

The Twelve Days of Christmas: Twelve Responses

A Christmastide Devotional



Patrick T. Weston *and* Timothy R. Butler

Grace Presbyterian Church * Cottleville, Missouri

Introduction to “The Twelve Days of Christmas” Devotion

DURING THE SEASON OF ADVENT, we look forward with great anticipation to celebrating the birth of Jesus, when God took on flesh and was born of a virgin more than 2000 years ago. However, often December 26th feels like such a letdown and we think, “What is there left to do but clean up after Christmas?” But we forget that Christmas Day is the beginning of the Twelve Days of Christmas.

When we think of the Twelve Days of Christmas, the first thing that comes to mind is the famous old Christmas carol of the same name. But, the Twelve Days of Christmas are the days between Christmas and Epiphany, the day we celebrate the visit of the Magi to Jesus. This year, Pastor Tim and Pastor Patrick invite you to use the Twelve Days of Christmas to reflect on and respond to the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ from a biblical perspective. To help you with that, we have developed twelve devotions that explore the responses to the birth of Jesus found in Scripture, both good and bad. And finally, explore what these responses tell us about how we should respond to Good News of Great Joy in the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Christmas Day 2014
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December 26: Satan

Today's Reading: Revelation 12

Satan goes by many names: The Devil, The Deceiver, The Father of Lies, The Destroyer, The Adversary, The Ruler of the Darkness of this World. He always opposes the gracious plan and work of the LORD and seeks to destroy all that the LORD has made good. Satan is also called the Great Serpent. When God completed creation, He pronounced that all He had created was good. But Satan tempted Eve and Adam sinned against the LORD bringing death and darkness and suffering into God's good creation and He wants it to stay that way.

Satan is real and he is evil and he is powerful but the LORD our God is infinitely good and so much more powerful. Even from the moments following that first sin, the LORD began His great work of redemption for His creation, promising the destruction of Satan in Genesis 3:14-15 saying, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring¹ and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."

Satan knew that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, the Promised One, from Genesis 3 who would destroy him. And so, what is Satan's response to the birth of Jesus? Satan would seek to destroy Jesus before Jesus can destroy him. But, though Satan rages savagely and many suffer because of it, his destruction is certain in Jesus.

Anyone who watches the news can tell that there is still death and darkness and suffering all around us. Undoubtedly each of us has experienced some of these this year. As we reflect this day on the birth of Jesus, we celebrate that He was born to save His people from their sins (Mt. 1:21) and that one day, Jesus will return and He will ultimately destroy Satan and death and darkness and suffering will be no more. So Christmas Day reminds us not only of Jesus' birth, but also the hope that He has promised to return. With expectant hearts and watchful eyes, we wait longingly for His return. Come, Lord Jesus! (Rev 22:20)

December 27: Darkness

Today's Reading: John 1:1-18

At the beginning of John's Gospel, we already find the conclusion of the plot laid out. Not only will the Prince of Darkness be defeated, as we saw yesterday, so too the darkness itself will not be able to overcome the light that has entered the world (John 1:5). Though not a part of early Christmas celebrations, we are reminded of this light coming into the world each year when we find ourselves surrounded by little Christmas lights that pierce the dark December nights.

Though God himself is the true light who entered the world *and* this light will ultimately triumph, we also find just a few verses later that this darkened world cannot understand the light. As we reflect on those who surround the birth of Christ, we find that they were divided between those who understood the light and those who did not. The Creator came into His creation and yet that same creation did not recognize him (v. 10).

In the glow of Christmas, as we look at the beautiful lights on Christmas decorations, it seems hard to imagine that we might not be able to understand light for what it is, but Scripture tells us that is exactly what happened. God came into the world he made and "he was despised, and we esteemed him not" (Isaiah 53:3). What we cannot overlook is the necessity of the Holy Spirit in taking us from being those who pass by the light as ones blind to it and enables us to rejoice in the true light who dwelt amongst us. Whether today is the day God calls you for the first time to understand his light or you have been bathed in that light for years, let us again celebrate the One who pierces darkness, coming into our world that we might be restored by our Creator.

