



IN THE PRESENCE
of the

KING

Five Devotions to Celebrate the Birth of the Messiah

WILL GRAHAM

“

O Bethlehem...

from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be

RULER

in Israel,

whose coming forth

is from of old,

from ancient days.

”

—MICAH 5:2, ESV



INTRODUCTION

HOW WILL YOU RESPOND TO HIS COMING?

If I were to ask you to close your eyes and picture Christmas, what visions would come into your head?

Perhaps it would be an image of your extended family, gathered around the dining room table, enjoying a special meal together. Maybe you would picture you and your spouse in front of the window, watching snowflakes dance in the December wind. You could picture your children ripping open presents in front of a tree, the room aglow with Christmas lights and laughter. Or maybe it would be the family gathered around grandma or grandpa, listening to the Christmas story from Luke 2.

Happy memories. Good times.

For others, those pictures wouldn't be quite as joyful. Perhaps the Christmas season brings back painful memories of difficult times or lost loved ones; shattered plates, slamming doors, or empty chairs.

Maybe Christmas fills you with delight and peace. Maybe it's cause for anxiety and dread.

It's true that we could all look at the same thing—Christmas—and come up with completely different emotions and responses.

Have you ever considered that the same was true that first Christmas, when Jesus came into this world?

The people we see in the Christmas story experienced things that were unique in the history of the world—things that were never seen before and have not been seen since. Naturally they responded in different ways.

For some, Jesus brought hope; for others, fear. For some, He was God's greatest gift; for others, He was a challenge to their authority.

Over the next few weeks, as we approach the celebration of Christ's birth, we'll look at some of the emotions and responses that were evoked when Jesus was born to Mary and Joseph in a simple manger. While we tend to read quickly through the Biblical account, we'll slow down and consider how the very real people involved had very real emotions related to the coming Messiah.

Thank you for joining me on this journey! I pray that you will be blessed.

—WILL GRAHAM



WEEK ONE
MARY

LUKE 1:26-36, 46-55 | LUKE 2:1-7, 19-20

“And Mary said: ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name.’”

—LUKE 1:46-49

It’s hard not to be intrigued and impressed by Mary. She was just a teenager, some estimates say between 13 and 16 years old, when an angel appeared to her. I can just imagine how a teen today would have reacted if an angel of the Lord showed up in their room. My guess is that the immediate response would be fear, screams, or crying. The overwhelming nature of the experience would be enough to cause sheer panic.

When the angel appeared with a joyful message—*“Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!”* (Luke 1:28)—the Bible says that Mary was *“troubled”* (v. 29). The angel even encouraged her with *“Do not be afraid”* (v. 30).

You would expect Mary to struggle with this life-changing revelation that she would bear the very Son of God. After all, things seemed to be going okay. She was engaged to a man

named Joseph, but now she would be the gossip of the town. A scandal like an unwed pregnancy would not go unnoticed, and answering the critics by saying that an angel visited her would likely cause more questions than answers.

But Mary was clearly no normal teenager!

After her initial response, Mary embraces her calling as the earthly mother of Jesus. In what is called “The Song of Mary” (Luke 1:46–55), we see a young woman who considers herself blessed, who rejoices!

Of course, the story doesn’t end there, and things don’t get any easier. Mary, at the end of her pregnancy, must endure the trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, at the end of which she delivers the Christ child in a stable.

Was she bitter? Did she shout at God, “You did this to me, and now you can’t even give me a decent place to give birth? Not even one room?”

No, as she held her child, the Son of God, the Prince of Peace, Emmanuel, she pondered all that had taken place, treasuring it in her heart.

As you enter this Advent season, maybe this year hasn’t gone

how you planned. Maybe you expected your life to be much different than it is. Perhaps you're even mad at God and blame Him for your circumstances.

If so, it's okay to be troubled, but I invite you to do as Mary did, and rejoice in the midst of your pain. Lay it all at the feet of the One who came to save you, whose birth we celebrate. Despite the struggles, Mary considered herself blessed because of what God did for her, and you can too as you ponder how He has blessed you.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

In what ways has the past year been a struggle?
How have you seen God work through your situation?
Are you able to worship Jesus in the midst of the challenges?

PRAYER:

*Dear God, thank You for the gift of Your Son, Jesus Christ, and for the hope that He gives us. Even when our lives take difficult or unexpected turns, we can still find our joy and peace in You.
In Jesus' Name, amen.*



WEEK TWO
SHEPHERDS

LUKE 2:8-18

“Then the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.’”

—LUKE 2:10-12

Imagine you are a shepherd in ancient Israel: Your job is mundane, dirty, and maybe even a little frightening. You’re out in the wilderness, away from town, and the only light you see at night comes from the fire around which you are huddled and the moon hanging overhead. With that small field of vision, you’re supposed to not only keep track of your sheep, but also protect them from attack.

