

Week 1 He Will Come Again in Glory

Nov. 29 Revelation 1:4-9; 19:11-16; 21:1-5, 22-27; 22:1-5 Nov. 30 Zechariah 9:9-17; Romans 5:3-5; 8:18-30 Dec. 1 John 1:1-5, 14; Revelation 22:12-13, 20 Dec. 2 Mark 13:24-37; Luke 21:25-28

Dec. 3 2 Peter 3:8-15

Dec. 4 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

Dec. 5 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Week 2 God's Presence and His Promises

Dec. 6 Exodus 1:1-3:10 Dec. 7 Psalms 46, 112 Dec. 8 Isaiah 2:1-5 Dec. 9 Isaiah 40:1-11 Dec. 10 Isaiah 64:1-9

Dec. 11 Isaiah 9:2; John 1:4-5, 9

Dec. 12 Isaiah 7:14; 9:6-7

Week 3 Immanuel: God with Us

Dec. 13 Matthew 1:1-17 Dec. 14 Luke 1:5-25 Dec. 15 Luke 1:26-38 Dec. 16 Matthew 1:18-24 Dec. 17 Luke 1:39-56

Dec. 18 Isaiah 9:2-7; 40:1-5; Luke 1:57-80; 3:1-6

Dec. 19 Luke 2:1-7

Week 4 A Savior Is Born

Dec. 20 Luke 2:8-20 Dec. 21 Luke 2:22-38 Dec. 22 Matthew 2:1-12

Dec. 23 Matthew 2:1-18; 1 John 3:8

Dec. 24 John 1:1-18

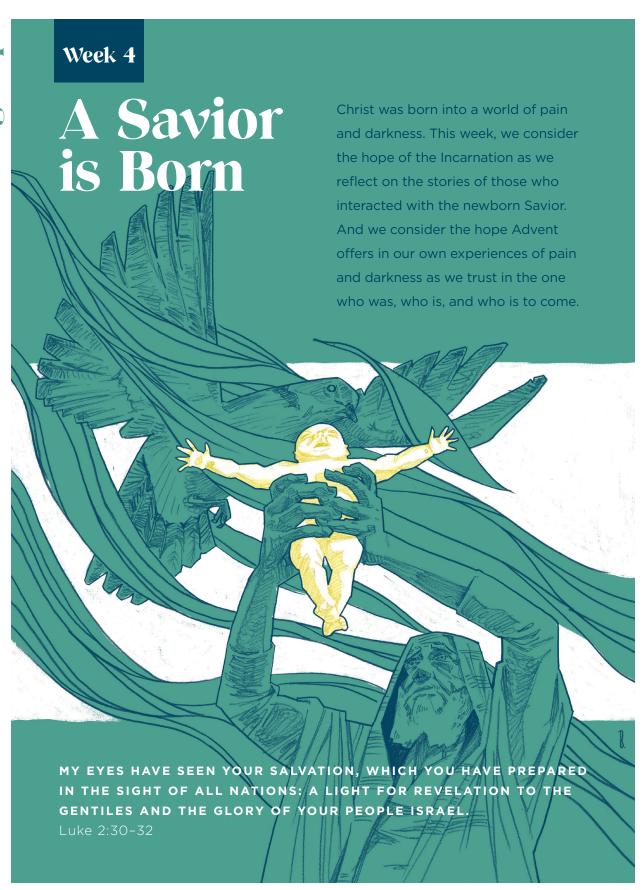
Dec. 25 Isaiah 9:6-7; Luke 2:4-7; 1 Peter 1:3-5, 13

WEEK 4 A SAVIOR IS BORN

BIBLE STUDY

find most co	would you summarize their responses in a word or a phrase? What do you impelling or convicting about each?
immediatel	2:8–38 . Scripture is clear that both the shepherds and Anna almost y began telling others about Jesus. How does their natural response sm inspire you? Are there people God is bringing to mind whom you ut Jesus?
	ew 2:1-12 . What does the Magi's worship of Jesus reveal about the gospe ure of God's kingdom? Why is their worship significant?
reminder of	new 2:13-18. Anthony Carter describes this scene as "the brutal and blunt why Jesus came into the world in the first place." In your own words, why rent belong in our remembrance of the Christmas story? What do we miss ok it?
	I:1–18 and Philippians 2:6–11 . As you ponder the Incarnation, what sparks vonder, or praise? How does it kindle hope?
	ect on this Advent journey, how has your understanding of hope changed?