December 28: Herod

Today's Reading: Matthew 2

The Old Testament repeatedly speaks of the promised Messiah as the true and righteous King who would rule over the people of God with justice and wisdom and the authority of Heaven. And He would be a light to those who have suffered in darkness in the world because of sin. For example, the prophet Isaiah wrote,

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.” (Isaiah 9:2, 6-7)

Jesus is this promised King. However, when Jesus was born, Herod the Great was king over Israel, the OT people of God. The problem is that Herod had no right to be king. Herod was not in the line of David. In fact, Herod was not even Jewish. He was Idumean, a descendant of Esau rather than Jacob. Herod was appointed “King of the Jews” by the Roman Senate because of his support for the Roman government.

When Herod learned of the birth of Jesus, the true King, he saw Jesus as a rival to his throne and a threat to his power. In Herod’s mind, there was only one thing to do, destroy the newborn King.

When the Magi came from the East, seeking the Christ, Herod tried to use them to discover the identity and location of the infant King. But the LORD warned the Magi in a dream not to return to Herod. When Herod learned that his plan was foiled, he became furious and, in a desperate attempt to destroy his rival, had all the male children 2 years old and younger killed in the region surrounding Bethlehem.

As we reflect on the birth of Jesus, Herod reminds us that not everyone rejoiced at the birth of the King and that is still true today. In fact, even those of us who do celebrate Jesus’ birth, often resist his rule over our lives. Today, let us repent of our self-governance and long for the righteous rule of the true Kings in our hearts and minds and lives.

December 29: Scribes

Today's Reading: Matthew 2:1-5

We may think that if we just know enough, we will recognize what God is doing. In the chief priests and teachers of the law, we find those who had spent their lives pouring over God's Word. These men were those whom all the people in Israel would have looked to in order to understand the Scriptures and, indeed, in this passage we see that they knew well the prophecies of the coming Messiah. The Gospel writer speaks to this knowledge in Matthew 2:4, where these men answer Herod's inquiry about the Messiah not with their mere speculation about where the Messiah would be born, but rather their complete confidence that the Scriptures said Bethlehem would be that place. They knew the place and, thanks to the visiting Magi, they knew the time the baby had been born.

Despite their knowledge, however, we find what would appear to be apathy in their response. We read nothing of these leaders of Israelite religion seeking to find God's Messiah. That task would be left to the non-Israelite pilgrims we know as the Wise Men. Surely, this reminds us that to know is not enough. Both the Scribes and the Wise Men would have been highly knowledgeable and, certainly, this was a laudable thing. Yet the crucial turning point in their lives was how they were guided to use that knowledge. The teachers of the law understood the words of Scripture, but the Spirit was not working to enliven that knowledge in their hearts. May we pray this day that the Spirit would guide us as we reflect on the miracle of Christmas this season and every day of the year.

December 30: Israel

Today's Reading: John 1:1-13

According to the Apostle John, when Jesus, the living Word of God revealed to man, came into the world, He came to His own. He came to His own creation and to His own people. In other words, when Jesus came into the world, He came home. All of creation is His. Furthermore, He did not come to a foreign people who would have no knowledge of Him nor expect His coming. He came to Israel. He came to the very people who had received the Word of God in Scripture and yet, when the true and living Word of God came to His own people, they did not receive Him. Of all the people in the world who should have received Him, it should have been them. It makes His rejection all the more painful.

It is important to remember that the nation of Israel did not receive Jesus because He was not what they expected of the Messiah. He did not rise to power and overthrow the Roman oppression of the Jews. By the way, this was a valid desire – the Roman oppression of Israel was terrible. Instead, Jesus came to His own to deliver them in a way that they did not know they needed. He came to save His people from their sins. The Apostle Matthew wrote of Jesus saying, "... behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

While we recognize that most of Israel rejected Jesus, it is important to remember that all of the earliest disciples of Jesus were Jewish. The Apostles were all Jewish. The church in Jerusalem was undoubtedly all Jewish. While most rejected Him because He was not what they wanted in a Messiah, many are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Whether Jewish or not, all those who place their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ are His people. As we reflect today on Jesus birth, perhaps we are reminded of ways in which we reject Jesus. While He has taken upon Himself the wrath of God our sins deserve, has He taken away all financial difficulties? No. Has He taken away all marital and family strife or concerns with work and health and taxes? No. Not yet. One day when He returns, that will all be made right. But until then, are we willing to rejoice in our salvation even if everything is not yet perfect?

