



Introduction

Scripture Reading

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- The Promises and Preparations
- The Journey to Bethlehem and Birth
- Shepherds and Angels
- The Wise men and a Greater Story

Devotionals

- 1. Two Adams
- 2. The Ark of Salvation
- 3. The Patriarchs and the Promise
- 4. Th Prostitute in Paradise
- 5. The King's Eternal Throne
- 6. The World Made Visible
- 7. But God...
- 8. Eastern Wisdom
- 9. Herod's Trouble

- 10. Oh. Little Town of Bethlehem
- 11. The Star
- 12. A Kingly Gift
- 13. A Priestly Gift
- 14. A Sacrificial Gift
- 15. Immanuel
- 16. Away in a Manger
- 17. Different Christmas
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- 19. It was Known
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Different Pook

Introduction





The Christmas story is not just a familiar narrative; it's a powerful and cherished saga that echoes through history, bursting with angelic visitations, miraculous births, and humble origins. Yet, in each annual retelling, the awe-inspiring details can fade into a comfortable routine, leading us to overlook the raw human emotions, the profound upheaval, and the extraordinary hope that lies at its heart. This invigorating perspective urges you to venture beyond the familiar, polished scenes of the nativity and into the gritty, uncertain reality of that first Christmas. It dares us to confront the profound vulnerability of its central figures—a bewildered teenager and a confused carpenter—and the world-changing stakes that hung in the balance.

By viewing the Nativity through a fresh lens, we can unearth a profoundly richer, more intricate story than we ever imagined. This passionate approach lays bare the hidden fears, unshakeable faith, and quiet courage of the individuals entwined in a divine narrative that transcends their wildest understanding. This is not merely a retelling of events; it is a fervent invitation to immerse ourselves in the narrative, allowing its timeless truths to resonate as both exhilarating and deeply personal. As you plunge into this experience, ponder what it must have truly felt like to navigate through this miraculous chaos, and let the story astonish you anew with its depth and wonder.



How to use this Journal:

There are many study methods out there! I encourage you to search through them and find what motivates and encourages you the most. I like to use the S.O.A.P Method.

scripture

Write out a verse or passage of scripture.

Observation What stood out to you about

this verse or scriptures?

Where there any commands or instructions?

How can you apply this today to your life today?

How can you live in light of this truth?

Frayer

Write out a prayer. Ask the Lord to show you how to meditate and apply this truth to your life.

Other areas to consider:

- Author
- Audience
- Major Concept
- Theme
- **Event**
- Keywords and Definitions
- People
- Places
- When
- Where
- Who am I in this Verse?
- Where is God?
- What Is God Speaking?

Give yourself room to ponder and pray. Allow yourself time to listen for God to speak to you. Get creative! Draw, paint, make diagrams, whatever ig-

Visit It Starts Small for more examples and in-depth study guide ideas! www.itstartssmall.com

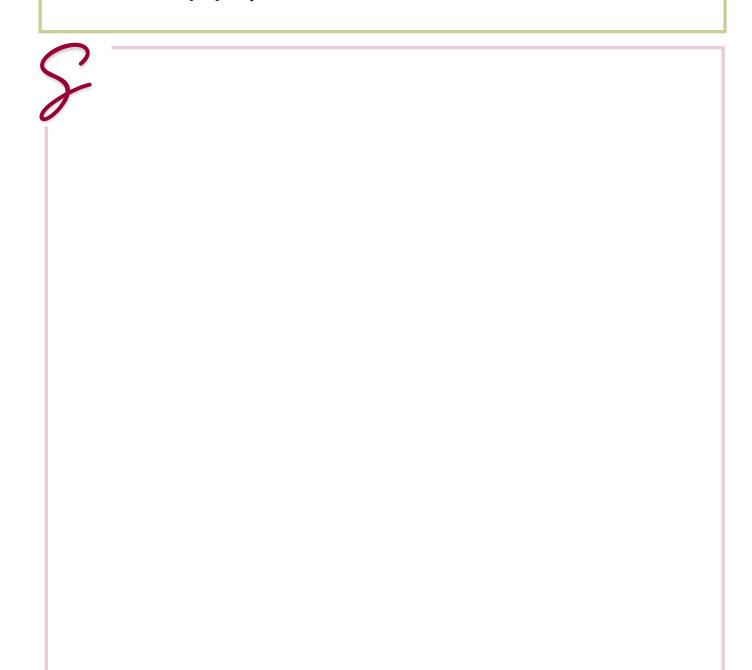
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The Promises and Preparations



