

ADVENT PRAYER & DEVOTIONAL GUIDE 2020

by Stephen G. Derges



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INTRODUCTION

Over the centuries, although Christian denominations have varied in their approach and traditions, the period leading up to Christmas has been associated with people preparing themselves.

Advent derives its name from the Latin word 'adventus' meaning 'arrival' or 'coming'. It's a time of expectation, of waiting in anticipation and getting ready for a momentous event – interesting as the term 'expecting' is invariably used in the context of the birth of a baby.

Whilst initially the focus of Advent was on the birth of Jesus, over the centuries there has been an increasing emphasis on His Second Coming – Jesus' return as King of kings and Lord of lords. We'll be exploring both aspects in this Devotional.

This year the Advent season commences on Sunday 29th November and continues through to Thursday 24th December. However, we're going to include Christmas Day as well – the day we celebrate the birth of Jesus, our Saviour.

Whilst it's implausible that 25th December was the actual date of Jesus' birth – it was most probably early springtime – the primary focus of this Advent Devotional is not so much about the 'when?' but the 'why?' and the 'who?' so we're going to reflect on four primary themes:

- **The Promises**
- **The Purpose**
- **The People**
- **The Presence**

Each day there will be a Bible reading to consider, a time to pause and ponder on the implications and a responsive prayer.

But please don't stop there. My hope is that as we read this Devotional we will take time to look in depth at the Bible passages, consider what the implications are for our lives today and to commit to whatever challenges the Holy Spirit brings to us.

Hopefully, this Devotional will help us understand the height, depth and width of God's love. But more importantly I hope it will spur us into action so that God's Kingdom is extended in our lives and in the lives of those with whom we are involved.

Be richly blessed.

Stephen G. Derges



The PROMISES

Over the next few days, we're going to look at some of the prophecies about Jesus – the promises that have already been fulfilled about His First Coming and those yet to come relating to His Second Coming.

SUNDAY 29TH NOVEMBER 2020: Living in the Gap

Reading: “*But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times*” – **Micah 5:2** (NIVUK)

Pause & Ponder: Micah wrote these words some 750 years before Jesus' birth. He was reflecting on what was happening in Israel and Judah, which was imploding from the effects of ungodly leadership ahead of an impending invasion by the Assyrians, and also looking forward to an eternal kingdom ruler of peace (Micah 5:5). Micah's prophecy balances the requirement for judgment with the prospect of restoration and security.

As mentioned earlier, Advent is about looking back to the First Coming of Jesus but also looking forward to the Second Coming – His return to usher in the culmination of the Father's redemption plan.

We're 'living in the gap' between the birth and the return of Jesus. In the meantime, Micah 6:8 lays out God's desire for us – to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with Him.

As we wait for Jesus' return, how can we validate our faith in everyday scenarios by practising humility, demonstrating compassion and working for justice?

Prayer: Thank You Father, that You see what we're really like. We've been unfaithful to You yet You have shown us mercy and compassion. We are so grateful You made a way for us to be redeemed and restored to relationship with You through Jesus. Amen.

MONDAY 30TH NOVEMBER 2020: He came for us

Reading: “... the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means 'God is with us')” – **Isaiah 7:14** (NLT)

Pause & Ponder: Another prophecy from around 700 years before Jesus was born – one of over 20 Messianic prophecies in the book of Isaiah alone. In fact, Bible scholars claim there are over 360 Old Testament prophecies alluding to the birth, life, death and resurrection of the Messiah. Jesus' birth was no accident, no after-thought, no knee-jerk reaction to sin. It was pre-planned and prophesied long before it occurred.

The sign would be miraculous: a virgin conceiving and giving birth to a Saviour who would be called Immanuel – God is with us. God incarnate comes to earth so we could know and appreciate Him, the immortal, invisible creator of the world.

One of the key differentiators between the Christian faith and other religions is that we don't have to go searching for God – He came to us! But He not only came **to** us, He came **for** us. And now we can come boldly, with confidence, to Him (see Hebrews 4:16) when we're in need.

What are the implications of knowing Jesus came to us and for us and how will that impact our lives today?

Prayer: I'm amazed You provided a pathway between You and me Father. May my life always reflect my gratitude that Jesus is with me and for me. Amen.



TUESDAY 1ST DECEMBER 2020: Bearing Fruit

Reading: *“The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land’”* – **Jeremiah 23:5** (NIVUK)

Pause & Ponder: Here's a further prophesy from a different source. Jeremiah, who lived around 400 years after King David, isn't referring to one of David's immediate natural successors but to Jesus who was born in David's hometown Bethlehem, and whose adopted father, Joseph, was a descendant of David.

LUKE 1:38

“I am the Lord’s servant... may your word to me be fulfilled”



Jeremiah was looking forward to a righteous, wise, holy ruler who would enable us to have a ‘right’ relationship with our Heavenly Father. Another prophecy also connects some of the dots here. Isaiah 11:1 (NIVUK) says, “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.” Jesse was David’s father and Jesus referred to Himself as **“the Vine”** (see John 15:1-8) that will bear fruit.

Take time today to read John 15:1-8 and reflect on Jesus as the Vine and us as the branches. It appears pruning is inevitable – either because we’re not producing fruit, i.e. ineffective, or because we’re capable of yielding an even more productive harvest. Think about what it means for us to **“remain in Him”** and for Jesus to **“remain in us”**.

Prayer: I’m amazed You provided a pathway between You and me Father. May my life always reflect my gratitude that Jesus is with me and for me. Amen.

