

Immanuel,
God with us
Advent | 2021

Welcome to your 2021 Advent Reader

As we approach Christmas and the end of another year, each of us will have different memories and reflections on a year gone by: for some, moments of joy; for others, sadness and loss; for most, a mixture of both.

Amidst all the activity that accompanies every Christmas, why stop and reflect? Why read the Bible, and its two thousand year old story of a child born in Bethlehem? One of the great convictions of Christians is that through the Bible, God speaks to us. In a wonderful and mysterious way, these stories of long ago speak into our stories. And in the story of Jesus, Christians believe we have the greatest story of all.

Despite our different experiences of this year past, our different struggles and joys, our different contexts, the Bible has something to say to each of us through the story of Jesus. As we read through this booklet, perhaps in an evening as we sit warming ourselves in front of a fire, or in a coffee shop as we grab five minutes before meeting a friend, God will come near to speak to us.

One of the names given to Jesus in the Hebrew language of the Old Testament is "Immanuel". It means "God with us". In the readings contained in this booklet, we'll be thinking about that, and the difference it makes in our lives to know that God is not far away, but near. God is with us.

Whatever this year has been like for us, and whatever we face ahead in 2022, may we all experience the wonder of God coming near to us again this Christmas through Jesus, speaking words of life and hope into our lives.



Top Tips for Daily Bible Reading

In this booklet you will find a set of daily Bible readings. One set of readings, entitled, "Advent" run from 6th-25th December, and reflect upon the coming of Jesus. Our readings from 26th-31st December are entitled, "Benediction". A benediction is a short prayer for blessing, and these readings encourage us to seek God's help and blessing as we prepare for 2022.

Each day there is a Bible reading, a short reflection, and a prayer. Perhaps you've never read the Bible, or never read it every day.

Many of us may already have a daily Bible reading habit. For others of us, this will be a new thing. Forming new routines takes time. For some, morning is best, before the distractions and activity of the day take hold. For others, evening provides the space we need after busy days. Try and pick a time and stick to it. Similarly, some people find reading in the same place each day helpful: a favourite chair, a seat next to a window, a place we can close the door and be still. For others, daily readings come alive with variety: try reading outside in a park or by a river, or in a place where we can see the sun rise or set.

Whenever and wherever we are reading, we are not alone as we read. God the Holy Spirit is with us to open God's word that we may hear his voice in a noisy world. As we read, we join thousands of people all across the nation reading the same daily readings and reflections. May we know that joy of joining with the church across Scotland, even as we are apart.

But perhaps the most important thing is that we take a moment before we read and simply pray, "Lord, please speak to me today through your living Word. That's a prayer God delights to answer!

Advent

The word "Advent" comes from a Latin word, and it means "coming". Advent is a season when Christians remember the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. As we read these reflections, may we be encouraged with the good news that, through Jesus, God is with us.



Monday 6th December, Isaiah 9:1-2

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honour Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan –

² The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

A Dawning Light

Amidst this winter darkness, who doesn't long for the light?

Isaiah promises much: no more gloom, no more distress, light for those living in deep darkness. Christians have always read these words as pointing to Jesus.

The light, he says, will come from an unexpected place: Galilee, which was "up north" in Israel, with a reputation for being a bit difficult. Yet this was where Jesus would grow up and begin his public ministry.

Perhaps we know the Christmas story well. Maybe it is just a hazy memory from childhood. There's always the danger that we think we know the story of Jesus' birth and therefore don't expect much reading it again.

What if this year, we raised our expectations? What if this Christmas we expected the light to make a difference in the darkness? What if we read these Bible stories not simply as a window to past events, but also allowed them to be a gateway to experiencing God's presence with us today?

Amidst the winter darkness, the Lord Jesus Christ comes again to us this Christmas, bringing hope and a dawning light. What might happen if we truly believed this?

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus Christ, thank you that you bring light to our darkness. Thank you that you know completely the darkness we are passing through, and that through you there is the promise of an end to gloom and distress. Thank you that we are not alone in the darkness and that because you came there is light. Thank you that the light of your presence is greater than any darkness we face. Help us to put our hope in you today. **Amen**



Tuesday 7th December, Isaiah 7:14

¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

God With Us

Over these past two years we have become aware of new signs appearing in streets, shops and other public places telling us what we can and cannot do. However, in the Bible signs are all about what God is going to do for us. When God gives a sign, he does so as a guarantee of a promise.

Fast forward seven hundred years from Isaiah, and the sign of a virgin conceiving and having a son comes true in the birth of Jesus to Mary. With the birth of Jesus, God fulfils the extraordinary promise of "Immanuel" - "God with us".

Here is the heart of the story of Christmas, the amazing truth that in Jesus, God came as a human being. Theologians use the word incarnation, meaning God became flesh. God has come near and is with us in our joys and our sorrows, in our hunger and our plenty, in every aspect of life.

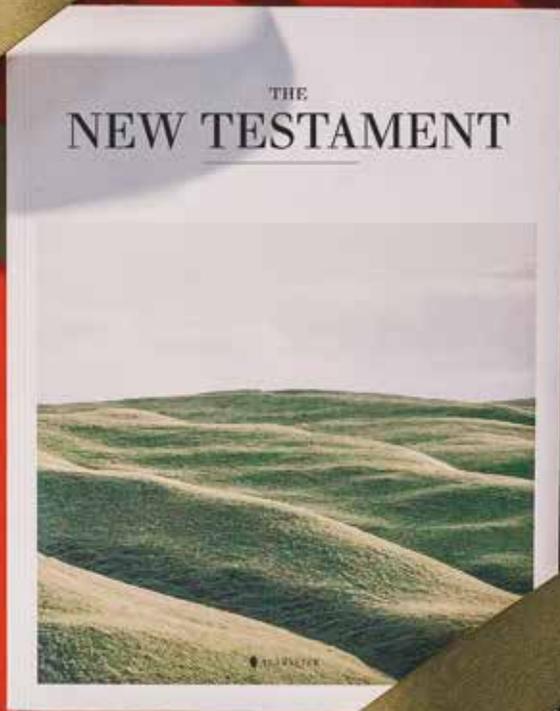
What difference would it make today if we knew God was with us? How would our days be transformed if we experienced God's presence? Today, will we ask God to make his presence known to us?

