



Nov/Dec 2019

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

*Jesus'
Family*

ALSO: QUESTIONS IN THE BIBLE

Friends:

Years ago I had a lot of questions about where my family came from. We had a death certificate for a great-grandfather, but that was as far back as I knew. So I began researching my genealogy. I built a family tree, and—person by person, document by document—the story of how my family immigrated (not once, but twice!) emerged. I came to know a lot about my family history.



On hearing my story, others began to ask for help. Could I help them discover their story? Could we fill out their tree? Could we find half-forgotten branches? Could we find a birth father fifty years after an adoption? Genealogy has been a fascinating way to help people discover how they came to be where they are.

Two of the four gospels include genealogies for Jesus because it's important for us to see where Jesus of Nazareth came from. The whole Bible tells the story of how God worked in people's lives to bring about his Messiah, the Savior, Christ Jesus.

This December, John Van Schepen considers Jesus' family tree. We'll explore the stories of people who came before and how they were woven into the bigger story of how God saves his people in Jesus.

But first, in November, Norman Brown walks us through some of the many questions we find in the Bible. Scripture is full of answers, of course, and yet it is also full of questions—big and small. Together let's wonder aloud as we explore the Word of God.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Steven Koster". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Steven" and last name "Koster" clearly distinguishable.

—Steven Koster

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"Questions in the Bible"
Norman Brown



"Jesus' Family"
John Van Schepen

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ReFrame
Media

december

Jesus' Family

John Van Schepen

During this Christmas month, we will be considering many names. We find most of these names in the genealogies of Jesus recorded in Matthew 1 and Luke 3. We will reflect on how God used a large variety of people to carry out his great plan of salvation. Some of them served God eagerly, while others gravely disobeyed. Yet God in his grace and mercy faithfully carried out his plan by sending his only Son, Jesus, to save us from sin and to restore us. As we reflect on these people in Jesus' family this month, may we also see how God can use us to live faithfully for him each day. What better way to prepare ourselves to celebrate Christmas?

Dr. John Van Schepen is a retired pastor who served churches in Washington, Wisconsin, Indiana, Oregon, and California. He and his wife, Willie, have been blessed with five children and eleven grandchildren. Since retirement, he has served as an interim pastor several times. The Van Schepens have also served with various organizations to train and encourage pastors and church leaders in several countries.

IN THE BEGINNING

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. . . . God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

—Genesis 1:1, 31

The opening words of Matthew present us with a list of names in the family line of Jesus. Some readers skip over such lists, seeing them as boring or only filled with names that are hard to pronounce. The gospel account of Luke has a list of names like this too. These lists are selective genealogies of Jesus—and in them God is saying, “See, I have kept my word; the promised Messiah and Savior has come through my chosen people.”

The list in Luke includes many names that are different from those in Matthew, possibly because Luke lists the ancestors of Mary, the mother of Jesus. The list in Luke is also longer than the one in Matthew, going back all the way to the beginning, to connect Jesus with God himself. This helps us see that the story of salvation—indeed, the story of the whole

world—is really all about God. God created a good, amazing world, only to have it scarred by sin because our human parents disobeyed (Genesis 3). But God did not sit idly by. He set out to redeem and restore his world—including us!

From the beginning, God planned to renew us through his Son, Jesus. And when Jesus, the Savior, was born in Bethlehem, God’s plan took a major step forward. So as we look ahead to celebrating Christmas, let us join with the angels who announced Jesus’ birth, singing, “Glory to God in the highest” (Luke 2:14)!

Creator God, thank you for your faithfulness in sending your Son, our Savior, Christ the Lord! Amen.

ADAM AND THE FALL INTO SIN

The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
—Romans 6:23

Adam and Eve, the first human beings, were created good. If God created all things good, including humankind, then why is there so much bad in the world and in our lives? Where did sin come from? This question has intrigued people throughout the ages.

Genesis 3 tells us the sad story of the fall into sin. God had called Adam and Eve to obey him freely and willingly as they cared for his creation. But they failed to obey. Because of their disobedience, which we call sin, this world and our lives are now filled with brokenness, pain, and sorrow. Further, the lives of all people will end in death (Genesis 2:17; Hebrews 9:27).

Perhaps today you are experiencing the devastating effects of sin around you: the death of a loved one, a life-threatening disease, hunger, homelessness, or the ravages of war. Thank

God that the story does not end there.

In Romans 5, the apostle Paul compares and contrasts Jesus and Adam. While Adam, the first man, brought sorrow and death, in Jesus we receive new hope and joy. Christmas reminds us that God sent his Son to heal this sin-scarred world, to forgive our sins, and to give us eternal life. What an awesome gift! And here's more good news: you don't need to wait until Christmas to receive this gift. Why not trust Jesus as your Savior and Lord today?

God of all grace, thank you for the gift of Jesus, who came to restore us from all the effects of sin. We long for that day when he returns and we will see you face to face! Amen.

