

John 1:1

*In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.*

A Christmas Prayer from *The Book of Common Prayer*

*Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word:
Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives,
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen.*

Bigger Than Our World

A God Who Strangely Fit in a Stable

One of my favorite books is *The Last Battle* by C.S. Lewis. And one of my favorite quotes from that book is when Queen Lucy says, “Yes, in our world, a stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world.”

I love that quote because what it claims is incomprehensible but true. How can something bigger than the world fit inside a small stable? And yet this is exactly what happened roughly two thousand years ago in Bethlehem. The God of no limits limited himself. The One with infinite days took on flesh and numbered his days. The LORD of immeasurable wisdom and knowledge set aside his omniscience to grow in wisdom and stature like us. I love how John describes this moment in his gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. John 1:1-5, 14

In other words, a stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our world.

We are noticeably not bigger than our world. As a matter of fact, we would fit perfectly well inside a stable. So there would be nothing particularly special about you or me being born there.

This reality reveals an important truth: We are not infinite, eternal, omnipotent, self-existent or sovereign. We are limited, weak and small. Simply put, we are not God.

I believe Christmas is an invitation to rediscover the truth that God is God and we are not. I suppose we can rediscover this truth any time of the year, but there is something about the Christmas season that opens our hearts to embrace a God whose reason is higher and whose ways are better and wiser. There is something in the carols and the candles that reminds us that our world isn't sustained by our anxious striving. There is a good God who made and sustains our world – a God who is bigger than our world and yet he humbled himself and he came to save us.

Joy fills our souls when we embrace this infinite, eternal and omnipotent God. We stop striving for power because we know the One who holds all power. We start celebrating because this powerful God is for us and wants to bless us. We find gladness knowing we are limited but our God is not. Nothing is impossible with him.

More than anything else, I want this Christmas to be a season of great joy for our church, and I believe this can happen if we spend these days celebrating the various ways Jesus is different from us.

I've written this devotional to help this happen. Each Sunday you will find a characteristic about Jesus that is totally unique to him as God. The following days of the week will look at why this characteristic is good news of great joy for those who are limited, weak and small.

Most likely, what you find in this devotional will not be new because what you and I need is usually not new truth about Jesus. What we need are reminders of old truths. Truths that have been passed from one generation to the next. Truths that have withstood the test of time. Truths we once had and might have forgotten, had we not seen them again.

As we go through this season, remember: Jesus is God. So keep your eyes fixed on him. Keep reading the stories about his life, death and resurrection. There is always more to see in what you see, and Christmas is for seeing him.

Merry Christmas, Faith! May this season be the dawning of good news and great joy!

Every Blessing,
Pastor Charlie

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WEEK 1

Jesus is God

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 2: *Jesus is God*

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

John 1:1

The simple message of Christmas is not that God picked a baby to save the world, but rather that God humbly entered the world as a baby to save us. This is the exact meaning of John 1:1. Jesus was God in essence and character - glory and power - beauty and majesty. Jesus was God in every way possible, though he was a separate person from God the Father. The Word was with God, and the Word was God.

This message is shocking and yet entirely true. The great God who flung planets into space and hung the stars in the heavens made himself small and entered the womb of a virgin to become a man.

This belief sets Christianity apart from every other religion. You see, on one end of the belief spectrum there are religions like Buddhism and Hinduism which teach that God is in everything; that we all share in the divine. In these religions, there is nothing special about God coming to be with us. It is not a life-transforming event because God is always with us. He is part of us, and we are part of him.

On the other end of the belief spectrum are religions like Islam and Judaism which teach that God is so far removed from us that his coming is impossible. To be near to God we must make our way back to him by our effort and goodness, because there is no way God would enter our sinful world.

Christianity is utterly unique. Christianity teaches that God is so personal and involved in this world that his coming is not only possible; it is promised. Christianity also teaches that God is so transcendent that his coming is history-altering and life-transforming. Jesus' birth is the hinge on which history begins to turn.

Jesus is God. This always has been and always will be at the core of his identity. No one gave this identity to him and no one will ever take it from him. He is the cosmic king, and one day every knee will bow before him.

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from John 1: 1?

What is your response to the truth that Jesus is God?

MONDAY, DECEMBER 3: *Bigger and Bigger*

How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you.

Psalm 139:17-18

Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable.

Psalm 145:3

Those who follow Jesus find that over time he gets bigger and bigger. He encompasses and informs more of life. In the book *Prince Caspian*, Lucy has a similar experience with the lion Aslan, who is the Christ figure in C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*. Lucy returns to Narnia and as she gazes into Aslan's face, he seems larger and wiser to her. This is the interaction that unfolds:

"Aslan," said Lucy, "you're bigger."

"That is because you are older, little one," answered the Lion.

"Not because you are?"

"I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger."¹

The reason Jesus gets bigger and bigger is that he is an infinite God. This means there are no limits to what can be known about him, and no human will ever fully comprehend him.

For thousands of years, followers of Jesus have reflected on the person and the work of their Savior. Libraries of books have been written about Jesus, but their sum amounts to a thimble's worth being taken from the ocean of Jesus' fullness. Even the most gifted theologians have barely scratched the surface of understanding the full character of Jesus. He is fully known only to the members of the Trinity.

This is good news of great joy because it means we will never be bored. There will never be a day when the adventure of knowing Jesus is over. There is always more to know and more to see. There are always new insights to gain and new reasons to worship. I love how Jen Wilkin puts it: "Like a Christmas morning with always another present to unwrap, eternity will increasingly disclose his hidden glories to the eyes of our hearts."²

I wonder if one reason Christmas is so special is that it is a yearly invitation to be like Lucy, to gaze into the face of our Savior and to see that this year he seems bigger and wiser than he was the year before.

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from Psalm 139:17-18 and Psalm 145:3?

Think back over this past year. What new things have you learned about Jesus?

1 C. S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian*

2 Jen Wilkin, *None Like Him*

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 4: *Immeasurably More*

But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.

Romans 5:20

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

Matthew 1:21

Our sin is great, and it has grave consequences. Sin distances us from God. It brings guilt and shame. It damages relationships, steals joy, mars goodness, disfigures beauty and destroys life. In other words, sin leads to death.

So consider for just a moment all that is wrong in this world. Here is a short list to get you started: poverty, broken families, human trafficking, violence, racism, abuse, loneliness, addiction and inequality. These things exist because sin exists.

