

The Cast of the Christmas Story



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Merry Christmas!

I hope you are enjoying this beautiful season of twinkling lights and candy canes. As I pondered the Christmas story this year and how we've done devotions in the past, I wanted to do something that looked at the Christmas story in a new way. How often do we read the words in Luke or Matthew without really thinking about them? Sure, we know the basic story, but have we ever really looked at how God constructed it. So, this year, we read through the Christmas story as told by both Luke and Matthew and wrote down all the 'characters' we encountered in our reading. 13 writers came together to write about these characters and their importance in the Christmas story. We hope it will help you shine fresh eyes on Christmas and the beauty of how God wove it together.

Take a look at our character list and read through the Christmas Story as told by Matthew and Luke. Together, let's walk into Christmas with a greater understanding of the importance of this incredible season.

Blessings,
Rebecca Beckett
Content Coordinator, CRISTA Media

Characters (Listed in Order of Devotion)

Angel of the Lord
King Herod
Magi
Archelaus
Caesar Augustus
Quirinius
The Heavenly Host
People's Chief Priests & Teachers of the Law
Prophets
The Shepherds
Joseph
Mary
Jesus

The Christmas Story: Matthew 1:18-2:23 (NIV)

This is how the birth of **Jesus the Messiah** came about: His mother **Mary** was pledged to be married to **Joseph**, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because **Joseph** her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an **angel of the Lord** appeared to him in a dream and said, “**Joseph** son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name **Jesus**, because he will save his people from their sins.”

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through **the prophet**: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). When **Joseph** woke up, he did what the **angel of the Lord** had commanded him and took **Mary** home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name **Jesus**.

After **Jesus** was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of **King Herod**, **Magi** from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

When **King Herod** heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the **people's chief priests and teachers of the law**, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what **the prophet** has written: “‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.’” Then **Herod** called the **Magi** secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother **Mary**, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to **Herod**, they returned to their country by another route.

When they had gone, an **angel of the Lord** appeared to **Joseph** in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for **Herod** is going to search for the child to kill him."

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of **Herod**. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

When **Herod** realized that he had been outwitted by the **Magi**, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the **Magi**. Then what was said through **the prophet Jeremiah** was fulfilled:

"A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,

Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more."

After **Herod** died, an **angel of the Lord** appeared in a dream to **Joseph** in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead."

So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that **Archelaus** was reigning in Judea in place of his father **Herod**, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through **the prophets**, that he would be called a Nazarene.

The Christmas Story: Luke 2

In those days **Caesar Augustus** issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while **Quirinius** was governor of Syria.)

And everyone went to their own town to register.

So **Joseph** also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with **Mary**, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were **shepherds** living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. **An angel of the Lord** appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But **the angel** said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a

sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” suddenly a great company of **the heavenly host** appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

When **the angels** had left them and gone into heaven, **the shepherds** said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

So they hurried off and found **Mary** and **Joseph**, and **the baby**, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about **this child**, and all who heard it were amazed at what **the shepherds** said to them. But **Mary** treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. **The shepherds** returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named **Jesus**, the name **the angel** had given him before he was conceived.

Day 1: The Angel of the Lord

by Julie Lessman

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:10-11) (NASB).



Oh, to be a messenger of God like the angel Gabriel—a bearer of “good news” to a world that so desperately needs it!

Did you know that Gabriel is one of only three angels mentioned by name in the Bible? One is a messenger—Gabriel. One is a warrior—Michael the Archangel. And one is a deceiver—Lucifer.

The angel Gabriel, whose name means “God is great” and “strong man of God,” is mentioned three times in the Bible. First, he delivers a message from God to the prophet Daniel, to explain a vision (Daniel 8:16). Next, he informs the priest Zechariah about the upcoming birth of his son, John the Baptist (Luke 1:19). And then finally, he appears to the Virgin Mary to tell her that she would conceive and bear a son—Jesus—Who would “be great and called the Son of the Most High.” (Luke 1:26–38).

The gospel of Luke even refers to Gabriel as the “Angel of the Lord” in Luke 1:9, when he tells Zechariah, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God.” And although he isn’t mentioned by name, some theologians believe it was Gabriel who announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds in our Scripture quote above, bringing “good news” for all people.

Good news, indeed. The beginning of the gospel on earth.

Which is why I believe that Gabriel is so very important to the Christmas story—an angel charged with delivering “good news” to mankind that a Savior has come. A true “messenger of God.”

Just like us.

Jesus said, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.” (Mark 16:15)

And so, this Christmas, I don’t want to just revel in the joy of the season with its twinkling lights and glittering trees, Hallmark movies and beautifully wrapped gifts. No, I want to be a “messenger of God” too, just like Gabriel. I want to follow his example to proclaim not only the birth of our Savior, but the good news that Jesus has set us free from sin and the world of darkness to usher us into His glorious light. The true “Light” of the world, Who illuminates our lives—and those with whom we share the message of Christmas—brighter and more dazzling than Gabriel’s sky over Bethlehem, blazing with a host of angels.

During this holiday season, there are many ways we can share the true message of Christmas. Anything from delivering home-baked cookies to an elderly neighbor or shut-in and spending time with them ... to looking past the hustle-bustle of our own stress to those who just might need a gentle smile. You know, someone you glance at in a crowded store? Or a weary-looking traveler in the car next to yours, mired in traffic? Or even that harried waitress in a busy restaurant teeming with Christmas parties and fun. I pray that in each and every situation of stress and potential selfishness we may encounter this season, God will give us the grace and strength to say no to sin and yes to being a messenger of His love. A love that is truly the essence of Christmas.

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Discuss: During this often hectic season, what are some ways we can be “messengers of God,” countering our own frustrations by dispensing kindness and sensitivity instead?