EVE AND THE GOSPEL PROMISE

The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.
—1 John 3:8

Eve's name is not mentioned in Matthew or Luke's genealogy. But it's important to include her as we reflect on God's promise to bring the Savior. Having been tempted by the serpent (Satan), Eve disobeyed God, and so did Adam. Sin damaged Eve's relationship to her husband and her child-bearing. Yet there is hope.

Genesis 3:15 includes what is often called the first gospel promise. God promised that one of Eve's offspring would crush Satan and the power of sin in this world—and yet the offspring would be wounded in the process.

When Eve gave birth to her first son, she may have thought this child would be the promised victor over sin. She named him Cain, saying, "With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man" (Genesis 4:1). But Cain was not the promised one.

Cain only made things worse by murdering his brother (Genesis 4:8).

Many generations later, another woman—Mary—gave birth to a son, and he was named Jesus because he would "save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). He, the Son of God and Son of Man, came "to destroy the devil's work" by dying on the cross to save us. That battle will not be over until Jesus comes again (Revelation 20:11-21:8). What a day that will be when the victory over sin will be complete!

God of grace and peace, thank you for continually working to bring the Savior, Jesus, to crush Satan under his feet. Thank you, Lord Jesus, that one day your victory over sin will be complete. Amen.

GLIMMERS OF HOPE

Adam . . . had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth.
—Genesis 5:3

Adam and Eve must have been devastated when Cain murdered Abel (Genesis 4:8). Nevertheless, they continued to rely on the promise of God.

When Eve had another son, Seth, she said, “God has granted me another child . . .” The word for “child” here also means “offspring,” indicating reliance on the promise God had made (Genesis 3:15). Although we know salvation was a long way off, we can also see a glimmer of hope here, for as Seth grew up and also had children, we read, “At that time people began to call on the name of the LORD.”

We see another glimmer of hope where Seth is described as a son of Adam “in his own likeness, in his own image.” This reference echoes the words of Genesis 1:27, indicating that our gracious and faith-

ful God and heavenly Father was renewing humankind.

As we celebrate the coming of Christ at Christmas and long for his coming again to complete the work of restoring God’s world, may we serve our Lord joyfully and call on his name each day. Knowing that God’s Son himself came to live among us to fulfill God’s promise of salvation, we can worship him with all our heart, singing, “O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord!”

Dear God, thank you for the hope you give us in the coming of Jesus, our Savior. As we continue to struggle against sin in our lives and in the world, may we faithfully worship and joyfully serve you. Amen.

WALKING WITH GOD

Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away.
—Genesis 5:24

Were you tempted to skip over the strange names in today's Bible reading? Please don't! When we read this genealogy, we learn that Enoch was the father of the oldest man in the Bible. More importantly, Enoch is the only one in this list of names who doesn't follow this pattern: "he lived . . . and then he died." Instead, the Bible says, "Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away." How could this be?

The Bible gives us a clear hint. Twice we are told that Enoch "walked faithfully with God." The word "walked" here indicates a special relationship between God and Enoch, and—as a result—Enoch did not die. After reading how each generation died, it's awesome to read of this man, Enoch, who walked with God and then was taken to be with God.

Perhaps today you would like to know how you can walk with God. In Matthew 1 we read that Jesus was the promised Immanuel, which means "God with us." Jesus bridges the gap between us and God so that we can walk with him not only today but forever, like Enoch. That is why Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die" (John 11:25). There is only one question left to answer: "Do you believe?"

Loving God, thank you for calling us to walk with you today, and thank you for making it possible by faith in Jesus to walk with you forever. Amen.

A RIGHTEOUS MAN

"To me this is like the days of Noah . . . yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken . . ." says the LORD, who has compassion on you.
—Isaiah 54:9-10

Many people have heard the story of Noah and the ark. It's an exciting drama from beginning to end. The Bible tells us that all the wickedness and evil on the earth grieved God, and he was sorry he had made human beings. Human sin was so devastating that it had infected all of God's good creation.

But there was one person who "found favor" with the Lord. Noah was "a righteous man"; he "walked faithfully with God." Can you imagine Noah's patience as he worked for many years, possibly several decades, to build the ark while other people probably mocked him? (See Genesis 5:32; 6:10; 7:6; 11:10; 2 Peter 2:5.)

Of course, the lead actor in this drama is God. God is the one who told Noah to build an ark. God is the one who saved Noah and his family and all the

animals on the ark from the flood. Noah was called "righteous," but he was still infected by sin (Genesis 9). God's restoration work wasn't finished.

Many years later, God sent Isaiah to call his people to repent. The situation reminded him of the days of Noah, but God would never stop loving his people. A little earlier, in Isaiah 53, God also promised that his righteous servant would come and take on himself all the people's sins—and that servant was Jesus. By his love, God has made a way to rescue us and remove our sins forever.

Lord, thank you for sending Jesus to save us. Thank you for forgiving our sins and promising to restore the world. Amen.

A DIVIDED WORLD

"I pray also for those who will believe in me . . . that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you."

—John 17:20-21

Peleg, a great-great-grandson of Noah, was given an unusual name, which means "divided." Our reading today explains that he was "named Peleg, because in his time the earth was divided." And what does that mean?