Now consider all that is wrong in your heart. Here is another short list: selfishness, gluttony, worry, insecurity, stubbornness, laziness, lust, greed and pride. These things also exist because of sin.

This exercise isn't designed to lead you to shame. It is designed to lead you to Jesus, because here is the good news of great joy that is announced with the birth of Jesus: Since Jesus is infinite, his sacrifice for sin is not just sufficient to deal with our sin; it is immeasurably more.

You see, our sins are finite in number. They are the product of finite beings rebelling in time and space. But Jesus is not finite, nor is he bound by time or space. He is infinite and so his sacrifice for sin is immeasurably more than able to deal with all of our sin. This means we can have peace and confidence that nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

I love how this is expressed in the hymn *His Mercy Is More*:

What love could remember no wrongs we have done

Omniscient, all knowing, He counts not their sum

Thrown into a sea without bottom or shore

Our sins they are many, His mercy is more

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from Romans 5:20 and Matthew 1:21?

What is your response to the truth that God's mercy in Jesus is immeasurably more than your sin?

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 5: *He's got Time for You*

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Matthew 11:28-30

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

1 Peter 5:6-7

Sometimes we are tempted to think that Jesus doesn't have time for us. That he is too busy to hear about what we are going through. That there are more important people or more pressing needs that he is attending to. That what we face is too small to warrant his attention or that what we face is our fault so we had better take care of it ourselves.

The fact that Jesus is God says that this kind of thinking is nonsense. He isn't limited in any way, shape or form. The fact that he gives careful attention to one person doesn't mean that he isn't able to care for you at the exact same moment. There isn't a shortage of his time. He is God, limitlessly available to you.

This is why Jesus invites all who labor and are heavy laden to come to him. If Jesus weren't God, this invitation would be impossible to fulfill. But because Jesus is God, all of us can come, all of us can cast our anxieties upon him and all of us can find rest, care and comfort from Jesus.

This means Christmas really can be a time of great joy because in all the stress, busyness, loneliness and fear that can creep into our hearts during this season, he has all the time in the world for us. So this Christmas, cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from Matthew 11:28-30 and 1 Peter 5:6-7?

Are you ever tempted to believe that Jesus doesn't have time for you?

What is your response to the truth that Jesus has all the time in the world for you?

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 6: *Enough Forgiveness for All*

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Matthew 5:1-3

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

Romans 12:3

Jesus starts his most famous sermon saying it is blessed to be poor in spirit, meaning it is good to recognize we are limited. The reason for this is because it is true. We are not God. We are in need.

The coming of Jesus announces this reality to the world. No one is better than anybody else. We could never get to heaven on our own. God had to come to us. This means that the people who are saved are not those who are strong, good and able. Salvation comes to those who are poor in spirit.

Do you see what this means? The coming of Jesus is a time for great joy because it gives us a great resource for something we desperately need. Christmas gives us the ability to decimate bitterness in our relationships because Christmas gives us the ability to forgive as we have been forgiven.

Let me explain. If we are poor in spirit, we will recognize this Christmas how much forgiveness God will be giving to us during this season. After all, in the coming month we will lose our temper. We will fail to love our friends and family exactly like we want. But that's not all. Our friends and family will fail to love us. At times, they will be unkind and ungrateful because they too are limited, weak and in need. This can create all kinds of bitterness.

But here is the good news: Jesus came for people who are poor and needy. And because of him, God calls us to forgive as we have been forgiven. This is absolutely possible if we are poor in spirit. If we recognize the greatness of our need and the unlimited forgiveness God has given to us, we will be more than willing to give away what we have received. And when forgiveness is given away, bitterness doesn't stand a chance.

Conversely, if we aren't poor in spirit, if we look down on those who struggle or stay aloof to their weakness, we demonstrate that we have not really understood or experienced God's grace.

So here is to a Christmas of being poor in spirit and giving away forgiveness like it's unlimited and free.

A Moment to Reflect

What is your response to the truth that you are poor in spirit?

What person in your life needs you to understand that he or she is weak, limited and in need?

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

I was born February 7, 1980, at Saint Mary's hospital in Rochester, MN. On that cold winter day, the doctor who delivered me documented my arrival on my birth certificate. It was the first legal document attesting to the fact that I was not God. I had a beginning. My life could be measured. My frame could be weighed. I could be quantified and contained.

Jesus is different. He has no beginning or end. He created all things. The universe continues, not because it is great but because he is watching over it. Jesus defies measurement of any kind. His power, knowledge, love and mercy are not merely great; they are infinitely great. They are immeasurably great. Jesus is measureless and matchless. He is the king of glory.

So here is a question to consider this Christmas: Is there anything great in this world that excites you? Is there any artist whose paintings move your soul? Is there any athlete whose game you take pleasure in watching? Is there any musician whose music you love to hear? Is there any author whose books fill your time? Is there any thinker whose thoughts shape your life? Is there any cook whose recipes thrill your senses? What in this world seems great to you?

Do you have your answer? Great! Now consider this: Jesus stands above them all. As a matter of fact, all of their abilities, intellect and creativity flow from him. Sure, some may deny this. Sure, some may even take the abilities that come from Jesus and use them to mock him, but the truth remains, all things come from Jesus and Jesus is ten billion times ten billion times greater in every realm, except the realm of sin.

To grasp this reality, imagine that you took all the great artists of every country and every century of the world and you put them in a room with Jesus. Sitting in one corner is Monet and in another is Picasso and in another is the great Michelangelo. As Jesus puts his brush on the canvas, they would all gaze in amazement and feel small in comparison to Jesus.

This is true for every human endeavor. All the great physicists would listen to his theories of physics. All the great biologists would lean in to hear his understanding of life. All the great musicians would sit in silence as he performed. Even LeBron James would sit the bench to Jesus. He is infinitely better than any person we admire. Words simply fall short of describing the greatness of Jesus. Perhaps the only words that come close are from one of his doubters who eventually became a follower: *Jesus, you are my Lord and my God.*¹

A Moment to Reflect

What is your response to the truth that Jesus is infinitely better than all things?

This Christmas, what things do you find yourself putting above Jesus?

Saturday is a day to rest and reflect. So today look back at the passages you read and the reflections you wrote from last week. Is there a theme about Jesus that really sticks out to you? Is there something special God is saying to you this Christmas? Is there an area in your life that God is trying to renew or restore? In the space below, name what God is doing in your life this Christmas season and then write a short prayer praising him for his good work.