What are ways and traditions you’ve embraced the true “message” of Christmas in your own life and family?

Pray: Dear Lord, Like Gabriel, I long to be a messenger of Your love and good news to a world that needs it as much as I do, so please show me ways I can bless others this season.

Holy Spirit, put a guard over my heart, mouth, and emotions so stress and temper cannot have its way with me during this, the holiest of holidays.

And most of all, sweet Jesus, help me to keep You at the center of Christmas so Your love can sparkle and shine within me to reveal the true Light of the World.

Day 2: King Herod

by Mesu Andrews

I love Christmas, but I don't know anyone who gets as excited about Christmas as my husband. He starts the countdown for next year on December 26th. He breaks out the Christmas music the day after Thanksgiving (because I hide it until then) and begins greeting folks with, "Merry Christmas!" by December 1st. Can you imagine how sad he was when folks stirred up a fuss and asked him to say, "Happy Holidays," instead? As we've thought and prayed about a reply, we've come to this conclusion:

It's not the first time someone tried to take Christ out of Christmas.

"During the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?'" Matthew 2:1-2 (NIV)

Herod was a cruel and maniacal king, appointed by Rome to rule over Judea at the time of Jesus' birth. He was a great builder, restoring Jerusalem's Temple, constructing palaces, and adorning Judean cities to match the lavish splendor of Rome. But building talents couldn't save Herod from himself. Suspicion and paranoia haunted him. Herod suspected his wife and her family of betrayal and had them killed. Certain some of his sons were plotting to steal his throne, he ordered their executions as well. Is it any wonder that Herod and all of Jerusalem were disturbed when Magi (wise men) from the east arrived saying a new king of the Jews had been born?

Herod's role in the Christmas story can be found in Matthew 2:1-18. After the Magi's question, Herod called the chief priests and teachers of the Law to determine where this new king was to be born. He secretly asked the Magi when they first saw the star and then sent them to Bethlehem, asking them to report back to him when they returned.

The Magi needed no direction from Herod. God's sovereignty led them by the same star to the exact house in Bethlehem where Jesus lived.

"Having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route." Matthew 2:12 (NIV)

When Herod realized he'd been duped, he remembered that the Magi saying they'd first observed the star two years ago. So this cruel king ordered all boys in Bethlehem, two years old and younger, to be slaughtered. Crazy, right?

Actually, yes. Plagued by a long list of chronic ailments (fever, whole-body itching, intestinal pain, tumors of the feet, abdominal inflammation, and gangrene), Herod's final commands added mental instability to his physical maladies. When he realized death was near, Herod locked up all prominent Jewish leaders and made plans to execute them upon his death. Why? To ensure mourning at his burial. F. LaGard Smith said, "Evil bears within it the seeds of its own destruction." Herod's life bears out the principle. A leader who knowingly tried to kill the Messiah, he was eventually swallowed up by the evil flourishing in his body, soul, and

spirit. But God used even an indisputably evil leader like Herod to fulfill His sovereign plan.

[Joseph] he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘Out of Egypt I called my son.’” Matthew 2:14-15 (NIV)

If you struggle with today's commercialized Christmas—take heart. Herod couldn't kill Him, and neither can the checkout person wearing the silly elf hat who says, “Happy Holidays.” God is still greater, and His good plans prevail. God. Wins.

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Discuss: Why do you think Herod asked the Magi to return with a report about the new king of the Jews? Why did God need to warn them in a dream not to return?

If the star led the Magi to the exact house in Bethlehem after they stopped in Jerusalem, why didn't God take the Magi to Bethlehem first? Why involve Herod in this process at all?

Did Herod the Great have an opportunity to believe in the Messiah?

Can you think of current-day examples of governments, regimes, or individual “bad leaders” who try to kill God? How

does the example of God's sovereignty during Herod's reign encourage you today?

Pray: Heavenly Father, thank you for showing us this example of Your absolute authority over evil. Though each of us has freedom to choose evil over good, we trust Your sovereign plan to save and bless Your people. Thank You for Jesus' birth, for protecting Him from Herod, and for His death and resurrection—so we can live with You forever.

Day 3: The Magi

by Sarah Varland

One of the most difficult parts for a modern day Christian to understand about the Bible's account of Jesus' birth is the fact that there weren't more Jewish people celebrating it, especially Jewish religious leaders. Why didn't they realize he was the Messiah? Why weren't they waiting at his stable, having studied the prophesies and put the pieces together?

We don't know. The Chief Priests and Scribes knew where Christ was to be born, at least it seems they found that information eventually based on what is said in Matthew 2:6. But we see no evidence of them making a journey with the expectation of meeting Him.

Do you know who *does* pursue Christ in Matthew 2? Some wise men. "The magi" we also call them. These men are mysterious to us in many ways as we wonder what exactly they did, where exactly they came from. We know relatively little about them. We don't even know how many of them there were. We know they were not priests, not Jewish religious leaders of any sort. Rather they were likely people "whose practices included astrology, dream interpretation, study of sacred writings, the pursuit of wisdom, and magic" according to the notes in the ESV study Bible (2008). Maybe not the people we would have expected to be so earnestly searching for the infant Messiah.

But they were wisdom seekers...The Bible says in Proverbs 2:3-6:

"Yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding."

So little is known about the wise men, the magi, in the Matthew 2 Christmas story that it's difficult for us to know too much about them. Were they seeking God when they started this journey? What were their motivations? Did they find the star during their studies of the night sky by what appeared to be chance? And if so, how did they connect it to the Messiah's birth? We don't know for sure. We don't even know how many of them there were. But we can be relatively sure that they were wisdom seekers.

It appears that years had passed by the time the Magi reached Jesus. Matthew 2:11 mentions "the house" they found Jesus in, and many scholars believe it was up to two years after his birth.