The story about the tower of Babel in Genesis 11 may be the answer to that question. The people in that day wanted to build a city with a tower reaching into the sky in order to make a name for themselves. What a far cry from Noah, who "walked faithfully" with God! God intervened at Babel by confusing the language of the people so that they scattered throughout the world.

Wherever we look in the world today, we still live with the bitter results of division as we experience nationalism, tribalism,

racism, prejudice, and warfare. Just as we begin making headway in one place, division rears its ugly head in another place. Is there any hope? Yes!

At Jesus' birth, the angel announced, "I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. . . . A Savior has been born to you" (Luke 2:10-11). And in John 17 we see that before Jesus was arrested and crucified for our sins, he prayed that we would be one. Because of Jesus' finished work, we can walk not only with the Lord but also together, and we can love one another. Let's begin today.

Lord Jesus, we pray that unity in you may replace our divisions so that people everywhere might see your glory. In your name we pray. Amen.

NAME CHANGE

"You are worthy . . . and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation."

—Revelation 5:9

Long ago God gave Abram, whose name meant "exalted father," an amazing promise: "I will make you into a great nation" (Genesis 12:2). Sometime later God also told Abram that his offspring would be as many as the stars (15:5). But many years rolled by, and Abram and his wife, Sarai, had no children of their own.

When Abram was 99 years old, God appeared to him again and doubled down on his promise. God renamed him Abraham, which means, "father of many nations." As a sign of this new promise, God commanded that all males in Abraham's household—whether born to him or bought by him—were to be circumcised. God's promise was sealed in blood.

Abraham and his wife did have a son, and many descendants followed. So Abraham became

a father of many nations. But that is not the end of the story.

Years later, one of Abraham's descendants, a child named Jesus, was born in Bethlehem. In Ephesians 1:7 we read this about him: "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins." And that forgiveness, we find in the book of Revelation, extends to every tribe, language, people, and nation.

Today, through the shed blood of Jesus who died on the cross, God's promise to Abraham extends to you wherever you live. Will you receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior?

Lord, with all the hosts of heaven we worship you, for you are the one who faithfully keeps his promises. In Jesus, Amen.

ANOTHER NAME CHANGE

"Your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him." —Genesis 17:19

Let's pause today to consider someone who is not named in the genealogies of Jesus: Sarah. When we first meet her, she is called Sarai, which means "princess." But God made a subtle change to call her Sarah, indicating that she would be the mother of nations and kings.

When God told Abraham these things, he laughed to himself. So did Sarah (Genesis 18:12). But a year later, their laughter was filled with joy. God kept his promise, and Sarah gave birth to a son, Isaac, which means "he laughs."

This delightful story points back to God's promise to Eve about the importance of the woman's offspring. It also points ahead, for God said he would establish an everlasting covenant through Isaac. Much later an angel of the Lord appeared to

a man named Joseph and said, "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife. . . . She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21).

Some people might laugh at this and say, "Impossible!" But the Bible says it's true—and whoever believes in Jesus will be saved from sin and have eternal life (John 3:16). Put your trust in Jesus today so that your life may be filled with the joy that he alone can give.

Lord, strengthen our faith, and remind us as you did for Abraham and Sarah and for Joseph and Mary that you are always faithful and keep your promises. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WHERE IS THE LAMB?

"The fire and wood are here," said Isaac, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"
—Genesis 22:7

I was a young boy when I first heard this story about Isaac. I remember the picture in the story Bible my mother read, showing Abraham raising his knife over the altar. Our focus today is on Isaac's question, "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

Though God graciously provided a ram in place of Isaac, it was not "the Lamb." Later, hundreds of lambs were sacrificed on the night of the Passover to deliver God's people from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12). Later still, thousands more were sacrificed in the temple in obedience to God's commands for offerings. Yet Isaac's question remained: "Where is the lamb?"

Years later, Isaiah prophesied that the people's true salvation would come through a lamb who would pour out his life and bear the sin of many

(Isaiah 53). But God's people continued to wait.

Then—more than 700 years after Isaiah—while John the Baptist was baptizing people in the Jordan River, he pointed to Jesus and cried out, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

Christmas Day is coming. Let us joyfully celebrate the birth of God's only Son, Jesus Christ, the Lamb, who died and rose again to take away our sins and give us new life forever!

Lord, we eagerly look for that day when Christ will return and we will sing with the angels, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive . . . honor and glory and praise!" (Revelation 5:12). Amen.

JACOB THE WRESTLER

So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till day-break.
—Genesis 32:24

Jacob was in a difficult position, and it was mostly his own fault. After deceiving his brother, Esau, Jacob had fled for his life to go and live with his Uncle Laban in Haran. Now, many years later, Jacob was on his way back home, and he was expecting to meet Esau again (see Genesis 27-31).

Jacob plotted and planned how he might smooth things over with Esau. Finally, in desperation and fear, he cried out to God, "Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack" (Genesis 32:11).

The next night—as Jacob waited alone—a stranger came to wrestle with him till dawn. It left Jacob injured but blessed by God. God marked that event by giving Jacob a new name: *Israel*, meaning "he struggles with God."