WEDNESDAY 2ND DECEMBER 2020: Listen and Obey

Reading: “... the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus’” – **Luke 1:31** (NIVUK)

Pause & Ponder: Prior to the birth of Jesus we have a promise made by the angel Gabriel to Mary. None of us could possibly imagine how Mary felt confronted by an angel – it’s probably an understatement to record she was **“greatly troubled”** (verse 29). Gabriel had the same effect on Zechariah in Luke 1:12 when he told him that he and his wife Mary were going to become the parents of John the Baptist.

Although I’ve never, to my knowledge, had an angelic visitation, I have received several life-changing prophecies from people who have brought direction and wisdom from God. And of course, there have been numerous passages of Scripture that have informed and inspired me.

The bottom-line question though is, ‘how willing are we to listen and obey?’ How much does the opinion of other people or the prospect of failure paralyse us? Mary was prepared to step out in faith, whatever the cost – **“I am the Lord’s servant... may your word to me be fulfilled”** (Luke 1:38) – are we?

Prayer: Samuel prayed, **“Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.”**¹ Help me have the same response and when I’ve heard what You have to say, enable me to obey. Amen.

¹ See 1 Samuel 3:10

THURSDAY 3RD DECEMBER 2020: A Forever Home

Reading: “In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” – **John 14:2-3** (ESVUK)

Pause & Ponder: Some theologians claim there are three times as many prophetic references to Jesus’ Second Coming as there were to His First Coming. All 9 New Testament writers mention the Second Coming and there are at least 60 references to His promised return. Jesus Himself prophesied about His return (as recorded in all 4 Gospels). The inference is clear – Jesus is coming back so during Advent we can look forward.

When thinking about moving, people often talk about finding ‘*their forever home*’. Here Jesus promises He is preparing a place for us – an eternal home where we can be with Him forevermore.

Read Daniel 7:13-14 – it’s probably the most explicit Old Testament prophecy about the Second Coming. Jesus references it Himself twice in Matthew 24:30 and Matthew 26:64. Daniel refers to an everlasting kingdom. What are the implications for us now? Are we living our lives in the light of the prospect of eternity?

Prayer: I can’t fully comprehend or imagine what eternity will look like Father but I believe this life on earth is not all there is or will be. Thank You that You have promised nothing can separate me from “***the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.***”² Amen.

² Romans 8:39

FRIDAY 4TH DECEMBER 2020: Courage and Doubt

Reading: “... suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ‘Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven’” – **Acts 1:10-11** (NIVUK)

Pause & Ponder: The 4 parallel accounts of the Great Commission and Ascension (Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; Acts 1) are fascinating. Obviously, there are many similarities but only Luke in Acts recalls the angelic promise of Jesus’ return.

The disciples had witnessed the resurrection and now they are told Jesus will come back. We’re told “***some doubted***” (Matthew 28:17) but my sense is that the revelation of future reunion with Him filled them with the assurance and courage they needed to proclaim the Gospel even though they would face persecution and martyrdom.

For me doubts aren’t a sign of unbelief – doubt presumes at least some kind of faith!

We’re encouraged to “***live by faith, not by sight***” (2 Corinthians 5:7) implying some questions won’t necessarily be answered. But when any questions are resolved it gives

me the reassurance I need and leads me to increased faith and a determination to 'keep on keeping on'.

- In what areas do we need reassurance and confidence today?
- How does the knowledge that we're members of an eternal kingdom help alleviate our doubts?

Prayer: Even though I still have some questions Lord, I'm determined to follow You. My prayer today is, **"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"**³ Amen.

³ Mark 9:24

SATURDAY 5TH DECEMBER 2020: Until He comes again

Reading: "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come" – **Matthew 24:42** (NIVUK)

Pause & Ponder: There have been many people who have attempted to work out when Jesus will return, yet even Jesus Himself said He doesn't know when it will be (Mark 13:32).

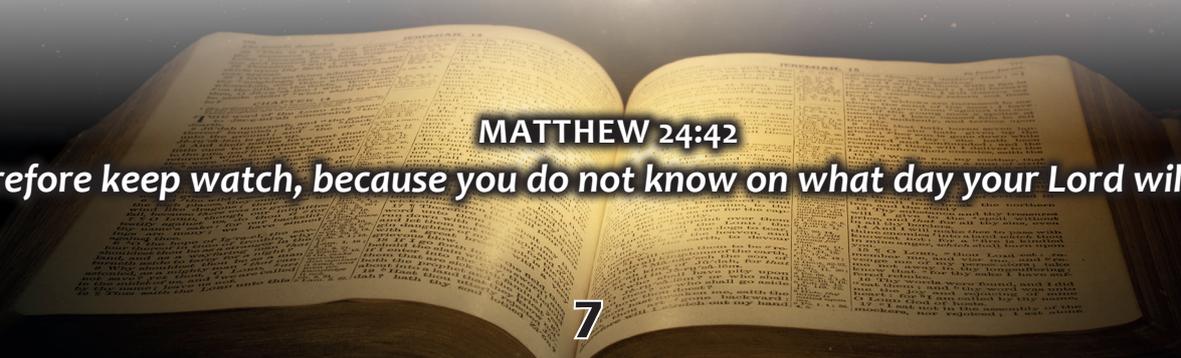
Rather than speculate about dates and times, I encourage you to read and consider the following scriptures:

- **"We are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Saviour"** - Philippians 3:30
- **"For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes"** - 1 Corinthians 11:26
- **"Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again"** - 1 Thessalonians 5:23 (NLT)

And one other thought: is it possible that His return is being delayed to give others the chance to accept Jesus as their Saviour (2 Peter 3:9)?