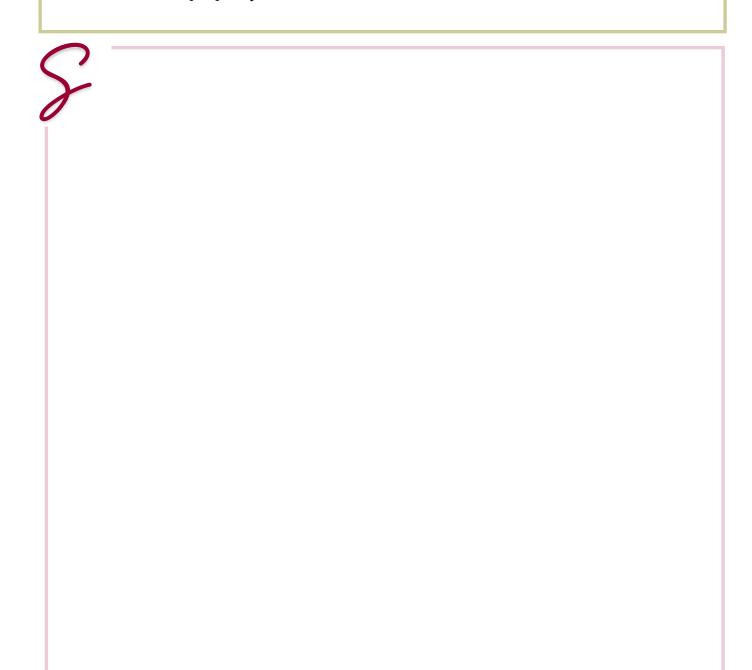
Read and write out the Following Scriptures:

- ♦ Isaiah 7:14: The prophecy of the virgin birth.
- ♦ Micah 5:2: The prophecy of the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem.



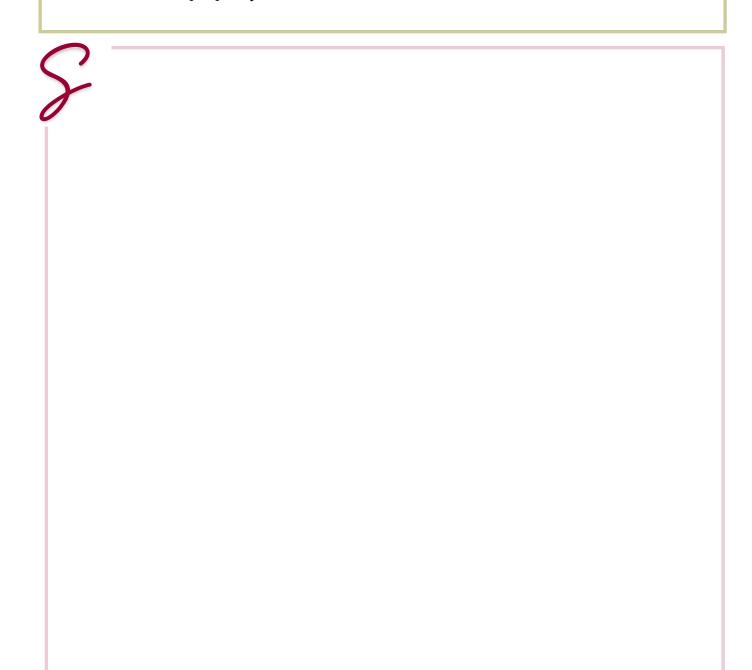
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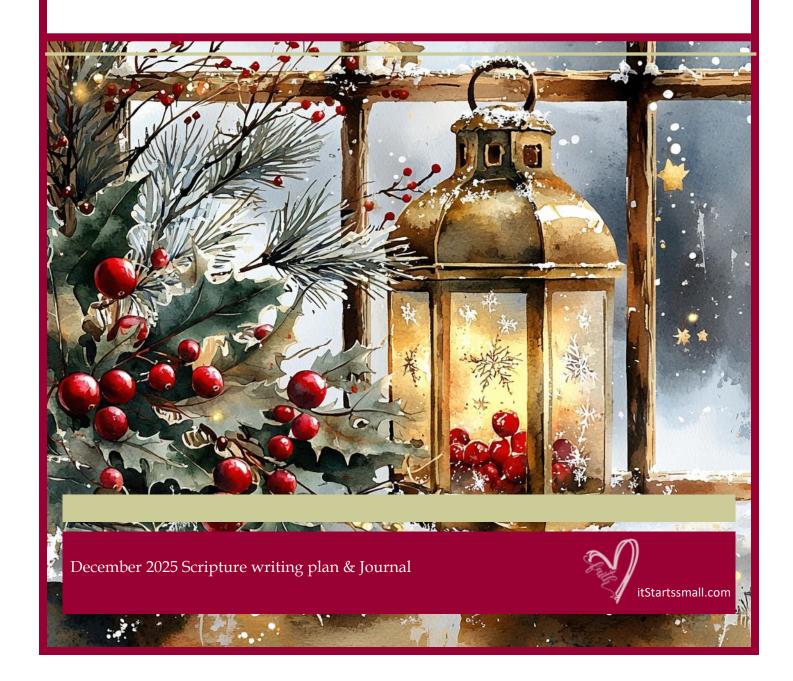