Are you wrestling with God and struggling with sin in your life? You may be asking, "Does God really care for me?" Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). God sees us; he sees our pride, our selfishness, and our lack of love for others. He also knows when we feel left out.

What's more, God knows who we are in Christ. Through Jesus we are forgiven and reconciled with God. We are given new life and called to be faithful. Is God renewing your life today?

Jesus, you were given the name Immanuel, "God with us." Thank you for the promise that nothing can separate us from your love. Amen.

THE SCEPTER OF JUDAH

"The scepter will not depart from Judah . . . until he to whom it belongs shall come. . . ."
—Genesis 49:10

God works out his plans, but they are often mysterious to us. Consider the case of Judah, Jacob's son. Jacob's blessing of favor was not to Reuben, his firstborn, or to the next two eldest sons, Simeon and Levi. The blessing of kingship went to Judah.

Jacob predicted that his other sons would bow before Judah. To him would belong "the scepter," a symbol of kingship. This scepter would be passed down continually through his descendants. How could that ever happen?

Jacob's prophecy began to be fulfilled when David, a shepherd from Bethlehem in the land of Judah, was chosen by God to rule God's people (1 Samuel 16; Psalm 78:67-72). He led them with a heart of integrity and with skill. Yet we know that despite David's kingship, the people were seldom faithful to

the Lord. They needed a new and better king.

God continued to work out his plan, eventually bringing Jesus to be born in Bethlehem, the city of David. And Jesus came to give up his own life, to pay for all our sin, and to rise again so that we can have new life with God. That is why Jesus, the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Revelation 5:5), is the one who holds the scepter as King of kings. And he declares boldly, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18).

Thank you, Lord, that you are always faithfully at work in our lives even if we do not understand. Empower us daily to put our trust in Jesus, the Lion and the Lamb, our Savior, Lord, and King. Amen.

THE CURE FOR MESSINESS

"She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah."
—Genesis 38:26

Life can get messy, and Judah made a mess of his life. Perhaps your life is in a jam right now. My mother (echoing some old preachers) often said, "God can make a straight line with a crooked stick." Genesis 38 shows how God's grace can give us hope in the midst of life's messiness.

Judah chose a wife, Tamar, for his oldest son, but the oldest son died without children. According to custom, Tamar was given to the second son, to father an heir for his brother, but then the second son also died. The next brother, Shelah, was legally required to marry Tamar next. But Judah put off the marriage indefinitely. Perhaps he felt Tamar was cursed.

Desperate for her future, Tamar pretended to be a prostitute and seduced Judah to make her pregnant, without his realizing it. When he found

out she was pregnant by prostitution, Judah accused her of immorality, but then Tamar proved that Judah himself was the father. Judah proclaimed, "She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah." She later gave birth to twin boys, and the first-born was named Perez.

Though Tamar was "more righteous," she too was sinful. So are we. Christmas reminds us—in spite of our messiness—that God is in control. Jesus, our Savior, became a descendant of Perez (Matthew 1:3) so that the righteousness of God might be given to all who believe in him (Romans 3:22). What grace! What hope!

Lord God, thank you for the grace given to us through the righteousness of Jesus. Amen.

THREE STRIKES BUT NOT OUT

By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed. . . .
—Hebrews 11:31

Rahab was a prostitute, a traitor to her own people, and an outsider. Even with those three strikes against her, God did not say, "You're out!" Rather, she received a place among God's people and is held up as an example of faith (Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25).

Rahab had grown to recognize that the God of Israel was the Lord of heaven and earth. She trusted God and was willing to take risks to help his people. So her life was spared, and she became incorporated into God's people (Joshua 6:25).

This story serves as a lesson to God's people that his love for them is not because they are so great or good; rather, God loves us all because he is gracious and good. Rahab became an ancestor of David (Matthew 1:5). So she too is in the family line of Jesus.

Today you might think you have too many strikes against you to belong to Jesus' family. But the Bible has good news: all who receive Jesus and believe in his name have the right to become children of God (John 1:12).

Christmas invites us to believe in Jesus and to look forward with hope to the day when he will come again to reign as the Lord of lords and King of kings forever.

We worship you, Lord of heaven and earth, and we pray that during this Christmastime many more people may come into your family, for Christ Jesus alone gives us the right to become children of God. In his name we pray. Amen.

FAMOUS IN BETHLEHEM

"May you . . . be famous in Bethlehem . . . through the offspring the LORD gives you by this young woman. . . ." —Ruth 4:11-12

The story of Ruth is one of the Bible's great love stories. It overflows with kindness and compassion. It also highlights how God's people experience his sovereignty and tender mercy as he works through the lives of his people.

As Ruth had shown kindness to Naomi her mother-in-law, (Ruth 1:16-17), so Boaz, a close relative of Naomi, showed kindness to Ruth. Boaz's kindness is not only personal but also flows from the kindness of God as he acts to provide Ruth and Naomi a home because they are his relatives (Ruth 2:20). Boaz acts as the guardian-redeemer for Ruth and Naomi, and the people of Bethlehem bless Boaz by saying, "May you . . . be famous in Bethlehem."