What part can we and should we be playing? Remember we are His ambassadors (envoys, representatives) on earth – 2 Corinthians 5:20. Am I eagerly waiting for Jesus to return? How does that impact my lifestyle?

Prayer: Help me today Lord to wait patiently and eagerly wait for Your return. May I be an ambassador for You and may my life faithfully proclaim Your love in every situation and to every person I encounter. Amen.



MATTHEW 24:42

"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come"

The PURPOSE

We're moving on from the prophecies and promises to think about the purpose of Jesus' coming to earth. We'll be looking at Jesus' mandate and ministry and the ultimate 'end game'.

SUNDAY 6TH DECEMBER 2020: God loves us – period!

Reading: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” – John 3:16-17 (NIVUK)*

Pause & Ponder: John 3:16 is one of the most well-known verses in the Bible but I've included verse 17 as well because it supplements the reason Jesus came to earth.

God loves everyone – hard though that may be for some of us to comprehend. Martin Luther said: *‘God does not love us because we're valuable, but we are valuable because God loves us.’* Many people have a hard time believing God loves them and that they are precious to Him – they can accept He loves the world but not them as an individual.

But believe it – God loves us – period! Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, intercession for us now, awaited return, is demonstratable proof.

Jesus told Zacchaeus that He had come to **“seek and save the lost”** (Luke 19:10). As John 3:17 says He came to save not condemn the world, so why do many of us doubt God's love?

Prayer: I'm sorry Father that my life doesn't always reflect the grace and mercy You have shown to me. I often see the negative in others, can be quick to criticise and judge and slow to offer reconciliation and forgiveness. Teach me how to show compassion today. Amen.

MONDAY 7TH DECEMBER 2020: Announcing God's Favour

Reading: *“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour” – Luke 4:17-19 (NIVUK)*

Pause & Ponder: Jesus quotes from Isaiah chapters 58 & 61 to announce the purpose of His ministry and mandate – notice the 3 'proclaims' -

- **“Proclaim good news to the poor”**
- **“Proclaim freedom for prisoners”**
- **“Proclaim the year of the Lord's favour”**

Whilst most Bible translations use the word ‘year’, the word could also be translated as ‘time’ or ‘day’. Our broken world isn’t much different to Jesus’ day – often devoid of good news; where people are blinded by avarice and materialism or oppressed through injustice, persecution, prejudice and inequality.

Take a few moments to read Matt 5:13-16 where Jesus talks about being “**salt and light**”.

- What “**good deeds**” can we be involved in?
- How can we bring good news, proclaiming (announcing, declaring, making known) God’s favour and so help to stand against discrimination in all its forms?

Prayer: Holy Spirit, give me the courage today to stand up and speak up where it will be appropriate and helpful. In the relationships where I have influence, let both my words and my actions validate my faith. Amen.



TUESDAY 8TH DECEMBER 2020: Bringing glory to the Father

Reading: “Now my soul is deeply troubled. Should I pray, ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But this is the very reason I came! Father, bring glory to your name” – **John 12:27-28** (NLT)
“I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do.” – **John 17:4** (NIVUK)

Pause & Ponder: These two passages confirm Jesus was fully aware of His purpose – to bring glory and honour to His Father.

Everything Jesus accomplished here on earth points to the Father – the miracles, healings, the mercy He showed and ultimately, as John 17:4 says, His death, resurrection and ascension. Hebrews 1:3 tells us, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being...” and is endorsed by other Scriptures – see John 14:8-9; Colossians 1:15 & 2:9.

But now it’s our turn! Following from yesterday’s thought about being “**salt and light**”, Jesus said in Matthew 5:16 (ESVUK), “...**let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.**” 1 Corinthians 6:20 tells us to “**glorify God in your body**” and 1 Corinthians 10:31 says, “**So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.**”

- How does that happen in practice?
- Hand on heart, can we really claim that everything we will do today will bring glory to God?

Let’s pray about it.

Prayer: This is a tough ask Holy Spirit. Help me to channel my words, my thoughts, my actions so that I fulfil the desire in my heart to bring glory to the Father. Amen.

WEDNESDAY 9TH DECEMBER 2020: Taking the opportunities

Reading: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” –
Luke 19:10 (NIVUK)

“Here’s a word you can take to heart and depend on: Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. I’m proof – Public Sinner Number One – of someone who could never have made it apart from sheer mercy” – **1 Timothy 1:15** (The Message)

Pause & Ponder: The context of the first reading is that of Zacchaeus. I don’t know what motivated him to climb a tree – perhaps it was his stature or perhaps curiosity, as Matthew (Levi) was a tax collector before joining Jesus’ team. Maybe it was a guilty conscious – he says later that “**if I have cheated anybody**”, which probably implies he had.



There are some shared similarities with the second reading referring to Paul – formerly Saul, the chief persecutor of the early Church – both of them:

- Had a divine encounter with Jesus
- Were called by name (see Acts 9:4 in Paul’s case)
- Had chequered histories
- Responded to the call on their lives.

Jesus knew who they were and wanted them to know Him.

The people we meet may not be social outcasts like Zacchaeus or complicit in persecution against others like Paul, but everyone needs the Saviour. Will we **“always be prepared to give an answer”** for the hope we have - see 1 Peter 3:15?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, sometimes I know I miss, or even avoid, opportunities to share Your love with others. Help me to be aware and willing to step out in faith as and when those opportunities occur. Amen.