MY EYES HAVE SEEN
YOUR SALVATION,
WHICH YOU HAVE
PREPARED IN THE
SIGHT OF ALL
NATIONS: A LIGHT
FOR REVELATION TO
THE GENTILES AND
THE GLORY OF YOUR
PEOPLE ISRAEL.





12/20 LYING IN A FEEDING TROUGH

BY QUINA ARAGON

Luke 2:8-20

THIS WILL BE A SIGN
TO YOU: YOU WILL
FIND A BABY WRAPPED
IN CLOTHS AND LYING
IN A MANGER.

Luke 2:12

The fullness of time had come. For thousands upon thousands of years, God's people waited for the coming of the greater son of David, the Messiah-King of Israel. The promised Prince of Peace. And now, their prophets' wildest, God-wrought dreams finally materialized as angel choirs announced, *The King is here! Born this very day.*

In the Messiah's arrival, we marvel at—but expect—an angel of the Lord to proclaim it. We gape at—but expect—a whole army of angels to burst into praise. We might even expect this proclamation to ring through royal halls or in the temple—anywhere other than some obscure field near Bethlehem . . . to shepherds.

Their garments' animal stench, their ignoble social position, and the dirt lodged beneath their fingernails didn't disqualify these shepherds from receiving the word of the Lord. After all, this good news of great joy was for "all the people" (Luke 2:10) and, we read later, especially for "the poor" (4:18).

And what did the angel say would be the sign of this exceedingly good news? Look for the Messiah's poverty: He'll be lying in a manger. A feeding trough. He'll smell like you, blessed shepherds. In humble circumstances. Pushed to the margins. Indeed, "blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (6:20).

And blessed are we too when, like the shepherds, we receive this good news and hurry to meet Jesus for ourselves. Isn't that how we began with Christ? We didn't understand all he is, all he's done, and how all of that is meant to radically transform us. We just knew we needed to see him, to meet him. And when we did, how could we keep from proclaiming the good news, "glorifying and praising God," for all we had heard and seen (2:20)?

This rhythm—hear the gospel, hurry to meet with Jesus, then proclaim the gospel and praise God—isn't this also how we continue in the faith? Isn't this the recipe for worship that fuels our endurance? Isn't this the soil where hope blooms?

The kingdom of God is filled with stories like these: lowly shepherds who become esteemed heralds of salvation; tax collectors and prostitutes who become friends of God; the foolish and weak who shame the wise and strong. Even our hope himself—"the Messiah, the Lord" (2:11) who once lay in a feeding trough.

MEDITATE ON LUKE 2:8–20. What does the humble audience chosen for this angelic announcement emphasize about Christ and his purpose? How are you challenged by the shepherds' response to Christ?

JOY OF OUR DESIRES

BY MARLENA GRAVES

Luke 2:22-38

SIMEON TOOK HIM IN
HIS ARMS AND PRAISED
GOD, SAYING: "... MY
EYES HAVE SEEN YOUR
SALVATION, ... A LIGHT
FOR REVELATION TO
THE GENTILES, AND
THE GLORY OF YOUR
PEOPLE ISRAEL."

Luke 2:28-32

It was in the twilight of Simeon's and Anna's lives, when most others might have thought the ship of their hopes and dreams had long ago set sail, that God made his most spectacular appearance. It was in that sort of moment, when from a human standpoint all hope seemed lost, that Mary and Joseph gently placed newborn baby Jesus—the Messiah, their hopes and dreams made manifest—into their arms. God is like that. Over and over again, God shows up in history and in our lives, when all bets are off.