What God is doing in me:

The truth that brought joy to my heart this week:

My prayer of praise:

WEEK 2

Jesus is Eternal

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 9: *Jesus is Eternal*

He was in the beginning with God.

John 1:2

Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.

John 17:5

The Bible reveals a God who has no beginning or end. He exists eternally outside of time, simultaneously seeing all moments in time, and yet visibly acting at precisely the right moment in time to accomplish his perfect will.

The Christmas story reveals this truth. In Ephesians 1:4 we see that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of this world. So before time began, God made a plan for what he would do through Jesus in time. Then after creating the world, which included the creation of time, God revealed what he would do in the future. Most famously, he prophesied the virgin birth, the place where Jesus would be born and the way Jesus would die.¹ Finally, *when the fullness of time had come, 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.*² All of this reveals an eternal God, who is simultaneously the God of the past, present and future.

We are noticeably not eternal. We are limited by time and fettered by its constraints. We cannot go back to change the past nor can we see into the future to prepare in the present. This can lead to the unpleasant feelings of regret for the past, uncertainty for the future and anxiety for the present.

And yet we don't have to feel these things. The good news of great joy declared every Christmas is that the timeless God entered time so that we could have a relationship with him. In Jesus, we can know the eternal God who is unfettered by time's constraints. In Jesus, we can be close to the One who is able to redeem our past, know our future and fill today with his presence, guidance and joy. Jesus was and is and is to come, which means there is no need for regret, uncertainty or anxiety this Christmas, or any Christmas to come.

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from John 1:2 and John 17:5?

How have you been tempted this Christmas to allow regret, uncertainty or anxiety to steal your joy?

1 Isaiah 7:14; Micah 5:2; Isaiah 52:13-53:12

2 Galatians 4:4-5

MONDAY, DECEMBER 10: *Christmas was Planned*

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

Ephesians 1:2-4

And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words....And all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.

Revelation 13:5,8

We don't really know what the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were doing before time began, but we do know one thing for sure: before the foundation of the world, God chose us and wrote down our names in the Lamb's book of life. A helpful but imperfect picture of this is an author who charts out a story before writing or an architect who draws blueprints before building. In other words, Christmas didn't just happen. God planned the whole story of salvation before a need for salvation existed.

This is a profound mystery that some people are hesitant to embrace. Yet it is true and God reveals it because the implication of God planning salvation is so incredibly good: We have never lived a loveless day.

So may this Christmas be a time of great joy as you rest in the reality that God's love for you reaches back to eternity past. Before the foundation of the world, God chose you.

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from Ephesians 1:2-4 and Revelation 13:5, 8?

What happens in your soul when you reflect on the truth that God chose you before the foundation of the world?

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 11: *Right on Time*

He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

Ecclesiastes 3:11

But when the fullness of time had come, 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 4:4-5

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

Romans 5:6

Jesus is right on time. He is never early or late. He is never rushing to get something done. He is never playing catch-up or trying to stay in front of something that is careening out of control. Human history is happening precisely as Jesus wants it to happen. By the way, this includes your life. At this moment, you are precisely where you need to be and things are happening at exactly the right time.

You may not feel like this is true. As a matter of fact, you may feel like Jesus has checked out because things are not happening as you would like. Perhaps you are sick and you think, "Now is the perfect time for healing." Or maybe you have a friend who has walked away from Jesus and you think, "Now is the perfect time for her to turn back." Or perhaps you are waiting for a problem in your life to be solved and you think "Now is the perfect time for the solution to come." But it doesn't come.

From our perspective this can be pretty frustrating. We can look around and think, "Where is God's perfect timing? A two-year-old could come up with a better plan for my life." In these moments, remember that God does not operate according to our wisdom, but he has promised to work all things for good at the perfect time.

Here is the kicker in all of this: God's perfect time is often not what we want. What we want is now. But sometimes it takes more time for healing to come. Sometimes years go by before beauty comes from destruction. As a matter of fact, the answer to our problems may come long after we take our final breath. This was true for the people who lived before the birth of Jesus. They lived waiting for Jesus to come and many of them died still waiting. Then at precisely the right time Jesus came.

Do you see what this means? God's perfect timing may mean that we go to our graves without seeing our problems solved. This isn't another problem; it's a reality to embrace. So this Christmas, remember: Jesus is eternal and what he is doing in your life is right on time. May this truth bring great joy to your life!

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from Ecclesiastes 3:11, Galatians 4:4-5 and Romans 5:6?

Are there areas in your life where you are frustrated with God's timing? What would it look like to surrender those areas to Jesus?

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 12: *Enough Time*

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?”

Matthew 6:25-26

Sometimes we can feel like there isn't enough time, but we are wrong. In God's providence and grace he gives us exactly the amount of time we need.

This is good news that leads to great joy. There is enough time to linger and laugh. There is enough time for the work of our hands and enough time to lay our hands to rest. There is enough time for family, friends, small group Christmas parties, shopping, baking and sleeping in.

There is enough time because Jesus is eternal. He is not rushing about, so we don't need to rush about. We can slow down, savor time and make memories. We don't have to fear being passed over, because everything is happening as Jesus wants it to happen and Jesus' timing is good.

Worry and anxiety flow from thinking that there isn't enough time or that God's timing isn't good. Jesus often said he didn't want our lives to be filled with worry. So while he walked this earth he pointed to the birds and said, “If God cares for the sparrows, how much more must he care for you?”

Jesus' point was simple and profound. God's care for us is immense. He gives us exactly what we need, including enough time.

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 and Matthew 6:25-26?

How do you feel right now? Do you feel rushed, anxious or worried? Do you feel confident that God is good and he has given you enough time?

How are your feelings affecting your life and your joy this Christmas?

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 13: *Learning to Number our Days*

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. You return man to dust and say, "Return, O children of man!" For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night. You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.... So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.

Psalm 90:1-6, 12

Jesus is unbounded by time. A thousand years are like a moment to him and a moment is like a thousand years. In other words, time has no hold on him. Yet time holds us. We have a beginning and one day our life will end.

I was sixteen when I learned that my days were numbered. This insight came from a small cold that turned into life-threatening pneumonia. I still remember the night I stumbled out of my room unable to breathe. My mom rushed me to the hospital where I was immediately admitted to the ICU. As the doctors and nurses raced to connect me to a breathing machine, I gained an important perspective on my life. It was limited and incredibly fragile.

