

*Watching,
Waiting,
Listening,
Believing*

PREPARING YOUR HEART TO WELCOME THE CHRIST



JEFF DOLES

Watching, Waiting, Listening, Believing

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Contents

Watching, Waiting, Listening, Believing	5
From the Manger to the Cross	15
Simeon and the Consolation of Israel	23
Looking for Redemption	29
Why Jesus Came	37
The Reason for EVERY Season	45
The Angels Came	52



Watching, Waiting, Listening, Believing

The four weeks before Christmas are known as Advent. Advent means “coming.” It is a season of spiritual preparation as we make our hearts ready to celebrate the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ into the world. It is a time of watching and waiting, of listening and believing. The Christmas story is full of such things.

 ECHARIAH was waiting for his opportunity to perform the temple service which would come only once in his lifetime. He had also been waiting for a child, a son, for which he and his wife Elizabeth had prayed many years. But Elizabeth had remained barren, and now they were well past the time of having children (Luke 1:5-25*).

* All Scripture quotations in this chapter are taken from the NIV.

Finally, as his life was much nearer the end than the beginning, the lot fell for Zechariah to burn incense in the temple of the Lord. This offering symbolized the prayers of God's people. As the smoke of the burning incense rose up inside the temple, the prayers of the people likewise ascended to heaven. For they, also, were waiting for God's Messiah to come.

Their wait would not now be long, for the angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah. He stood near the altar of incense and said, "Your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will have a son. You shall call his name John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. He will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even in his mother's womb. And he will go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah."

"How shall I know this?" Zechariah asked.

"I am Gabriel," the angel answered, "who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you this good news. But now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words."

Zechariah had been waiting and watching, but when the time came, he was not ready. The words of his mouth betrayed the secret of his heart and revealed his unbelief.

Mercifully, the angel stilled his tongue and prevented him from further speech, that he might learn to listen and believe.

When his temple duty was fulfilled, Zechariah returned home. Elizabeth became pregnant, just as the angel had said.

Watching, waiting, listening, believing.

SIX MONTHS PASSED. Mary was waiting to begin a family with her husband, Joseph. But they had not yet come together because their betrothal period was not yet complete. Mary was a young girl and a virgin, and her heart was receptive to the Lord. The Lord sent the angel Gabriel to her (Luke 1:26-38).

Gabriel told her that she would conceive and bring forth a Son, Jesus. "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end."

Mary listened. "How will this be," she asked, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. That Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God."

Mary believed. "Behold the Lord's servant! Let it be to me according to your word."

Watching, waiting, listening, believing.

JOSEPH WAS WAITING for his bride (Matthew 1:18-24). When Mary was found to be with child, Joseph, being a just man, and not willing to disgrace her, thought to divorce her quietly. But while he was watching over these things, considering what to do, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream.

"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife," the angel said, "for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

Joseph listened, and in obedient faith, took Mary as his wife.

Watching, waiting, listening, believing.

ELIZABETH, Mary's cousin, had prayed for a son right along with her husband Zechariah. The only difference was that, when the promise came, she believed and received what they had waited for so long (Luke 1:24-25). "The Lord has done this," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

She was in her sixth month of waiting when Mary, now pregnant, came to visit (Luke 1:39-45). She was still listening, for when Mary greeted her, the babe leaped in her womb for joy. The child, watching and waiting in the womb, and filled with the Holy Spirit, as the angel promised, recognized the presence of the Lord Jesus.

Elizabeth, too, was filled with the Holy Spirit. And listening, she said to Mary, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord.”

Watching, waiting, listening, believing.

RETURN TO ZECHARIAH (Luke 1:56-80). It was now the ninth month. Mary, having stayed for the last three of those months, had returned home. Elizabeth’s time to deliver had come. Neighbors and relatives rejoiced at the news of the birth. On the eighth day, they came to circumcise the child and would have called him Zechariah, after his father. But Elizabeth said, “No, he shall be called John.”

They were perplexed, for no one in the family was called John. So they went to ask Zechariah, making signs to him—oddly, people who are silent are often presumed to be deaf, as well. But Zechariah was not deaf. He could hear. In fact, he could hear better now than ever before in his life, for he had learned how to listen—and to believe.

He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." Immediately, his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began speaking and praising God. All those who heard were filled with wonder.

Then Zechariah, being filled with the Holy Spirit, began to prophesy. Having learned to listen, he could now hear the Holy Spirit in his own spirit, and he began to speak what he was hearing the Spirit say. He prophesied over Israel, and over his son.

Watching, waiting, listening, believing.

CONSIDER THE SHEPHERDS (Luke 2:8-20). They were humble men, low on the economic scale and little regarded. But they knew something about watching. On the night the Lord Jesus was born, they were out in the fields, watching over their flock. For them it was a night like many other nights, until an angel of the Lord appeared and the glory of the Lord shone all around. Then the focus of their watching shifted. They were fearful, but attentive.