THURSDAY 10TH DECEMBER 2020: Abundant Life

Reading: *“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full”* – **John 10:10b** (NIVUK)

Pause & Ponder: In this discourse with the Pharisees, Jesus refers to Himself as both the Good Shepherd who lays down His life and the gateway by which people can be saved or more literally ‘*can be kept safe*’.

Jesus isn’t talking about the kind of abundant life most people seek – power, possessions, prosperity, position, prestige – but lasting fulness of life, in other words, eternal life. Jesus defined eternal life in John 17:3, **“Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”**

Secondly, I think Jesus wasn’t talking about the duration of eternal life but more about the quality of relationship we enjoy with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Colossians 3:2-3 encourages us to **“Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.”**

God knows we have material needs (see Matthew 6:25-31; Philippians 4:19) but our primary focus should be to **“seek first his kingdom and his righteousness”** (Matthew 6:33).

Let’s ask the question: have I lost focus on what real life is all about? What steps am I going to take to address it?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, forgive me for the times I have allowed my focus to stray from Your Kingdom purposes. Give me a deeper understanding of the eternal perspective I pray, starting today. Amen.



FRIDAY 11TH DECEMBER 2020: The promised Holy Spirit

Reading: “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth... But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” – **John 17:16-17a & 26** (NIVUK)

Pause & Ponder: In case anyone is wondering, I’ve included these verses because it’s vital we recognise and appreciate Jesus gave the Holy Spirit to His followers (including us) as part of His purpose for coming.

Titus 3:5 says Jesus “**saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit**” and in addition to convicting us of our sin (see John 16:8) the Holy Spirit will:

- Help us and be with us forever
- Guide us into all truth, instructing us and reminding us of Jesus’ teaching
- Become the seal and deposit that guarantees our redemption (Eph 1:13-14)
- Enable us to be effective witnesses (Acts 1:8)
- Empower us with spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4-10) and the spiritual fruit that should characterise our lives (Galatians 5:22-23)
- Intercede on our behalf (Romans 8:26-27)

Here’s today’s challenge: In what areas do I need to depend on the Holy Spirit to work in my life rather than relying on my own abilities?

Prayer: Holy Spirit, I can’t do this on my own. I need Your supernatural power to fill me continuously⁵. Help me to increasingly submit to You today and every day. Amen.

⁵ Ephesians 5:18b





SATURDAY 12TH DECEMBER 2020: The ultimate end game?

Reading: *“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” – Philippians 2:9-11 (NIVUK)*

Pause & Ponder: Reading Philippians 2:1-13 we see Jesus demonstrated the character traits of humility, servanthood and obedience. And we’re exhorted to emulate Jesus – to have the same attitude as He had. We acknowledge Him as Lord as we humble ourselves, sacrificially serve and obey the calling on our lives.

2 Corinthians 3:18 encourages us to **“contemplate the Lord’s glory”**. Other versions talk about ‘beholding’, i.e. looking intently; as we do, we’ll reflect His glory resulting in us **“being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory.”** Note it’s a continuous process, not a one-off occurrence. Becoming more like Jesus is a whole-life event.

And this leads us to the ultimate ‘end game’ scenario – the reason Jesus came to earth – all creation bowing and acknowledging Jesus as Lord with the Father given the glory.

Let’s finish this section on the purpose of Jesus’ coming by considering a few questions:

- In what aspects does my attitude need to be adjusted?
- Where does my character need attention and improvement?
- How can I become more like Jesus?

Prayer: As I meditate on all You have accomplished Lord Jesus, it’s difficult to articulate my gratitude for all You have done. May my life reflect Your amazing love, grace and mercy and may I become more like You, Jesus. Amen.

The PEOPLE

Over this coming week we're going to look at some of characters in the Advent story. Whilst none of us were there at the time, let's use our imagination to reflect on how they responded and reacted to the scenarios they faced. And let's ask the Holy Spirit to impart understanding and inspiration to us as we consider how we can learn from their experiences.

SUNDAY 13TH DECEMBER 2020: Mary – highly favoured

Reading: “God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth... to a virgin... The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, ‘Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.’” – **Luke 1:26-28** (NIVUK)

Pause & Ponder: What an angelic endorsement to receive – that you are **“highly favoured!”** My first thought is why was Mary highly favoured? Was the ‘are’ in the sentence a reflection of her life of faith up to now, or was it somehow prophetic, i.e. you’ve been chosen to be highly favoured?

Whichever it was, the key is that Mary was obviously special and had the qualities required to become Jesus’ mother.

Earlier I referred to Mary’s response in Luke 1:38, **“May it be to me as you have said”**. She seems to be instantly enthusiastic to take on the challenge but did she have time to take in the enormity of what was being asked of her or have any doubts or reservations? Did she consider the ramifications or the potential reaction of her parents?

We don’t know but I doubt an all-knowing God would have selected Mary for this special role if it wasn’t within her capabilities or willingness.

What about us?

- Do we find excuses or potential obstacles when faced with a challenge?
- How likely are we to step out in faith to attempt something we’ve never done before?
- To what extent are we prepared to completely trust the God Who plans everything in meticulous detail?

Prayer: Father, I confess there have been occasions when I have limited Your power and purposes because I’ve been unwilling or afraid. Help me to fully trust You today – whatever You ask me to do in Your name. Amen.