I don't think we have to have a life-threatening illness to gain this perspective. Our eternal God clearly reveals this in his word and he encourages us to number our days.

Numbering our days doesn't mean we live with a morbid sense of impending doom, nor does it mean that we don't plan for tomorrow because who really knows if tomorrow will come. Numbering our days means we recognize that life is a gift. Every moment is undeserved. Every breath is a miracle. Every day is graciously ordained by God.

When we have this perspective we do not take life for granted. Instead, we seek to live it well by investing in things that have eternal significance. God and people are eternally significant. So living well means we love God with our heart, soul, strength and mind and we love people with a similar passion.

To be sure, we won't always get this right. Sometimes we will take life for granted, but the moments that we number and invest in eternal things, those are the bright moments — the joy-filled moments — the moments where we are living in light of an eternal joy.

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from Psalm 90:1-6, 12?

How does your awareness that this Christmas is numbered and could be your last, impact the way you love God and interact with people?

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

Revelation 1:8

Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 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.

Exodus 3:5-6

One of the fun things about Christmas in my family is that generations gather together. So around the dinner table is my grandma who is now in her eighties, my dad who is in his seventies, my mom who is in her sixties, my older sisters who are in their forties, my younger sisters who are in their twenties and thirties, all of our spouses and a growing group of grandkids who range in age from 15 years to three months old.

My family isn't what I would call quiet. Everybody has a perspective and nobody is particularly shy about sharing their point of view. This means our family meals are usually filled with lots of laughter, talk and, at times, tension.

Over the years I've notice something about the tension that rises to the surface during our family dinners. Most of the time it comes because we are each shaped by the period of history we were born into. For example, my grandma will never fully understand the attraction of social media and my kids will never fully appreciate the value of life without constant connection. An age difference of just several decades can cause two people who love each other to see an issue from completely different perspectives.

What causes this phenomenon? We are creatures of time with limited perspective created by time.

God couldn't be more different. He is the Alpha and the Omega. He is the beginning and the end. He is the God of all generations, and he brings his timeless truth to every generation.

Over the years I have found that what makes my family strong is not that we agree on everything. What makes us strong is that we are being knit together by a timeless God. So after the dinner debates have faded and the dishes are washed and put away, he remains.

This is good news that has created great joy in my family. It has given us confidence that there is something bigger, stronger and wiser at work in our midst. There is an eternal God who has timeless love and truth for all of us, and this eternal God will knit us together and work in our family long after we are gone.

A Moment to Reflect

How have you seen God work through the various generations in your family?

Saturday is a day to rest and reflect. So today look back at the passages you read and the reflections you wrote from last week. Is there a theme about Jesus that really sticks out to you? Is there something special God is saying to you this Christmas? Is there an area in your life that God is trying to renew or restore? In the space below, name what God is doing in your life this Christmas season and then write a short prayer praising him for his good work.

What God is doing in me:

The truth that brought joy to my heart this week:

My prayer of praise:

WEEK 3

Jesus is Omnipotent

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 16: *Jesus is Omnipotent*

All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.... 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 1:3, 14

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Colossians 1:16-17

Jesus is the all-powerful creator of this world. He possesses infinite control. At the creation of this world he spoke order from chaos and something from nothing.

Though we don't always perceive it, Jesus' power is persistently present. He does not grow weary or faint. Right now, all of creation is being sustained by the power of his might.

I still struggle to comprehend how the One who strung the stars in their place took on flesh. I honestly don't get how this could be. But this is what the Bible clearly reveals. The baby in Bethlehem's manger took part in the creation of this world. Mary's firstborn Son exchanged the comforts of heaven for a dirty stable. Ultimate power wrapped itself in a fragile human body. I love how Charles Wesley expressed this in *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*:

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;

Hail the incarnate Deity,

Pleased as man with man to dwell,

Jesus, our Emmanuel.

The doctrine of the omnipotent God becoming a man is inexplicable. It is a mystery that defies rationality. And yet, it is that very irrationality that gives the Christmas story its greatest defense. For only a truly infinite God could conceive such a story.

I think this is why the Christmas story has the power to fill us with constant joy and wonder. It reminds us that we will never fully comprehend God. All our efforts are like a gnat seeking to drain the ocean. This is good news because a God we could understand would be no God at all. If we could fully grasp him, he would not be infinite, and if we could control him, he would not possess all power.

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from John 1:3, 14 and Colossians 1:16-17?

What parts of the Christmas story are still a mystery to you?

MONDAY, DECEMBER 17: *You can be Weak*

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Philippians 1:6

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Jesus is omnipotent. He possesses infinite power and he is constantly working in our lives, even though we may not realize it. This is especially true when we are tired or hurt or our day has too many temptations. These days often leave us feeling like Jesus isn't with us. But he is right at our side using his unstoppable power to strengthen and guide.

The Apostle Paul reveals this truth. Paul wasn't strong or powerful. He was weak, perplexed and tested. As a matter of fact, Paul had a "thorn in his flesh" that perpetually reminded him of his limitations.

So what made the difference in Paul's life? One word: Jesus. You see, Jesus used his power to strengthen Paul. Jesus went before Paul to clear away the things that Paul couldn't face and Jesus walked beside Paul to empower him along the way. Paul had a fruitful, effective and joyful life, not because he was strong but because Jesus used his power to strengthen him.

This reality is cause for great joy! God isn't looking to add his strength to people who are already strong. God is looking for weak people who rest in Jesus so that Jesus' strength is seen to be great. This means this Christmas can be fruitful, joyful and full of life, not because you are strong but because Jesus is omnipotent and he wants to magnify his strength through your weakness.

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from Philippians 1:6 and 2 Corinthians 12:9-10?

In what ways do you personally feel weak this Christmas?

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 18: *The Spirit of Power*

And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."

Luke 1:34-37

In the months leading up to the birth of Jesus, Mary experienced God's omnipotent power. Most obviously, God the Holy Spirit worked in Mary's womb to bring Jesus into the world, but God's powerful work didn't stop there. The Holy Spirit also gave Mary supernatural strength, comfort and courage.

Remember, Mary was around 15 years old when she became pregnant with Jesus. At that time she was engaged to Joseph, and she was living in a culture that looked down on single women becoming pregnant. While the virgin birth was true, it wasn't a story many people would believe. So Mary faced criticism, judgment and shame.