Not only were these relatively unknown men devoted wisdom seekers, but they were determined. Two years. *Two years.* What was the last thing you wanted for two years, that you sought out and hoped for for that long?

Again, we don't know for sure what they thought but it's interesting to imagine. Did they realize the full impact this little child would have on them? They said from the beginning, Matthew 2:2 "...We saw his star when it rose and have come

to worship him,” so worship was always their intention. Can you imagine being so captivated by this desire that you devoted two years of your life to it?

These men did. And when they saw him, they did worship Him, a little child who was fully man and yet also fully God. They gave him gifts. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And then they left, but they didn’t go back to Herod as the King had demanded they do. Matthew 2:12 says “And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.” These wisdom seekers must have had sensitive hearts to not only follow a star for two years to worship God’s son, but to identify their dream as having meaning, and having the faith to not question it, but to do as the dream had said.

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Discuss: These men are so, so important in the Christmas story. We can look at any of the characters in it, the real people who played parts, and learn lessons from them. But the Magi are so obviously applicable to our lives today, giving us questions to ask ourselves:

1. Do we seek wisdom and seek to worship with the same intensity that the Magi did, or do we fit it into our lives where it works easily and doesn’t make us sacrifice anything?
2. Do we view our time as “ours” or God’s? The wise men likely devoted years to this project, or close to it. Do we give our time to God like this?

3. Are we sensitive to God’s voice in our lives?

Pray: Father God, as we search our own hearts this Christmas season, may we learn from the wise men more about what it means to seek after wisdom, and to seek after You. And may doing so become the desire of our own hearts. Amen.

Day 4: Archelaus

by Mary Connealy

It is a delight to be allowed to speak in a Christmas devotion about Archelaus. It made me smile when his name came up Archelaus is part of a deeply held belief of mine about the Bible.

You will find three verses that talk about where Jesus will be born. Or better to say, where Jesus will come from.

They are:

Hosea 11:1b (King James Version) ...out of Egypt I called my son.

Micah 5:2a (King James Version) But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel.

Matthew 2:22, 23 (King James Version) But when he heard that Archelaus did reign in Judaea in the room of his father Herod, he was afraid to go thither: notwithstanding, being warned of God in a dream, he turned aside into the parts of Galilee. And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene.

The third one, Matthew 2:22, 23 is the verse about Archelaus. Joseph feared him and did not want his family near him.

Instead of settling his family in Bethlehem, he chose to settle in Nazareth.

I use these verses a lot when someone tells me the Bible got something wrong. Have you heard the lists? Jesus is wrong on And there's a list. I've had people say, "I can't take the Bible as the literal word of God because of....Add in whatever the problem is.

And my response is, 'the Bible told us Jesus was from Bethlehem, Egypt and Nazareth. Anyone who read those verses—before Jesus was born—would say the Bible is WRONG. It has to be wrong because Jesus can't be from THREE places.'

But the reason for that is easy to see now. Simple. Jesus moved. Wow, it's so obvious now. The prophets had a deeper knowledge of Jesus' life than anyone could imagine. And when someone says the Bible is wrong I say, "Look to your own understanding." The Bible is not wrong.

1 Corinthians 13:12 (King James Version) For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. Archelaus, with that one tiny mention in the Bible, in the midst of Jesus childhood, becomes a lesson that has helped me through Bible studies. It's helped me give greater respect to the limits of my own understanding.

Discuss: The Bible's infallibility. Places in the Bible that seem to contradict each other and how we can search for understanding. Talk about kind ways we can encourage people who reject portions of the Bible...or reject the whole Bible because of portions of it they don't understand.

Pray: Dear Jesus, in this Holy Season when I celebrate the sacred beginning of the greatest story ever told, Your birth, Your life, Your death and resurrection, Your saving grace...grant me a deeper understanding of Your Word. Bless and nurture my mind to be open to Your leading when I read the Bible, and forgive me when I fail. And please give me an open heart for those who find stumbling blocks in scripture. Give me wisdom that can lead me...and with your help lead others...to a full faith in You.

Thank you, Dear God in Heaven, my Savior Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit, in this blessed Christmas season, for surrounding me Your love. In Jesus Holy Name, Amen

Day 5: Caesar Augustus

by Mary Connealy

Luke 2: 1 And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. (KJV)

Why include Caesar Augustus? Why did God pick that as the fullness of time?

I remember a lyric from the song Superstar, from the movie Jesus Christ: Superstar

“Now why'd you choose such a backward time and such a strange land? If you'd come today, you could have reached a whole nation Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication.”

The song—that lyric—struck me as really reasonable.

Back then, when I first heard that song, I asked my dad, who loved his Bible and read it faithfully all his life, why then? Why did God pick **then** and **there**?

We think of today as so connected, word of every little thing can spread across the world in minutes if not seconds. But that's not really true. There are vast stretches of the world almost completely cut off by tyrannical governments from any kind of news.

Augustus Caesar took over after the assassination of Roman Emperor Julius Caesar. Augustus teamed up with Marc Antony and punished the men who'd killed Julius then turned on each other and eventually Antony married Cleopatra, and the two were allowed to rule Egypt. Augustus retained the rest of the Roman Empire. Finally a battle broke out between them ending in Antony and Cleopatra committing suicide. Remember Cleopatra and that infamous asp?

By the time Jesus was born, Augustus ruled the whole world (the whole known western world) Yes there were other people in other parts of the world, but never before or after was the world this united and this at peace.

Augustus ruled from 27 BC until his death in AD 14 at age 75...extreme old age in those days. When news spread it could cover most all of the world in a very short time. Add in the three wise men, who I believe came from corners of the world NOT controlled by Rome, and you did indeed get the word out to almost the whole world in very short order.

When Augustus decided to tax and do a census of the whole Roman world he set in motion a prophecy made 8 centuries before. Micah 5:2 But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall

he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.