Something I am going to Apply



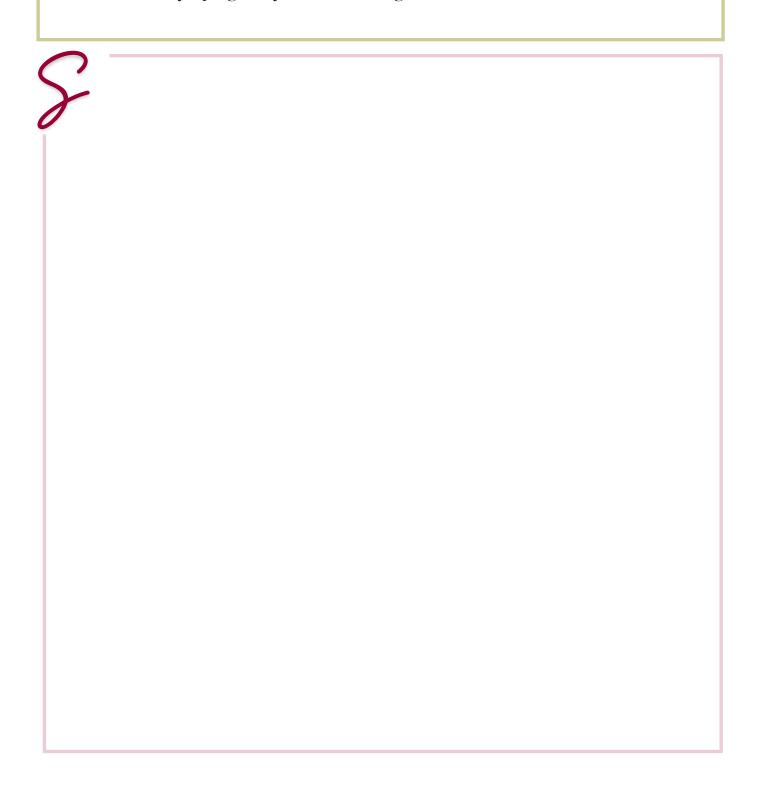
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The Journey to Bethlehem and Birth



Read and write out the Following Scriptures:

- at christmas
- ♦ Luke 1:26-38: The angel Gabriel appears to Mary and announces the birth of Jesus.
- Matthew 1:18-25: The angel appears to Joseph in a dream, revealing the miraculous nature of Mary's pregnancy and instructing him to take her as his wife.





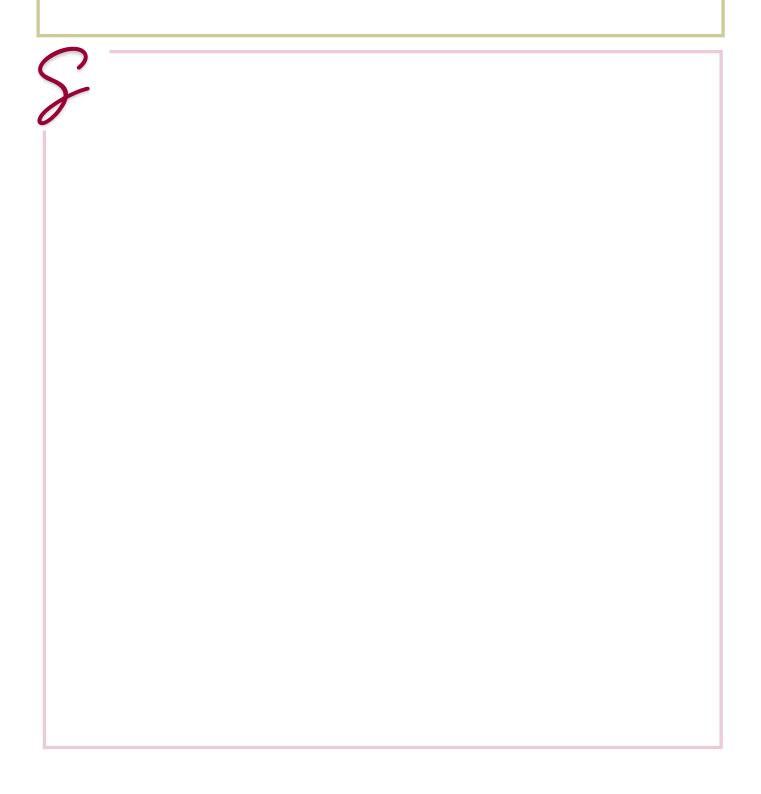


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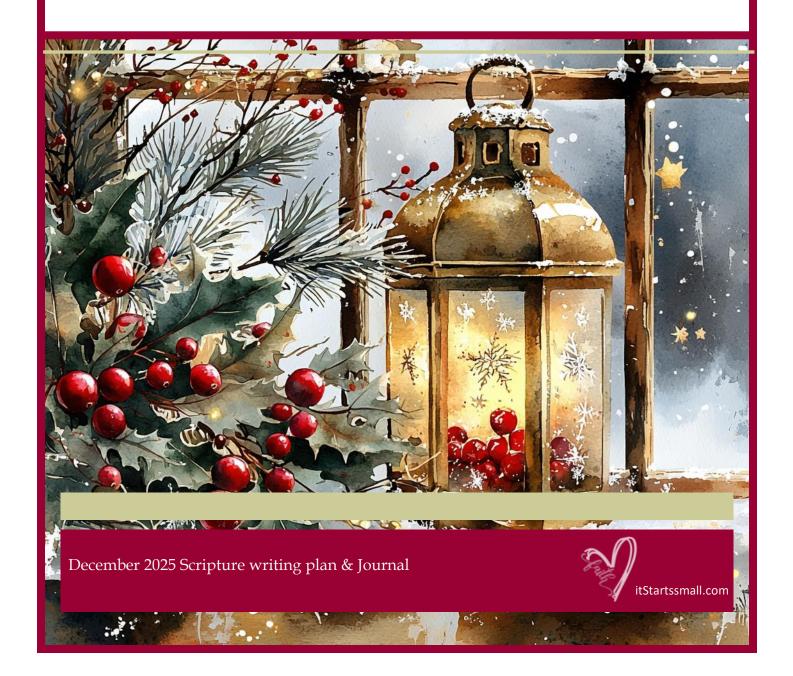




Something I am going to Apply



The Shepherds and Angels



Read and write out the Following Scriptures:

- at christmas
- ♦ Luke 2:1-7: The journey to Bethlehem for the census and Jesus' birth in a stable, laid in a manger.
- Luke 2:8-14: The announcement of Jesus' birth to the shepherds by an angel, followed by a multitude of angels praising God.
- ♦ Luke 2:15-20: The shepherds visit Jesus in the manger and then return, glorifying and praising God.