MONDAY 14TH DECEMBER 2020: Mary – the worshipper

Reading: “And Mary said: ‘My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour’” – Luke 1:46-47 (NIVUK)

Pause & Ponder: These two verses are part of ‘*The Magnificat*’ – Mary’s song of praise. She bursts into jubilant song when her cousin Elizabeth (more about her later), filled with the Holy Spirit, recognises Mary is going to have a child. Some translations of verse 37 indicate this was a short time after Gabriel’s visit, e.g. “*a few days later*” (NLT).

As I read the story in verses 30 to 56, I particularly noted two aspects:

- Mary was a worshipper – her immediate response to Elizabeth’s joyful, prophetic exclamation was to give glory to God.
- Mary and Elizabeth had begun to understand the significance of what was happening. Elizabeth refers to Mary being the “*mother of my Lord*” (v43) and Mary declares she “*rejoices in God my Saviour*”.

Confirmation of the Holy Spirit’s call on our lives can come from many different sources. I’ve experienced this personally as people who didn’t know me or who were unaware of my circumstances, have brought prophetic direction, confirmation and encouragement. We’re instructed not to treat prophecies with contempt but to test them and above all, to not quench the Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21). Remember that prophesy should always strengthen, encourage and comfort (see 1 Corinthians 14:3).

And another thought: the instruction about prophesy in 1 Thessalonians 5 comes in the context of “*rejoicing always*”, “*praying continually*” and “*giving thanks in all circumstances*” (verses 16-18) because “*this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.*”

Prayer: Touch my life today Holy Spirit, that I may be thankful in every circumstance and be a worshipper in “Spirit and truth”⁶ Amen.

⁶ John 4:24



TUESDAY 15TH DECEMBER 2020: Joseph – a righteous man

Reading: “Joseph... was a righteous man” – Matthew 1:19 (NLT)

Pause & Ponder: Joseph is often portrayed as a ‘bit part player’ in Nativity shows – he usually leads the donkey, asks the inn-keeper for a room (neither of which actually occur in the Bible) and looks on lovingly as Mary holds the baby. He’s only mentioned by name 16 times in Scripture, yet he is integral to Advent.

Imagine with me the scene. Mary tells Joseph, to whom she’s engaged, that she’s pregnant. Joseph knows the baby’s not his – they haven’t been that intimate – but is he reassured that Mary says her pregnancy was a result of the Holy Spirit? Two mind-blowing revelations! Legitimately, he could expose Mary to public ignominy, resulting in potential capital punishment. But we read he was righteous and planned to divorce Mary quietly and probably leave town in shame and dishonour to avoid the ridicule and gossip. Sometimes life throws us ‘curve balls’. They seem to come out of nowhere and are totally unexpected. It could be slander, cynical comments, false accusations, misunderstood actions or even attempts at ‘one upmanship’.

Living righteously is tough but primarily it all boils down to the choices we make. Joseph doesn’t strike me as someone who would be tempted to retaliate or get his revenge in first.

Here’s a verse for us to consider: **“Be careful to live properly among your unbelieving neighbours. Then even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honourable behaviour”** – 1 Peter 2:12 (NLT). Will that be the way we live today?

Prayer: My desire is to be righteous in my thoughts, actions and the choices I make every day. Help me Lord, I pray. Amen.

WEDNESDAY 16TH DECEMBER 2020: Joseph – Supernatural Intervention

Reading: “When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded” – Matthew 1:24 (NLT)

Pause & Ponder: Joseph was no stranger to supernatural angelic intervention. On four occasions he’s recorded as having dreams, each of which was strategic in terms of Jesus’ future.

- Matthew 1:20-21 an angel reassures Joseph it’s God’s will and plan for Mary to have a baby
- Matthew 2:13-15 he receives angelic instruction to leave for Egypt to protect Jesus from harm
- Matthew 2:19-21 the angel of the Lord informs Joseph it’s safe to return to Israel
- Matthew 2:22-23 another dream guides him to move to Nazareth

Notice that on the first three occasions (and by inference, the fourth), Joseph doesn't delay – he acts decisively and immediately, no hanging about waiting for further confirmation.

How about us? Are we prone to procrastination, unwilling to move in the revealed flow of God's purposes or paralysed by fear when opportunities come our way to demonstrate our faith in action? Let's be like Joseph – be open to hear, trust and obey.

The apostle Peter quoting the prophet Joel at Pentecost says, young men will have visions and old men will dream and sons, daughters and servant, male and female will prophesy (Acts 2:17-18). Let's be open to Holy Spirit inspired revelation.

Prayer: Father, Your Holy Spirit speaks through Your word, the Bible, and through individuals empowered to bring direction and instruction. May I be open to receive Your revealed truth and guidance. Amen.



THURSDAY 17TH DECEMBER 2020: Zechariah & Elizabeth – patiently waiting

Reading: “But the angel said, “Don’t be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John”” – **Luke 1:13** (NLT)

Pause & Ponder: Whilst unusual, it wasn’t unique to learn you’re going to become a parent via an angelic visitation – it happened for Abram and Sarah, Samson’s parents, Mary and Joseph – now Zechariah.

Taking his turn as a priest in the Temple, an angel appears with the news he’s going to become a father. Verses 6 & 7 tells us both he and his wife Elizabeth were righteous and blameless before God, had been praying, and no doubt patiently waiting, for a child, but were now “**very old**”. Zechariah, stunned, fearful and hesitant to believe the angel, is struck dumb, yet on his return home, Elizabeth becomes pregnant.

The son that is born is no ordinary child – he’s filled with the Holy Spirit before birth, is empowered with the attributes of Old Testament prophet Elijah and becomes John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus calling people to repentance.