The angel calmed them with good news. "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great multitude of heavenly hosts accompanied the angel, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!"

When the angels left, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go to Bethlehem now to see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." The shepherds not only heard the message, they were well aware of from whom it came. They believed.

So they went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. They shared the word they received from the angel and all those who heard were amazed. Then they returned to their fields, praising and glorifying God for all they had seen and heard.

Watching, waiting, listening, believing.

SIMEON WAS WAITING for the "Consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25-35). He was a righteous and devout man, and the Holy Spirit was upon Him. He had heard from the Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Messiah.

He believed, and he was watching in the temple, as the Spirit led him, when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to present Him before the Lord. He saw that this was the One. Simeon took the child in his arms and praised God: "Lord, now you let Your servant go in peace. Your word

has been fulfilled, for my own eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared in the sight of all people.”

Then Simeon, the Spirit upon him, blessed them and prophesied to Mary: “This Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”

Watching, waiting, listening, believing.

ANNA WAS WATCHING NEARBY (Luke 2:36-38). She was a prophetess, and quite an old woman who had been widowed at a very early age. For many years she had been in the temple, day and night, watching and waiting before the Lord, with fasting and prayer. She knew how to listen.

She came to Mary and Joseph while Simeon was prophesying over Jesus. For she, too, recognized that this Child was the Messiah. She gave thanks to God and spoke of Jesus to all who were waiting for redemption in Jerusalem.

Watching, waiting, listening, believing.

FINALLY, THERE WERE THE WISE MEN from the East (Matthew 2:1-12). They had been watching the night sky, waiting for the King of the Jews. They listened to what the

prophets foretold about Messiah. When they recognized His star in the East (Numbers 24:17), they followed.

They believed. When they came to where the Christ child was, and found Him with His mother, they fell down and worshiped Him. Then they opened up their treasures, as open as their hearts, and presented Him with gifts.

They returned home, still watching and listening. God warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod. So they returned to their country by another way.

They were different men leaving than they had been coming. They were changed. They knew that would happen, of course, for they were wise men and realized that no one who watches and waits and listens and believes can ever be the same again.

Watching, waiting, listening, believing. Shepherd or sage, carpenter or King, we are all called to this. For our God is not silent. He speaks. Through prophets and angels, He reveals His plans. Through dreams, He gives us guidance and warning. Through Word and Spirit, He speaks to us intimately, that we might know His heart and speak it to the world.

The fruit is joy and wonder. For in watching, waiting, listening and believing, we discover our Redeemer and King, the Lord Jesus Christ.



From the Manger to the Cross

*And this will be the sign to you:
You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths,
lying in a manger. (Luke 2:12)*

A MANGER is nothing more than a crib for fodder, a place for creatures to receive nourishment, a feed trough. Not a suitable place for infants, certainly not for a newborn King. But that is where the Baby Jesus lay, wrapped about in strips of cloth, in Oriental fashion. A very humble scene indeed. And yet, it was a sign—*the* sign, as the angel of the Lord called it—of a very great and special person, the Savior and Messiah promised by God. And so this simple manger became the emblem of good tidings and great joy.

“You shall call His name Jesus.” Those are the words that were spoken to Joseph by an angel of the Lord on an earlier occasion. “You shall call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins.” The name of Jesus is very significant. It is the Greek form of the Hebrew *Yeshua*, the Old Testament word for “salvation.” It means “the LORD saves,” and it includes everything that goes along with salvation: deliverance, restoration, security, wholeness and prosperity. That is exactly what this Babe in the manger was called—all wrapped up in the name Jesus!

Now a manger, as someone has succinctly defined it, is a wooden structure large enough to contain the Bread of Life. See how this common stable fixture is lifted up to a place of sacred significance. All mangers hold food, of course, for that is their design and purpose. But this particular manger, this sign, cradled the Bread of Life.

“I am the bread of life,” Jesus said, “He who comes to me shall never hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). “I am the bread of life which came down from heaven” (John 6:41).

Here was that bread, come down from heaven and lying in a feed trough. Giving heed to the angelic voice, the shepherds said, “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us” (Luke 2:15). So they went and they saw.

They beheld the heavenly bread nestled in an earthly breadbox—the divine Son of God displayed in human flesh. They came and believed, and they were changed. They testified about what they had heard, and people marveled at their testimony. Then they departed to their fields and flocks, glorifying and praising God, for they had received the sign of the Babe in the manger.

Destiny in the manger

A manger is not enough, though, not even one that holds the Bread of Life. It is only a beginning. The fulfillment lies in another wooden fixture. Looming in the midnight shadows of the manger, there is the figure of the Cross. Like the manger, the Cross is a wooden structure large enough to hold the Bread of Life.