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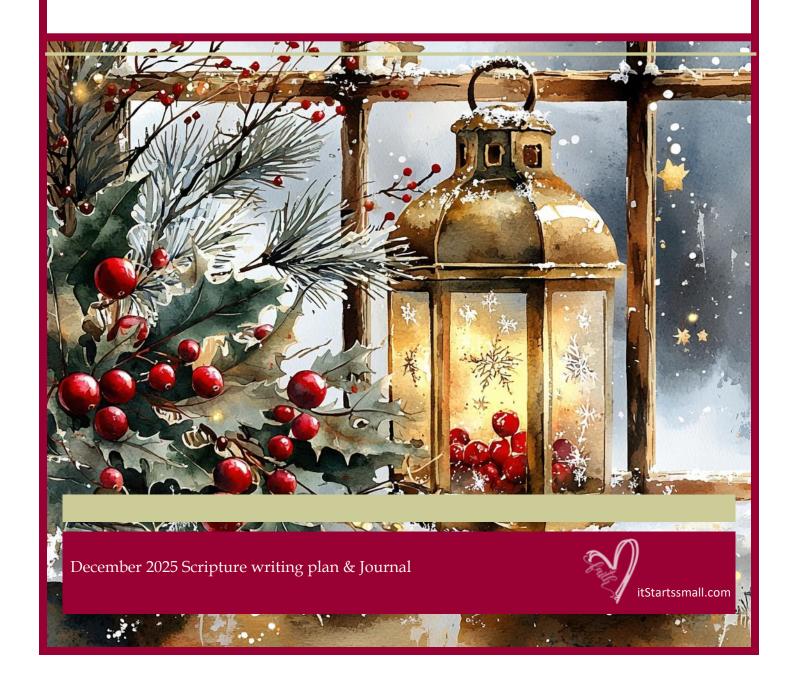




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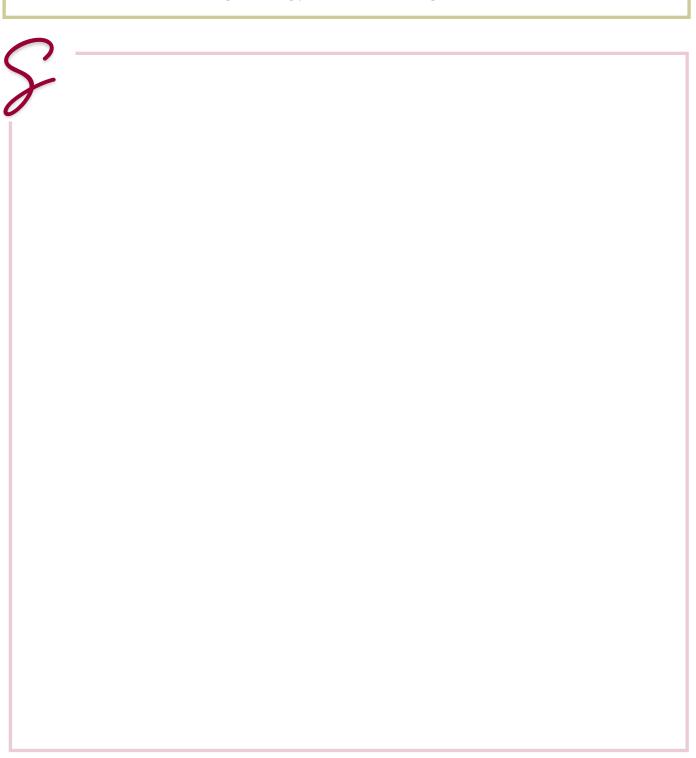


The Wise Men and a Greater Story



Read and write out the Following Scriptures:

- Matthew 2:1-12: The wise men follow a star to find Jesus, worship Him, and present Him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.
- ♦ Matthew 2:13-15: The flight to Egypt to escape King Herod's intention to kill Jesus.