December 31: John the Baptist and Elizabeth

Today's Reading: Luke 1:39-45

The coming birth of John the Baptist is announced to his father, Zechariah by the angel Gabriel, who says that John will walk in the spirit of Elijah and prepare the way for the Lord Jesus. Gabriel further declares that John will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from the womb (Luke 1:13-17) so that, when Mary was pregnant and went to visit her cousin Elizabeth who was pregnant with John in her sixth month, John leaped for joy at the sound of Mary's greeting. Even from the womb, he recognized the presence of the Christ.

Furthermore, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit praising God and proclaiming in a loud voice that the baby in Mary's womb was her Lord and the ultimate fulfillment of prophecy.

All who recognize Jesus as Lord and Savior do so because our eyes and hearts have been opened to the truth by the work of the Holy Spirit in us. As we reflect this day on the birth of Jesus, will we leap for joy along with John and proclaim along with Elizabeth the Good News of the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

January 1: Mary

Today's Reading: Luke 1:26-35

To say that Mary faced painful hardships around the birth of Jesus is definitely an understatement. Yet, we can see in how she reacted why the Holy Spirit revealed to Elizabeth that Mary was “blessed among women [...] the mother of my Lord” (Luke 2:42-43). Mary may have been a young teenager, but she appears fully cognizant of the fearsome seriousness of the Lord’s angel is (v. 29).

When the angel revealed his message to her, she surely knew the difficulty of the road that lay ahead of her. How would she explain this to Joseph? How would others in her community react to her baby? Yet, she responds with one of the most beautiful statements of dedication and trust that we find in all of Scripture, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Lk. 1:37).

When called, Mary was ready to trust in God’s plan. When we look to the promises God has given each of us, most fully in his Son, are we ready to trust? As we find ourselves in this New Year, many of us may be evaluating where the LORD is leading us for the next year. Sometimes we will be led to big changes, sometimes to dutifully continuing to labor at what we have done for years. Grand or mundane, the same God who called on Mary is the one who calls us to the path set before us. Whatever we may be called to do, let us pray today that we might trust Him who calls us with it.

January 2: Joseph

Today's Reading: Matthew 1:18-25

We see in Joseph a man who desired not only to keep the letter of God's law, but the spirit of it, as well. Before the angel appears to Joseph, despite the anger he surely felt, we read that he sought to avoid publicly shaming Mary for her surprising and disturbing news (Mt. 1:19). When Mary told Joseph she was pregnant, he could have had her publicly put to death (Lev. 20:10), but Joseph did not choose the route of "justice" for himself. Rather, he followed the example God gives us – one of mercy when wronged.

Of course, Joseph had not been wronged at all, but his actions before he understood what God was doing are notable in themselves. Yes, he still needed to hear from the angel before he was willing to take Mary as his wife, but in his actions prior to the angel's appearance, we see that the man entrusted to raise Jesus bent away from our natural inclination to react badly when we are hurt.

Like Mary, Joseph was an ordinary person called to an extraordinary job. We may be called to much more ordinary things, but we too have the opportunity to start this new year by showing mercy, even when we are in our rights to demand "justice." After all, at Christmas we celebrate our Lord doing just that for us.

January 3: Angels and Shepherds

Today's Reading: Luke 2:1-20

The Greek word translated “angel” is *angelos* which literally means “messenger” or “one who is sent.” The angels are the messenger servants of the Lord. We see them fulfill this role as they visit Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds bringing the Good News of great joy of the birth of the Christ, but the angels are not only messengers of the Lord, they are worshipers of the Lord as well. When they completed delivering the Good News, a multitude of angels broke out in praise saying, “Glory to God in the highest!” (Luke 2:13-14)

Imagine what it must have been like for the shepherds in the field that night. Not only were they visited by an angel pronouncing the birth of the Christ but also saw the sky filled with an angel army praising God. It must have been an awesome and fearful sight. But it must also have been a joyful experience knowing that the Lord had chosen to reveal to them His great work of salvation in Jesus.