Maybe, like Simeon, we've joyfully served and adored God our entire lives. And perhaps, too, we've sensed God saying that what we are experiencing now is not the end—that there is something more.

It could be that, like the prophet Anna, we've spent our whole lives on God's heels and as close to his people as possible. We've been where God is—sacrificing for and loving people—yet we've had our share of pain and suffering along the way. Maybe each morning we wake with great expectations, only to be continually disappointed. Perhaps days pass by and nothing changes. Life may even feel like a disappointment. We may question whether or not we really did hear from God.

For Simeon and Anna, on an ordinary day that started off like all others, suddenly everything changed. Mary and Joseph went to the temple to fulfill the Mosaic Law by offering their firstborn son, Jesus, up to God. In that ripe *kairos* moment, the Holy Spirit nudged Simeon and then Anna in the holy family's direction. Though each of them was on the brink of death—their sagging skin brandishing age spots, their bodies stooped, their movement slower and more measured—God showed up fresh faced, as alive as could be, with twinkling eyes and ever-so-soft skin, as a newborn baby. Unpredictable and unexpected indeed.

The witness of Simeon and Anna speaks to us, reminding us that God keeps showing up in our lives, often unexpectedly. He breaks in, bringing unimaginable joy to our ordinary days. And not just in this life but also in the life to come—when our hopes and dreams will be ultimately realized in God himself.

So with Simeon and Anna, may we exclaim the sentiment of the great hymn, "Jesu, joy of our desiring!" Our hope and dreams are—and will continually be—made manifest in Christ, now and forevermore.

READ LUKE 2:22–38. Consider Simeon's and Anna's experiences on this day and in the many years leading up to it. How do their stories challenge you? How does their witness inspire you?

12/22 A DISRUPTIVE JOY

BY QUINA ARAGON

Matthew 2:1-12

God's great story of redemption is filled with irony. Even as Matthew emphasizes that Jesus is the promised Messiah by virtue of his Scripture-fulfilling birthplace, he also introduces his Jewish audience to a mysterious group of foreigners: Magi from the East. Right away, we see the Christ child causing the nations to "rally to him" (Isa. 11:10; 60:1–6).

This migrant caravan of Gentiles enters the Holy City—the center of Jewish religious life and the residence of Herod, the so-called "king of the Jews"—intending to find and worship the *true* "king of the Jews" (Matt. 2:2). The irony here almost provokes laughter, until we notice the chief priests and scribes' seeming indifference to Christ's birth. And until we see Herod's faux worship result in the slaughter of infants.

More than entertaining, the irony is convicting. The Magi's ambition contrasts starkly with Herod's. Though both were informed by the Scriptures and both inquired of Christ's whereabouts, Herod resorted to closed-door schemes to try to eliminate this threat while the Magi simply followed the star to their exceeding joy.

We also see a critical contrast between the Magi's response of worship and the apparent inaction of the chief priests and scribes. Clearly, proximity to the truth is not enough. Was it embarrassing for these Messiah specialists not to recognize his advent before these pagans did? Why didn't their theological expertise rouse a readiness in them like we see in the watchful Magi? Was their spiritual responsiveness dulled by a hunger for power and thirst for privilege as they allied themselves with a tyrannical king?

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled," Scripture tells us (Matt. 5:6). This is the reality we see embodied by the Gentile Magi. Their joy overflowed into worship when they saw that shining sign of hope rest over the home of hope himself (see Num. 24:17). They traveled from afar to gladly bend the knee to the "king of the Jews" who, it turns out, is also the "King of the nations" (Rev. 15:3).

The love of God is a scandal—too full to contain, too shocking to predict. It makes Christ-worshipers out of pagans, faith heroes out of foreigners. Are we willing to learn from these unlikely leaders and their generous, humble worship? If we are, perhaps we too will embody a beautiful irony—a disruptive joy, a bright hope, piercing through the darkness of our times.