Why did a man have to go to his ancestral home to pay taxes? Why not just be counted and taxed in the town he lived? That was Caesar's ruling, and eight centuries before God knew where Mary could be when her time came to give birth. God called Jesus a Nazarene, he said 'out of Egypt I will call my son. And he said the ruler would come from Bethlehem. Scholars of the time might believe this was three men or they might believe it was proof the prophets weren't infallible. Did it occur to anyone the answer was as simple as Jesus' family moved? I consider these three scriptures to be proof that our understanding of the Bible is limited and when verses seem to conflict, we need to look to ourselves and our own limits.

Augustus Caesar picked Bethlehem and God knew he would. This was the perfect time. The perfect place.

Augustus was around 60 years old. A settled, respected and feared emperor. His word was law. The Empire was united and at peace. And here comes Jesus into a time of cruel but

efficient order in a place where word of him could travel to all corners of the world.

It was indeed, the fullness of time.

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Discuss: Have you ever struggled with the time Jesus came? Have you ever wondered by he didn't come back today? Imagine, if he did come back today. How do you think he would be received? How would it have been different?

Pray: God help us to remember that no part of the Bible is 'small'. No detail is unimportant. The Fullness of Time was not chosen by chance. You saw it all eight centuries before it would happen, even more, you saw it all from the very beginning. Bless us with trust in Your divinity, Your wisdom, Your guiding hand. Thank You for the precious gift and sacrifice of Your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Day 6: Quirinius (Governor of Syria)

by Julie Lyles Carr

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)

And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.

Luke 2:1-4 (NIV)

Quirinius was not the nicest guy.

Ambitious. Well-heeled. Driven.

He was born in a suburb of Rome to an average Roman family. But Quirinius had some big aspirations. He pointed his drive for position and power into the venue of military service, building a name for himself in several key battles and triumphs in Roman conquests. He positioned himself as advisor to those close to Augustus Caesar. Following the removal of Herod Archelaus as the governor over Syria, Quirinius took his place. A political climber, he married and divorced and married and divorced, using marriages as a means of stepping up the ladder of power. One of his marriages was particularly tabloid sensational, replete with accusations of poisoning and promiscuity.

But in Quirinius's economics, it had all been worth it. He now governed a large region for Caesar Augustus, secure that he had built a name for himself. Surely he would make his mark

with his military and governmental career, a legacy. Caesar had ordered a census to be taken of the whole known Roman world. And Quirinius would make sure it happened in the region over which he was to command.

Ironic.

Because it was in the issuing of this census that Quirinius's name even rings a familiar tone in our ears. Roman rule existed over the Syrian region for generations. Governors came and went. But it is Quirinius and then Pilate thirty-three years later whose names are recorded in the best-selling book of all time.

It is this census that brings Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, the hometown of King David, the adopted turf of Ruth, the place of the tomb of Rachel. Joseph returns with his betrothed to be counted in the Roman census and there she gives birth to the child who will ultimately turn the world on its ear.

Quirinius's authority over this region has been used for the accomplishment of prophecy.

In Quirinius's view, his military exploits and cocktail party networking were all to facilitate his achievement within Roman power. All the drama, the allegiances, the scramble to create notoriety, all to make sure he left a mark in what was at the time the biggest game in town.

None of that is why we even know his name today.

Little did he know that his greatest fame would come as a small side note as a contemporary to a most important time.

The time of a census. A census that would be a tool to complete prophecy. A census that would bring a simple carpenter and his knocked-up girlfriend back to the family land, to have their heads counted.

The Lord can use anything to accomplish His plans.
A power-hungry man and that man's machinations for 'success'.
A teenage girl.
A baby.
A feeding trough as a cradle.

A cross.

Tools for the building of grace.

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Discuss: Wow, God can use anyone. Have you ever thought about the role these people played in the Christmas story? How do you see God using you in a broader story?

Pray: Heavenly father, we know you can use all of us. We ask to be used, Lord. We want to be used for your greater purpose and story. Help us to see the big picture plans you have.
Amen.

Day 7: the Heavenly Host

by Jayme Hull

As a little girl growing up in a small town in Pennsylvania, I can remember my family all dressed up and going to our Christmas service with beautiful music and candles lit all throughout the church. My favorite part of the evening was singing along as loud as we could with the “Hallelujah Chorus.” Even though it may have only been 100 people, to my little-girl ears, it sounded like thousands of loud voices singing and praising God.

My best memories at every Christmas Eve service was of my mother singing the last solo of the evening before the entire group stood to sing all the traditional Christmas hymns, loud and strong. She had such a beautiful, sweet soprano voice and sounded like an angel.

Do you have any family traditions you enjoy with your children on Christmas morning? One of our family traditions is reading *The Christmas Story*. Because of my singing background, I smile with the verses about the angels appearing to the shepherds and loudly singing to proclaim the good news of the baby born in a manger. Luke tells us in Luke 2:8-16:

Luke 2: 8-16 (VOICE)

“Nearby, in the fields outside of Bethlehem, a group of shepherds were guarding their flocks from predators in the darkness of night. Suddenly a messenger of the Lord stood in front of them, and the darkness was replaced by a glorious light—the shining light of God’s glory. They were terrified!

Messenger: *Don’t be afraid! Listen! I bring good news, news of great joy, news that will affect all people everywhere. Today, in the city of David, a Liberator has been born for you! He is the promised Anointed One, the Supreme Authority! You will know you have found Him when you see a baby, wrapped in a blanket, lying in a feeding trough.*

At that moment, the first heavenly messenger was joined by thousands of other messengers—a vast heavenly choir. They praise God.

Heavenly Choir: *To the highest heights of the universe, glory to God!*

And on earth, peace among all people who bring pleasure to God!