We might never have given Bethlehem a second thought if not for the fact that Ruth and

Boaz, with their son Obed, became ancestors of David there (Matthew 1:5). And many years later, Jesus, a descendant of David, was also born in Bethlehem.

Jesus saves us from our sin through his birth as the Son of God and through his death on the cross. Why? Love. In fact, it's the greatest love story ever! "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Father, you honored Ruth and Naomi, showing kindness to them through Boaz as their guardian-redeemer. And today, through their descendant and your Son, Jesus, you honor us by redeeming us from sin! In his name, Amen.

THE WAY OF GOD'S HEART

"People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."
—1 Samuel 16:7

Today, as we move closer to Christmas, we move on to the second section of Matthew's genealogy, which focuses on David and his descendants. Matthew wants us to know clearly that Jesus, the son of David, came to be our King.

David was not the first king of Israel. Saul, who was tall and handsome, had become the people's first king (1 Samuel 8-10). But Saul disobeyed God's commands, so the Lord rejected him as king. God then chose David to be king—not because he was perfect, but because he was a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14).

What does that mean? Psalm 23, written by David, who had been a shepherd in his youth, helps us understand. In Psalm 23, David says the Lord is his shepherd, leading him to green pastures and

quiet waters, guiding him in the right paths and protecting him in dark valleys. The Lord, said David, refreshed his soul, comforted him, and assured him that God's goodness and love would surround him forever. In some ways, we could say, David walked with God as Enoch and Noah had done.

Jesus, who became not only the son of David but is also the Son of God, our King, is our "good shepherd" who has laid down his life for us, his sheep (John 10:14-15). And he has shown perfectly the way of living by God's heart. Shall we trust and follow him today?

Thank you, Jesus, our Shepherd-King, for calling us to follow your way and your heart in the world today. May we do so always. In your name, Amen.

REHOBAM'S HEAVY YOKE

Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God . . . made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant. . . .
—Philippians 2:5-7

When King David died, his son Solomon became the next king. He had an excellent start, but Solomon later turned away from God. His actions angered the Lord (see 1 Kings 2-11). When Solomon died, his son Rehoboam was crowned as king. The coronation was interrupted by Jeroboam, who pleaded with Rehoboam to lighten the crushing taxes that Solomon had put in place.

Rehoboam consulted with the elders. They advised him to serve the people by lowering the taxes. But Rehoboam refused. Instead, he decided to increase the burdensome taxes. The result was rebellion, division, and sin in the kingdom.

Philippians 2 describes Jesus' attitude and actions when he came to be our Savior and King. It tells us that although Jesus was one with God, he

humbled himself by becoming a human being like us. And he willingly served by giving his life on a cross to save us from sin and death. Therefore, God raised him not only from death but also to rule in heaven, promising that every knee will bow before our servant King and confess him as Lord.

Is anything burdening you today? Jesus calls, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. . . . For I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28-29).

Lord Jesus, our Servant-King, may we not only come to you to find rest for our souls but join with you as we joyfully serve others today. Amen.

STAND FIRM IN FAITH

"If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all."
—Isaiah 7:9

Today's reading in Isaiah takes place many years after the kingdom of Israel had divided. The northern part, made up of ten tribes, was still called Israel (and sometimes Ephraim) and their capital was Samaria. They had hopelessly walked away from God. The southern part, known as Judah (plus the tribe of Benjamin), was not far behind. Judah was under attack by Aram (Syria) and Israel. In a panic, King Ahaz of Judah turned away from God and looked to the powerful king of Assyria for help (2 Kings 16).

Isaiah told Ahaz not to fear but to stand firm with faith in God. Israel and Syria would soon be shattered, he said. God even offered to give Ahaz a sign of his own choosing to prove that he could trust God. But Ahaz refused. So God, the true King of kings, gave both Ahaz and the house of David a sign.

God said a virgin would have a son, and he would be called Immanuel, which means "God with us."

How does that relate to us? A week from today will be Christmas. Matthew describes the birth of Christ as God's miraculous fulfillment of the sign given to Ahaz. Jesus was born, and he is Immanuel, "God with us" (see Matthew 1:9, 23).

We may be tempted to lose heart because of warring nations or life-threatening events, but this sign remains our hope. Immanuel has come and is coming again. Stand firm in faith, sisters and brothers, for "if God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31).

Lord, help us to stand firm in faith. Thank you that in Jesus nothing can separate us from your love. Amen.

NO REMEDY

The LORD . . . sent word to them through his messengers again and again. . . . But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets. . . . —1 Chronicles 36:15-16

Perhaps Matthew ends his list of kings with Josiah (Matthew 1:11) because the Bible says, "He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and followed the ways of his father David" (2 Chronicles 34:2). Josiah, however, was not the last king of Judah. Zedekiah was.

Though God persistently sent messengers and prophets to warn Zedekiah, he hardened his heart and would not turn to the Lord. The Bible says there was "no remedy." Incredible! So God sent the king of Babylon to destroy Jerusalem, and God's people became captives in a foreign land.