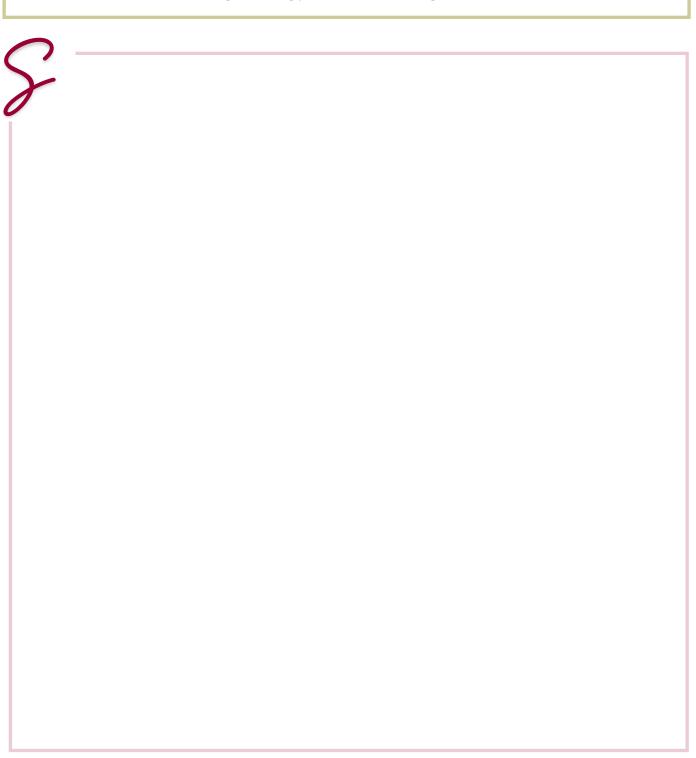


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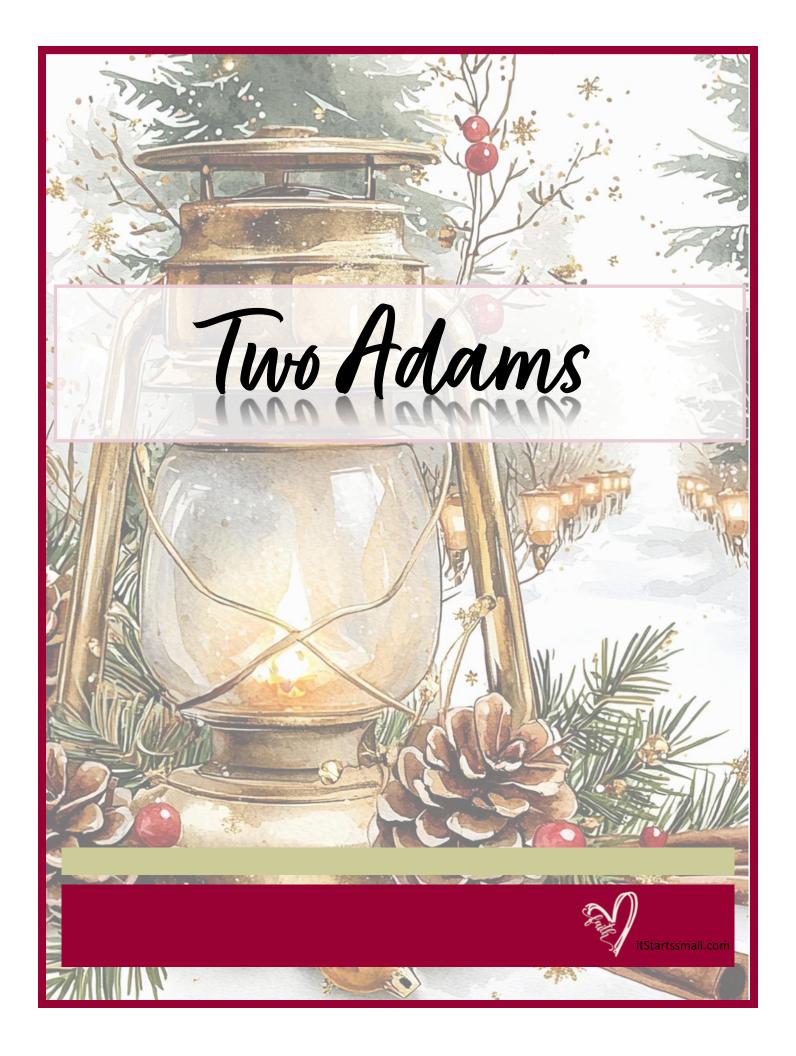






Something I am going to Apply







Read the Following Scriptures:

♦ 1 Corinthians 14:45

♦ Luke 1:26

♦ Luke 3:38

♦ Genesis 1:27

♦ Isaiah 43:7

♦ John 10:10

♦ Psalms 16:11

♦ Genesis 2:15-16

♦ Romans 15:12

Did you know that Christmas story does not start with the birth of Jesus as told in Luke 1:26?

It began long before that... at the very dawn of existence! Yes, all the way back in Genesis, where the tapestry of our story unfolds! It commenced with Jesus' first earthly ancestor (Luke 3:38), the patriarch of us all: Adam.

²⁷ So God created man in his own image; he created him in the image of God; he created them male and female.

Genesis 1:27

On the sixth day, the Lord created man in His own image! Truly, mankind is the crowning jewel of God's magnificent and flawless creation. Humanity embodies the likeness of our Creator with awe and wonder. But why, you may ask, did God choose to create Adam and, by extension, all of humanity? What grand purpose lies behind the creation of mankind? This is a profound question we have all contemplated at some point in our lives. It may resonate deeply with your heart today.

God's Word provides the answers to this important question.

⁷ everyone who bears my name and is created for my glory. I have formed them; indeed, I have made them."

Isaiah 47:3

Isaiah passionately proclaims that God created us for His glory. We are meant to bring glory, honor, and praise to His magnificent name! We were designed to embrace His invitation to savor His presence. This invitation is not just for a fleeting moment, a single day, or a passing season. It is for all of eternity! God's Word vibrantly assures us that we were made to be overflowing with joy. Jesus boldly declared, "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). The Psalmist exclaims, "In your presence there is fullness of joy" (Psalm 16:11). Before Jesus graced the earth, no one experienced the essence of their creation more gloriously than Adam and Eve. They walked hand in hand with God, conversing with Him, basking in His glorious presence in the Garden. They tirelessly pursued their calling, reveling in the fruitful blessings of the garden (Genesis 2:15-16).