This helps us to see more of the Spirit's powerful work in Mary. Without the Holy Spirit's presence and power, Mary would have been overwhelmed by worry and uncertainty. Without the Holy Spirit, Mary would have said no to God's impossible calling. But because the Holy Spirit powerfully worked, Mary said yes and she became the mother of Jesus.

Mary's experience highlights our need for the Holy Spirit. We need the Spirit's presence to steady us as we wait for Jesus to return. We need the Spirit to bring life to our souls. We need him to enter the empty parts of our lives to bring fullness. We need his peace to quiet the chaos and his supernatural joy in our moments of sorrow. We need his power at work within us helping us to overcome sin and grasp the extent of God's love for us.

The good news of Christmas is that the same Spirit who powerfully worked in Mary lives in us. So this Christmas, be open to the Holy Spirit and believe that nothing is impossible with him.

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from Luke 1:34 – 37?

What impossible thing do you need the Holy Spirit to do for you this Christmas?

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 19: *Surrendered to Jesus*

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

Luke 1:38

The only appropriate response to Jesus' omnipotent power is surrender. This is hard for us because we are sinners and sinners tend to see submission to a powerful authority as a loss of freedom.

This might be true if the powerful authority were an evil tyrant. But the powerful authority is Jesus and he is good. He literally died for us so that we could be forgiven and loved.

Another thing that makes it hard for us to surrender to Jesus is that we think we know what is best. In other words, we like to call the shots, make the rules and write our own stories.

Sadly, the stories we write without Jesus aren't very good because without Jesus we tend to focus on living for ourselves, gratifying our own desires and building our own little kingdoms. Thankfully, Jesus invites us to tell a bigger and better story that is focused on worship, wonder and love.

Mary's story typifies the story Jesus invites us into. When Mary surrendered herself to God, impossible things started to happen. She literally became pregnant with God. What is even more thrilling is that she entered into a deeply personal relationship with God. She gave up control of her life. She started going where God wanted her to go and her life was never the same. It was radically altered and changed.

Do you think Mary ever pouted about her loss of freedom? No. Not a chance. She got to be part of a great story, a story that will be told for all eternity, a story of God doing impossible things in and through her.

Right now God is inviting you to be part of a greater story. There are impossible things he wants to do in and through you. He wants to literally change you from the inside out and he wants to change this world through you. And so this Christmas you are at a crossroads. Will you live in your own strength and wisdom? Or like Mary will you surrender yourself to Jesus?

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from Luke 1:38?

This Christmas what area of your life is God asking you to surrender to him?

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 20: *The Greatest Demonstration of Power*

And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.

Matthew 27:50-51

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 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 4:14-16

The greatest demonstration of God's infinite power is seen in Jesus' death and resurrection. On the cross Jesus made a way for ordinary people to have extraordinary access to God. He who knew no sin became sin so that sinners might be forgiven and free. He who had perfect access to the Father was forsaken so that we could draw near to God. The all-powerful King of heaven died as a common criminal so that common criminals might have uncommon access to him. Ordinarily the death of a king is the end of the story. But Jesus powerfully conquered death and rose again, revealing his infinite power. He is truly an omnipotent king.

We can live our whole lives and never have access to the powerful people of this world. This shouldn't trouble us because at the cross Jesus made a way for us to have access to the all-powerful God of human history. Because of Jesus, God's presence and power is available to us anytime and anywhere.

Free, unlimited, anytime access to God is the gift Jesus offers to you this Christmas. This is a gift that was powerfully purchased with Jesus' own blood. If you embrace this gift and draw near to God with confidence, your life will be filled with joy. You will know the King of all Kings and you will encounter the God of infinite power.

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from Matthew 27:50-51 and Hebrews 4:14-16?

What can you do this Christmas to further enjoy Jesus' gift of free access to God?

And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him, saying, "Save us, Lord; we are perishing." And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?" Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. And the men marveled, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?"

Matthew 8:23-27

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:28

One of my favorite stories in the Bible is when Jesus gets up from a nap during a storm and tells the winds and the waves to settle down. In that moment Jesus allowed his disciples to catch a glimpse of his divine power and they wondered, "*What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?*"¹

The answer: Jesus is so much more than just a good man; he is the God man. Jesus possesses infinite power and he wants to use his power to work all things for good in our lives.

About 15 miles away from the cabin where my family spends our summer vacations there is an old cedar forest. Some of the trees in that forest are over 400 hundred years old and most likely they will still be standing hundreds of years from now. The reason for this is that each tree has a massive root system that sustains, strengthens and steadies it through wind, hail, drought and storms.

The truth that Jesus is all powerful is a root system for us. And the implication of this truth brings calm and stability in whatever storm we face: *Since Jesus is all powerful, he is able to make all things work together for good.* If we live inside this reality, we will be more solid and stable than those massive cedars. Nothing will blow us over and we will have a constant calm even in stormy seasons. If we live outside this reality, our lives will be like a straw house in a hurricane. We will quickly be blown over and fear will overwhelm us because we do not have a root system to stabilize and strengthen us.

Do you ever wonder how Mary brought Jesus into this world with such courage, calm and confidence?

I think it's because she understood that God was able to take all the rejection, criticism and struggle she would face and work it for her good.

The good news of Christmas is that Jesus does this for all who love him. So if you know Jesus, live today like a giant cedar. You have a massive root system supporting you. You are connected to the all-powerful God of human history. Those who trust him are the calmest people in the world, not because nothing traumatic happens to them, but rather because they know that their God is able to work all things for their good.

A Moment to Reflect

How have you seen Jesus' omnipotent power bring peace and stability to your life?

Saturday is a day to rest and reflect. So today look back at the passages you read and the reflections you wrote from last week. Is there a theme about Jesus that really sticks out to you? Is there something special God is saying to you this Christmas? Is there an area in your life that God is trying to renew or restore? In the space below, name what God is doing in your life this Christmas season and then write a short prayer praising him for his good work.

What God is doing in me:

The truth that brought joy to my heart this week:

My prayer of praise:

WEEK 4

Jesus is Self-Existent

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 23: *Jesus is Self-Existent*

In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

John 1:4

In him we live and move and have our being.

Acts 17:28

Jesus is self-existent. This means that unlike everything else, he is uncreated. He has no origin. He did not begin to be. He has always been and his being has always been complete.