Prayer

Our loving heavenly Father, thank you for every evidence of the truth that you are with us. Thank you for the signs all around us that speak of your goodness, your grace, and your kindness. Help us to believe that you are with us. Please come near today that we might be transformed by your life-giving presence. **Amen**

God has
come near and
is with us
...in our joys
and our sorrows





Wednesday 8th December, Isaiah 9:3-6

- ³ You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder.
- ⁴ For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.
- ⁵ Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.
- ⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
- ⁷ Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and for ever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

Good News, and Lots of it

Have we got to that point yet when we just don't want to pick up a paper, switch on the telly, or surf the internet, because we know it's just going to be more bad news?

This passage is, by contrast, full of good news which brings joy to those who hear it (v3). It promises an end to oppression, an end to war (v4). Sometimes we wonder if such things are possible.

But God speaks through Isaiah of a child to be born who will accomplish all this. A child who is a gift to the nations (v6), whose government and kingdom will last forever and who will bring everlasting peace. A ruler who will bring justice and do what is right (v7).

This child, whom the New Testament will reveal is Jesus, offers hope for the world. In a world full of bad news, where many are without hope, the Bible offers a hopeful vision of a world transformed through Jesus. What is it we are hoping for this Christmas? As we look ahead to another New Year, are we full of hope for the world? And in what, or in whom, is our hope?

Prayer

Dear God, thank you that you love this world and everyone in it. Thank you that you have not abandoned this planet but are working through Jesus to put everything right. Our world needs hope this Christmas. Help us to understand a little bit more this Christmas about the hope that Jesus brings. Help us to put our faith and our hope in him. **Amen.**



Thursday 9th December, Isaiah 40:1-5

- ¹ Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.
³ A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
⁴ Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.
⁵ And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

Comfort and Tenderness

One of the hardest parts of these past two years has been being apart from those we love. The "way" to special family gatherings and regular social engagements has been closed.

But God is not bound by any restrictions. In this passage, Isaiah pictures God removing all the barriers that stand in the way of his coming: barren deserts, deep valleys, high mountains, rough and rugged ground. God levels them all in his desire to come to us.

Fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy, John the Baptist appeared in the desert, calling people back to God, and proclaiming that God was on his way to them. And then Jesus began his public ministry.

And what is it that God wants to say? "Comfort my people...speak tenderly...her sin has been paid for" (v1-2).

What is our view of God? Is he some distant, angry being who longs to punish us? Or is he the God who, in love, sent his son Jesus to die for us, that we might be forgiven? What sort of welcome are we preparing to give him this Christmas?

Prayer

Our loving heavenly Father, thank you that you are a God of compassion and tenderness. Thank you that even when our backs are turned against you and we are actively walking away, you pursue us still because of your astonishing grace. We know that we have done wrong. Thank you that through Jesus, you have provided a way for us to be forgiven. Help us today to receive and welcome you into our lives. **Amen**

Friday 10th December, Micah 5:2

- '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.'

The God of Small Things

Our world has always tended to value the big and the visible over the small and the unseen. Yet throughout the Bible, small unseen things are always valued in the purposes of God.

In this seemingly insignificant place, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Israel placed great hope. Micah's words were understood to be speaking of the promised Messiah, the saviour whom God would send to rescue them. While this Messiah has very human roots, he would also have divine origins, "from of old, from ancient times". Somehow both human and God.

It is to this verse in Micah the religious leaders point King Herod when the Wise Men from the East show up looking for the new king who has been born (Matthew 2:1-12). Everybody knew that Bethlehem was to be the birthplace of the Messiah.

Do we feel small, insignificant, unseen today? Everyone was waiting for and expecting the Messiah. Yet Jesus was born right under their noses, and many missed it. Are we waiting for and expecting Jesus? Could it be that he is here, working, right under our noses in the small unseen details of our lives? This Christmas let's not miss the moment of Christ's coming.

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for your coming to us. Thank you that you came as a human being, yet you are God. Thank you that you are present and working in this world, even though, so often, we do not see it. Help us today to trust that in the small and unseen places of our lives and our world you are at work. Thank you that you are present with us to save. Give us faith, dear Lord, to see you. **Amen.**



Saturday 11th December, Luke 1:5-11

- ⁵ In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.
- ⁶ Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.
- ⁷ But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.
- ⁸ Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God,
- ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.
- ¹⁰ And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.
- ¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense

Waiting for a Miracle

The Christmas story features two miraculous births. We will read about the miracle of Jesus' birth tomorrow. But today, we focus on Zechariah and Elizabeth. We are told they are both very old and that Elizabeth was not able to conceive. The Bible does not dodge painful things, but instead reflects the reality of life.

Zechariah, this faithful servant of God, is chosen to go into the temple of the Lord. As he goes into the presence of God in the temple, an angel appears. This angel will announce that their prayers have been answered: Elizabeth is going to give birth to a son, and they are to call him John. It's a very human thing that Zechariah, at first, doubts this is possible. After all, it would take a miracle.

Perhaps like Zechariah and Elizabeth we are waiting for a miracle this Christmas; something we long for that seems quite impossible. Maybe like Zechariah, even an angel turning up and talking to us won't make us believe.

What is it we are waiting and longing for this Christmas? Do we believe in a God of miracles who is concerned with our impossible circumstances?