And then came the fall.

Adam and Eve, in their hubris and fervent desire to be like God, allowed their judgment to be clouded. They fell prey to the serpent's cunning. Thus, they tumbled from grace, tragically blinded by the very thing they coveted—an equality with God that they already possessed. They were created in His image and likeness, bearing His sacred seal and divine imprint. And so, sin burst into the world, along with the shadow of death. Romans 5:12 powerfully declares, "sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, in this way death spread to all people, because all sinned."

In the most heartrending moments of humanity, we catch a glimpse of the glorious unfolding of God's divine plan. His salvation bursts forth, heralding the first domino of the Christmas miracle. Humanity fell into sin and faced judgment. However, God, in His infinite mercy, assures us that this is not the final chapter. Through the incarnation of the Lord, Jesus experiences profound human life. He masterfully rewrites the sorrowful narrative that Adam's sin began. Jesus infuses a vibrant new leaven into the essence of mankind. He graciously bestows immortality upon those who cherish Him by faith. This act ignites an ethical

transformation. It resonates through their very souls. By His unwavering obedience, He triumphantly rectifies the disobedience of Adam, paving the way for renewed life. You see, Jesus' powerful words to Nicodemus about being born again transcend mere metaphor. They unveil the profound truth of His redemption work. The Son of God stands as the firstborn of this dazzling new humanity - the new Adam! He invites us to embrace a transformative journey. This journey liberates us from the deep stain of sin that came from the first Adam. As we embark on this sacred season, let us earnestly reflect on the glorious implications of being in Christ. We are a new creation. We are reborn into the magnificent family of God!

Reflecting on the glorious implications of being in Christ

Reflecting passionately on the glorious implications of being in Christ involves immersion in life-changing truths. These truths concern your identity and position in God's kingdom through Jesus. This exhilarating journey involves actively diving into Scripture. It includes nurturing an intimate relationship with Christ. It also means wholeheartedly living out the transformative power of the Gospel.

Here are some ways you can reflect on these glorious implications:

1. Deepen your understanding of "in Christ"

- **Dive into key biblical passages:** Immerse yourself in the powerful words of Scripture that proclaim what it means to be "in Christ." Focus on transformative passages like Romans 6:1-11, Ephesians 1, and 2 Corinthians 5:17. Let these verses resonate deeply within you. They illuminate the exhilarating themes of new creation and resurrection life. They also highlight adoption, justification, and sanctification that flow from your incredible union with Christ.
- Embrace the spiritual reality of union: Grasp the profound truth of being "in Christ". It signifies an exhilarating and intimate spiritual union. This is a divine bond where all that is true of Jesus becomes your reality through faith. Revel in the magnificent truth of your unity with him in his death and resurrection. Share abundantly in his life and blessings.
- Contemplate the beautiful images of union: Reflect fervently on the rich metaphors Scripture employs to convey this awe-inspiring union. These include Christ as the vine and you as the branches. Also, Christ as the head and you as part of his body. Allow these vivid images to ignite your heart, reminding you of the deep, intimate connection you joyfully share with him.

2. Embrace the transformation

 Awaken to your glorious identity: Embrace the truth that your identity is anchored in Christ! You are chosen, beloved, redeemed, forgiven, and boldly declared righteous. This is not just a change; it is a magnificent transformation that defines your very being.

- **Rejoice in the liberation from condemnation:** Celebrate the incredible reality that in Christ, there is no condemnation for your sins! He has taken the penalty upon Himself, granting you freedom from the chains of sin and death. This is your invitation to live a life bursting with purpose and joyous freedom.
- Thrive as a brand new creation: Understand this profound truth: being "in Christ" means you are a brand new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). Let go of your past! Step into a divine life where you are aligned with God's will and purpose, flourishing in His love.
- **Pursue a life of holiness and obedience:** Embrace with ardor the noble call to holiness and obedience that accompanies your life in Christ! Let your desire be to live in a way that glorifies God. Remember, it is His divine power within you that ignites both your desire and your ability to follow Him faithfully.
- **Discover your divine purpose in Christ:** Revel in the knowledge that you are God's masterpiece, crafted meticulously in Christ Jesus for extraordinary good works that He prepared specifically for you (Ephesians 2:10). This realization fills your life with purpose and meaning beyond measure!