Suddenly, a supernatural brightness—*“the glory of the Lord”* (Luke 2:9)—blinds your eyes, and there’s somebody there, unlike anything you’ve seen before. Perhaps you immediately realize that it’s the angel of the Lord, or maybe you are so consumed with confusion that it takes a minute to sink in that this being is from the heavenly realm. Either way, you’re so awestruck that the angel’s first words are, *“Do not be afraid”*

(v. 10). “Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger” (vv. 10–12).

I wonder if the shepherds collapsed on the ground during this overwhelming experience. We know they felt fear, of course, but imagine the flood of emotions as they began to realize that the angel of the Lord is proclaiming the news of the arrival of the Messiah!

What is the Messiah? The One promised since Genesis 3, who would come and rescue all of mankind. For the Jewish people, this is the One they had been longing for. And the shepherds were some of the first to hear of His arrival.

If the knees of the shepherds hadn’t buckled by that point, you can be sure that they did when suddenly the skies lit up and one angel became “*a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying: ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!’*” (vv. 13–14).

It’s no surprise that they immediately ran to find the Child in the manger and returned passionately glorifying and praising God!

Fear, confusion, awe, joy—the shepherds likely experienced the gamut of emotions that historic night.

How about you? As you read this passage, are you still filled with awe? Do you empathize with the confusion and fear? Can you feel their joy? If not, re-read Luke 2 and try to envision it from the shepherd's perspective once again, and pray that the Holy Spirit will fill you with His joy this Christmas season.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

As you contemplate Christmas, what are some ways that Jesus' birth brings you joy? How is your life different today because of that pivotal moment in Bethlehem?

PRAYER:

Dear God, this Christmas season, help me to focus on the incredible heavenly appearing of Jesus in this world, and what that has meant for all of mankind. Renew my passion for You. Rekindle in me the joy of my salvation! In Jesus' Name, amen.



WEEK THREE

**HEROD &
JERUSALEM**

MATTHEW 2:2-8

“Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.’ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.”

—MATTHEW 2:2-3

While the birth of Jesus brought joy and peace to Mary and the shepherds, it was a worst case scenario for King Herod. He had a generally successful reign as king, but Herod was near the end of his life and had grown paranoid, jealous, angry, and unhinged.

He was so desperate to maintain his throne that he murdered anyone he deemed a threat, especially his own family. He is said to have killed his beloved wife, Mariamne, and her two sons, as well as her brother, mother, and grandfather—and even his own firstborn son, Antipater.

It’s no wonder that Herod was terrified when wise men from the East arrived, asking “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?”

I can imagine Herod forcing a smile as he spoke with the magi. “Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also,” (Matthew 2:8) he lied, concealing his hatred and dread.

He probably waved a friendly goodbye to the wise men before excusing himself to a back room where his temper exploded.

I picture him throwing priceless vases and tearing his clothes, ripping tapestries off the wall, and turning over tables. “How can this be? I’m the king! No one—NO ONE—will take my throne! He will die first!”

All he had to do was wait on the foreigners to find the baby and report back to him. Then he would take care of this issue before the boy was even old enough to crawl.

We know the emotions that Herod was feeling, but we’re also told in this passage that all of Jerusalem was troubled as well. They knew enough about Herod to understand that he would spill innocent blood trying to protect his throne.

That’s exactly what happened, of course. After the wise men were warned about Herod and slipped out of Jerusalem without returning to him, the king devised an evil, murderous plot. In a last attempt to stave off this potential insurrection, he massacred all boys two years old and under in and around Bethlehem. Many innocent children died, many families were left broken and devastated, because of the actions of King Herod.

Christ’s arrival troubled Herod greatly, to the point of violence, because it meant a shift of power. He was used to having all authority and running things his way. He was aggressively protective of his rule and kingdom. But the birth of Jesus—the King of the Jews—meant that he might lose those things he held dear.

In Herod's mind, there was only room for one king on the throne, and he was not about to share it. The truth is, Herod was absolutely right! There is only room for one King on the throne, but Herod was not that king. Jesus is the King!

This year, what is sitting on the throne of your heart? What things are you elevating above Jesus in your life? Perhaps it's your job, your relationships, your hobbies, or your vices? Maybe you're living in a way that you know is not pleasing to Him? Don't make the same mistake as Herod. Recognize that Christ is King and surrender full control of your life to Him today.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Whether intentionally or accidentally, would you say that you prioritize the material celebration of Christmas (the gifts, parties, and decorations) or the spiritual celebration of Christmas (focusing on Jesus' birth)?

In your daily life, what items do you elevate above your faith and how can you reorder your priorities this Advent season?

PRAYER:

Dear Jesus, forgive me for not giving You complete control of my life. Help me to turn from the things that hinder my faith and walk fully surrendered in Your light. In Your Name I pray, amen.

A man with a beard, wearing a head covering and a patterned robe, is kneeling in a field of tall grass. He is holding a small, ornate, metallic box with both hands, looking down at it intently. The entire scene is bathed in a deep blue light, creating a serene and contemplative atmosphere.