Prayer

Our loving heavenly Father, thank you for your Word. Thank you that you speak into all the circumstances of our lives. Thank you for the miracle you worked in the lives of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Thank you that you are a God who speaks to us still, a promise making, miracle working God. Help us to trust you, particularly with those things in our lives that are painful. Give us faith to believe that you a God of miracles. **Amen**

Sunday 12th December, Luke 1:26-33

- ²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee,
- ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.
- ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.'
- ²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.
- ³⁰ But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God.
- ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.
- ³² He will be great and will be called the on of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David,
- ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants for ever; his kingdom will never end.'

God is on his Way

The announcement that God is coming to earth in human form is not made in Jerusalem, the capital city, or to a royal court. Instead, the angel Gabriel appears to a teenager, Mary, in Nazareth a small town in Galilee, in the north of Israel.

To Mary, a virgin who was engaged to be married to Joseph, the news comes that she will conceive a child. The promises God makes about Jesus are amazing. This child is the Son of God, he will inherit the throne of Israel's great king David and he will reign over an eternal kingdom. What a lot of information for Mary to take in!

God turns up in an unexpected place with an unexpected plan. Though Mary is "highly favoured", what she and Joseph were about to go through would not be easy. Yet, they would not be going through this alone, "The Lord is with you...do not be afraid".

Are we facing unexpected things? Do we have faith to believe that God is working through these unexpected things, however difficult they may be? The Lord is with us. We do not need to be afraid.

Prayer

Dear God, thank you that you are with us. So much in this world makes us afraid. Thank you that because you are with us, we do not need to be afraid. Help us today to believe that you are at work in our circumstances, even in the things that are difficult and unexpected. Help us to look for your presence today and to trust in you. **Amen.**



Monday 13th December, Luke 1:39-45

³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth.
⁴⁰ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.
⁴¹ In a loud voice she exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!

⁴² But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?
⁴³ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.
⁴⁴ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!'

"But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

Jumping for Joy

Mary, having received the angel Gabriel's message, goes to stay with her relative Elizabeth. Perhaps she needed the time away to think, to talk things through with her older relative. However the words Mary receives in the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth are another message from God, more words that confirm for Mary what God is doing in her life.

Elizabeth is given words by God the Holy Spirit, words from God that speak a blessing over Mary and over her unborn child. And God, through Elizabeth, confirms the identity of Jesus. Mary is, "the mother of my Lord". Even John the Baptist, unborn and nestling in Elizabeth's womb, jumps for joy as he hears Mary's voice!

But there is one final blessing in our passage. A blessing for Mary as she believes, "that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her."

What words of blessing is God speaking over our lives? What words of reassurance do we need from the Lord?

Prayer

Our loving heavenly Father, thank you that you are a God of blessing, a God of good things. Thank you for all the blessings and promises you speak over us in your Word, the Bible. Thank you that you are a God who speaks to us, with words that are just what we need to hear each day. Help us today to trust in all your promises. May we receive the blessing that comes when we put our faith in you. **Amen**



Tuesday 14th December, Luke 1:46-56

- ⁴⁶ And Mary said: My soul glorifies the Lord
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
⁴⁸ for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed,
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.
⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.
⁵⁵ Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Help for the Helpless

Mary responds to God's words with words of her own, words which praise God. In her song of praise, Mary lists all the things God has done. Her words are a wonderful portrait of who God is. God is a God who extends mercy, who performs mighty deeds, who helps.

Mary, who was poor herself, sings of a God who lifts the humble and fills the hungry with good things, a God who scatters the proud and sends the rich away empty. God provides help for the helpless.

Mary speaks about generations, and looks back two thousand years to Abraham, Israel's great ancestor. It is one of those wonderful moments in the Bible when we suddenly realise that God's activity over thousands of years suddenly all comes together, and we get to see the bigger picture.

Can we, like Mary, list all that God is and has done in our lives? Do we recognise our helplessness and need of God? Are we able to look at our lives and see the big picture of God at work in the details?

Prayer

Dear God, thank you for who you are and what you have done in our lives. Thank you that you have been at work since the beginning of the world, and that you are still at work in our world today. We are needy people, and we need your help today Lord. Help us to see how you are at work in our lives. Help us to trust that you are at work, even when we can't see you. **Amen.**

Wednesday 15th December, Matthew 1:18-21

- ¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: his mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.
¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.
²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.
²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.'

Do Not Be Afraid

How are you with difficult conversations? Can you imagine what it must have been like for Mary to tell Joseph that she was pregnant but still a virgin?

God, in his mercy, speaks to Joseph through an angel in a dream, using the same words the angel Gabriel had spoken to Mary, "Do not be afraid". Both Joseph and Mary receive the same message, "What is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit". Both are told to name the child Jesus which means, "God saves" or "God is salvation". The angel tells Joseph of the mission Jesus has, "he will save his people from their sins".

Joseph will have other dreams in which God speaks to him. Like Mary, he not only recognises the voice of God, but he chooses to believe and obey what God has said.

Into the easy as well as the difficult circumstances of life, God speak to us still. As with Mary and Joseph, God, speaks the words that we need to hear, "Do not be afraid". Amidst the busyness of this season, are we listening for God's voice? And when we hear God's voice, are we responding in faith and obedience?

Prayer

Dear God, thank you that you speak to us. But the world is so noisy, and we are so afraid, that it is often difficult to hear your voice. Help us today to take time to listen for your voice. Thank you that we do not need to be afraid, for you are with us. Help us today to hear the words you long to speak to us. Help us, like Joseph and Mary, to obey you. **Amen.**



Thursday 16th December, Luke 1:57-66

- ⁵⁷ When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son.
- ⁵⁸ Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.
- ⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah,
- ⁶⁰ but his mother spoke up and said, 'No! He is to be called John.'
- ⁶¹ They said to her, 'There is no one among your relatives who has that name.'
- ⁶² Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name
- he child.
- ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, 'His name is John.'
- ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God.
- ⁶⁵ All the neighbours were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things.
- ⁶⁶ Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, 'What then is this child going to be?' For the Lord's hand was with him.