The manger is a symbol of joy, but it is a very peculiar joy, for even as we celebrate Christmas, we know that the day of Crucifixion must also come. But it was for the joy that was set before Him, the Bible says, that Jesus endured the Cross, despising the shame (Hebrews 12:2). He pursued that joy from the manger all the way to the Cross. That was the only way His joy could be fulfilled, for that was the only way He could save His people from their sins. You see, the joy set before Him, which caused Him to endure the shame of the Cross, was that you and I might be saved, delivered, restored and made whole.

As we consider the Babe in the manger, it is difficult for us to imagine the hands and feet of this tiny infant being driven through with large spikes and nailed against the rough-hewn timbers of the Cross. And yet, that is exactly what they were destined for.

Bread upon the doorpost

In Tampa, there is a section called Ybor City, a place rich in history and cultural heritage. It is a place that was settled over a hundred years ago by Cuban cigar makers who established their industry in the heart of the community. The tobacco cutters and rollers lived nearby in small company-owned houses.

A few of those old houses are still on display in Ybor, restored as museum pieces. On the front doorposts you can still see the nails where the local baker would hang the daily loaves of Cuban bread—a crusty bread, about a yard long and about as big around as a fist.

Each morning the baker would step up onto the porch and slap a fresh loaf onto the nail. There it would hang, impaled upon the doorpost, to provide sustenance for the household.

Blood upon the doorpost

The great salvation event of the Old Testament was the Passover and deliverance from Egypt. The Lord commanded

Moses that every household should take a male lamb, less than a year old and without blemish, and set it apart. Then they were to kill it at twilight, take the blood and paint it on the doorposts and lintels of their houses. They were to remain in their homes to roast the flesh and eat it, leaving nothing for the morning. In this way, their firstborn children would be delivered from death, and all would be released from the land of bondage. The blood of the lamb, smeared on the doorposts, established salvation for all in the house, and its flesh became their sustenance.

The Lamb in the manger

In a stable in Bethlehem, the baby Jesus was set apart and placed in a manger. Here lay the spotless Lamb of God, ordained by the Father to take away the sin of the world. Here lay the Bread of Life, come down from heaven. Here lay our sacrifice, our salvation and our sustenance. For as Jesus said of Himself,

He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst. (John 6:35)

I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world. (John 6:51)

Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. (John 6:54)

The Lamb upon the Cross

The day finally came when the journey from the manger to the Cross was completed. It was at Jerusalem, during the Passover remembrance, on the day when the paschal lamb was set apart. Jesus was hung upon the Cross, His hands and feet driven through with spike nails.

The wooden members of the Cross became the doorposts and lintel of the portal between heaven and earth. There hung the Bread of Life upon a nail. There was painted the blood of the Lamb. There hung our sacrifice, our salvation and our sustenance.

The body of Jesus was lifted up and His life was poured out for us, in our place. He cried "It is finished!" and then gave up His spirit. His body was taken down, buried in the ground, and three days later He arose from the grave in the glory of Resurrection.

A sign to you

The angel said, "And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger" (Luke 2:12). As you consider the Babe in the manger, let this be a sign to you of the salvation and wholeness God has for you. Claim every bit of it, laying hold of it by faith.

If you have never received the Lord Jesus Christ, you can do it right now. Use this simple prayer as a guide:

FROM THE MANGER TO THE CROSS

Dear Lord,

Thank You the Babe in the manger, who came to be the Bread of Life for me. Thank You for the spotless Lamb of God upon the Cross, who came to save me from my sins. I now receive the Lord Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for the salvation and wholeness I have in Him. Fill me with Your Spirit and teach me to walk in Your ways. I take hold of all these things now,

In Jesus' name, Amen.

NOW WHEN THE DAYS of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they [Mary and Joseph] brought Him [Jesus] to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the LORD”), and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, “A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law, he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said:

“Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.”

And Joseph and His mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him. Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, “Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” (Luke 2:22-35).

Simeon and the Consolation of Israel

THERE IS NOT A LOT TO KNOW about Simeon. He was not an important political figure, not a priest of the temple, not even a religious leader. He was just a simple man, fair and honest in his dealings, and careful to honor God in all things.

But he had a longing in his heart and a great expectation. He was waiting for the “Consolation of Israel.” Long ago, Isaiah had prophesied that such comfort would one day return to God’s people:

“Comfort, yes, comfort My people!” says your God. “Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned; for she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins” (Isaiah 40:1-2).

Simeon's name comes from a Hebrew word which means "to hear." It was a name he lived up to, for the Holy Spirit was upon him, and Simeon had learned how to pay close attention to His voice. It was the Holy Spirit who had shown him that the Consolation of Israel was at hand, and that he would see the Lord's Christ—Messiah, the "anointed one"—before he saw death.

This revelation from the Holy Spirit was a *rhema*. That is the Greek term used when Simeon blessed God and said, "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word [*rhema*]." A *rhema* is an aptly spoken word, acutely articulated, which comes at a very strategic time. Literally, it is an utterance that pours forth, or flows like a river. It pours forth from the Holy Spirit to make things of heaven come alive within the human spirit.

