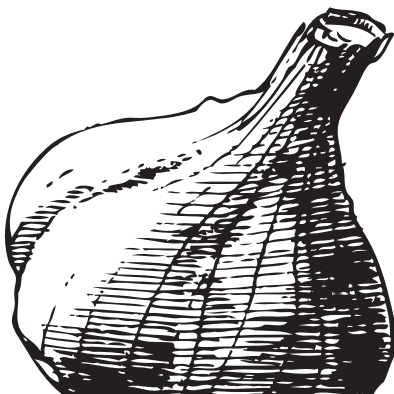
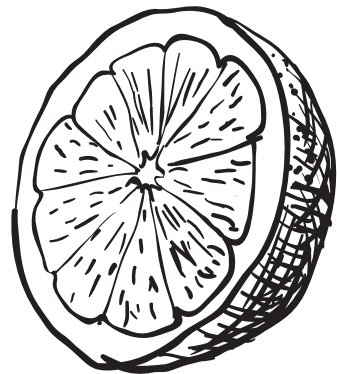
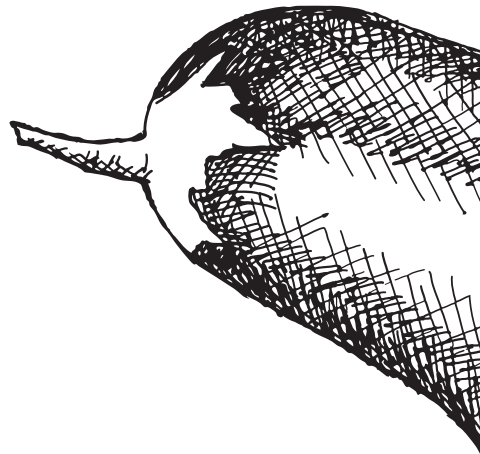
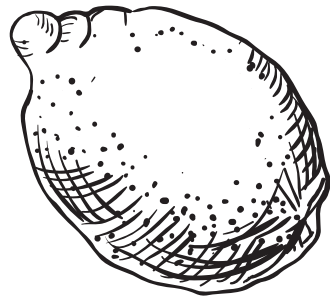
Are there areas of your life where you are crying out to God in need of deliverance? How do these verses help you believe God hears you?

Have you ever felt the Lord has charged you with a task that seemed too big or hard for you to handle? How did you respond? Is it hard for you to truly believe God can use you as powerfully as He used Moses? Why?

Moses led the people of God out of slavery from harsh taskmasters and to the banks of the Promised Land. How does his life point to a greater and better deliverer in Christ?

music to play as you eat

Listen to Track 3, "O Holy Night," on The Austin Stone's *Day of Glory* Christmas album, available wherever you listen to music. In light of these truths, worship God together with your community.





Communion

SERVES 6-10 PEOPLE

gluten free bread ingredients, makes 1 loaf

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3 ½ cup (500 grams) almond flour | <input type="checkbox"/> 4 large eggs |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ¾ tsp baking soda | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 tbsp honey |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ¼ tsp salt | <input type="checkbox"/> ¾ tsp apple cider vinegar |

bread ingredients, makes 1 loaf

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4 cups all-purpose or bread flour
(plus extra for dusting the work surface) | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 tsp honey |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 tsp salt | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 ¼ cups warm water (110 degrees) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 ¼ tsp or 1 packet instant yeast | <input type="checkbox"/> butter or olive oil for greasing the pan |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 tsp extra virgin olive oil | |

gluten free bread baking instructions

1. Preheat oven to 300 degrees.
2. Combine all the dry ingredients.
3. In a separate bowl, whisk the eggs, then add in the honey and apple cider vinegar.
4. Pour wet ingredients into dry. Mix just until dry ingredients are moistened.
5. Pour the batter into a well-greased loaf pan.
6. Bake for 45 minutes or so, or until the bread is golden brown and a wooden skewer comes out clean when inserted.