New Name, New Possibilities

Many of us have family stories about how names were chosen. Elizabeth and Zechariah have a very unusual story of how they named John. The angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, telling him that Elizabeth would have a child in her old age, and also told him that the child was to be named John.

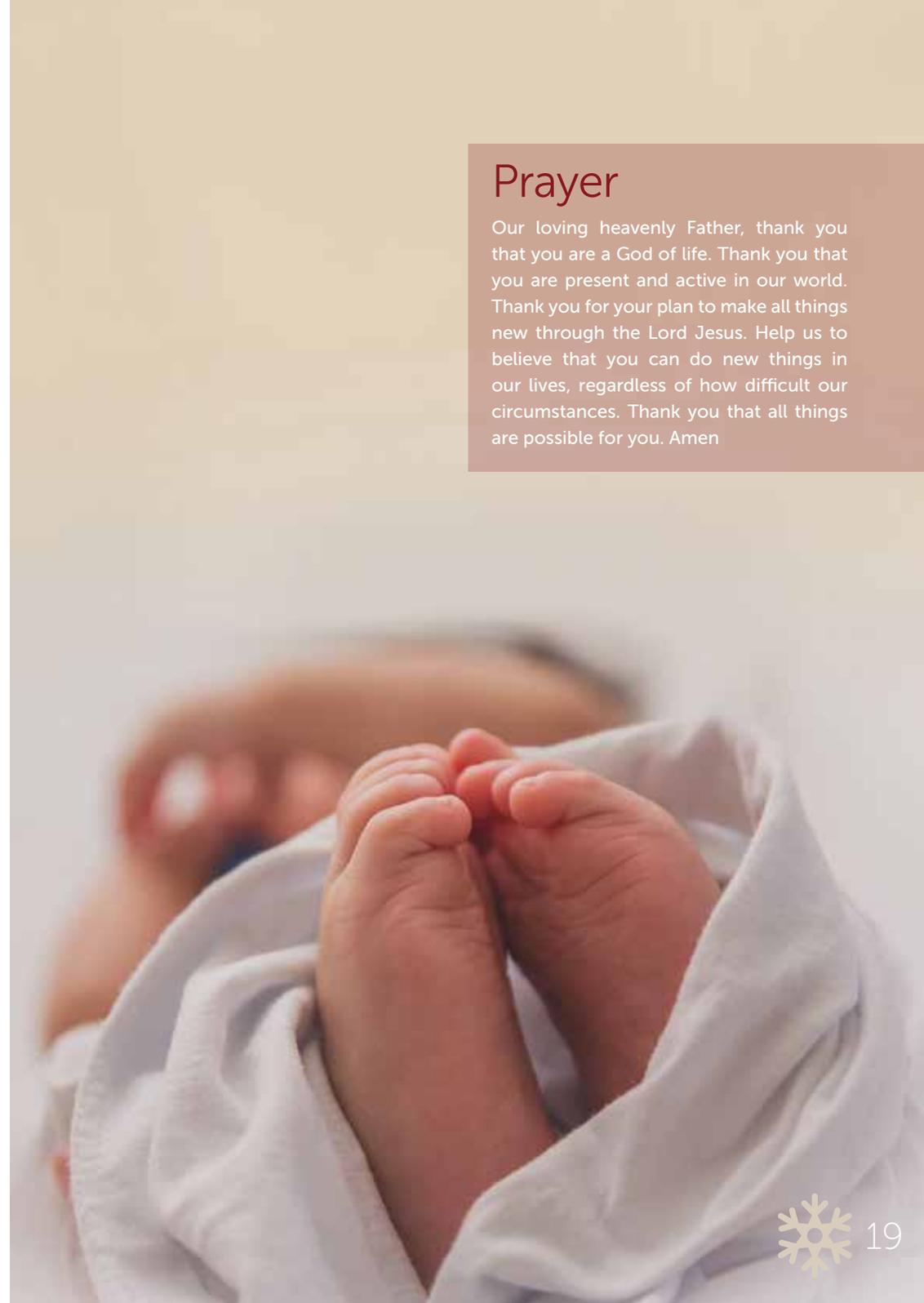
Zechariah had struggled to believe God's amazing promise, so Gabriel struck Zechariah dumb, telling him he would not be able to speak until God's promise came true. As they come to name the child, it's clear that Elizabeth and Zechariah are in agreement: John is the name! As Zechariah writes out John's name on the tablet, he is finally able to speak again, and the first thing Zechariah does is to praise God.

Everyone else was expecting the child to be named Zechariah. But this new God-given name signalled new possibilities - and everyone was talking about it. God was doing something extraordinary through this miracle child.

Sometimes when our circumstances have been unchanging for a long time, we stop hoping for things to be any different. Do we believe in a God who breaks into our everyday lives with new possibilities?

Prayer

Our loving heavenly Father, thank you that you are a God of life. Thank you that you are present and active in our world. Thank you for your plan to make all things new through the Lord Jesus. Help us to believe that you can do new things in our lives, regardless of how difficult our circumstances. Thank you that all things are possible for you. Amen



Friday 17th December, Luke 1:67-75

- ⁶⁷ His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:
- ⁶⁸ 'Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.
- ⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David
- ⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
- ⁷¹ salvation from our enemies and from
- the hand of all who hate us –
- ⁷² to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant,
- ⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
- ⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear
- ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days

God Has Come

As we look at our world, what do we think it most needs? Zechariah, filled with God the Holy Spirit, speaks words from God, about what God is going to do in the world. The first thing Zechariah proclaims is the wonderful truth that God has come.