Jesus being self-existent also means that he depends on nothing. No one gave him life or breath. No one currently sustains him, and there will never be a moment when he is in need. He has life in himself and he himself is the source of all life. In him we live and move and have our being.

The personal implications of Jesus being self-existent are worth considering.

First, we must conclude that we need him. This is John's point in John 1:4 where he writes, "In him was life, and the life was the light of men." In our world light and life are inseparably connected. If the sun went out, we would quickly die. In a similar way Jesus is our source of light and life. This is true not only of our physical life but also of our spiritual life. The transformation of our soul, the strength we need for today and the hope we hold for the future come from Jesus.

Second, we must affirm that our dependence on Jesus isn't seasonal. We need him when the winter sun hangs low in the sky and when the summer sun burns bright. We need him in seasons of plenty and in seasons of want. It is limiting to only celebrate and depend on Jesus at Christmas. We need him like fish need water, which is to say we need him all the time.

Finally, Jesus' self-existence means he can bring life to what is dead. He is the light that pushes back the darkness of sin. He is the life that breaks our addictions. He holds in himself the healing that will mend what is broken. He is life when death destroys and he is light when all other lights go out.

So this Christmas consider the reality that Jesus is self-existent and as you do, admit that you need him. You are not independent or autonomous. You are not self-sufficient. You can't pull yourself together to live a good, moral and joyful life. That may be a hard confession. That may be admitting more than you are comfortable admitting. Yet that confession is the only way to truly find life. Jesus is life and in him is the light of men.

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from John 1:4 and Acts 17:28?

In what ways has Jesus reminded you this past year that you need him?

MONDAY, DECEMBER 24: *Liar, Lunatic or the Light of the World*

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Luke 2:1-7

Jesus said..., "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

John 14:6

No matter what you do in a dark room, you first have to turn on the lights. Certainly, you could leave the lights off and stumble around in the dark, but to do anything meaningful or productive, you must first turn on the lights.

In a similar way, before you can see what is really happening in this world you must embrace Jesus as life and light, meaning you must believe that the baby in Bethlehem's manger is more than a human. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, divinity and humanity mysteriously together as one.

Over the years when I have talked about the reality that Jesus is God, I have heard some people say something like this: "I don't believe Jesus is God. I am willing to believe that he was a good man and I want to try to live a good life like him, but I'm not willing to embrace the belief that Jesus is God."

While that is a response to Jesus, it's one that leaves you in the dark. C.S. Lewis expressed this well when he wrote:

*I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Jesus: I'm ready to accept him as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about him being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.*¹

So your choice this Christmas is simple: Jesus is either a liar, a lunatic, or the Light of the World.

The evidence of history and the Bible clearly points to the validity of the third option. As a matter of fact, the only plausible way to explain the explosive growth of the church during the first century is that Jesus is who he said he is and he accomplished what he said he accomplished. He was God in the flesh. He lived, he died and he rose again. The light of the world descended into darkness in order to bring us into God's beautiful light.

Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. So if you disregard Jesus, you really do sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life in the dark, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. This is the surest way to waste your life and to lose your soul. But if you embrace Jesus, he will shine into the darkness and you will be able to see. His light will illuminate everything, because of course he is the life and the life was the light of men.

1 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from Luke 2:1–7?

Have you come to a place where you believe that Jesus is God? If so, how has that decision been like turning on a light? If not, what keeps you from believing that Jesus is God?

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 25: *A Joy-Filled Message*

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

Luke 2:8-14

I love the classic Christmas movies like *It's a Wonderful Life* and *White Christmas*. I watch them every year and I'll keep watching them because I genuinely enjoy them. So what I am about to say isn't from a Christmas scrooge; it's an honest reflection on why I think the story of Jesus' birth offers a better message.

It seems to me that the overall message of the classic Christmas movies is something like this: In the end we will be able to pull together and create a world of unity, love and peace. In other words, we have light and life within us, so we can dispel the darkness and create a wonderful life.

So here is a question I'd like us to consider: Is that *really* true? Do we *really* have the ability in ourselves to overcome loneliness, broken relationships, conflict, evil and injustice? It's a great message to declare if it's true, but a casual look at human history reveals that we cannot save ourselves. Yes, there are bright moments when people work together, but still there are wars and rumors of wars. Still there are families in crisis. Still our world is full of darkness, anger, violence and despair.

I love the story of Jesus' birth because it reveals a realistic message about life. Jesus' birth doesn't say, "Cheer up! There is light and life in you. If you try very hard you can make the world a better place." On the contrary, Jesus' birth reveals that things are really bad. We are in trouble. Our world is broken beyond our ability to repair, and yet there is incredible hope.

Why is there hope? Because Jesus came as light and life to save the world. This is what the angel announced to the shepherds on that first Christmas so many years ago, "*I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*"

Notice the angel didn't say "I bring you good news of great joy. You can save the world!" No. The angel declared "A Savior is born." This reveals the truth that we need salvation. We need a light and a life that is outside the world to enter the world to save the world. This of course is the message of Christmas, which is why Jesus' birth is a story of good news and great joy.

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from Luke 2:8-14?

How does your heart respond to the message that Jesus came to save the world?

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 26: *Joyful Sharing*

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

Luke 2:15-18

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Matthew 5:14-16

After the angels left, the shepherds raced down the grassy hillside into the sleepy town of Bethlehem. Their hearts were no doubt filled with questions and hope. So they ran until at last they reached the place they were longing to find. And then they saw him. The baby wrapped in rags. The second member of the Trinity resting in human flesh. The light of the world sleeping in darkness.

What happened next is hidden from us. We don't know how long they stayed. We don't know what they did when they first encountered their Savior. Did they kneel in worship? Did they hold him? Did they silently thank God for the gift?

We don't know, but what we do know is this: The good news of Jesus had to be shared. We know this because after the shepherds left the manger, they ran around telling everyone about their experiences with Jesus. It's like Jesus ushered in a joy that had to be shared. It's like something so profoundly true was experienced that the truth had to be told.

In this we see that joyful sharing is a natural outcome of encountering Jesus. When we meet him, we must tell others about the light and life we have found. His grace is too great to keep to ourselves, his love is too much for us alone and the freedom we have found in him is too good to hide away. Others have to know. Others need to see. There is light and life for the world!

I find it interesting that Jesus didn't say his followers *might* be the light of the world, instead he said *you are the light of the world*. I think the reason for this is because it is true. We shine when Jesus shines on us. We share joy when we encounter Jesus because his joy is infinite. It's overflowing, so it flows through us just like it flowed through the shepherds on that first Christmas. So this Christmas, consider: Who needs to hear the good news of Jesus' birth through you?