WEEK FOUR
WISE MEN

MATTHEW 2:1-2, 9-12

“And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”

—MATTHEW 2:11

Who were these foreign visitors that arrived at the steps of Herod’s palace? We know very little. They’re often referred to as wise men, or magi, or even kings.

We do know that they were from “*the East*,” (Matthew 2:1) which encompasses so much territory that it’s hard to pinpoint an exact location. While there are many fascinating theories about these mysterious ambassadors, their origination, and their motivation, we can assume that they were well-educated, upper class, and likely not Jewish.

In short, one would not expect rich men of status to travel across the vast expanse of the Middle East to track down a baby in Judah. Perhaps they had studied the ancient texts of the prophets, which pointed to the coming Messiah, who was to be born of David’s line in the small town of Bethlehem.

Still, their interest in this Jewish baby was not just intellectually or curiosity-driven. No, they had “*come to worship Him*” (v. 2).

Unlike Mary and the shepherds, who were shaken from their everyday lives by a sudden jolt of a heavenly presence, the wise men were able to methodically take their time. They recognized a star in the sky that was leading them on to the Christ child, and they followed it until they found the Boy.

How did they respond at the end of their journey, as this pivotal moment came to fruition? “*They rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him*” (vv. 10–11).

Imagine the look on the faces of Mary, the teenage mother, and Joseph, the carpenter, when these exotic visitors entered, knelt in worship, and then presented gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These were gifts of great value, befitting a king.

As if a visit from the angels wasn't enough, now foreign dignitaries were entering their humble home. Not only had the heavenly realms proclaimed the arrival of the Savior, but earthly kingdoms were recognizing the importance of this moment as well.

In the coming days, you'll likely be surrounded by family and friends. Hopefully many of them will know Jesus intimately, but others may be like the wise men. They may be coming from a place far away—not physically, but spiritually. They may know of Jesus but have never met Him personally. I would encourage you to look for opportunities to share the hope of Christ with them. Like the wise men, Jesus may be exactly what they're looking for, and—once they've found Him—they too can rejoice “*with exceedingly great joy*” (v. 10)!



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

What things bring you the most joy?

The wise men brought gifts to Jesus. How are you using your gifts to bring glory to Him?

PRAYER:

Dear Jesus, I praise You, my Savior. You humbled Yourself and came to earth to save broken sinners like us, leaving Your heavenly throne. You are worthy of our worship and adoration.

Help me to live a life worthy of Your sacrifice.

In Jesus' Name, amen.

“

He is

Lord of lords and

KING OF KINGS,

and those with him are

called and chosen

and faithful.

”

—REVELATION 17:14, ESV

CONCLUSION

A CHRISTMAS THOUGHT TO PONDER

There were many reactions to Jesus' birth in that humble Bethlehem manger: peacefulness, fear, excitement, anger, hatred, and joy.

How about you? How have you responded to Christ?

Like Mary, has Jesus entered your life and changed it for the better? Do you have peace and purpose because of Him?

Like the shepherds, has your experience with Jesus left you passionately praising God? Do people around you know about Him because you can't keep your excitement to yourself?

Are you like Herod? Do you believe that Jesus might interfere with your life, place, and power so much that you want Him to stay as far away from you as possible?

Finally, are you like the wise men, the visitors from the East, who met the living God face-to-face and fell to their knees to worship Him?

What I'm asking, my friends, is this: Have you fully surrendered your life to Jesus—the One whose birth we celebrate this Christmas—as your Savior? Have you taken your brokenness and laid it at His feet? Have you allowed Him to give you a new life?

At Christmas we celebrate the birth of Jesus, but there's so much more to the story. That baby—who was fully God and fully man—grew in wisdom and stature, teaching us incredible lessons about Heaven and Hell, sin and repentance, death and life.

He ultimately went to the cross, paying your debt and mine as He bore our sins. He suffered and was crucified.

But that wasn't the end!

Jesus conquered Hell and the grave, and created a path for broken sinners like us to enter into the presence of our perfect

and righteous God. We can have eternal life with Him as we call on His name as Savior!

Yes, many people had many responses to the arrival of Christ, but today it's your response that really matters. What will you do with Him?



If you'd like to make Jesus the Lord of your life, you can express your feelings to Him with this prayer:

Dear God, I know I'm a sinner. I want to turn from my sins, and I ask for Your forgiveness. I believe Jesus Christ is Your Son. I believe that He died for my sin and that You raised Him to life. I want to trust Him as my Savior and follow Him as Lord, from this day forward. Guide my life and help me to do Your will. I pray this in the Name of Jesus.


AMEN.



All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New King James Version, ©1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Scripture quotations marked ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, ©2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.



WILL GRAHAM is vice president and associate evangelist of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) and also serves as executive director of the Billy Graham Training Center at The Cove in Asheville, N.C. Will is the third generation of Gramhams to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ under the banner of BGEA and has shared the Gospel across six continents since 2006. Will and his wife, Kendra, have two daughters, Christine Jane (CJ) and Rachel Austin, and a son, William Franklin Graham V (Quinn).



BILLY
GRAHAM
Evangelistic Association
Always Good News.