



WHERE LIFE & PURPOSE CONNECT

## **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 24, 2023**

### **Weekly Prayer**

God of hope and light, your good news has been announced to the world, the great night of Jesus' birth. You have given us a new chance, a reminder of your continual love for us. Guide our thoughts and our actions. Heal and restore us. For we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

### **Monday, December 25, Christmas Day**

#### **Scripture: Luke 2:1-7**

In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.

#### **Observation**

On Christmas day, we reflect on the birth of the child who showed us God's kind of power—the power of selfless love. For Jesus to be born in a parking garage (that's what a stable was), lying in a bed of straw where the animals ate, was an amazing revelation of God's love for us. The apostle Paul wrote that Jesus didn't cling to his status as God, but "emptied himself...by becoming like human beings" (Philippians 2:6-7). The long-awaited Savior arrived in a humble, quiet way few would have predicted.

#### **Application**

The King of kings was born to a young couple whose income placed them on the lowest rung of society, and he was born homeless. In Jesus' birthplace, we see that the God of the universe identifies with the lowly. Spiritually, we are all poor and homeless without God. How can grasping the deeper meaning(s) of Jesus' birth open your heart to praise God, and to love and show more compassion for all the people Jesus came to set free?

## **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, your birth was just the start of an amazing story that is reshaping and uplifting my life today. Be born anew in my heart this Christmas day. Amen.

## **Tuesday, December 26**

### **Scripture: Luke 2:8-20**

Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors." When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened. Let's confirm what the Lord has revealed to us." They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully. The shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told.

### **Observation**

History tells us that when Rome crowned an emperor, they gathered an audience of nobles, gave the new emperor the title "Savior" (among others), had choirs sing the new ruler's praise, and declared the emperor divine. Luke structured his story to suggest that at Jesus' birth the same scenario took place—audience (shepherds), Savior, choir (angels), divinity on earth. The point was that from his birth Jesus, not Caesar, was the true Savior, King and God.

### **Application**

We see nothing unusual about the shepherds in manger scenes, Christmas pageants and paintings. But in Jesus' day, few even noted shepherds, much less valued them. They were obscure (like Mary and Joseph). Most priests shunned them because, caring for flocks, they couldn't observe "holiness" rituals. Yet after hearing the angels, the shepherds said, "Let's go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened." What moves you to "go right now" to learn more about God's purposes, especially as revealed in Jesus?

## **Prayer**

Lord God, December 26 has become a day for returning gifts. I don't ever want to "return" your gift of yourself in Jesus. Help me keep growing a life in harmony with my Savior's teachings. Amen.

**Wednesday, December 27**

**Scripture: John 1:1-8, 15**

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

The Word was with God in the beginning.  
Everything came into being through the Word,  
and without the Word  
nothing came into being.

What came into being  
through the Word was life,  
and the life was the light for all people.

The light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light.

A man named John was sent from God. He came as a witness to testify concerning the light, so that through him everyone would believe in the light. He himself wasn't the light, but his mission was to testify concerning the light.

John testified about him, crying out, "This is the one of whom I said, 'He who comes after me is greater than me because he existed before me.'"

**Observation**

The "man named John" (verse 6) was not this gospel's writer, but John the Baptist, the preacher/prophet we've studied this Advent. In varied places, the Bible saw the good versus evil conflict as "light" and "darkness." The gospel writer saw the "light" as a person. The Jesus he had seen/heard/known, he said, was the light shining in the world's darkness. Jesus, the life and light, could (and can) deliver us from our world's and our own darkness.

**Application**

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light" wasn't just poetry—it's elementary physics. As we saw in our Christmas Eve services, a large room of darkness does not put out the light of one small candle that comes into the room. When has it felt to you as though darkness was trying to put out God's light in your life? How do spiritual practices like worship, Bible study and service to others help to keep any kind of inner or outer darkness from putting out God's light in you?

**Prayer**

Lord Jesus, you didn't have to go online to find a Christmas gift for me. You shined the life-giving light of your love and grace into my life, and you keep doing it. Thank you. Amen.

**Thursday, December 28**

**Scripture: John 1:19-28; Matthew 3:13-17**

This is John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him, "Who are you?" John confessed (he didn't deny but confessed), "I'm not the Christ." They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" John said, "I'm not." "Are you the prophet?" John answered, "No." They asked, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" John replied,

*"I am a voice crying out in the wilderness,  
Make the Lord's path straight  
just as the prophet Isaiah said."*

Those sent by the Pharisees asked, "Why do you baptize if you aren't the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered, "I baptize with water. Someone greater stands among you, whom you don't recognize. He comes after me, but I'm not worthy to untie his sandal straps." This encounter took place across the Jordan in Bethany where John was baptizing.