Simeon had heard this word of revelation concerning Messiah, and so he waited, until one day when the inner prompting of the Holy Spirit led him into the temple. This was the same day Mary and Joseph showed up with the baby Jesus, to fulfill the custom of the law.

Sensitive to the Spirit, Simeon immediately recognized the child and scooped Him into his arms. He gave thanks and praise to God: "Lord, I can die a happy man now. You have kept Your promise, and I have seen Your salvation."

For here was Jesus—Savior, Defender, Deliverer, Healer—nestled in Simeon’s bosom. Here was God’s salvation, prepared like a highway leading from the heart of heaven into the heart of the world. Here was the Light which shines in the darkness, now shining forth through God’s people Israel to reveal His saving purposes to the nations. Simeon clung to the child in adoration.

Mary and Joseph stood in amazement. Although they had already received divine visitations and experienced the touch of God in marvelous ways—they kissed the face of God whenever they kissed Jesus—still, they had not realized the scope of what was now being revealed through Simeon. Jesus was not just a Savior for Israel, but for the whole world.

But Simeon was not yet finished. He blessed Mary and Joseph, then he prophesied to Mary about the infant in her arms. “Pay close attention,” he said, “This Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.” The very one who would bring consolation to Israel would be the dividing line between those who fall and those who rise.

This is the same thing Isaiah prophesied about Messiah: “He will be as a sanctuary, but a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense to both the houses of Israel, as a trap and a

snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem” (Isaiah 8:14). “And in that day there shall be a Root of Jesse, Who shall stand as a banner [sign] to the people; for the Gentiles shall seek Him, and His resting place shall be glorious” (Isaiah 11:10).

Though many in Israel have been offended at Jesus, many others—even among the pagan Gentile nations—have sought Him and welcomed Him, to find rest and peace in Him. Though He is a banner often spoken against, His very presence unveils the thoughts hidden deep within the heart of every person.

Simeon’s prophecy revealed the coming of truth and righteousness, but it also foreshadowed sorrow and great suffering. Isaiah had spoken of Messiah as “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief . . . Surely He has borne our sorrows and carried our griefs” (Isaiah 53:3-4).

Mary gasped at the thought that this would be the lot of her little child. “A sword will pierce through your own soul also,” Simeon added. It was a strange reassurance, mingling great sorrow with great expectation of redemption.

These prophetic utterances have been filled full in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, for He is truly the dividing line for all mankind. He is the Savior, Defender, Deliverer and Healer of all who come to Him in faith.

And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life;

he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.
(1 John 5:11-12)

For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (John 3:17-18)

But God demonstrates His own love toward us , in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
(Romans 5:8)

For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.
(2 Corinthians 5:21)

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

Jesus Christ, God's Messiah, is the Consolation of Israel and of all the nations. The Greek word for "consolation" is *paraklesis* and refers to one who comforts, encourages, advocates or intercedes. We find this word again in the Gospel of John, where Jesus prepared the disciples for His crucifixion, resurrection and ascent into heaven.

I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever— the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees

Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you. (John 14:16-18).

This “Helper” is the *parakletos* (also translated as “Comforter”). Jesus was talking about the Holy Spirit—the same Spirit who had been upon Simeon, revealing to him promises from the heart of God, bringing him into a holy encounter with his heart’s desire, and prophesying wondrous things through him. In a very real sense, the Consolation for whom Simeon was waiting had been with him all along.

Enlarge your expectation, as Simeon did. Ask the Holy Spirit to take the things of Jesus and make them come alive in your heart, to wake you up to the reality of who Jesus is and why He has come, to apply the redemptive work of Jesus to every area of your life. Then give praise to the Lord with the prayer of Simeon.

Lord,

Now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.

Amen.

Looking for Redemption

Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; and this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem. (Luke 2:36-38)

AT THE TIME OF JESUS' BIRTH, there were many who were looking for redemption to come to Jerusalem, as had been foretold by the prophets hundreds of years earlier. The "Seventy Weeks" of Daniel's messianic prophecy (which actually signified 490 years) was nearing completion, as those attuned to the Scriptures were well aware.

Many of the Jews, because of the turmoil of the times, thought of Messiah mostly as a political leader who would, by force of violence or military might, break the oppression of the Roman empire off the neck of Israel. But there were others who recognized that what they needed even more than rescue was redemption. They needed to be ransomed from a captivity which was far greater than that of the Roman yoke. There was a matter of divine holiness and righteousness to be reckoned with, and this required One who could buy them back from the bondage of their sin by becoming a sacrifice for them.

To the Hebrew mind, the concept of redemption was one of covenant and kinship. In the Old Testament, the word for “redeem” is *ga'al*, and refers to the Kinsman Redeemer. We find this role wonderfully enacted in the Book of Ruth, where Boaz redeems the lot and destiny of his kinsman, Mahlon, by taking Mahlon’s widow, Ruth, as his own wife.