bread baking instructions

1. Put the flour into a mixing bowl, add the salt and yeast, and stir with the wooden spoon so they are all combined.
2. Spoon the olive oil and honey into the measuring cup and fill with warm water to just over the 1 ¼ cup mark. Stir well.
3. Pour the oily water onto the flour in the bowl, a little at a time. With either the wooden spoon or with your hands, work the water into the flour and gradually bring it all together into a mass of soft, slightly sticky dough. If the dough feels very sticky, add a little more flour. If it feels as if it won't come together, then work in some more warm water—a soft dough is much easier to knead.

bread baking instructions, continued

4. Flour the work surface and turn the dough out onto it. It'll look rough and saggy at this stage, so it has to be kneaded until it's smooth and bouncy. Keep kneading for as long as you can, at least 10 minutes if possible.
5. When you feel that your arms are ready to drop off, shape the dough into a neat ball, put it back in the bowl, and cover the bowl with some plastic wrap or a damp towel to proof. This is when the yeast starts to do its magic and the dough will start to rise. Ideally, the dough needs to sit somewhere fairly warm, away from drafty open windows or doors. Too hot a place will cause the yeast to die, so keep it away from direct heat. If you can't find a suitable warm place, then a normal dry place will work.
6. Grease the base / sides of your loaf pan with butter or olive oil.
7. After about 1.5-2 hours, your dough should have risen to a great, big puffy balloon, about twice its previous size. Push your hands into the dough to flatten it. Pull it out of the bowl after you've done this and knead it gently for 30 seconds on the work surface.
8. Form the dough into what looks like a big fat sausage, roughly the size of the pan. You will need to tuck the side of it underneath to make it look more like a tucked under pillow. Place it in the middle of the pan / sheet and sprinkle a little flour on top of the dough. Cover with a clean, dry towel and let sit for another 30 minutes. Do not let it double in size this time, but let it rise a bit. Set the oven to 475 degrees.
9. Put pan in oven and set timer for 10 minutes. After 10 minutes turn oven down to 400 degrees for another 10 minutes. After this time, take the pan out of the oven and put it upside down. Put the loaf back in the pan and return it to the oven, for 5-10 minutes to brown the base. Tap the base of the loaf – if it sounds hollow, then the bread is done; otherwise, leave it in for a little longer. Turn off oven after this, take pan out of oven and let dry on wire rack. Enjoy!

communion ingredients

- ☐ 1 loaf of bread (regular or gluten free)
- ☐ 1 bottle of red wine or grape juice

communion instructions

Leaders, please read ahead and prepare accordingly, as this is not a traditional method for taking communion and involves more participation from the entire group.

1. Place the loaf of bread, the glasses, and the bottle in the center of the table and have everyone be seated.

READING 1 *on the next page*

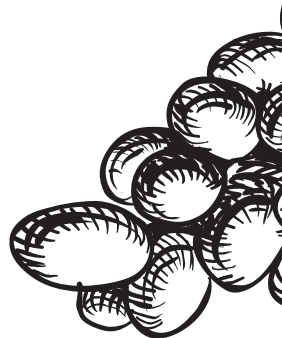
2. Take the bottle of wine or juice and divide it among the group in equal portion just as the Scripture said.

READING 2 *on the next page*

3. Take the bread and break it. Pray a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the gift of Jesus and then divide the bread in equal parts among those who are in attendance.

READING 3 *on the next page*

4. One by one, starting with the leader of the group and moving around the table, share a story of how thankful you are for God in your life. Also confess a way you are struggling with unbelief in your life. It's as simple as completing these two sentences:
 - I am thankful to Jesus for _____.
 - I confess that I do not believe God in _____.
5. After one person has shared both sentences, ask the entire group to hold up a piece of their portion of the bread and say, "Me, too!" As we share in the sufferings of Christ through His death, we can share with one another in our thanksgiving and confession.
6. Dip the bread in your individual cup and then eat that small portion.
7. Repeat as many times as there are people in the group.



readings

READING 1

And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, “Take this, and divide it among yourselves. For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.”
(Luke 22:17-18 ESV)

READING 2

And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” (Luke 22:19 ESV)

READING 3

And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”
(Luke 22:20 ESV)



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