As soon as the heavenly messengers disappeared into heaven, the shepherds were buzzing with conversation.

Shepherds: *Let’s rush down to Bethlehem right now! Let’s see what’s happening! Let’s experience what the Lord has told us about!*

So they ran into town, and eventually they found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in the feeding trough. After they saw the baby, they spread the story of what they had experienced and what had been said to them about this child.

Everyone who heard their story couldn’t stop thinking about its meaning.

Have you ever wondered what the shepherds must have experienced that special Christmas night?

Suddenly!

The first angel *suddenly* appeared. Such a brilliant light must've shone that they were consumed with fear. The first words from the angel to the Shepherds were encouraging: "Fear not!" But this mighty angel would not be alone in delivering the good news for very long.

I picture this scene as if the people involved were like the actors of a Broadway musical's opening night, just waiting with anticipation and excitement in the wings of the stage for their cue to enter. With boldness, the first angel speaks the cue found in Luke 2:12: "You will know you have found Him when you see a baby, wrapped in a blanket, lying in a feeding trough."

Can't you just see it? The company of angels finally hears their cue and designated time to join in the celebration and shout out the good news of the Savior arriving on Earth.

What a blessing to be able to bring the good news of a Savior born for all people! In the hymn "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing," the lyric shares the entire purpose of the angels' message:

Hark, the heard Angels sing, glory to the Newborn King, peace on earth and mercy mild,

GOD AND SINNERS RECONCILED!

God's angels are messengers from Heaven to the humans on Earth. The angels proclaim to the shepherds, finally, reconciliation between God and sinners on earth. Hallelujah!

It's amazing to me that, out of all the ways God could have been announced and chosen to come, He chose to reveal the announcement to the common shepherds and, most importantly, to arrive as a helpless baby.

After the angels disappeared, the Scripture says the shepherds rushed into town to find the newborn baby, the Savior of the World. Once they saw the baby Jesus, they shared the story of wonder and the newborn Savior with everyone they could.

The angels were the messengers who passed the good news on to the shepherds, and they, in turn, passed the message on to the people in their community. Isn't it so true: when you have the good news of Jesus, you've just got to share the joy and excitement of salvation.

* * * * *

Discuss:

1. Who was the "angel" who first told you about Jesus?
2. What effect has the good news had on you in your walk with the Lord?
3. Like the shepherds, what would you tell others about what Jesus has done for you with your family and friends?

Pray: Dear God, You are such a loving God, to choose to come to the Earth for me as a baby. I long to be a messenger of the good news to others, but so often, I fall short of time and courage. Right now, I'm asking for you to use me in any way you desire this Christmas season to shine the light of your love to others. I long to be a positive witness for Your Glory. Thank you for sending the angels to the lowly and poor shepherds to remind me that, no matter who we are, You care and reach out to everyone who is willing and available to listen to your message of hope and peace. To You alone goes all the glory!

Day 8: People's Chief Priests & Teachers of the Law

by Nicole C. Mullen

And gathering together all the Chief Priests and Scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written through the prophet, (Matthew 2:4-5 ASV)

The wisemen from the East, had come to Jerusalem where King Herod was residing. They were in anticipation of celebrating and worshiping the new "Baby King of the Jews". They came to the place where one might expect to greet royalty... Jerusalem, and The Palace; but there was no baby King there and it caused quite a stir... Upon hearing of the inquiries, the reigning monarch was very disturbed. Statesmen from afar had come to worship royalty... Except, they were not looking for him, but his replacement. Now he was being asked about something that he had no answers for.

The very question of "another King" was more than likely seen as treason, a usurping of his power. Being the paranoid monarch that he was, he inquired of his own wisemen and demanded answers. The Magi from the East would provide him with the timing of 'this birth'; and he would see to it that these religious advisors (who's titles were Chief priest and Scribes), Quickly found the clues to the location of this " Baby King".

According to scripture, every Chief Priest was chosen by men, and called by God. Their duty was to represent man in front of

God. Their job was to offer gifts and sacrifices for sin. He was to be gentle with the people and their weaknesses, remembering that he too struggled with the same dealings; and in the same way, he had to offer sacrifices for his own sins.

The scribes on the other hand, interpreted the laws of the Jewish people, but they did not write them. They were more like lawyers and judges.

The Chief Priest and the Scribes were the very ones who interpreted and reported to King Herod that the true King of the Jews, would be born in Bethlehem of Judea. It had been prophesied. It had been written. It was an undisputed fact.

So if this was unanimously agreed upon; and confirmed by the arrival of the wisemen from the East; then why was it, that not one of these scholars or Holy men joined the band wagon to see the babe? Why did they not go, and worship the Desire of Nations, the infant Emmanuel "God with us"? Could they have been guilty of what is eluded to in James 1, as "dead faith" ...belief with no works?

Whether they knew it or not, all of creation was waiting for THIS moment, when the babe who was Born already a King, would make himself known to those on earth.

See, It's common for men to BECOME KING after growing up in a kingdom, first as a prince, then as a successor; but no one had been BORN KING... Until Jesus. He did not have to be taught by humans in order to be groomed for such a position.

He did not need the votes or approval of men, like a president would; as in a democracy. No, this is who He had always been and who He will always be. His kingship started in Heaven and was expanding to earth. It had been foretold thousands of years before it had happened. It had been both written "plainly" and disguised in "mystery" for men to discover.

His arrival had been foretold in the stars, believed by foreigners, heralded by angels, witnessed by lowly shepherds, worshiped by the Wise...given birth through a virgin, proclaimed in the palace, whispered among commoners, beheld by prophets...and still, disbelieved by the chief priests and the scribes.