A Kinsman Redeemer was now required to ransom Jerusalem and what was left of Israel. Zechariah the priest recognized that the time for this was at hand when he prophesied over his infant son, John: “Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David” (Luke 1:68-69). Zechariah understood John to be the forerunner for Messiah—the Anointed One

who would bring salvation and redemption to His kinsmen. No doubt, the news of John's birth spread quickly around the circle of those who lived in expectation of that coming Redemption.

That is why, before moving on from the Christmas story to tell how Jesus grew and became strong in spirit, and took up His ministry, Luke lingered a moment to unveil a precious jewel set against the backdrop of this expectation. Let us pause with him and look deeper into this brief narrative about the prophetess Anna.

PAY CLOSE ATTENTION TO THE NAMES which are given in this account, for Luke tells an important part of the story through them. The name *Anna* means "favored" or "full of grace." Anna was the daughter of *Phanuel*, whose name is a form of the Hebrew *peniel*, which means "the face of God." Phanuel was of the tribe of *Asher*, which means "blessed" or "full of happiness." It is a name which calls forth the prosperity of God, and the women of this tribe were particularly known for their beauty and giftedness.

Now, Anna was a woman who was favored by the Lord. She carried within her the inheritance of blessing and the promise of seeing the face of God. She treasured this inheritance and learned how to walk it out continually before the Lord, even in the midst of adversity.

You see, Anna had married at a very young age, probably about 14 years old. For seven brief years she cherished the potential of a long and happy life, one in which she might be surrounded by children and family. But by age 21 she was a widow, and childless. Her dream was dashed. What would her life be now, she wondered. How was the call of God, a call full of favor and blessing, now to be fulfilled?

Out of her brokenness she gathered up her inheritance—the promise of blessing and of seeing the face of God—and abandoned herself fully to the Lord. She devoted all of her days and nights to the service of God. Each day she presented herself at the appointed times of prayer and worship, nine in the morning and three in the afternoon, and remained in private devotion before the Lord in the night watches.

She became a woman of much fasting and prayer, always making room in her heart for the Lord to come and do a work in her and through her, and learning to dwell with Him in every aspect of her life. For 84 years, she spent her life in this manner, always seeking the face of God.

Now, at 105 years of age, though she might have seemed very old and frail on the outside, she had become a powerful woman of God—a prophetess, as Luke calls her. All of those years spent in the presence of the Lord,

seeking His face and listening for His voice, had matured her in the things of God.

The psalm writer said, "Those who are planted in the house of the LORD shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bear fruit in old age; they shall be fresh and flourishing, to declare that the LORD is upright" (Psalm 92:13-15). This was Anna, well-established in the house of the Lord. Her faith was strong and her spiritual senses acute. And now something wondrous drew her attention in the courts of His temple.

THERE WAS SIMEON, standing with Joseph, Mary and Jesus. Simeon was cradling Jesus in his arms, and speaking a blessing, prophesying over Him. He had long been watching and waiting for the "Consolation of Israel," for the Holy Spirit had revealed to him that, before he died, he would see the Lord's Messiah. And now it was finally coming to pass.

Anna knew of Simeon's expectation, and the promise that had been given him, and she immediately recognized his excitement, even from a distance, as it was now being fulfilled. For she, too, had been filled with the expectation of seeing the face of God. That was not only her inheritance and her purpose all these years, it had become her very profound passion. Her heart stirred with excitement as she watched, and nothing could keep her from entering into

that moment. She came over to where the Holy Family stood.

Simeon had scarcely ended his blessing when Anna began giving thanks to God. The Greek word used for this shows that her prayers were in complete agreement with Simeon's. She was prophesying over Jesus just as Simeon had done. She could not help it. She was divinely guided by the Holy Spirit and the words simply burst forth from deep within. Her praise was effusive, even extravagant, and she did not cease. She kept talking about Jesus to everyone she saw, everyone who was longing for the redemption of Jerusalem, for she was now in the very presence of the Redeemer Himself. She had now finally seen the face of God in the face of the infant Jesus. Once you have had that kind of intimate revelation of Jesus Christ, you want Him to be revealed to others, and that is exactly what she did until the day she died.

The promise of Anna's life was fulfilled in every way. Though she had been childless, now she had seen The Child. Though she had no family to surround her, now she was able to bless the family of Jesus, and she became a part of His inheritance. She had been one of those who were waiting expectantly for redemption in Jerusalem, and now she had experienced it in a most profound way.

Why Jesus Came

DECEMBER is a fun and exciting time of year as we prepare to celebrate Christmas, how the Lord Jesus came to be born in a lowly cattle stall over two thousand years ago. But the best and most important preparation we can make is the preparation of our hearts as we remember, not only *that* Jesus came, but also *why* Jesus came.