We’ve already reflected that when Mary visited her, the baby leaped in Elizabeth’s womb (verses 41 & 44), and the joyful Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit.

A couple of thoughts to consider:

- After years, faithfully praying, Zechariah seems unprepared and hesitant when told his prayers were going to be answered. Has that been our experience?
- Elizabeth was filled with joy at Mary’s pregnancy. How do we react when other people are blessed?

Prayer: Sometimes I can be disappointed when someone else’s prayers are answered when mine seem unfulfilled. Help me to be gracious and generous when others are blessed and to persist in faithfully bringing my requests to You. Amen.

FRIDAY 18TH DECEMBER 2020: Simeon – waiting and waiting

Reading: “Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah” – **Luke 2:25-26** (NIVUK)

Pause & Ponder: I realise this is part of the post-Nativity narrative, but both Simeon and Anna (we’ll look at her tomorrow) were in action ahead of Advent. Take a moment to read Luke 2:22-40 to understand the context.

It’s interesting to note the connection between righteousness and being led by the Holy Spirit – look back over the past few days! Simeon is described as both “**righteous and devout**” – morally upright and totally committed – and aware of the Holy Spirit’s guidance.

He was holding on to a promise, revealed to him by the Holy Spirit – that he wouldn't die until he saw the Messiah, so he was waiting expectantly. Then one day, he was **“moved by the Holy Spirit”** (Luke 2:27). Simeon was in the right place at the right time because he was in tune with the Holy Spirit.

Advent is about waiting, patiently and eagerly, ready for action.

- Could we be described as righteous and devout? If so, how do those attributes play out in our daily lives?
- Are we waiting expectantly and ready to share our faith as and when opportunities come along?
- How dependent are we on the Holy Spirit's leading and direction?

Prayer: If there are areas in my life where I need to be more righteous or devout, I submit to You Holy Spirit, so that I can be ready to fulfil Your purposes. Amen.

SATURDAY 19TH DECEMBER 2020: Anna - seeing what others don't see

Reading: *“She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying”*
– Luke 2:37 (NIVUK)

Pause & Ponder: In just 3 verses we have a story of an 84-year old widow (no mean feat in that day and age) who had made a life-long commitment to serve and worship God, devoting herself to prayer and fasting. Whilst we know little of her ‘back story’, Anna is recognised as a prophet – someone with divine insight. The Greek here suggests intuition and perception – Anna ‘saw’ what was hidden to others. Could that have been an outcome of her dedication to worship, fasting and prayer?

Simeon had just blessed the family and spoken prophetically over Mary (verses 34 & 35) and then Anna confirms that Jesus was the one Israel had been waiting for – to everyone who was there. She was an evangelist too!

Imagine how many children Anna must have seen attending the purification ceremony during her many years serving in the Temple. Yet she picks out this 40-day old boy who was being presented to the Lord – she saw something others didn't see.

Four people – Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon and now Anna – of advanced years. None of them were particularly famous but they were faithful.

We're never too old to be useful in God's Kingdom. With age comes experience – which we can pass on to others. We stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us and who have helped us grow in knowledge and understanding. How can we do the same for the next generation?

Prayer: Open my eyes Lord to see what You see and help me to equip others with the lessons I've learned to enable Your Kingdom to advance. Amen.

The PRESENCE

We're heading to the culmination of this Advent period. As we do so let's focus on how the presence of the Lord Jesus in our lives impacts us and those around us.

SUNDAY 20TH DECEMBER 2020: Overcoming temptation

Reading: *"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth"* – John 1:14 (NIVUK)

Pause & Ponder: John describes Jesus as the **"Word"** who **"was God"** and **"with God"**. Yet as we read in Philippians 2:5-8, Jesus took on humanity and humbly, obediently died on the Cross.

As a man, Jesus was tempted yet didn't capitulate to sin (Hebrews 4:15) so He can understand and empathise with us. The temptations He faced in the wilderness following His baptism (see Matthew 4 and Luke 4) illustrate three categories of struggle that confront us and call into question our attitude to:

- **Physical provision:** turning stones into bread
- **Protection:** jumping off the Temple pinnacle
- **Power, Prestige and Pride:** being offered the kingdoms of the world.

Just like Jesus, we always have a choice. We can give in to temptation or fight it by standing on God's Word, both the Bible and our relationship with Jesus – the Word made flesh, Immanuel, God with us.

So, here's a promise to claim – ***"The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure"*** – 1 Corinthians 10:13 (NLT).

Prayer: Thank You Lord Jesus that You know me through and through. Help me to overcome temptation by relying on Your strength at work in me. Amen.

MONDAY 21TH DECEMBER 2020: Recognising His presence with us

Reading: *"As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognising him"* – Luke 24:15-16 (NIVUK)

Pause & Ponder: It may seem strange to include the Emmaus Road account in an Advent Devotional but please take a moment to read the passage.

Cleopas plus one, most probably his wife Mary, are walking home, no doubt heart-broken

and confused. They'd witnessed the crucifixion but they couldn't comprehend why there was no trace of Jesus' body in the tomb. Suddenly someone they don't recognise joins them and engages them in an Old Testament Bible Study. But it's not until later, after inviting the stranger in for a meal, and He breaks the bread, that they recognise it's Jesus – risen and alive.

- How often do we 'miss' Jesus' presence with us in the frenetic hurly-burly of life?
- Are we willing as The Message Version of Romans 12: 1 says to **“Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering”**?
- Can we explain our faith simply and relevantly to others, even if we still have unanswered questions?
- Would we be prepared to offer hospitality to strangers? Hebrews 13:2 (NLT) has an interesting take on this.