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from Luke 2:15–18, Matthew 5:14–16?

Who needs to hear the good news of Jesus' birth through you?

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

John 11:25-26

There was expectation in the air. It was like a great concert in the moments just before it begins. There was a pause, a breath and then the great Conductor raised his arms to begin.

Lazarus was sick and his sisters knew Jesus could heal their brother. Yet Jesus delayed in coming. When Jesus finally decided to come, Lazarus was dead. Jesus knew this and told his disciples it was for their sake that he was now going to visit Lazarus.

As Jesus came near, word of his coming quickly spread. Martha, Lazarus' sister, went to meet him. She said that if only Jesus had come, her brother would still be alive. Jesus said to Martha that her brother would rise again. And Martha agreed that on the last day, Lazarus would rise. Then Jesus said to her, "*I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes on me shall never die. Do you believe this?*"²

The world seemed to pause, waiting for her answer. Then it came, "*Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.*"³

It was her faith Jesus looked for and measured because without faith it is impossible to please God.

Finally, Jesus asked where they laid Lazarus. As Jesus walked towards the tomb of his dead friend, time seemed to stand still. People shifted their weight and leaned forward. They glanced at each other, not knowing what was coming or what to feel, but feeling anxious, hopeful and afraid.

Then the tombstone was rolled away, and Jesus called out in a mighty voice, "*Lazarus, come out.*"⁴ And as Lazarus obeyed, faith grew more deeply in those who believed.

It has always been this way. God reveals his glory to increase our faith. He shines his light to cast darkness away. He brings his life to overcome death. In these moments God seeks to accomplish so much more than the miracle at hand, he seeks to increase faith in us, so that when we stand on the brink of death we can say with Martha, "*Yes, Lord; I believe.*"⁵

And do you want to know what happens in our moments of belief? The world stands still, heaven pauses to notice and again there is expectancy in the air as the great Conductor raises his arms to pour grace, light, beauty, hope and life upon us.

A Moment to Reflect

How does the miracle of Lazarus increase your faith in Jesus?

1 Written by Karl Murphy

2 John 11:25-26

3 John 11:27

4 John 11:43

5 John 11:27

And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

John 17:3

In a few days we will ring in the New Year and life will return to its normal pace. The ornaments will come down. Friends and family will head back to where they came from. Our thank you notes will be written and our responsibilities will find us waking up again before the winter sun.

As life kicks back into its normal pace, remember the main message of this week: Jesus is crucially important for living life. He is self-existent and we are not. In him is life and the life is the light of men.¹

In other words, as it would be cruel to place a fish out of water, so we are cruel to ourselves if we try to live in this world without Jesus. In fact, the world becomes a strange, confusing and painful place, and life is disappointing and second-rate for those who do not know Jesus.

But when we know Jesus, there is life, freedom and flourishing. When we know Jesus, there is joy, peace and contentment. When we know Jesus, there is boldness for God and energy for life. This means the most important thing we can give ourselves to in this next year is knowing Jesus.

If we are going to give ourselves to knowing Jesus in this coming year, we must first recognize how much knowledge of Jesus we lack. Jesus is infinite, self-existent, omnipotent, eternal, omnipresent and omniscient. He cannot be measured or contained.

Many of us fail to passionately pursue knowing Jesus more fully because we feel we have plumbed the depth of the ocean. We know all there is to know. This is a sign of spiritual poverty. We haven't even come close to knowing him. Sure, what we know is good and sufficient for salvation but it is nowhere near all there is to know.

Second, if we are going to know Jesus more fully in this coming year, we must daily seek him in his word. The Bible is the clearest revelation we have of Jesus till we see him face to face, so until that great day we need to be people who read the Bible and meditate on what we find.

Our approach to the Bible needs to be that of travelers in a foreign country who continue to return to their map so that they can successfully navigate their way through the unfamiliar terrain. The Bible is our map in pointing us to Jesus. It shows us the contours of his character. It reveals the heights of his love and the depth of his grace. It offers us a path to walk when we've lost our way and a narrow road that leads to expansive encounters with Jesus that encourage, challenge and change us.

Jesus said, "*This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*"² The implication is profound. There is life in knowing Jesus! So as we make our way through this next year, let's pick up our Bibles and recognize there is still so much more for us to learn.

A Moment to Reflect

Stop and ask Jesus, "How can I know you more deeply in 2019? What practices can I put in place to encounter you more fully?" Take time to listen to Jesus and follow what he reveals to you.

1 John 1:4
2 John 17:3

Saturday is a day to rest and reflect. So today look back at the passages you read and the reflections you wrote from last week. Is there a theme about Jesus that really sticks out to you? Is there something special God is saying to you this Christmas? Is there an area in your life that God is trying to renew or restore? In the space below, name what God is doing in your life this Christmas season and then write a short prayer praising him for his good work.

What God is doing in me:

The truth that brought joy to my heart this week:

My prayer of praise:

WEEK 5

Jesus is Sovereign

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 30: *Jesus is Sovereign!*

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

John 1:5

Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all.

1 Chronicles 29:11-12

Today authority seems to be front of mind quite a bit. Governments vie for authority. People constantly question those in authority. There appear to be constant abuses of authority. Regardless of how much authority people have, they always want more.

While the world spins in circles chasing authority like a top chasing its own momentum, there is no limit on Jesus' authority. Think of the most powerful authority figure you can, be it a boss, president or military might, and multiply its abilities by infinity. Even then it couldn't even come close to competing with the authority of Jesus.

To some this realization may be scary, but to believers there is nothing more comforting than this truth: Everything on heaven and earth is his. He has all the power, all the splendor and all the majesty.

God is in control. He's got this. To a believer, that fact erases every fear, dries all tears, vanquishes any anxiety and provides a peace of mind that transcends all understanding. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Jesus is that light that radiated into earthly existence on that cold dark night in a manger. And while at times the world's darkness seems to close in, his light is as powerful today as it was when he was born.

Light is more than a metaphor here. Anyone who has truly experienced the blinding blackness of pitch dark knows that light is warmth, comfort, direction and, ultimately, life. Without it hope fades and the cold settles in. Light is life.