Jesus came to do the Father's will.

"I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me" (John 6:38). "For I seek not to please Myself but Him who sent Me" (John 5:30).

Jesus was perfectly in tune with the heart of the Father, and delighted to do His will. His ministry was thoroughly

guided by it, for He said, “The Son can do nothing by Himself; He can do only what He sees His Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son does also” (John 5:19). “Whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say” (John 12:50).

Jesus never took it upon Himself to say or do anything except what the Father told Him to say and do. This was the pattern for His ministry. Everything He did perfectly expressed the will of God. Even on His final night in the Garden of Gethsemane, He prayed, “Nevertheless not my will, but Yours, be done” (Luke 22:42).

Jesus came to serve and to give His life.

As Jesus’ ministry on earth was drawing to a close, He spoke to the disciples about true greatness: “You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all” (Mark 10:42-44).

In the world, greatness is measured by how much weight you can throw around, or how many people you can order about, or how much rank you can pull. But Jesus turned that on its head. The great ones are not those who know how to “lord it” over others, but those who know

how to become the servant—the slave!—of all. This kind of servanthood is not so we can one day become great leaders and put aside the role of being a servant. Quite the contrary, this kind of servanthood exactly defines what a great leader is—the servant of all. “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

It is the very nature of Jesus to give and to serve, for Jesus is truly God, and “God is love” (1 John 4:8), and it is the very nature of love to give. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son” (John 3:16).

In doing the Father’s will, Jesus demonstrated the Father’s love, giving His own life as a ransom for us—paying a terrible price He did not owe to redeem us from a debt we could never pay.

Jesus came to seek and to save.

“The Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them” (Luke 9:56). “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10).

Jesus did not come to destroy us, but to save us. This is the promise of the Christmas story. For the angel of the Lord said to Joseph, “Do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call

His name JESUS for He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:20-21).

The very name of Jesus, in its Hebrew form, *Yeshua*, means “Yahweh saves!” It comes from the Hebrew *yasha*, which means to rescue or remove someone from burden, oppression or danger.

Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil.

“For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8).

Jesus did not come to destroy our lives, but to destroy the bondage which plagued life ever since Adam and Eve, when the devil first led mankind into sin. But even then, the Lord made a promise about One who would come and destroy the devil and his works. He said to the serpent, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed [Jesus]; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel” (Genesis 3:15). This is the first mention of the Gospel that is recorded in Scripture.

The devil tried to destroy the people of God from Adam to Abraham, but he could not. He tried to destroy the descendants of Abraham, the children of Israel, but he could not. He tried to destroy the lineage of Jesus in every generation, but he could not. He tried to destroy the ministry of Jesus in the wilderness temptation, but he could

not. Finally, he tried to destroy the lifework of Jesus by nailing him to the cross, little realizing that it was for this reason that Jesus came: to give His life on the cross as a ransom for many.

The devil could never destroy the plans and purposes of God, not even if he had all eternity to try. But through the Cross and the empty tomb, Jesus destroyed all the works of the devil. Sin and sickness, poverty and strife, death and everything that stands against the people of God—all the power of the devil has been broken. But Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father, “far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named” (Ephesians 1:21).

Jesus came that we might have life more abundantly.

“The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy,” Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10).

The thief is the one who tries to deceive God’s people, seeking to turn them away from God’s purposes. He comes to steal, kill and destroy. These are the works of the devil, but as we saw, Jesus came to destroy all those works.

Jesus came that we might have life, and have it more abundantly. For our God is a God of abundance. His paths

drip abundance (Psalm 65:11). He is able “to do exceedingly abundantly above all we ask or think according to the power that works in us” (Ephesians 3:20) and He is able “to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have abundance for every good work” (2 Corinthians 9:8). He gives to us out of His abundance so that we can give to others out of our abundance, and so share in His ministry.

Jesus came to proclaim the favor of the Lord.

“The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD” (Luke 4:18-19).

Jesus began His preaching ministry with this passage, which comes from Isaiah. This wonderful text is the charter of His ministry, for after reading it, Jesus said, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). In it, we find that Jesus came to preach, to heal and to deliver the captives—in short, to proclaim the favor of the Lord.

Throughout the rest of this chapter, indeed, throughout the rest of the Gospel of Luke, and in the other Gospels as well, we find Jesus preaching and healing and casting

out demons. We see Him choosing the disciples “that they might be with Him, and that He might send them out to preach, and to have power to heal sickness and to cast out demons” (Mark 3:14-15). Then we see Him actually sending them out to do just that (Mark 6:7-13).

Before His ascension into heaven, we see Jesus commissioning the disciples with these words: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them . . . teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded” (Matthew 28:18-20).” The disciples were not only to continue these charter works, but they were to disciple others in them, as well. “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. . . . And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons . . . they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover” (Mark 16:15-18). Their commission is our commission, too, for thus we are to proclaim that the time of God’s favor has come.