Here's a suggestion: take a 'time-out' at regular intervals during the day. It will enable us to reset our minds and acknowledge Jesus' presence is with us wherever we are.

Prayer: I want to praise You Lord that Psalm 139:7-10 reminds me that nowhere is out of Your sight. Thank You that are always with me. Amen.



TUESDAY 22ND DECEMBER 2020: We are not alone

Reading: *“I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming back...you will know absolutely that I’m in my Father, and you’re in me, and I’m in you” - John 14:18-20 (The Message)*

Pause & Ponder: I said earlier that we’re living in the gap between the First and Second Coming. We can’t physically see Jesus now but He promised to impart His Holy Spirit to us so we’re never alone.

Note the sequence in these verses: Jesus is **in** the Father; we are **in** Jesus and He is **in** us. In John 14:16-17, Jesus says the Spirit will be with us forever and lives with us and in us. Isn’t that amazing – we have the Trinity with us.

John 17:20-25 re-emphasises this truth – Jesus and the Father are one and we’re included in that unity. The outcome is that the world will know what true love and unity is.

As the world faces the implications of Covid-19, many have felt isolated, abandoned, even orphaned, when parents and loved ones have succumbed to this terrible disease.

The unity talked about in these two passages is both vertical and horizontal. We aren’t meant to be independent of God or one another but in relationship with Him and each other.

The first stanza of Psalm 68:6 says, **“God sets the lonely in families”**. One of our God-given challenges is to help alleviate loneliness and isolation, offer practical friendship to those needing reassurance or encouragement and to make ourselves available as necessary. Pray about it!

Prayer: Because I am in You and You are in Me, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, help me be aware of those in need that I can support and help today. Amen.

WEDNESDAY 23RD DECEMBER 2020: New Creations in Christ

Reading: *“I have been crucified with Christ and I know longer live, but Christ lives in me” - Galatians 2:20a (NIVUK)*

Pause & Ponder: Here’s another verse that asserts Jesus lives in us – just in case we’ve not got the message that His presence is with us. It’s also a reminder that our lives are now not our own.

2 Corinthians 5:17 asserts **“in Christ”** we become **“new creations”** – our old life has gone and new life has commenced. His presence in us enables us to become both the **ministry** and the **message** of reconciliation (see verses 18 and 19) and to act as His ambassadors.

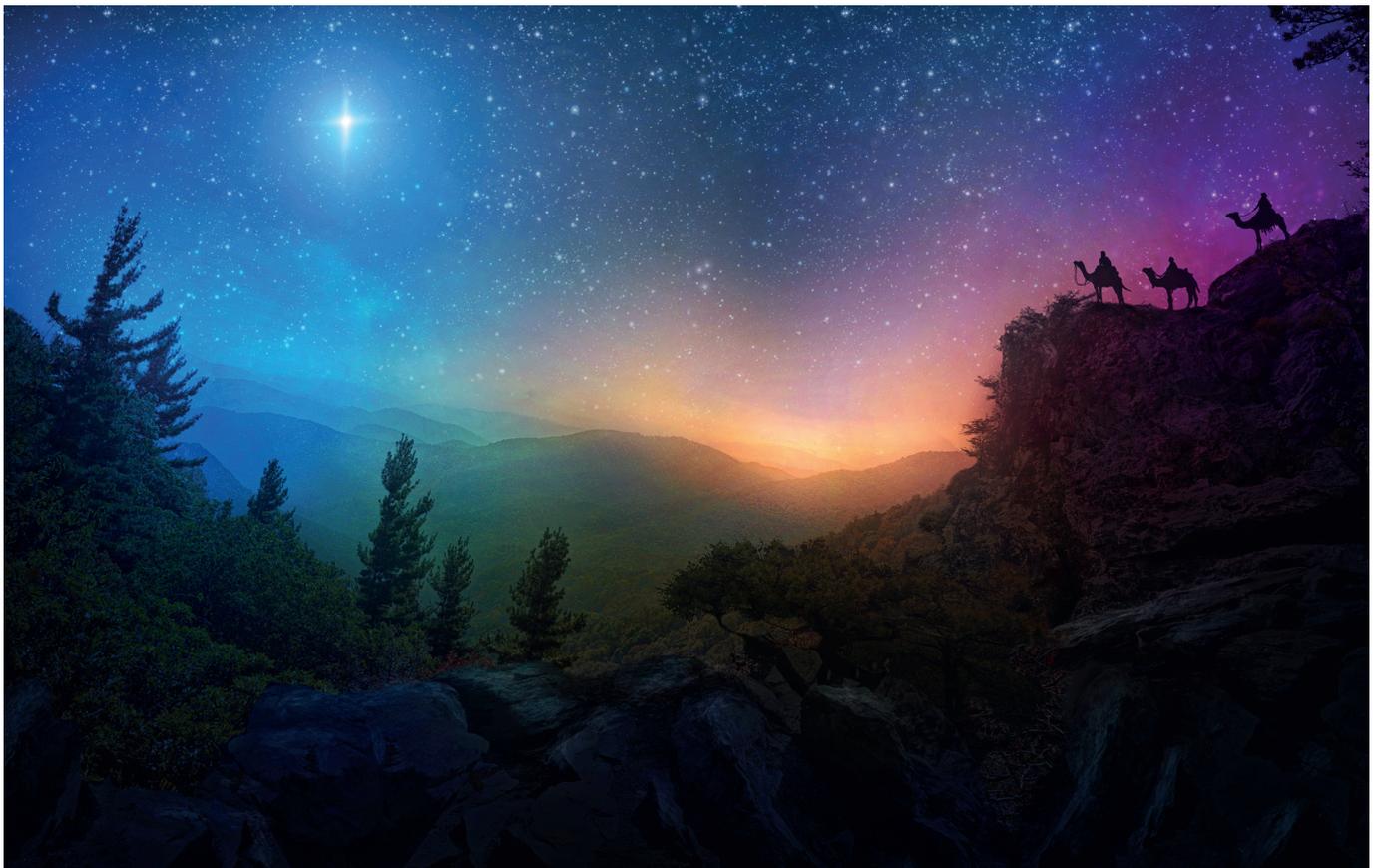
Our commission as we wait for the return of Jesus is to represent Him in every situation and location in which we find ourselves. Each day we have the privilege of surrendering our lives to His purposes knowing we can depend on the promise He will never leave us or abandon us (see Hebrews 13:5).