In their example, we can clearly see that head and heart knowledge are not the same thing. These men were among the best that the land had to offer. They had studied long and hard, and would have gotten an "A+" in knowing the information asked of them. They knew the right answer. The sad part is, either they really didn't believe it in their hearts, (because the discovery would have changed their actions); or they simply didn't care. They could have thought "yea, I know this is what was written about the King, who will be born in Bethlehem (the land of King David's birth), but we are comfortable with our current Ruler, our current way of life"; Or it's possible that they could have wanted change, but had no faith for it.

Around the same time, There was another man in the scriptures who was described as devout and just. His name was Simeon. The Holy Spirit was upon him, and he had been

eagerly waiting for the "consolation of Israel"... The King of the Jews. He had been told by the Holy Ghost that he would not die until he has seen the Christ... The one written about in the scriptures, and explained by the scribes.

One day, Simeon was prompted by the Spirit to go into the temple. At the same time, Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus. When Simeon saw him, he took the babe in his arms, blessed God and said " For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel. (Luke 2:30-32)

Unlike the chief priest and Scribes, this man had taken what he had heard, what he had learned by the spirit and mixed it with action. Only then did his faith come alive!

The event of a lifetime was missed by the scholars and the grand opportunity was instead given to the lowly, the faith filled...who believed what they had been told by credible witnesses. Their faith was proven by their actions and they were rewarded with seeing the baby face of God, in the baby form of a King. The one who was born to rule not just the Jews, but the entire universe itself.

* * * * *

Discuss: So, what will be do with what we know and have learned? Will we be like Herod's scholars who had knowledge but dead faith? Or Will we allow our knowledge of the king to

make us more like the wisemen...who brought their gifts and worshiped?

Pray: Heavenly father, we believe. Lord, show us your ways.
Make yourself known to us and fill our hearts! Amen

Day 9: Prophets

By Emily Klesick

One of my most favorite things about the Bible is the way that prophecies are fulfilled. I have always loved seeing the way that portions of God's word tie together into each other and foretell of the amazing things that God would do, and the people He would choose to do them.

The prophecies concerning Jesus' birth are no different. They fill me with deep joy, and I almost feel a sense of anticipation for the sake of those who walked here on earth in the era when He was born, hearing word of His birth and seeing those prophecies come to be.

But what about the prophets who get to say and write these things, these words from God written for a generation to come?

Micah, one of the minor prophets of the Old Testament, writes one prophecy I'd like to focus on. Micah spoke to many different kings of both Israel and Judah concerning the wickedness in their nations. In his book of the Bible, he speaks on their sins, their punishment, and then at the end of his book, he speaks about the Messiah, Jesus, to come. He speaks of how the ruler who is coming to be over God's people, Israel, is going to come from the town of Bethlehem.

*But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old,
from ancient days. —Micah 5:2 (ESV)*

This ruler to come is Jesus, the Messiah. Micah had the privilege and blessing of getting to pen the very words of God about His own Son, who would come to save His people. And Micah wrote these words long before Jesus was ever born, in fact 700 or so years before. Can you imagine?

Many other prophets foretell of Jesus' birth. Back in the beginning, Jacob speaks a prophecy over his son, Judah, about how the Messiah would come from his lineage (Genesis 49:10). Isaiah writes about the Lord giving a sign, a child born to a virgin and calling Him Emmanuel, or "God with us" (Isaiah 7:14). Isaiah also writes about how the Messiah would come from the lineage of Jesse, who was the father of King David (Isaiah 11:1-10). And this is just a sampling of the prophecies foretelling of the coming Christ!

The most important thing to remember about these prophets and their writings is that they were writing the very words of God. God spoke right to them and they penned His words for the generations to come: for the people who longed and cried for the Savior spoken of from old, for the people who would live when Mary carried Jesus and birthed him in that manger, for those who needed to believe. And now, here in 2016, they are written for us that we might believe. Fulfilled prophecy

proves that God's word is true. His word is tested and proved faithful again and again as we read the foretold events and see them come to life many books later.

So in this Christmas season, I ask you to reflect on this. The event of Christ's birth was something so special and so sacred, but it was by no means a surprise. God had planned His birth from the moment of Creation, knowing that we would so desperately need a Savior. He, in all His love and grace, gave His people a taste of Who was coming, alluding to the coming Messiah. And when Jesus came, amidst all the chaos and unbelief, there were those who rejoiced and praised God, who had waited in anticipation for so long.

My prayer this Christmas is that you would be the same, rejoicing and praising over the Messiah who came, with the added joy of knowing that the ultimate gift of His birth and time here on earth is the gift of salvation. May we never forget that the sweet baby boy born in the manger, Who's birth was foretold over the ages, was the One who would save us all.

* * * * *

Discuss: What strikes you most about the prophecies about Jesus' birth?

Is there something new in these prophecies that you didn't know before?

How can you live in light of these prophecies in this Christmas season?

Pray: Heavenly Father, we thank You for the way that You shepherd us and guide us with Your Word. How amazing it is that You foretold the birth of Your Son long before You chose for Him to come! May we remember that You have a divine plan and purpose, and to live in light of that fact. May we remember this Christmas season of all the people and all the facets of the amazing story You wove together. In Jesus Name, Amen.

Day 10: The Shepherds

by Lenora Worth

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. (NIV)

One question regarding the birth of Christ has been analyzed for centuries. Why did the Angel of the Lord appear before the Shepherds?

Shepherds were not high up on the social ladder. They were outcasts who struggled and scraped to make a living. Most were considered vagrants and con men and certainly not worthy of a visit from a multitude of angels.

And yet, the angel came to the shepherds as they watched over their flocks and brought a multitude of heavenly hosts along. The angel told them “Do not be afraid.”