Jesus came for you.

The Bible says that “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

If you are a “whoever,” Jesus came for you. He came to reconcile you to the heart of the Father and to give His

life as a ransom for you. He came to seek you out and save you from sin. He came to destroy all the works of the devil in your life and replace it with the wonderful abundance of His own life. He came to forgive your sins and heal your sicknesses, and to proclaim that the time of God's favor toward you has come.

We receive these things by faith—taking God at His Word. The promise is that “whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” If you have never received the Lord Jesus Christ before, you can do it right now. Simply say a little prayer to the Father—it doesn't have to be a fancy prayer, just speak to Him from your heart. Tell Him that you believe His promises and ask the Lord Jesus Christ to be your Savior. Then new life will begin for you.

Christmas is wonderful, especially when you know why Jesus came, and that He came for you.

The Reason for Every Season

EVERY YEAR AT CHRISTMASTIME the message comes to us in many forms—in sermons, banners, carols, greeting cards, even on bumper stickers:

Jesus is the reason for the season!

It is an enduring message, enjoying the double benefit of being both exceedingly memorable and profoundly true. It is memorable because of its pithy rhyme. It is profound because it speaks to us about the measure of our lives. The truth is, Jesus is the reason, not only for the Christmas season, but for *every* season of life. In Him we have a new and definitive way to think about all of time. As worship theologian Robert E. Webber has written,

From a Christian point of view the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are at the center of time, for from Christ we look backward toward creation, the fall, the covenants, and God's working in history to bring redemption. But from the event of Christ we also look forward to the fulfillment of history in the second coming of Christ. For this reason time is understood from the Christian point of view in and through the redemptive presence of Jesus Christ in history. (from *Common Roots: A Call to Evangelical Maturity*)

Some Christians know only two seasons of celebration in the Church: Christmas and Easter. Many do not bother with much in between. My daughter calls them "flower people" — they come only when the Church is decked out in Poinsettias or Easter lilies. But they miss out on something very wonderful, for the life of the Lord Jesus Christ in His Church is much richer than that—it is a full-time experience! The celebrations of the Church year, which have come down to us through the centuries, help us enter more completely into that experience, to know Jesus in all the seasons of life, and how each season flows into the next. So here is a brief summary of the Church year, submitted for your contemplation:

Advent

Advent means "coming." The season of advent is a season of repentance and preparation—a place of beginning again. It is the start of the Church year and occupies the

four weeks before Christmas. It is a time when we prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ, not only to a little stable in Bethlehem, but also His personal coming into our lives—“let every heart prepare Him room.” Hidden in the echoes of Advent we can also discern the promise of Jesus coming again to bring all things to divine completion.

Christmas

There are twelve days in Christmas, beginning on December 25th and continuing through January 5th. In Christmas we celebrate the birth of Jesus; God incarnate; the Word made flesh. We think of the love of God and the saving work of Christ, for the Incarnation is as much a part of our redemption as are the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. Like the shepherds who received the announcement of the Christmas angels, we come to adore Him.

Epiphany

Epiphany means “appearing” or “manifestation.” In this season, which begins on January 6th, we celebrate the ways Christ has made Himself known as the Messiah and Savior of the whole world, revealing Himself by many divine miracles and teachings. We think of the Babe made known to the wise men of the East; the Son made known at His baptism; Christ made known at the wedding feast

in Cana. We also watch for the ways Jesus is making Himself known in the world today through His Church.

Jesus is the “Light of the World.” In Advent, we celebrate the *promise* of the Light. In Christmas, we rejoice in the *coming* of the Light. In Epiphany, we wonder at the *shining* of the Light, just as the wise men marveled at the Star which led them to Jesus.

Lent

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, six weeks before Easter Sunday. Like Advent, it is a time of repentance and preparation. The ashes on the first day of this season represent mourning over sin and the longing for holiness. In Lent, we remember the temptation of Christ in the wilderness and His journey to the Cross. We become aware of how Christ humbled Himself and how God calls us, also, to humility as we participate in His redemptive purposes. We consider, also, what our own place of service and sacrifice is in His divine plan.

Lent concludes with Holy Week. On Palm Sunday, we think of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, knowing that soon He would be rejected by the very ones who waved their branches and shouted *Hosanna!* The irony of this is subtly observed by the burning of this year’s palm leaves to become next year’s Lenten ashes.

Holy Thursday commemorates the institution of the Lord's Supper. It is also called Maundy Thursday because of the new commandment Jesus gave His disciples to love one another (*maundy* comes from an Old Latin term for "mandate" or "command"). On Good Friday, we think of Jesus on the Cross and behold the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Holy Saturday recalls how the world hung between death and life, sin and righteousness, darkness and light. It is a vigil for *the* Light.