Ephesians 2:10 (NLT) says, **“For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.”**

Some questions for us:

- God has created me for a purpose – have I determined what the **“good things”** are that He has called me to achieve?
- Who would I trust to help me identify or pursue God’s will for my life?
- Am I assured and confident I am **“God’s masterpiece”**? If not, why?

Prayer: Lord, I want to wholeheartedly follow and serve You. Help me appreciate You are with me and in me today. Amen.



THURSDAY 24TH DECEMBER 2020: He is with us - always

Reading: *“And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age”* – **Matthew 28:20b** (NLT)

Pause & Ponder: Whilst there is some debate over what Jesus meant by **“end of the age”**, it’s the preceding phrase, **“I am with you always”**, that’s pivotal for me, especially in the context of the Great Commission.

None of us is immune to difficulties, disappointments, trauma, tragedy and a host of other circumstances that result in heartbreak or suffering. Because we’re all unique, our approach to these setbacks and trials will be different – there is no *‘one size fits all’* approach.

Ultimately though there are some serious questions to face:

- Where is my security? Do I really trust my Heavenly Father that He knows and cares for me?
- Am I confident that what He has started in my life will be achieved – see Philippians 1:6?
- How is what I may be experiencing shaping my character, my values, my outlook, my service, my maturity?
- Am I being transformed to become more like Jesus through this process, painful though it may be?

Whilst we wait for the day Jesus will return, remember Advent also includes the Second Coming, we have been given the task of helping people to become disciples, equipping them to continue the work of sharing the good news of salvation through Jesus.

It's vital we know Jesus is always with us and that His Holy Spirit will assist us complete our assignment.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, Your Word declares that all things, even the difficulties we may face, work together for our benefit when we love You and are in line with Your will for us⁷. Help me to trust You fully and to complete the work You prepared for me⁸. Amen.

⁷ Romans 8:28 ⁸ Ephesians 2:10





FRIDAY 25TH DECEMBER 2020: Christmas Day

Reading: “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.” – **Luke 2:6-7** (NIVUK)

Pause & Ponder: It was an inauspicious, almost anonymous start. No pomp and ceremony, no media circus or paparazzi – even for a royal baby, remember Joseph was a descendant of King David. There may have been a cast of thousands of angels, but that was out of town, so the only witnesses were a few shepherds although later, wise men would come to pay homage.

Jesus may have been born in relative obscurity yet His birth changed the course of history and eternity and demands a response from all of us.

Some people have reflected Jesus to have been a good man who helped people; a great orator and people motivator; an agitator or even a political activist; or a crutch for weak people to lean on. Alternatively, we can see Him as Bible portrays Him – the incarnate Son of God Who will one day return.

In one sense the waiting is over – but in another sense the waiting continues. James 5:7 encourages us, “**Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming**”. We may not know when it will be but what we do know is that it will be a “**great and glorious day**” (Acts 2:20).

In the meantime, keep watching, keep praying, keep serving, keep sharing, keep becoming more like Jesus, keep believing!

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want to thank You, on this great and glorious day, that You became Immanuel – God with us – and that You are still with us now as we wait patiently for another great and glorious day, when You return. In the meantime, may my life bring You honour and glory I pray. Amen.

EPILOGUE

Thank you so much for journeying with me through this Advent period – I trust these brief reflections will have been of benefit and a blessing.

The challenge for all of us is to live out our faith in such a way that others will come to know Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour and become His disciples, continuously filled with the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father.

2 Peter 3-11 is a passage that means a great deal to me:

- ▶ We have divine power providing us with everything we need to live a godly life.
- ▶ We have very great and precious promises to enable us to participate in the divine nature.
- ▶ When we make every effort to add – in increasing measure – to our faith the qualities of goodness; knowledge; self-control; perseverance; godliness; mutual affection and love, we will become more effective and productive in our knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- ▶ As we confirm our calling and election, we will not stumble and will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Patiently waiting involves persistence and perseverance – let's *'hang on in there'*, secure in our faith and the confident hope that Jesus is coming again.

Stephen Derges was formerly the Pastor of Bridgnorth Baptist Church in Shropshire and is now a Trustee and member of the Leadership Team of an Independent, Evangelical church in Devon.

He regularly writes for Christian publications and has authored a series of books, *"Bitesize Beliefs"*, and other devotionals. Stephen and his wife, Rosalyn, are both accredited Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® practitioners and speak at conferences and other events.

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