Every attribute we have considered thus far in this devotional has been moving us toward this week. This week's main message is that the most right and logical place for God to inhabit is a throne where he rules over all. Where he is sovereign. Where we can relax, because God's got this.

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from John 1:5 and 1 Chronicles 29:11-12?

Do you find Jesus' authority comforting or scary? Why?

MONDAY, DECEMBER 31: *The Wisest Response to Jesus*

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: "'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Matthew 2:1-12

There are stages to life, and I'm at that age and stage where all my friends are having babies.

One thing I've noticed is when a baby is born, people far and wide come to visit. Everybody wants to see the new baby. They hold the baby and say how cute the baby is (even if it's kind of funny looking), they take selfies with the baby and give the baby gifts.

But one thing they don't do is get down on their knees and worship the baby. I mean, that would be crazy, right? Unless that baby is God. In that case, it is the appropriate response.

The wisest response to Jesus is worship. We all have a decision to make when faced with the reality of Christ. King Herod had a decision to make. He was disturbed and made the wrong one. The Wise men also had a decision and they chose to praise him.

This is illustrated brilliantly by the wise men (emphasis on the adjective "wise") who are grown, yet they bow before a baby. They are intelligent, yet they kneel before an infant. They are wealthy, yet they humble themselves before poverty.

And notice what happens as they worship Jesus: Joy fills their hearts. So in this coming year, make the wise choice and worship Jesus.

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from Matthew 2:1-12?

How will you respond to Jesus in this New Year?

TUESDAY, JANUARY 1: *Teach us to Pray*

Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” And he said to them, “When you pray, say: “Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.”

Luke 11:1-2

Pray then like this: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Matthew 6:9-10

When it came to prayer, Jesus was specific. He knew he couldn’t just tell us to pray; he had to teach us to pray. After all, prayer is simply talking to Jesus, but Jesus knew we even need help with that.

How often is prayer used as a laundry list of wants or needs? How often do we hearken to prayer as if Jesus is there to grant us our wishes like some sort of cosmic genie? How often do we put prayer in our back pocket until something in our life breaks, then we pull it out like a magic fix-all tool?

Jesus makes it clear he wants prayer to be where we start the day, not end it. By praying the Lord’s prayer, we align our internal compass to Christ and are able to position our wants, needs and desires with his.

Since Jesus is King, we pray “your kingdom come, your will be done.” The key here is “your will” not “our will.”

While these words are easy to say, they are hard to mean because often what we want is our kingdom to come and our will to be done. We want the very throne of God, but we are wholly unqualified for it. Only God is. And joy fills our hearts when we give him his rightful place.

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from Luke 11:1–2 and Matthew 6:9–10?

How do you pray? Do you pray for your will or God’s will to be done?

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 2: *A King you can Trust*

"For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Mark 10:45

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, 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.

Philippians 2:5-8

I have a friend who loves to take selfies with celebrities. It's kind of his thing, I guess. He used to work in the entertainment industry and he would bump into stars like David Spade, Zach Braff or Jerry Seinfeld and somehow convince them to grin for an awkward picture. It's pretty funny to see these candid celebrity shots with my buddy, and it also illustrates that with fame comes a magnetic allure.

In today's world of corporate ladders and social statuses, it seems to be all about who you know. The right connections can land you a job or make you the envy of your friends. After all, position equals power in this world and the more power you have, the more clout you carry.

Jesus had the best connection anyone can have in God. The power and clout Christ carried surpassed that of any king, judge or Pharisee. However, rather than pull the "Do you know who my Dad is?" card, Jesus did not consider equality with God something to use to his advantage. Instead he made himself nothing more than a servant.

We started this week talking about authority. Submitting to authority is not in vogue right now. But that's exactly what Christ did when he came to earth as a frail baby.

Jesus is a good king who uses his authority to bless us. He is a king who washes feet and gave up his life for us. Often, we bristle at the idea of submitting to someone in authority. After all, they might use their authority to hurt us. Not Jesus. He uses his authority to bless us.

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from Mark 10:45 and Philippians 2:5-8?

In what ways do you need Jesus to serve you?

THURSDAY, JANUARY 3: *Borrowed Authority*

Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above."

John 19:11

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you." For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean." When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."

John 13:1-14

Here Jesus is faced with a tough situation. There is a traitor in his midst and he knows it. How will he respond? By picking up a towel and serving.

Sometimes when I'm faced with a tough situation I stop to consider what is within my control. Often, if I'm being honest, it's very little. When you boil it all down, we don't have a lot of control over what happens.

As humans we love to think that we have lots of authority or control in our lives, but really, when it comes down to it, we are left with the reality that we are quite powerless. We can control how we treat ourselves and others, but that's about it.

Any authority that we have is granted to us by the God who holds all authority. So, what should we do with the authority that is given? We use it like Jesus, which means we use the authority we have not for our own benefit. We use our borrowed authority to bless other people.

And when we are betrayed like Jesus, we follow his example. We use our authority not to crush in anger, but rather to pick up a towel and start washing feet.

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from John 19:11 and John 13:1-14?

How do you use the authority granted to you by God? How would you like to use it?

FRIDAY, JANUARY 4: *Over it all and Working for Good*

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.

Proverbs 16:33

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:28

Yesterday we confronted the truth that we don't have a lot of power over life, and in those few things that we do control, our authority is granted to us by God.

The reality that we are not in control can cause fear, insecurity and instability. In a world rocked by hurricanes, fires, famines, shootings, plunging stocks and bad Adam Sandler movies, it's easy to get lost in the swirl of tragedy and forget which way is up.

We will all get caught up in our own wave of tragedy at some point in life. Sometimes that wave turns into a tsunami and our lives capsize as the bailing buckets of life overflow and pain sinks our frail boat.

But even then, as the waves crash over our heads and we can't orient ourselves, there is nothing outside of Jesus' sovereign control. In fact, not only is he in control, but he is also using those very same circumstances for good. He's using those waves of pain to paint his story.

This means absolutely everything we experience in this coming year will be from him and for our good. Even when we can't see it.

Joy fills our hearts when we recognize this reality. Nothing is random or wasted. Jesus is in control and we can trust him in this coming year.

So, this year, if the flood waters rise and you find yourself treading water, fear not, for God is in control and there's a calm beach waiting for you, even if you can't see it yet.

A Moment to Reflect

What sticks out to you from Proverbs 16:33 and Romans 8:28?

How will you deal with adversity this year? What helps you to trust that God is working all things for good in your life?

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