Easter

In Easter we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ—His victory over sin and death and all the works of the devil. A great exchange has taken place: Christ's victory has become our victory, His life has become our life, and His righteousness has become our righteousness. Because of this, Easter is not just some "big Sunday" in the life of the Church. Rather, all other Sundays are little celebrations of this great Resurrection Day. The victory of Easter leads us on to the celebration of the Ascension, forty days later, when the Lord Jesus Christ ascended to His throne in heaven to rule and reign forever as King over all.

Pentecost

Before He ascended into heaven, the Lord Jesus told His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the "Promise of the

Father” — the Holy Spirit. “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,” Jesus said, “and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). That is exactly what happened ten days later, as we can see in Acts 2.

Pentecost is the commemoration of that event. It begins on the fiftieth day after Easter. In the season of Pentecost, we celebrate God’s gift of the Holy Spirit to His Church. The Spirit makes us one people, empowered to bear witness of the Lord Jesus Christ, to bring evidence—signs, wonders and miracles—of who Jesus is and what He has done for us.

Ordinary Time

After Pentecost, we move into Ordinary Time, the largest portion of the Church year. It reminds us that God most often comes into our lives in very ordinary ways and speaks to us in a “still, small voice.” When all of the feasting and singing and dancing give way to the tedium of work and the trials of life, God is still with us. The hope of joy is ever present in the silence and stillness of Ordinary Time, until it leads us once again to the preparations of the heart in Advent.

THERE ARE, OF COURSE, many Scripture readings, symbols, themes, and even colors associated with these Church seasons, giving us a variety of ways to meditate on the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Compared to the national traditions to which many Christians have become accustomed—Mother’s Day, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, to name a few—these celebrations of the Church year seem like a radically new concept. But this perspective, although radical, is not really new at all. It is deeply ensconced within the traditions and history of the Church. It is a part of the heritage of every believer, a gift to us from those who have gone before. In it we receive a marvelous way to celebrate this new life we have in Jesus.

As you journey through your years, take up these celebrations of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let your heart always be preparing Him room. Rejoice that God came to dwell with you so that you might dwell with Him. Ponder how the Light of the World shines in all His glory. Consider His service and sacrifice, and how He invites you to partner with Him in the redemption of the world. Remember the Cross, and how it set you free. Dance in the wonder of His Resurrection victory. Drink deeply of the Holy Spirit and learn to walk in His power. Seek out the joy of His presence at every moment of your life, to recognize the quietness of His voice and the softness of His breath, and so let your heart be synchronized with His. Then you will know that, truly, Jesus is the reason for *every* season!

The Angels Came

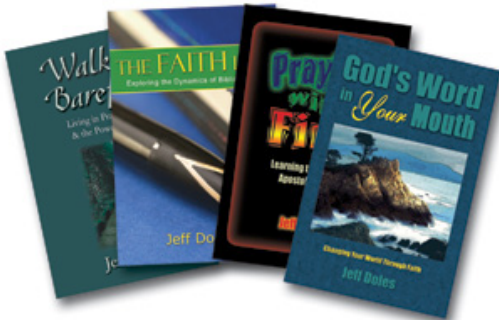
by Jeff Doles

When Christ was born, the angels came
And said to shepherds standing near
Come and see the place where Jesus lay
And as they drew in quietness near
To look upon the Lord so dear
They wondered at the Father's gift of Love
That He would come and walk with them
And save His people from their sin
And change the world from darkness into light

When Jesus rose, the angels came
And said to women standing near
Come and see the place where He was laid
And as they looked into the tomb
They saw there but an empty room
And wondered at the Father's gift of Life
That He would come and die for them
And on the third day rise again
And change the world from darkness into light

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WBM was founded in 1999 by Jeff and Suzanne Doles to minister to churches, conferences, retreats, revivals and other Christian events. With a fresh and gentle breeze of the Holy Spirit, they come to:

- Minister the Word of God through preaching and teaching on prayer, faith and the healing power of God.
- Establish an atmosphere of praise and worship that leads to greater intimacy with God and deeper expressions of love, faith and joy in His presence.
- Bring encouraging words from the Lord to inspire, build up, and bring comfort and healing to God's people.
- Share the joy and enthusiasm of their faith journey with the Lord Jesus Christ.
- Stir up the embers of revival fire and renewal in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jeff is a seasoned Bible teacher with great enthusiasm for bringing out the life-changing, world-changing truths of God's Word. His desire is to see people activated in faith and joy as he preaches on the awesome presence and power of God. As a worshipper, he delights to lead in extended times of worship—to press into the "inner courts."

Suzanne received a powerful work of the Lord in the Summer of 2000, a deliverance which released her from deep-seated fear. With strong faith and insight, she now gives testimony to the healing power of God, on the theme of moving from fear to faith.

"We are pressing in for more of the Lord, to know Him more intimately, love Him more lavishly, praise Him more extravagantly. To grow more in prayer and faith, to experience more of His presence, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.
To do the works of Jesus."

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