WHEN THEY SAW THE STAR, THEY WERE OVERJOYED.

Matthew 2:10

REFLECT ON MATTHEW 2:1–12. (Optionally, also read Isaiah 11:10 and 60:1–10.) What stands out to you in the Magi's response to Christ's birth? How does the Magi's joyful worship emphasize Christ's purpose?



BY ANTHONY CARTER

Matthew 2:1–18 1 John 3:8 Up until this point in the birth narrative of Jesus, it has been all singing and rejoicing. It has been angelic choirs, hurrying shepherds, and wise men seeking to worship him. But here, in Matthew 2:16–18, we have the brutal and blunt reminder of why Jesus came into the world in the first place. "When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi" (v. 16).

In this passage, we are faced with a disturbing and stark reality: There are evil and wickedness in this world. There is the terror of sin that rules and reigns in the hearts of men and women. Left to our own devices and under the influence of the Evil One, humans can be given over to murderous lies and to deceit. We see it clearly in Herod's actions; it couldn't get any more evil. Right here, in the Nativity story, while we're still listening to the angels singing, Satan and his minions *kill* countless numbers of babies.

The frustration of Herod gives way to fury, and he unleashes this unholy rage. We can only imagine the horror that gripped Bethlehem as Herod sent his death squads through, killing baby boys. This is the brutal, monstrous act of a sadistic ruler under the influence of Satan. This atrocity in the Christmas story is a stark and sober reminder to us, in the midst of our singing, that the reason Jesus came is to do battle. There's a war, and Jesus came to conquer our sin.

Christmas is not about ribbons and tags. It's not about packages or boxes or bags. It is about spiritual warfare. First John 3:8 tells us that it is about the Son of God being born to conquer our sin and to destroy the works of the Devil.

May we celebrate the peace and beauty of Christmas. May we celebrate as we sing, "Joy to the world! The Lord is come." But let us also remember this dark event in the Christmas story, because the slaughter of Bethlehem's babies reminds us of *why* Jesus was born. Christ came into the world to conquer our sin and to destroy the works of the Evil One.

This article is adapted from a sermon Anthony Carter preached on December 24, 2017. Used by permission.

THE REASON THE SON OF GOD APPEARED WAS TO DESTROY THE DEVIL'S WORK.

1 John 3:8

CONSIDER MATTHEW 2:1-18 AND 1 JOHN 3:8. In your view, how does the disturbing end to the story of Herod and the Magi emphasize Christ's purpose or point toward the gospel? How can it deepen our understanding of hope?

12/24 ADVENT ANEW

BY MARLENA GRAVES

John 1:1-18

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

The Word—the source of creation, the true light—entered humanity as a helpless babe born in humble circumstances. From a human perspective, Jesus' birth is quite shocking. Why didn't he, the God-man, first appear as a strapping young man flexing his divine muscles with spectacular feats for all to see? Angels could have trumpeted his coming throughout the whole world! But they didn't; an angel choir lit the night sky for only a few isolated shepherds.

Contrast Jesus' advent with first-century Roman generals arriving in town with fanfare and flourish after a military victory. They wanted to see and be seen, aiming to impress as they displayed power and demanded homage. Jesus came quietly and unobtrusively, demanding nothing.

Jesus' mode of arrival, his life among Jewish peasants, and his eventual execution as a criminal certainly seem like a counterintuitive plan for persuading the world that he's the Messiah. Yet John asserts: "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" (1:14).

The glory John testifies to doesn't comport with our human conceptions of glory and power. While the disciples witnessed many miraculous examples of Christ's power, in John's gospel the greatest demonstration of Jesus' glory is *the Cross*. Jesus himself makes this plain: "'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified . . . And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die" (12:23, 32–33).