3. Engage in spiritual practices

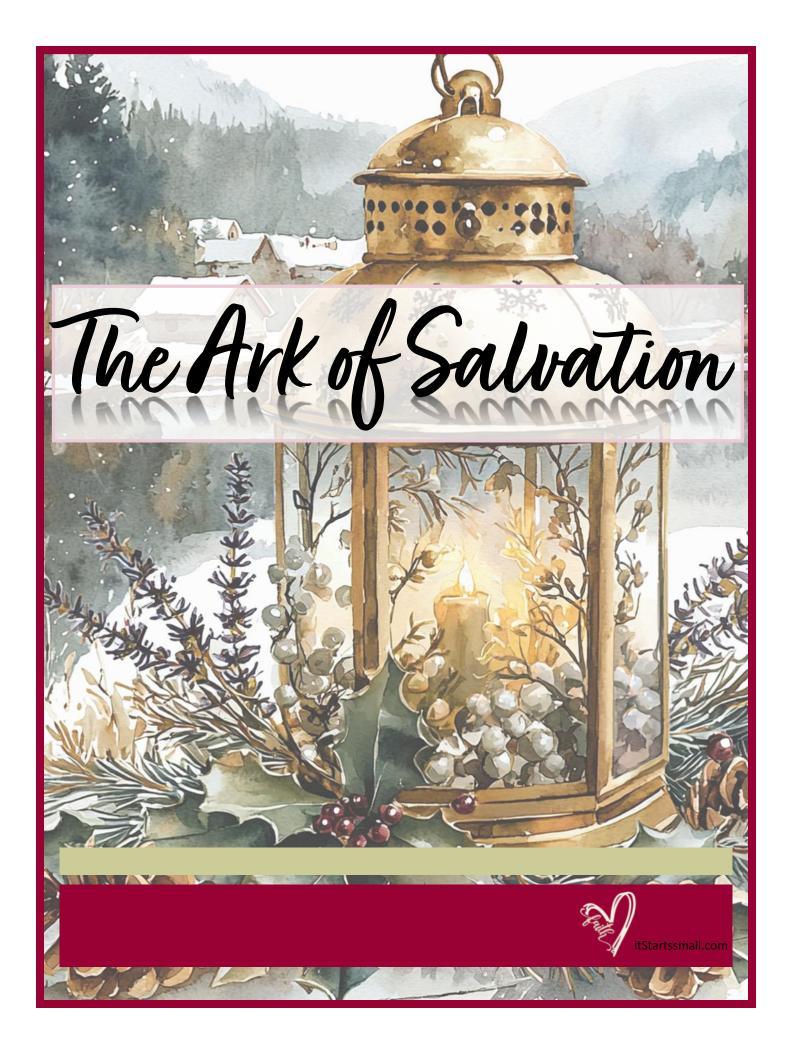
- Immerse yourself in Jesus: Just as couples start to reflect each other more deeply over time, so too will your spirit flourish when you passionately engage in intimate fellowship with Jesus. The more you draw near to him, the more his likeness bursts forth in your life.
- **Pray with fervor:** Let your prayers be a vibrant expression of your desire to abide in Christ and bask in his glorious presence. This sacred communion not only fortifies your connection to the Vine but also ignites the Holy Spirit's transformative work within you.
- **Delve into Scripture:** Dive headfirst into the richness of God's Word! Make it a regular practice to feast on passages that declare your identity and the immense blessings you have in Christ. This spiritual nourishment arms you against the deceptions of the world, illuminating the powerful truth of who you are in him.
- Engage in uplifting Christian fellowship: Surround yourself with fiery believers who will ignite your spirit, supporting and encouraging you in your walk with Christ. Sharing experiences and spiritual practices with others fuels a profound sense of union with him.
- Serve with a heart full of love: Shine Christ's radiant love and compassion by extending genuine kindness and empathy to everyone around you. Embrace a

- life of servant leadership, free of selfish ambition, and cherish others above yourself as you passionately live in unity with Christ.
- Embracing the glorious implications of being in Christ acknowledges the profound reality of your union with Him. This drives you to passionately live out the transformative power of that union every single day. This exhilarating journey leads to a life brimming with purpose and radiant freedom. It fosters an ever-deepening appreciation for the boundless grace and unfathomable love of God.

AS you reflect, meditate, or journal over today's devotional, consider the following questions:

- If you are "in Christ," what does that imply about your identity and worth?
- How does being "in Christ" change how you see yourself and how you believe others see you?
- What lies or self-defeating beliefs are you tempted to believe about yourself that are contrary to your identity in Christ?
- How does your relationship with God deepen or change now that you are "in Christ"?
- How has Christ's sacrifice on the cross impacted your relationship with God the Father?
- What does being "in Christ" mean for your access to God and your ability to approach Him?
- In what ways are you experiencing the "new creation" aspect of being "in Christ"?
- How has being "in Christ" brought about a change in your desires and priorities?
- What aspects of your "old self" are you still struggling with, and how can the truth of your "in Christ" identity help you overcome them?
- How does being "in Christ" inform your purpose and calling in life?
- What unique gifts and talents has God given you to further His kingdom as someone "in Christ"?
- In what ways are you actively using your gifts and talents to serve others and bring glory to God?
- How does knowing you are "in Christ" equip you to face difficulties and suffering?
- When facing difficult situations, how can you remind yourself of God's promises and His presence in your life?
- What role does your faith in Christ play when your understanding of Jesus

| • | feels "blurry" in certain areas of your life How does being "in Christ" influence your relationships with other believers? In what ways are you intentionally building relationships and sharing your faith with others? How does your identity in Christ motivate you to forgive others and extend grace? |
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Read the Following Scriptures:

- ♦ Genesis 7:1
- ♦ Genesis 6
- ♦ Hebrews 11:7
- ♦ John 14:6
- ♦ John 10:9

7 Then the Lord said to Noah, "Enter the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation.

Genesis 7:1

Everyone is captivated by the awe-inspiring tale of Noah and the Ark. This is a narrative so monumental and miraculous. Even Hollywood struggled to portray its grandeur. This epic story is filled with extraordinary moments that resonate deeply within us. It all begins in Genesis 6, where we learn of God's profound sorrow over mankind's creation. In a mere 1,600 years since the dawn of creation, the darkness of our wickedness reached an insurmountable level. The Lord gazed upon His creation. He found a world tainted by selfishness and sinful depravity. It was a stark reflection of souls completely stripped of His divine image.