At that time Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan River so that John would baptize him. John tried to stop him and said, "I need to be baptized by you, yet you come to me?" Jesus answered, "Allow me to be baptized now. This is necessary to fulfill all righteousness." So John agreed to baptize Jesus. When Jesus was baptized, he immediately came up out of the water. Heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and resting on him. A voice from heaven said, "This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him."

### **Observation**

John the gospel writer said John the Baptist's fiery preaching of repentance moved the authorities to send messengers to ask if he claimed to be the Messiah. John humbly said he was only carrying out Isaiah 40:3. His task, he said, was to point people to "someone greater." Matthew added that John (who called people to repent and baptized them when they did) tried to refuse to baptize Jesus, but Jesus modeled baptism for us. These passages give us a clearer view of the deep humility with which John the Baptist worked to prepare the way for Jesus.

### **Application**

John's baptism was a physical symbol of inner washing. People came tired and defiled, but God washed them clean, and gave them a fresh start. Jesus did not need that kind of baptism—he was sinless. Yet he asked John to baptize him anyway. Jesus humbly identified with our humanity, as he would do even more fully on the cross (2 Corinthians 5:14-21, Hebrews 2:11-18). What does that tell you about how much he values you?

## **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, thank you for your willingness to identify with the human family, with me. Your humility opened the way for me, with all my flaws, to see myself as part of your heavenly family. Amen.

## **Friday, December 29**

### **Scripture: John 1:29-34**

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one about whom I said, 'He who comes after me is really greater than me because he existed before me.' Even I didn't recognize him, but I came baptizing with water so that he might be made known to Israel." John testified, "I saw the Spirit coming down from heaven like a dove, and it rested on him. Even I didn't recognize him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'The one on whom you see the Spirit coming down and resting is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and testified that this one is God's Son."

### **Observation**

In this remarkable passage, John the Baptist first told the people listening to him that Jesus was "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." That title was a clear signal that Jesus' self-giving life and death would fulfill all the symbolism of Israel's long-standing system of sacrifices. And John had even more to say: "I have seen and testified that this one is God's Son."

### **Application**

The way Mark structured his gospel story, no one called Jesus God's Son until a Roman centurion who had watched him die on the cross said it (Mark 15:39). Twenty or thirty years later, John's gospel wove that crucial Christian belief throughout his very first chapter. On what basis did John the Baptist reach that belief? What leads you to believe and testify that Jesus "is God's Son"?

## **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, out of your greatness as the Son of God, you took on the role of the self-giving Lamb of God. Teach me what true greatness means in your kingdom and help me become willing to live your kind of great life. Amen.

## **Saturday, December 30**

### **Scripture: Luke 3:19-20**

But Herod the ruler had been criticized harshly by John because of Herodias, Herod's brother's wife, and because of all the evil he had done. He added this to the list of his evil deeds: he locked John up in prison.

**Observation**

To human eyes, Herod Antipas (a son of the Herod the Great who killed infants in Bethlehem) may have looked strong when he jailed John the Baptist. But ambitious, malicious Herodias seems to have used him. When Antipas traveled to Rome in c. A.D. 29, he visited his brother Herod (Philip), who apparently lived in one of the coastal cities of Palestine. While there he fell in love with his niece Herodias, who was also his brother's wife. She agreed to marry Antipas when he returned from Rome provided that he divorce his first wife. Get it? His own niece ditched his half-brother to marry Antipas, who had a higher political title—and he went along with her scheme. John the Baptist boldly decried that kind of royal depravity, and Herodias hated him for it.

**Application**

The Jewish historian Josephus says that Antipas imprisoned John in his Perea fortress Machaerus, which included a dungeon. (Perea was on the east side of the Jordan.) As messengers of God, prophets were supposed to have immunity to speak freely; the entire Mediterranean world regarded the abuse of messengers or heralds as a terrible offense. Herod Antipas confined the prophet of open wilderness spaces in what was likely a cramped, musty dungeon. Who looked like the powerful winner then? Today we remember John the Baptist with respect, and Antipas with contempt. In what ways does a longer-term view shift your sense of who was stronger?

**Prayer**

Lord Jesus, if I have any of Antipas' human hunger for earthly power, help me to replace it with John the Baptist's courageous moral compass. Amen.