The Lord called himself a shepherd and referred to those he loved as his flock and he told them, “Fear not. I am with you always.” Even the black sheep, even the worst of society. Is this why God sent the angel to these men so soon after Christ was born? Because they knew all about watching over their flocks? They knew how to corral stray lambs and keep their sheep safe and feed. Since they were hindered by society’s demands, they couldn’t help but spread the news out of shock and awe and amazement. They were every man. Or maybe it’s because King David was a shepherd who stood up to a giant. This is certainly part of the lineage that eventually gave us Christ. Christ stood up to his own giant—Sin. He was like one of those little lambs because he sacrificed himself for us. Shepherds knew of the sacrificial lambs and sometimes raised them for this very purpose.

Did God consider the shepherds to be the best messengers for the coming of the Lord? The prophets had declared Jesus would be born in Bethlehem. The shepherds were out in the hills surrounding Bethlehem. The heavenly star surely was their guiding light to keep their flock intact and safe. Where they already a part of the foreshadowing simply because of

their line of work? The Tower of the Flock, also known as Migdal Eder, was located between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Some suggest the three shepherds could have been guarding a special flock of lambs that were being raised purposely for sacrifice.

What could they have imagined when the angel told them to go and find the babe wrapped in swaddling cloth inside a manager. Wrapped in a fabric similar to what baby sheep were swaddled in when they were born to be sacrificed. But they obeyed the Angel. They immediately started spreading the word about what they'd seen, thus creating the beginning of the Gospel of Christ.

This was a small tight-knit community so word would have begun to spread as soon as Jesus was born. The shepherds had been told to look for the babe in a manger. While this could be symbolic, some believe the shepherds stayed in the hills and didn't actually find the manger until a few hours or maybe days later and that the manger could have been a cave-like enclosure near the inn where no rooms were available.

It's noted that the Shepherds are always on the right in renderings of the Nativity scene. The Magi are on the left. Some experts say the three on each side represent the three continents—Asia, Africa, and Europe. But on this night, they were there to pay their respects because the angel had foretold this exciting event. No one jostled for position. Isaiah 40:11 tells us "He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart."

This is the true sign of a shepherd, the true nature of Jesus Christ. Three common men who lived and worked on the land and with the animals became the beacon of hope for the Savior who was born on that starry night. They stood watch over him along with Mary and Joseph and the three wise men. The Angel of the Lord shined down on them. There were no outcasts in this scene. The three who had tended their flock would forever remain a part of the story of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have to wonder what became of those three. Were they there thirty-three years later, watching in the crowd? Did they feel that tug to rush to the cross and hold the lamb close to their hearts? I'd like to think they did, indeed.

* * * * *

Discuss: Jesus came for all of us. Every single one of us. That is a beautiful thing. What are some thoughts you have about the shepherds? Are they who you would expect Jesus to come to first?

Pray: Dear Jesus, thank you for embracing all of us. Thank you for showing yourself to every man. Thank you for wrapping us all up in your embrace. We love you. Amen.

Day 11: Joseph

by Sandie Bricker

Matthew 1:18-21, Luke 1:26-27

Even though, as believers, our very existence relies wholly on the foundation of faith itself, when we're faced with a challenge or situation that requires the blind use of that faith, how many times do we waver? The questions overcome us, our mind reels, our heartbeats hammer, and we struggle to swim our way back to shore where everything we have known and believed is waiting.

In the decades since I took a knee and received Christ into my heart, Mary's then-fiancé Joseph has been a consistent object of study for me. I've often gone back and marveled at the seemingly insurmountable odds this poor guy faced when his virginal girlfriend revealed—before the wedding—that she was pregnant. Since he'd followed all the rules and respectfully abstained from relations with this young girl he had come to love, his poor heart must have quaked within him at the news. Like any of us would likely consider, Matthew's account of Joseph's story includes the decision to quietly end the engagement and move on with his life.

And that's when it happened! An angel of the Lord appeared to him—which was unexpected enough, right?—and proceeded to tell him that Mary's story about the Holy Spirit implanting the seed of the Savior they'd all been awaiting was the truth! Can you imagine his initial reaction?

I don't know about you, but personally ... I might still have balked. Chalked it up to the Mexican food too close to bedtime, or a bad dream that simply *seemed* all too real. I think we humans tend to instinctively turn to logic first in times like those; a sensible way to explain the unexplainable. Until the engine of the faith that keeps our gears turning kicks in and reminds us that *believing* isn't dependent upon *seeing*.

As Joseph followed the will of God, I can only imagine how many times a day he had to remind himself of his mission, of this higher calling Jehovah God had assigned just to him.

- Marry the girl. *Check.*
- Keep her and her growing belly safe. *Check.*
- Head out to another location at a moment's notice from God. *Check.*
- Migrate back home when the time is right. *Check again.*

Despite the fact that very little is known about Joseph except for his role in laying the initial groundwork for Jesus's birth and subsequent ministry, this amazing man of God teaches us so much about the importance of keeping the faith in the face of very difficult times. At each phase of his pursuit, Joseph was required to keep his spiritual ears clean and attuned to the roadmap laid out for him. What a perfect picture-type of keeping our own spiritual walks on track.

* * * * *

Discuss: What are you facing today? Does your circumstance have you feeling ill-equipped? Disabled? Overwhelmed? Joseph's example tells us that, in times like these, our first response has to be turning back to what God communicated to us last and follow it with determined tunnel vision. His love for us will surely do the rest.

Pray: Father, rejuvenate the seeds of Joseph's kind of faith inside us. Let your voice speak loudly and clearly as we face down the challenges of the day, and help us through the power of your Holy Spirit to keep tunnel vision focus on you and your will for our lives. May your plans for our ultimate function within the body of Christ never be dismantled because of our own logic and reason.