At Christmas, we read how God came to us in Jesus. Look at the words that God gives Zechariah to describe what Jesus has come to do: "Redeem", "salvation", "mercy", "rescue". According to the Bible this is what our world needs, and this is what God has given us through Jesus.

The great purpose of God in showing us mercy, and redeeming, saving and rescuing us, says Zechariah, is that we might know him and live life with him, serving him without fear. God's great promise is to transform our relationship with him, and to transform us – making us holy and right with him.

God has come because God is faithful. God keeps his promise, fulfilling what, "he said through his holy prophets long ago".

What is our response to all this? Have we experienced the reality of God coming to us through Jesus in mercy, to redeem, to save, to rescue? What would change if we were to experience God's transforming presence in our lives today?

Prayer

Our loving Lord Jesus Christ, thank you that you came to us and that you came for us. Thank you for the mercy you show to us each day. Thank you that you are a God of redemption, of salvation, of rescue. We are in great need of your transforming power today, and every day. Please transform us through your presence in our lives, that we may serve you today. **Amen.**

Saturday 18th December, Luke 1:76-80

- ⁷⁶ And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
- ⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins,
- ⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our
- God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
- ⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death to guide our feet into the path of peace.'
- ⁸⁰ And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.

Prepare the Way for the Lord

Have you ever been in a town as royalty visits? The road is cleared and the way prepared. John, the promised miracle child of Zechariah and Elizabeth, is to prepare the way for Jesus.

Jesus comes, prophesies Zechariah, because of, "the tender mercy of our God". He comes to "give his people the knowledge of salvation", a way to be forgiven for our sins.

Part of the knowledge - the revelation - that Jesus brings, is that without this forgiveness we are living life in the dark. We are living in the shadow of death. Jesus coming to us, says Zechariah, is like the sun rising, bringing light to shine in our darkness. Jesus provides peace with God.

Darkness and death perhaps seem closer than ever during these past years of the pandemic. But the coming of Jesus always bring light. Where, in our lives, do we need God to prepare the way for the light of Christ?

Prayer

Our loving heavenly Father, thank you for your mercy to us. Thank you that you came in Jesus to save us, to offer us forgiveness. Thank you that in a world where darkness and death are ever present that you are the light. Help us to open our hearts and minds to you, that your wonderful, life-giving light might transform and renew us today. **Amen.**



Sunday 19th December, Luke 2:1-7

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

- ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)
- ³ And everyone went to their own town to register.
- ⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.
- ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.
- ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,
- ⁷ 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.

Difficult Journeys

At a time of year when many of us are contemplating cross-country trips to be with family for Christmas, it is good to reflect upon the difficult journey that Joseph and Mary made from Nazareth to Bethlehem. The distance was around 90 miles, and what would normally be a four day journey probably took considerably longer, as Mary was heavily pregnant.

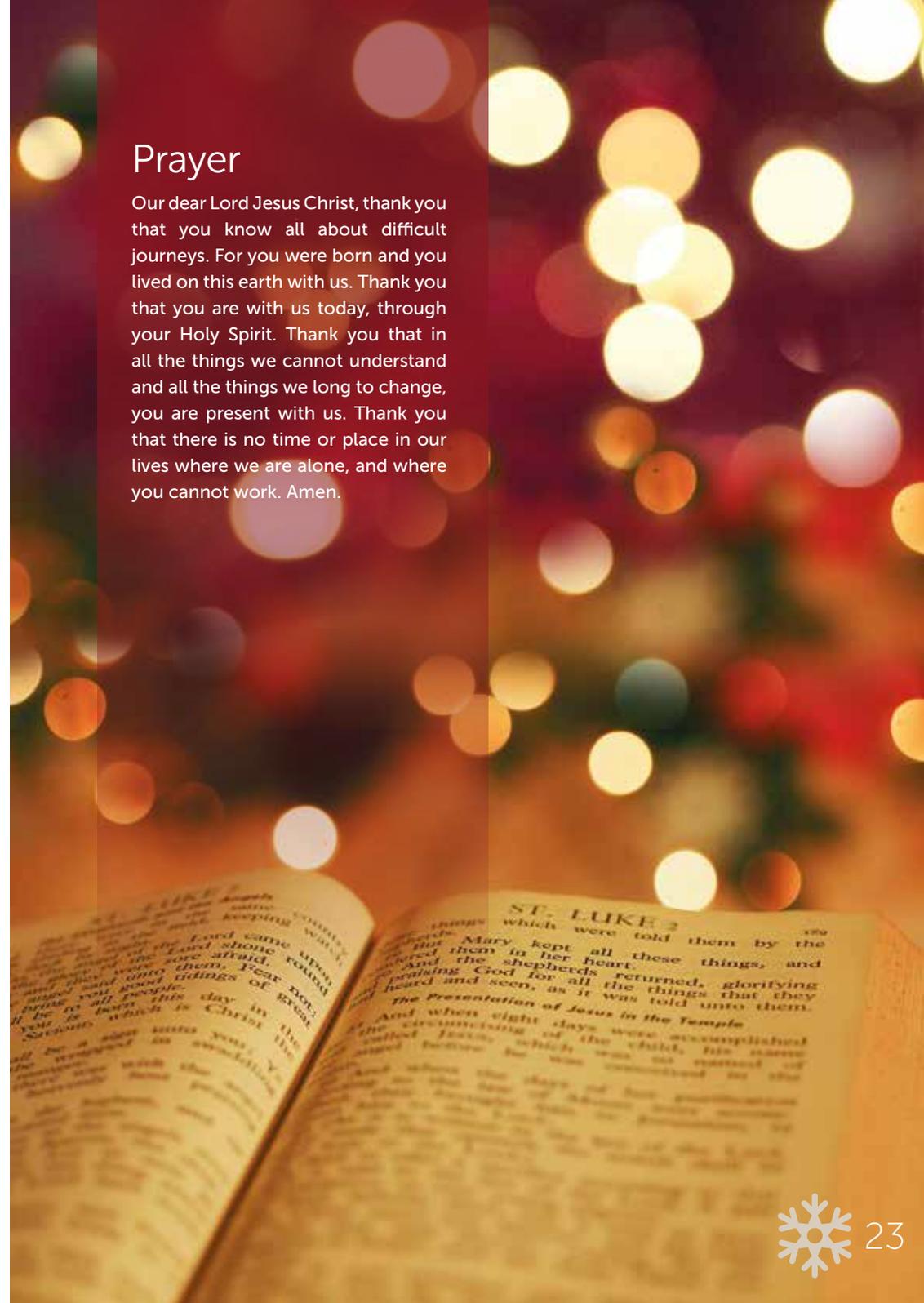
At Bethlehem there was no hospitable welcome for this young couple. Instead, they stay in the part of a house reserved for animals. When Jesus is born he is placed in a manger - an animal trough - for his bed. Despite the difficult journey, Jesus arrives at just the right time, in just the right place - Bethlehem.