But God's story does not end there. Praise God, there *is* a remedy! In Hebrews 1:1-2 we read that although God spoke through prophets in the past, "in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom

he appointed the heir of all things, and through whom he also made the universe." In less than a week, we will celebrate Christmas and the coming of Jesus, God's Son. He alone is the remedy for our sin.

Jesus, the maker of the universe, lived and died to restore us, was raised from the dead, and rules at God's right hand. He is the King of kings! Let us with joy do what is right in the eyes of the Lord as we reflect his glory in the world.

Father God, we join with the angels who sang long ago, "Glory to God in the highest." We praise you that through Jesus you give us the remedy for sin and all its effects. Heal and restore us, we pray. Amen.

THE COMING GLORY

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

After about 70 years in captivity, a remnant of God's exiled people in Babylon returned to the land of Judah. Persia had taken over Babylon, and now Zerubbabel, a descendant of King David (Matthew 1:13), was appointed governor to rebuild the temple of God in Jerusalem.

When the temple's foundation was laid, many of the people shouted with joy, but the older ones wept. Why? Because they had seen the former temple in its glory (Ezra 3). What could compare to that? God encouraged Zerubbabel to be strong and to keep working. One day God would shake up the world again, and the glory of the Lord's temple would outshine even the old temple that had been destroyed.

How could that be? The Bible gives us two answers. First, Jesus, the Son of God, became

one of us to reveal the glory of God's grace and truth (John 1:14). He whose very body is the temple of God (John 2:21) came to give us eternal life.

Second, when Jesus returns, with "the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God," there will be no temple, "because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple" (Revelation 21:2, 22). And all whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life will live there (21:27). Trust in Jesus, the Lamb of God, as your Savior, and you too will see the glory of the Lord!

Jesus, Lamb of God, thank you for being our temple, where we find forgiveness of sins and the loving presence of God forever. In your name, Amen.

GOD REMEMBERS

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them."
—Luke 1:68

For about 400 years, there had been no direct word from the Lord. Had God forgotten his people? No! In the temple one day, a word from God came to a priest, Zechariah. His name means "God remembers."

Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, were devoted followers of God. They were old and childless, and Elizabeth was a relative of Mary, who became the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:30-31, 36). One day Zechariah had a rare opportunity to burn incense at the time of prayer in the temple. And while he was doing that, an angel of God came with startling news: Zechariah and Elizabeth would have a son! He was to be named John, and he would become a prophet like Elijah, bringing many people back to the Lord (see Malachi 4:5-6). This child became John the Baptist, who pre-

pared people for the coming of Jesus, the promised Savior (Luke 3). When John was born, Zechariah sang a hymn of praise because he knew salvation was coming. God had not forgotten his people.

Dear friends, if you are struggling with disappointments and God seems far away, take heart. God has not forgotten you. He wants to give you his peace today. In his mercy and love God remembers each one of us. That's the good news of Christmas: Jesus, who forgives our sins and brings us new life, has come! So let's join with Zechariah and sing God's praises today.

Lord, thank you that you never forget us, no matter the circumstances. Work in us by your Spirit so that we may increasingly trust in you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WHY ME?

"Why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"
—Luke 1:43

"It's the most wonderful time of the year," says an old Christmas song. But for some of us who are reading these words, today may be far from wonderful. Maybe your life has been devastated by disease, or you have recently lost a loved one, or some other painful event is causing you to cry out, "Why is this happening to me?"

Elizabeth knew such pain. She was old and childless, and in that culture she was therefore disgraced (Luke 1:25). Long ago she had probably given up all hope of becoming a mother. Imagine the talk in her village: "What do you think she did to make God punish her this way?" God actually didn't operate that way, but people often made that wrong assumption.

Soon after God's promise that she and her husband would have a son, however (Luke

1:11-17), Elizabeth became pregnant. Then, six months later, her cousin Mary came with even greater news: an angel had said Mary would become the mother of God's Son (Luke 1:31-32)! Elizabeth was not disappointed or jealous. Full of excitement, she exclaimed, "Why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

Today let each of us, no matter our circumstances, look in awe at Christ and ask ourselves, "Why should I be so blessed that Jesus has come to save me and fill me with the hope of eternal life?"

Why? Because God loves you!

Lord, thank you for coming into our world to save us and give us hope even in our pain. Fill us with joy and amazement! Amen.

DO NOT BE AFRAID

"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."
—Matthew 1:20

Matthew makes clear that David is centrally important in the family line of Jesus. But with Joseph there is a disconnect. He is a son (descendant) of David, but Joseph is not the father of Jesus. If the birth of Jesus puzzles you, think how puzzling it was to Joseph.

Joseph was engaged to Mary, and they had dreams of raising a family together. Before the wedding, however, she came to him with the news that she was pregnant—by the Spirit of God. *Oh, sure!*

Picture Joseph as he wrestled with his dilemma. He wanted to live God's way. The law of God said he had the right to have her stoned to death. But Joseph was also gracious and did not want to disgrace Mary. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, to explain what God was doing. The angel

began by saying, "Do not be afraid . . ."—and then assured Joseph that the child conceived in Mary was from the Holy Spirit and would be the long-promised Savior. This child was to be named Jesus, because he would "save his people from their sins."