Day 12: Mary

by Barbara Scott

READ: Matthew 1:18-23, Luke 1:26-38, Luke 2:1-7

Biblical scholars disagree over the age of Mary when the Archangel Gabriel appeared to her to tell her that God had chosen her to bear His son. But the consensus is that she was a young maiden of about sixteen or seventeen—a virgin. Mary's encounter with the angel is more than my mind can comprehend. How terrified she must have been! But Gabriel told her not to be afraid. She was highly favored by the Lord, and He was with her. My heart thumps and my pulse races when I think about how I might have reacted. I'm not sure I would have been that brave.

When I was seventeen—a virgin, a naïve girl—I left home for the first time to attend university in a large city. I was lost. Desperately lonely and finding it hard to cope with all the challenges and adult pressures of my new life, I decided to move back under my parents' roof and enrolled in a four-year college nearby. I lived with Mom and Dad until I married.

Mary, pledged to marry her fiancée Joseph—a descendant of David—undoubtedly lived with her parents as well. Now she had to tell Joseph and her parents that she was pregnant. Can you imagine how difficult it must have been for her to tell them the story of how Gabriel appeared to her and how the Holy Spirit overshadowed her and God planted the seed of His son in her womb? I shudder to think of her dilemma. Who

would believe such a wild story? I can almost see the disappointment on everyone's faces—their disbelief.

You see, engagements at that time were more binding than engagements today. The only way to break an engagement then was for the man to divorce his intended. Joseph actually held the power of Mary's life in his hands. If Joseph had proclaimed Mary's infidelity and divorced her in public, her sentence for such an act of betrayal was death by stoning. Mary took a huge leap of faith when she answered Gabriel, saying, "I am the Lord's servant...May it be to me as you have said." Mary's complete submission to God came with enormous peril.

As devastated as Joseph must have been that the girl he loved had been unfaithful, he was a good and kind man. Evidently, he could not bear to be the instrument of her death, no matter how justified he would have been. Instead, he decided to end their relationship quietly and put her away from him. Did Mary lay on her pallet that night and cry out to God? Had she been wrong? Had she really seen an angel? Did she doubt her own sanity? I must confess, I'm afraid that would have been the lowest point of my life.

But the Lord always has a perfect plan. Even before He honored the virgin Mary to carry his child, He knew Joseph would make an excellent earthly father for his son Jesus. So God sent an angel to reassure Joseph that Mary was telling the truth. She, indeed, was pregnant with the Savior of the world. All of the Old Testament prophecies about Jesus came

to fruition in the womb of a young, innocent virgin, and she gave birth to a son in Bethlehem.

Mary's bravery and her submission to God's will, no matter how bizarre the event, is a testament to us all that we can follow Him in perfect peace to fulfill His call on our lives.

* * * * *

Discuss: Has God asked you to do something that seems unbelievably impossible? Do you feel inadequate for the task? Can you take a leap of faith and believe that God will equip you for His call on your life? Because Gabriel assured Mary that she was greatly honored and loved by God, she found the courage to submit her will to His desire. Because of her faithfulness and obedience in carrying the Savior to term, we can all rest in the knowledge that God loves us and wants to spend eternity with us. There is no greater gift.

Pray: Father, instill in us the courage and obedience of the virgin Mary even when we are afraid and full of doubt. Help us to submit to your will even though you call us to do hard things. May your Holy Spirit walk with us through the storms of life and whisper that we never need be afraid as long as you are with us. Guide us in the path of righteousness that we may always trust you and submit to your loving plan for our lives.

Day 13: Jesus

by Bekah Pogue

Two of the most beautiful truths of the Christmas story are how light and praise always precede the mention of Jesus, a babe born in a barn and laid - wrapped in swaddling cloths - in a manger.

After Jesus' birth, we find shepherds watching their flocks in Luke 2:8. Now, look closer. "An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the *glory of the Lord shone* around them..." (verse 9) How beautiful that the announcement of Christ's birth was declared by light, the very reason He came to Earth- as light. In 2:10 Luke recalls how the angels told the shepherds *why* Jesus came and *how* to identify him: "A Savior has been born...You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Imagine. A King born in a dirty stable and wrapped in humble swaddling cloths. When the shepherds traveled to Bethlehem and saw for themselves what God had promised, they "spread the word.. and returned, glorifying and *praising* God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told."

Light. Praises. Promises everlasting.

Matthew 2 offers another vibrant perspective of the Christmas story and guess what the two consistent avenues are pointing toward Jesus? Light and praise. Magi searched for the king of the Jews, saying, "We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." As they followed the star, it went "ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child

was." What a powerful symbol of light the star served as it led the Magi to Christ. When they neared, they were overwhelmed and "bowed down and worshiped him," offering Jesus gifts. Praises and gifts for a baby who had yet to demonstrate his power, but simply rested in the tender arms of his mother.

Jesus, as a babe, didn't perform or prove or speak. His birth was the catalyst to each character's response of worship. The mere mention of Jesus attracts hope-seekers. For where He is, people are drawn out of darkness and into light. He makes miracles from the unexplainable.

He was found *by* light to *be* light. His being beckoned praise from stranger's mouths. *Where is He inviting you out of darkness and shining light on His real presence? Where can you offer praise for the hope of what will come, even if the pieces leading up to it make no sense?*

May every twinkle of the Christmas story reflect Jesus our Savior during this hopeful holiday.

* * * * *

Discuss: Where is He inviting you out of darkness and shining light on His real presence? Where can you offer praise for the hope of what will come, even if the pieces leading up to it make no sense?

Pray: Lord, your very presence is the reason for the entire Christmas story. How are we going to react? Lord, we are ready. We believe. Amen.

THANK YOU!

It has been such an honor to work with these writers on this devotion book. What an eye-opening way to take a fresh look at the Christmas story. Together, this season, let's revel in the beautiful way God wove this story together and look with fresh eyes at the story around us God is unfolding. He has called each of us to a purpose. Are you ready?

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