How much of this Joseph and Mary understood at the time is not recorded. In the same way, for many of us, busy with the practical details and challenges of our everyday lives, it can often be hard to see or understand what God is doing in our lives.

Perhaps today life is proving a difficult journey for us. Could it be that in all the details and challenges, God is at work? Could it be that this is just the right time and just the right place for God to appear?

Prayer

Our dear Lord Jesus Christ, thank you that you know all about difficult journeys. For you were born and you lived on this earth with us. Thank you that you are with us today, through your Holy Spirit. Thank you that in all the things we cannot understand and all the things we long to change, you are present with us. Thank you that there is no time or place in our lives where we are alone, and where you cannot work. Amen.



Monday 20th December, Luke 2:8-15

- ⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night.
- ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.
- ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.'
- ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.
- ¹² This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'
- ¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,
- ¹⁴ 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.'
- ¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.'

Let's Go...and See

Many of us are used to getting recommendations of places to visit from friends and family. Perhaps someone recommended this Advent Reader to you with an invitation to, "go...and see" what happened all those years ago in Bethlehem.

It must have been an incredible moment. An angel of the Lord appears, "the glory of the Lord shone around them" and a chorus of angels sings praise to God.

Once again, the angel's first words are, "Do not be afraid". The shepherds are told good news, a message that will bring joy. The child born in Bethlehem is announced as Saviour, Messiah, Lord.

The shepherds encourage one another, "Let's go...and see this thing that has happened". They go to encounter not just a child in a manger, but an event that has changed the world.

Every time we open the Bible, we open the door to the possibility of an encounter with God. Will we this Christmas, "go...and see"? Will we listen for God speaking to us as we read the Bible? Do we believe that this child in a manger is the rescue plan of God? Will we trust in Jesus as our Saviour, Messiah and Lord?

Prayer

Dear God, thank you that you are a God who speaks to us. Thank you that you reveal yourself to us in the Bible through Jesus. Thank you that when we read the Bible, you speak to us. Help us to listen for your voice, and to "go...and see" all you have done for us through Jesus. Help us to put our trust in Jesus as our Saviour, Messiah and Lord. **Amen**

Tuesday 21st December, Matthew 2:1-6

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

- ³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.
- ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.
- ⁵ 'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they replied,
- ⁶ 'for this is what the prophet has written: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'

Unexpected Visitors

How do we deal with unexpected visitors? Do we throw open the door in welcome, or are we disturbed by their unannounced arrival? Herod was none too pleased when the Magi arrived telling of a new king of the Jews. After all, that's the title King Herod had been given by the Romans. And Herod did not tolerate rivals.

If the arrival of the Magi was a surprise, the birth of the long-promised Messiah in Bethlehem was not. The religious leaders quote these words from Micah, which we read on 10th December. Everyone knew the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

The Magi speak of stars predicting the birth of Jesus. They had travelled far from the East and had come to worship. God's purposes are clear, announced in advance, and will always be fulfilled. But they cut across Herod's plans.

Do we welcome God's purposes in our lives, even when his purposes interrupt our plans? Does God appearing in our life cause us to be disturbed, or does it lead us to worship?

Prayer

Our loving heavenly Father, thank you that you are working out your purposes in our world and in our lives. Thank you that you are in control of all things and that your purposes will be fulfilled. Help us to welcome your plans in our lives, even when we do not understand them. **Amen**



Wednesday 22nd December, Matthew 2:7-12

- ⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.
- ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.'
- ⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.
- ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.
- ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.
- ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

An Audience With the King

Have you ever met royalty? What was the setting like? As the story of the Magi continues, it is the meeting with King Jesus in a humble house that takes centre stage here, while King Herod and his palace are bypassed.

The passage vividly captures the activity: "They saw the star, they were overjoyed...they saw the child...they bowed down and worshipped him... they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts". Even the amazing moving star which they'd followed for so long gives way to Jesus. The Magi achieve the purpose for which they came: to worship the new born king.

The story of the Magi records people who were outside of Israel being invited to encounter Jesus. This speaks of the invitation that is open to all to come and worship Jesus.

Are we seeking "an audience with the King" this Christmas? Are we willing to stop and to search with the Magi for the king? And will we, with them, bow down and worship Jesus as king?

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus Christ, thank you that you were born into this world. Thank you that you invite us all to come and worship you. Open our eyes and our hearts to recognise you as king. Help us to bring everything we are and have and lay it at your feet in worship. **Amen.**

Thursday 23rd December, Matthew 2:13-18

- ¹³ When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. 'Get up,' he said, 'take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.'
- ¹⁴ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'
- ¹⁶ When Herod realised that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.
- ¹⁷ Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:
- ¹⁸ 'A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.'