Is there something in the past, present, or future causing you to fear? Christmas reminds us of Immanuel ("God with us"). In Jesus, *God is with us*. And his promise at the end of Matthew still stands today: "I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

Dear Jesus, we long to be free of fear. Make us secure in the knowledge that you are with us, no matter what happens. Amen.

GOD'S PONDERING SERVANT

Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.
—Luke 2:19

Mary had her share of struggles. Her wedding plans were made, and she looked forward to living a normal life with her husband in Nazareth. Then one day God stepped into her life and told her she would be the mother of the Savior, the Son of God. Mary responded in faith, "I am the Lord's servant. . . . May your word to me be fulfilled." She was all in, no matter where God's adventure would take her.

Mary's journey took her with Joseph to Bethlehem. She gave birth there and placed her first-born son in a manger. In obedience to God, they named him Jesus, because he would be the Savior of the world. A group of local shepherds showed up without an invitation, babbling about a bright light in the night and a choir of angels, and then they rushed off with shouts of praise. Wow! Mary reflected

on these things, struggling to put them together.

Mary kept on pondering: they received a visit from "wise men" from the East and escaped a massacre by the local king (Matthew 2), and later she watched her son die on a cross. Because Mary responded in faith, the Bible calls her blessed, for she believed what the Lord had said (Luke 1:45).

It's Christmas Eve tonight. Are you willing to take God at his word, no matter your circumstances, and believe in Jesus as your Savior? God's love, displayed for all the world in Jesus, will never let you go.

Father God, increase our faith daily. We know you love us. Guide us to serve and honor you wherever you call us to go. Amen.

THE WORD BECAME FLESH

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

—John 1:14

Since the beginning of this month, we have observed many of the people who lived in the family line of Jesus. Some were more successful than others in trying to live God's way. They wrestled with joy and pain, hatred and love just as we do. Each person forms a part of the story of God's people.

Today we celebrate Christmas. We celebrate that God became a fellow traveler with us in a new way. Just as Mary placed the infant Jesus in a manger, God placed himself into our difficult, messy, and often tiring journey in this world. John says it this way: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14).

At Christmas, the God of love gave his only Son (John 3:16) to redeem us and to be with us at all times and in all places. He wants to join us on our way,

listen to our joys and sorrows, prevent us from walking in meaningless circles, and direct us to his home of peace and joy.

Dear brothers and sisters, this is the great mystery of Christmas: Almighty God became a helpless infant. Because of the Word—Jesus in the flesh—we are not alone on our journey. We can always trust that he is walking with us. No wonder we sing today, "Joy to the world! The Lord is come!"

We glorify you, Father, for the gift of your one and only Son, Jesus. In love, you have come to walk with us through life and death to your house of peace and joy. Thank you, Lord! Amen.

LETTING GO AND LOOKING AHEAD

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation. . . .”
—Luke 2:29-30

Our children grew up referring to one of our dear friends as “Uncle Bud.” Uncle Bud and his wife attended all our daughters’ weddings. They were always there for us. Maybe you also have family friends like them. Though Simeon was not in Jesus’ family tree, he became a part of Jesus’ story in a way like family friends do.

When Jesus, the firstborn son of Mary, was brought to the temple to be consecrated to the Lord (Exodus 13:2), Simeon was there. He had served God faithfully as he waited for the Messiah, the promised Savior, to come. Then it happened. He saw Jesus, took him in his arms, and praised God.

By faith, Simeon had claimed God’s promise that the Messiah would come. By faith, he looked ahead to the salvation that Jesus would accomplish

for us. By faith, he grasped the awesome truth that the salvation brought by Jesus is available for all peoples, including you and me. No wonder Simeon was ready to move on in peace.

Christmas is past. We too must be ready to move on. Before we do, though, let me ask, “Have you seen Jesus, the Savior of the world?” You can’t hold him in your arms, but you can receive him as your Lord by faith. Then, like Simeon, you will be ready to move on as you praise God for all he has done, is doing, and will do in the future.

Father, may we, like Simeon, see all you have done and look forward to all you have promised. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

A FAITHFUL WORSHIPER

She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.
—Luke 2:37

Another “family friend” in Jesus’ story was the prophet Anna. She was eighty-four years old and had been widowed after just seven years of marriage. Anna was from the old Israelite tribe of Asher, one of the ten tribes that had split away from the rule of King David’s line long ago (see 2 Chronicles 10). So she represented a remnant of God’s followers from those earlier times, showing that God’s promise was for them too.

The Bible says Anna never left the temple but worshiped there night and day. Perhaps she noticed the commotion caused by Simeon—or maybe she too was “moved by the Spirit” (see Luke 1:27)—and suddenly she saw Jesus. By grace, her eyes of faith were opened to see that this child was the Christ who fulfilled all of God’s promises. And immediately she began to give thanks.

Just two days ago we celebrated Christmas. Jesus, the Savior of the world, has come. Have you stopped to give thanks because of God’s good news? In him we have forgiveness of sins and hope for the future. Thank you, Jesus!