The shocking humility of the manger points us toward the humiliation of the cross. This is our strange and otherworldly hope: The Word who was born as a helpless infant is the Savior who came to die a criminal's death—for us. When we receive him, John says, we enter into his light and life.

Sometimes I find myself among Jesus' followers who still wrestle with questions (see Matt. 28:17; Mark 9:24; John 20:24–29). When I do, I turn back to John 1:14. The disciples had seen and been with Jesus. They'd eaten with him, traveled with him, fished with him, laughed with him, grieved with him—with *God, face to face*. In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus so profoundly transformed them that they were willing to abandon everything to suffer and even die for Jesus. That reality quells my doubts.

I also think about the miracle we celebrate this Christmas Eve: Jesus, the babe in the manger who was "in very nature God" yet "made himself nothing" for us (Phil. 2:6–7). I think of the Christ child who grew up to die and rise again for my sins, offer me true hope, and make all things new. In those moments, Jesus, Faithful and True, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, appears to me afresh (Rev. 19:11; John 14:6). Advent anew.

CONTEMPLATE JOHN 1:1–18. (Optionally, also read John 12:23–36 and Philippians 2:6–11.) Ponder the mystery and glory of the Incarnation. What spiritual responses—like worship, trust, hope—are stirred up in you?

12/25 THE LAST CHRISTMAS

BY ANTHONY CARTER

Isaiah 9:6-7; Luke 2:4-7 1 Peter 1:3-5, 13

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 FOREVER.

Isaiah 9:7

Herod and the Devil tried to keep Christmas from coming—because the coming of he who is King of Kings is a frightful thought. But Christmas came anyway. Satan couldn't stop God's plans, which have been established forever. He couldn't stop Christ from being born. He couldn't stop Jesus from dying on the cross. He couldn't stop Christ from rising from the dead. He couldn't stop Christ from building his church. He couldn't stop Christ from saving you. And Satan can't stop Christ from getting you home. You place your trust in the King who not only came but will one day come again.

This Christmas Day, as we celebrate Christ's birth, we focus on why he came. And we also remember that there is another Christmas coming. The Lord our God is not finished yet.

Despite what the naysayers say, Jesus is coming again. Despite what the doubters doubt, Jesus is coming again. Despite what the skeptics say, Christ *will* come again. As Scripture tells us, "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him" (Rev. 1:7, ESV).

Beloved, let us remember: Every Christmas is one Christmas closer to that last Christmas when the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout and with the voices of the angels and the trumpets of God (1 Thess. 4:16). If you think it was loud and glorious when the angels announced his birth to the shepherds, just wait until his Second Advent comes!

For those who do not believe, the coming of Christ will be frightful. But for those who trust in Christ, the Lord's coming is delightful. We say, "Come, Lord!" *Maranatha!* (1 Cor. 16:22). Even though we don't know when or how he will come, we pray, *Come Lord Jesus, come. We, your people, are waiting for you. We want to be found faithful. We want to persevere. Come, Lord Jesus.*

This Christmas Day, we celebrate the miracle of the Incarnation. We join the shepherds who hurried to see the babe in the manger, glorifying and praising God. We worship with the wise men who knelt before the Christ child. We rejoice in the Good News of grace for which Jesus came, died, and rose again. We live in hope. And we remember that this Christmas is just one more Christmas closer to that glorious last Christmas we await. With everything we've got, we sing, "Come, Lord Jesus, come."

This article is adapted from a sermon Anthony Carter preached on December 24, 2017. Used by permission.

REVISIT ISAIAH 9:6-7; LUKE 2:4-7; AND 1 PETER 1:3-5, 13. Ponder Isaiah's prophesy in light of Christ's first coming and the Second Advent we await. How does your hope in Christ's return and eternal reign deepen your understanding of his birth? How can it enrich your celebration of Christmas?