Death and Life

The death of a child affects us all. The slaughter of innocents, which happens all too often in our world today, is almost unbearable. As with Herod's actions in this passage, the wars and atrocities that cause such awful scenes usually come from a lust for power and control.

But despite Herod's terrible actions, it turns out that he is not in control. His plan to kill Jesus at birth fails. While Herod breathes death, God speaks to preserve life. Another angel appears in a dream for Joseph, calling for immediate action.

Joseph trusts what God has said. His characteristic response every time God speaks is to obey. And Joseph, Mary and Jesus flee to Egypt. Matthew, always seeking to show how Jesus fulfils Old Testament prophecies, recognises God's word through Hosea the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my Son". Matthew also recognises that Herod's actions were foreseen by Jeremiah. God is indeed in control.

How easy do we find it to believe that God is in control? Are we willing to trust and obey God, even amidst the worst of circumstances?

Prayer

Our loving heavenly Father, there is much in this world which causes sadness. There is so much that has gone wrong. Thank you that you are in control. Thank you that you sent Jesus into this world. Thank you that he came to set all things right. Help us today to trust and obey you, especially if we are facing difficult situations. **Amen.**



Are we willing
to give up our
comfort that
...we might go where

Friday 24th December, Matthew 2:19-23

¹⁹ After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt ²⁰ and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead.'

²¹ So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.

²² But when he heard that Archelaus was

reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there.

Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee,

²³ and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.

Nazareth

For many years we have been seeing pictures of migrants travelling long distances, seeking a safe and secure future. The Bible reminds us that Jesus was a migrant: fleeing from Bethlehem to live abroad in Egypt. On their return, the family was still in danger in Judea - so they settled instead in Nazareth, in Galilee.

Just as an angel had appeared in a dream to warn Joseph to flee from Herod, so again God speaks and tells Joseph it was safe to return to Israel. It seems God asked a lot from this young couple. The shame of Mary's pregnancy, the arduous journey to Bethlehem for the census, fleeing the slaughter of the innocents, enforced separation from family and friends. Now finally, the holy family gets to settle down. Nazareth, this small town "up north", becomes the place where Jesus, the son of God, will grow up.

Are we willing to give up our comfort that we might go where God sends us? Are we willing to stay in a place that is far from ideal so that we might serve and obey God? Whoever we are, and whatever our circumstances, God is always speaking. Are we ready to respond in obedience when he calls?

Prayer

Our loving heavenly Father, thank you that you are a God who speaks. Thank you that you are a God who guides us and directs us through all the changing circumstances of life. Help us to respond to your call on our lives in obedience. Help us to trust you with our lives and to serve you wholeheartedly. **Amen.**



Saturday 25th December, Luke 2:25-32

- ²⁵ 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.
- ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.
- ²⁷ Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him

- what the custom of the Law required,
- ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:
- ²⁹ 'Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
- ³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation,
- ³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
- ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.'

Waiting, Listening, Seeing

Happy Christmas! After all these days of waiting and preparation, Christmas Day has arrived.

We are not told how long Simeon had been waiting. But he knew what he was waiting for: the appearing of the "Lord's Messiah".

Matthew says of Simeon, "the Holy Spirit was on him". God's presence was on Simeon, and while he waited, Simeon was listening. He had listened when told that he would not die before seeing the Messiah. Simeon was also listening on the day when Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the temple to dedicate him to the Lord.

With perfect timing, Simeon meets them in the temple. He takes Jesus in his arms, and praises God, saying, "my eyes have seen your salvation".

God's timing is perfect, but his timetable may not always be to our liking! We are to be patient and wait for God. But as we wait, we listen and respond in obedience. Waiting and listening is the only route to seeing Jesus.

Are we waiting patiently for God? Are we listening for God's voice, and when we hear, are we responding in obedience?

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for the joy and hope of this Christmas day. Thank you that today we remember how you came to save us. Help us to trust you with our lives. Help us to have patience as we wait for you. Help us to listen for your voice and help us to obey you, that we might see you, Jesus. Amen.

Benediction

As we approach the end of 2021 and the beginning of another New Year, these readings reflect on some of the last words that Jesus spoke to his disciples before his death and after his resurrection. A benediction is a short prayer of blessing. May God use these readings to speak a blessing over our lives this New Year.

Finding life is
not about what we
know, it's about
who we know...



Sunday 26th December, John 14:5-7

- ⁵ Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?'
- ⁶ Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'
- ⁷ If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.'

Directions for Life

Some of us are better than others at asking for directions when we are lost! It is the night when Jesus will be betrayed. Jesus tells his disciples, "You know the way to the place where I am going" (John 14:4). Thomas is confused, "We don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

Jesus' great statement, "I am the way and the truth and the life," reveals that life is not found in a particular place, set of circumstances, or philosophy. Life is found in a person: Jesus Christ.

Finding life is not about what we know, it's about who we know. It is through knowing Jesus that we come to know God the Father. It is very easy to allow faith to become about the pursuit of knowledge about God. Jesus offers us something infinitely better: a relationship with God.

As we approach another new year, are our hearts and minds set on knowing God better? Who or what is setting the direction of our lives - Jesus or something else?

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus Christ, thank you that you are, "the way and the truth and the life". Thank you that through you we can know the Father. Each day we face so many choices, so many roads we could go down. Please help us to know you and follow you. **Amen**



Monday 27th December, John 14:15-19

- ¹⁵ 'If you love me, keep my commands.
¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever –
¹⁷ the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him,
for he lives with you and will be in you.
¹⁸ I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.
¹⁹ Before long, the world will not see me any more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live.

I Will Come to You

What must it have been like for the disciples on this last night with Jesus? Shocked by the news he is going away. Not knowing what the future will hold.