And there is more! Anna immediately began telling others that, with this child, salvation had come. Many people today are looking for love that forgives and brings joy to their lives. Will you tell them that Jesus has come to do that? You don’t have to be old; any believer, even a child, can share the good news of salvation!

Lord, thank you for the joy and praise Anna adds to Christmas. Fill our hearts with thanksgiving in Jesus’ name. Amen.

SINGLE-MINDED DEVOTION

"He must become greater; I must become less."

—John 3:30

Nothing deterred this wilderness preacher from his single-minded devotion to Jesus. From the beginning, John made clear that he was not the Messiah (Christ). His ministry was about pointing people to Jesus.

When Jesus came to John to be baptized, John's voice rang out, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" Neither petty arguments nor the fact that his followers left him to follow Jesus (John 3:26) caused John to lose focus. He simply said, "He must become greater; I must become less." I love the words of John 3:29, which say John was full of joy because he had heard the bridegroom's voice.

At this time of year, children and adults often ask, "What did you get for Christmas?" How quickly we lose focus on Jesus, who came to give us salvation.

Instead, we think of ourselves and the things we have or don't have. Ask yourself today, "Am I full of joy because I have heard the Savior's voice?"

One day Jesus will return. Then all who have heard his voice and have faith in him as the Savior will join with God's people, singing, "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!" (Revelation 19:6-7). What a day that will be!

Dear Lord, help me to avoid getting caught up in my own interests and other distractions. Guide me daily to stay focused on Jesus and his amazing love—now and until he returns. In his name, Amen.

JAMES THE BELIEVER

I passed on to you . . . that Christ died for our sins . . . that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day . . . and that he appeared to . . . James. . . .
—1 Corinthians 15:3-7

Jesus, the firstborn of Mary, had several younger brothers who were born to Mary and Joseph. During Jesus' teaching ministry these brothers and many others from his hometown did not believe he was the Messiah, the promised Savior (John 7:5). On at least one occasion, his whole family wondered if Jesus might be insane, rather than truly the Messiah (Mark 3:20-21).

Then one day, after Jesus had died on the cross and had risen from the grave, he appeared to his brother James. We do not know the exact nature of that appearance, but we know that James became a believer.

James also became a leader of the early church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13; Galatians 1:19). Later he wrote the New Testament book of James. This letter was written to encourage

Jewish Christians who were scattered among the nations of the Roman Empire and being persecuted for their faith.

Do you believe in Jesus? Jesus appears to us clearly in God's Word, the Bible. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you see the truth that James saw. Jesus, the Son of God, was born a human being, died for our sins, and rose victorious over death; he is the Savior, Christ Jesus, our Lord. It's not too late. Believe in him and let his life fill yours today!

Lord Jesus, some people have decided they have reasons not to believe in you. Show us from your Word who you are so that we may know you as the risen Lord and Savior. In your name we pray. Amen.

THE JESUS FAMILY

To all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. . . . —John 1:12

I grew up in a large extended family. It's so large that I don't know all of my first cousins.

Though most of us love our families, we know there can be times of making mistakes, hurting one another, and disagreeing with each other. When conflicts come up, we should try to resolve them. And when we need wisdom, it can help to be able to rely on the family of God, which can offer love and support as well.

Today's episode took place early in Jesus' ministry. Jesus was attracting large crowds because of his teaching and healing. His family members had heard some reports, and they thought Jesus might be "out of his mind"—though he wasn't, of course. When he was told they had come looking for him, he gave what might seem a surprising answer. Jesus began with a question: "Who are

my mother and my brothers?" He was not disrespecting his biological family here; he used this as a "teaching moment" for all his listeners—including us. He pointed out a much larger and more important family, the family of God. Then he explained how to become part of this family: "Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

Jesus, God's Son, invites all of us into his family. And to all who receive him and believe in his name, he gives "the right to become children of God." Trust in Jesus today as your Lord and Savior, and you will be part of his forever family.

Thank you, Lord, for inviting us to become part of your everlasting family by trusting in Jesus as our Savior and Lord. Amen.

LOOK TO JESUS

When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman . . . to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.
—Galatians 4:4-5

We have observed many people in Jesus' family who either anticipated or experienced God's plan of salvation. We have also seen how, by faith, we can become part of Jesus' family.

Today marks the end of our month together and the end of another year. Where should we go from here? We end where we began. We can see that the story of salvation and being welcomed into God's family is all about the God who created us and gives us life. So, as members of Jesus' family, we are called to "look to Jesus."

Jesus, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, is "the pioneer and perfecter of faith." He planned the blueprint for our salvation. He died to save us from sin and to restore our relationship with the

Father. He is the only Savior. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name . . . by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). God has given us the right to be his children by believing in Jesus.

If you are unsure about the meaning or purpose of your life, look to Jesus. He endured the cross to remove your sins and give you eternal life. If you know Jesus as your Lord, keep looking to him in the coming year and beyond, and run with endurance and joy the race that is marked out for you.

Holy Spirit of God, work in our lives so that we may know you as our Savior and joyfully follow you as our Lord. May we always keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. In his name, Amen.

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