When the shepherds heard the Good News, they longed to see what the Lord had made known to them through His angels and hurried off to Bethlehem to see the Christ. When they found that all was just as the Lord had made known to them, they glorified and praised God just as the angels had done.

At Christmas, we remember that the Lord has made known to us His great work of salvation in Jesus. Let us remember to joyfully glorify and praise God for all He has done for us.

January 4: Simeon and Anna

Today's Reading: Luke 2:22-39

Simeon and Anna would have met the baby Jesus after most of the people we normally associate with his birth, but prior to the arrival of the Wise Men. Unlike the others, they saw no “special effects” messages calling them to witness the newborn king. They were not guided by a star. They did not see an heavenly host rejoicing. Nonetheless, God did not leave them to fend for themselves. What we see is that the Holy Spirit was upon Simeon (Luke 2.25) and Anna constantly sought the Lord in prayer and fasting (v. 37). Through God’s guidance, they were awaiting God’s rescue of Israel.

Like the chief priests and teachers of the law, they knew God’s promises, but unlike those leaders, Simeon and Anna were ready to act upon those promises’ fulfillment. When we encountered the Scribes, we reflected on how they had knowledge, but lacked the guidance of the Spirit. Clearly with these two ordinary people, however, God’s Spirit is very much at work.

As we start to think about what the New Year holds for us, the glow of Christmas ought to continue. We too know God’s promises. How can we look to those promises and be always ready to “give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who” are awaiting his redemption (v.38)? Let us seek the LORD’s guidance just as Simeon and Anna did and be ready to rejoice as we see Him working around us.

January 5: The Wise Men

Today's Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

The Magi were wise men trained in astrology and the interpretation of dreams who likely served as royal advisors to of the king of Babylon or Persia (modern Iraq and Iran, respectively). When they observed the sign of the star marking the birth of the true King of the Jews, they left their homes to set out on a long journey to Israel to worship Jesus. But the question that must be asked is how they knew to look for a star and associate that star with the birth of the King of the Jews.

In 586BC, Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and the Israelites were taken into exile in Babylon where they spent 70 years. While there, the prophet Daniel rose to great power in the land and eventually became the leader of the wise men. Through his testimony of faith in the LORD, it is likely that many converted to the worship of the LORD and studied the Old Testament Scriptures that are filled with prophecy concerning the coming Messiah. One of these prophecies is from the oracle of Balaam (who was probably also one of the wise men from many years before). His oracle says, in part, "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth" (Numbers 24:17). These men recognized the sign of the star marked the birth of the true King who would defeat the enemies of His people.

Yes, God even used the exile of the nation of Israel to prepare worshippers of the Christ from among the Gentiles. And that is exactly what the Wise Men did. When they finally reached the house where Jesus was, it was as much as two years after his birth. Their long journey had come to an end and "they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." (Matthew 2:10) And, when they saw Jesus, they fell down and worshipped Him and offered Him gifts of great value: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

As we reflect on the birth of Jesus, the true King of the Jews, let us not forget to worship Him. He is the King, spoken of throughout the Old Testament, who has come to earth to defeat our enemies of sin and death. And let us offer to Him the gift of greatest value, our whole lives.

January 6: Conclusions for Epiphany

Today's reading: Matthew 16:13-17

Confessing Jesus as Lord does not come naturally to us. As we reflected on the Wise Men yesterday, today we continue that celebration with the traditional date of their visit to see the newborn King: Epiphany, January 6. We know they arrived many months after Jesus's birth and, in all likelihood, after a very long trip.

God had already set his plan in motion, but even when it took time and extreme commitment, they were willing to make the journey to celebrate God's acting in history. Why? As we saw yesterday, through God's involvement in history and his Spirit's guidance, they were able to see the miracle for what it is even as others remained oblivious.

Amongst all of those we have studied during the Twelve Days of Christmas, the principle question is "what did they do with Jesus?" Each Christmastide, we have the opportunity to ask the same of ourselves. By our own power, we are inclined to allow other things in our lives to interfere with celebrating the miracle of what God has done, but fortunately, we need not rest on our own power. Like those who celebrated the birth of the Savior that first Christmas, may we today (and everyday) be guided by the Holy Spirit to give praise to our God and to share the joy that we have with others.

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

- Luke 2:14