But then come the words of assurance, "I will come to you". Jesus, the Son of God, is returning to God the Father. Jesus says he will ask the Father to send, "another advocate", God the Holy Spirit. Jesus says the Spirit will, "help you and be with you forever...he lives in you and will be in you".

Here then is the ultimate fulfilment of the promise of the name given to Jesus – Immanuel, which means God with us. Through Jesus, we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The very presence of God in our lives. God with us, God helping us.

Do we know the reality of the Spirit in our lives? Where in our lives do we most need the presence and help of the Spirit?

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for your great promise, "I will come to you". Thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Thank you for every experience of your presence and your help in our lives. Help us today not to rely upon our own strength. Help us instead to trust fully in the power and presence of the Spirit in our lives. **Amen.**

Tuesday 28th December, John 15:9-14

- ⁹ 'As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.
¹⁰ If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love.
¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.
¹² My command is this: love each other as I have loved you.
¹³ Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.
¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command.

Abide in My Love

One of the changes due to the national lockdown has been people moving house. Some have moved from flats to homes with gardens. Others have left cities for a new life in the country, due to the freedom to work from home. Most of us have probably just stayed put!

Earlier in the passage, Jesus has said, "remain in me". Now he says, "remain in my love". Some older translations use the word "abide", reading "abide in me...abide in my love". What a wonderful image! Making our home in Jesus. His love as a place where we live.

Jesus reminds us that our relationship with him is to be characterised by obedience, just as he has obeyed God the Father. Not a slavish obedience but rather, says Jesus, a route to joy in our lives.

How is our relationship with Jesus? Might we be in danger of treating Jesus as an occasional retreat venue, instead of our "home"?

Prayer

Our loving Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for your wonderful love for us. Thank you that you came to share the Father's love with us. Thank you that you demonstrated your love by dying on the cross for us. Help us to respond to your great invitation to make our home in your love. Help us to remain in you, the source of all love and all joy. **Amen.**



Wednesday 29th December, Matthew 28:18-20

- ¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the

- Holy Spirit,
²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'

Go and Make Disciples

In this social media age there are lots of options as to whom we follow. Whatever our interests, there is something online for us to read or watch.

As Christians we are to follow Jesus and invite others to follow him too. For this small group of disciples 2,000 years ago the task must have seemed daunting, "go and make disciples of all nations". Today, Christianity is the largest religion in the world, with one third of the global population - 2.5 billion people - following Jesus.

Jesus declares, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me". We are not only commanded to share our faith, but we are also empowered to do so. Perhaps when we look at the Church in Scotland our resources seem meagre for the task. Yet all the resources of heaven and earth are ours, under the command of the saviour who sends us. And we go with the promise of Jesus ringing in our ears, "I am with you always".

What part is God calling us to play in this global mission to make disciples of all nations? With whom can we share the good news of Jesus this Christmas and New Year?

Prayer

Our loving Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for your love for all nations. Thank you that you came to draw people from every nation and tribe and people and language to the Father (Rev 7:9). We praise you that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to you. Help us to take the good news to all nations. Help us not to rely on our own strength but instead to depend upon your power and authority. **Amen.**

Thursday 30th December, Luke 24:50-53

- ⁵⁰ When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them.
⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.

- ⁵² Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.
⁵³ And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

Picture of Blessing

Do you have treasured photographs of people who have died? Or perhaps not a photograph, but a mental image of the last time you saw a friend or a relative? Luke records here an eyewitness account of what Christians call the ascension. This is the moment when Jesus is taken up into heaven.

Here is the last image the disciples have of Jesus: the Lord with his hands raised, speaking words of blessing over them as he is taken up into heaven. It must have been an incredible scene to witness.

The disciples respond in two ways: they worship Jesus and they are filled with joy. Luke notes how their worship carries on at the temple, where "they stayed continually...praising God".

As we end one year and begin another, these are powerful verses that should fuel our own discipleship and worship.

As we look back on this past year, what words of blessing has God spoken over our lives? As we look forward into 2022, how might we strengthen our worship of and joy in Jesus?

Prayer

Our risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ, we praise you that you are in heaven, at the right hand of God the Father. We thank you that, "from the fulness of [your] grace we have all received one blessing after another" (John 1:16). Strengthen us in our worship of you today and pour out your joy into our hearts and lives, for your glory. **Amen.**



Friday 31st December, Revelation 1:7-8

⁷ 'Look, he is coming with the clouds,'
and 'every eye will see him, even those
who pierced him'; and all peoples on
earth 'will mourn because of him.'
So shall it be! Amen.

⁸ 'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says
the Lord God, 'who is, and who was,
and who is to come, the Almighty.'

Every Eye Will See Him

The Apollo moon landings on 20 July 1969 were watched by an estimated 652 million people. This was around one fifth of the world population at the time. The book of Revelation speaks of an event that will have even higher viewing figures: the return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The return of Jesus is a reality that is written about throughout the New Testament. We are told by the Gospel writer Luke, that two angels appeared as the disciples watched Jesus ascend. The angels said, "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 1:11).

Our text says, "Every eye will see him" (v7). For those who believe in Jesus, his return is something we should look forward to with great joy. But for those "who pierced him," for those who reject Jesus, his return will be a cause of mourning.

If Jesus returned tonight, as the bells ring out for new year, would we be full of joy or mourning? How might thinking about the Lord's return change our priorities for 2022?

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for the great hope of your return. Thank you that when you come, every eye will see you. Thank you that you are coming to make all things new, to bring about a new heaven and a new earth. Thank you for the promise that when you come there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain (Rev 21). Help us to live as those who are expecting you to return. We pray, at this turning of the year, come Lord Jesus Christ! **Amen.**

“I am the
Alpha and
the Omega”
...says the Lord God





The Scottish Bible Society,
7 Hampton Terrace, Edinburgh, EH12 5XU.
Tel 0131 337 9701. Email: <mailto:info@scottishbiblesociety.org>.

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