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ADVENT: LIVING HOPE

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Christianity Today 465 Gundersen Dr. Carol Stream, IL 60188

Christianity Today.com

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ADVENT Living Hope

Ideas For Families

SELECT SOME OF THESE IDEAS TO ENRICH YOUR FAMILY'S JOURNEY THROUGH ADVENT.

Throughout Advent

- With teens or preteens, read and discuss the devotions together each evening.

 With younger kids, focus on just the Scripture passages and reflection prompts.
- Create a hope-focused "stained-glass window" that you'll add to throughout
 Advent. Use a dry-erase marker (or a colored self-adhesive note) to write the word
 hope in the center of a window in your home. Use a thesaurus together to find and
 add related words that can help us understand biblical hope. Then, throughout
 Advent, use colored markers or notes to record words, ideas, images, symbols,
 or Bible verses from each day's discussion and add them to the window.

Week 1

- Invite teens or preteens to read "Hope: An Expectant Leap" by Jay Y. Kim, then go on a challenging hike together. As you walk, discuss Kim's hiking story and the idea that Christian hope is something that's gritty and determined.
- With younger children, have fun using a joke book to tell each other silly knock-knock jokes. Afterward, talk about the idea that Jesus will one day arrive. He will come again!
- Ask, "What are some things in life that upset you, are unfair, or make you feel angry or hopeless?" (Optional: Use newspapers or online news sites to generate ideas regarding current events.) Record on a posterboard some of the evils, injustices, and painful realities of life, like war, abuse, cancer, poverty, racism, stress, personal conflicts, and so on. Then tear up the poster together as you talk about our ultimate hope in Christ's future reign described in Revelation 21:1–5.

Week 2

- Find an online recipe for air-dry or no-bake salt dough, then use it to make simple Christmas tree ornaments as a family. The ornaments will need to dry for one or more days. Use the experience of waiting for the dough to harden as an opportunity to talk about Advent as a season of waiting. What were God's people in the Old Testament waiting for? How do we see hope in their waiting?
- Use a telescope or binoculars to look at far-off objects. Discuss how God used prophets like Isaiah to see some of what God would do in the future. Talk about some of the truths Isaiah foretold about Jesus.
- Turn off the lights in your house (other than Christmas tree lights) to play flashlight tag or flashlight hide-and-seek. Have fun together, then read Isaiah 9:2 and John 1:4–5, 9. Discuss Christ's identity as the light promised in Isaiah 9.

Week 3

- Play a quiet game to see who can be silent the longest. (Or challenge everyone to be silent
 for a set period of time.) Use this experience to discuss what Zechariah might have thought
 and felt during his long period of muteness as he waited for his son's birth and the coming
 of the Messiah.
- Have an upside-down dinner as a family. Sit under the table, wear clothing backward, eat food in reverse order, and so on. Use this silly experience to talk about how Mary's song pointed toward the upside-down nature of the kingdom. Discuss some of Jesus' teachings and actions that turned things upside down (the first shall be last, love your enemies, and so on).
- Go on a "choice drive" as a family to look at area Christmas lights. At each intersection, let a different family member choose if you'll turn right, turn left, or go straight. Afterward, use this experience to talk about the choices and decisions that Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and Joseph faced. How might they have felt in these situations? What motivated their choices or responses? What can we learn from them?

Week 4

- Reflect on the shepherds' and Anna's immediate response to seeing baby Jesus—telling
 others about him! Create a Christmas card as a family that tells about Jesus, then mail it to
 someone to share the Good News.
- Gather a baby picture of each family member. (If possible, even include baby pictures of
 grandparents and great-grandparents.) Look at the pictures and discuss each person's traits
 you may recognize even when they were babies. Use this experience to talk about how
 remarkable it was that Simeon and Anna recognized baby Jesus as the promised Messiah.
- Gather around your hope-focused stained-glass window and reflect together on the entire Advent season. How has everyone's understanding of Christian hope been enriched? What is one idea, verse, or biblical story that stands out most to each family member? How was each person's faith impacted through this experience of observing Advent together?