⁸ Noah, however, found favor with the Lord.

Genesis 6:8

What was so special about Noah?

⁹ These are the family records of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among his contemporaries; Noah walked with God.

Genesis 6:9

Noah was a righteous man standing tall amidst a wicked generation, embodying an unwavering godly character. He lived blamelessly, fiercely honoring God while the world around him spiraled into sin and despair. For Noah, this must have been an excruciatingly challenging journey—navigating a life that defied the very currents of society. He resisted the relentless pull of unrighteousness. He fought against the crushing waves of peer pressure. He bravely battled the deep, human desires for acceptance and belonging.

Noah never gave in. He stayed strong in the face of that pressure. He found favor in God's eyes as a righteous man of faith.

⁷ By faith Noah, after he was warned about what was not yet seen and motivated by godly fear, built an ark to deliver his family. By faith he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

Hebrews 11:7

When God spoke, Noah's heart ignited with unwavering conviction. He stood firm, resisting the seductive pull of popular opinion. Without a hint of doubt, he embraced God's command with fervent belief. Noah constructed the Ark with every ounce of his faith. He was driven by a profound trust that soared even before the first raindrop fell.

I can only fathom the immense ridicule Noah must have faced. Picture the onlookers, scoffing as he tirelessly constructs that colossal ark for... rain. What even was rain? It was a concept unknown to them! Envision his wife wandering through the village, procuring supplies while enduring the stinging whispers and judgmental glances. Yet, through it all, Noah stood resolute, unwavering in his faith. Why, you ask? Because he understood that God had a magnificent plan unfolding! As a forebear of Jesus, this remarkable man embodies the essence of righteousness. He serves as a beacon of living by faith, an unwavering testament to following the Lord with unshakable belief!

But Noah is not the most important figure in this story! Besides God, who can you guess it is?

It's the ark! The beloved picture of Christ. The ark contained only one door. Jesus said:

⁶ Jesus told him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

John 14:6

Like the ark that held the sole door leading to salvation from the deluge, Jesus stands as that one and only door (John 10:9) to eternal life! Noah and his family were not merely saved by belief; they were saved by their unshakeable faith in God. Their salvation was not passive; it thrived on obedience and a profound trust in their Creator. Because of their unwavering belief, they received the glorious invitation to enter the ark. They embraced the promise of safety amidst the storm!

Today, we stand at the threshold of an extraordinary opportunity! We can be rescued from the wrath of God through the incredible gift of salvation—Jesus Christ Himself! This is the essence of Christmas! Let's ignite our passion this holiday season. We should commit to bringing at least one soul into the ark of salvation with us. Who can you passionately introduce to Jesus today?

Reflecting on God's Promises and the Rainbow in the Story of Noah's Ark

The rainbow in the story of Noah's Ark is a powerful symbol of God's covenant with humanity and all living creatures, a pledge never to destroy the earth again by flood. This promise, recorded in Genesis 9:8-17, offers profound insights into God's character and his relationship with his creation.

Read Genesis 9:8-17

Here's how you can reflect on this promise and the rainbow, along with questions to ponder about your own life:

Understanding the significance of the rainbow

- A sign of God's extravagant grace and boundless mercy: In the face of humanity's sinfulness and rebellion, God graciously chose to bestow mercy and forge a promise of preservation. The rainbow is not merely a reminder; it embodies God's overwhelming grace, reaffirming His active involvement in our world and His relentless pursuit of our redemption.
- A powerful symbol of hope and renewal: Emerging triumphantly after the devastating flood, the rainbow heralds a glorious fresh start, a new covenant, and a future liberated from the shadows of destruction. It serves as a beacon of hope, illuminating the path forward, reminding us that even through the darkest storms, God's light shines brightly, guiding us with unwavering love.
- A vivid picture of God's magnificent glory: In the awe-inspiring visions of the Bible, the stunning brilliance and beauty of a rainbow capture the very essence of God's divine presence and glory. The rainbow is not an ordinary sight; it is a breathtaking glimpse into the majesty and splendor of the Almighty.
- A profound reminder of God's steadfast faithfulness: God's everlasting covenant with Noah echoes a powerful truth—His unwavering commitment to His promises. This profound assurance reverberates throughout scripture, bringing comfort and hope to believers, highlighting God's unchanging character and His eternal dedication to fulfilling His word.

Questions to ponder about your own life:

1. Trust and God's promises:

- What promises has God made that you are clinging to in your own life?
- How has God demonstrated His faithfulness to you in the past, confirming His reliability for the future?
- Are there areas where you need to relinquish control and fully trust God's promises, even when the outcome is uncertain?

2. Weathering life's storms:

- What "storms" are you currently facing in your life, such as challenging circumstances, uncertainties, or struggles?
- How can the rainbow, as a reminder of hope after the storm, bring you comfort and encouragement during these difficult times?
- In what ways can you actively look for God's guidance and presence amidst your challenges?

3. Witnessing and sharing God's faithfulness:

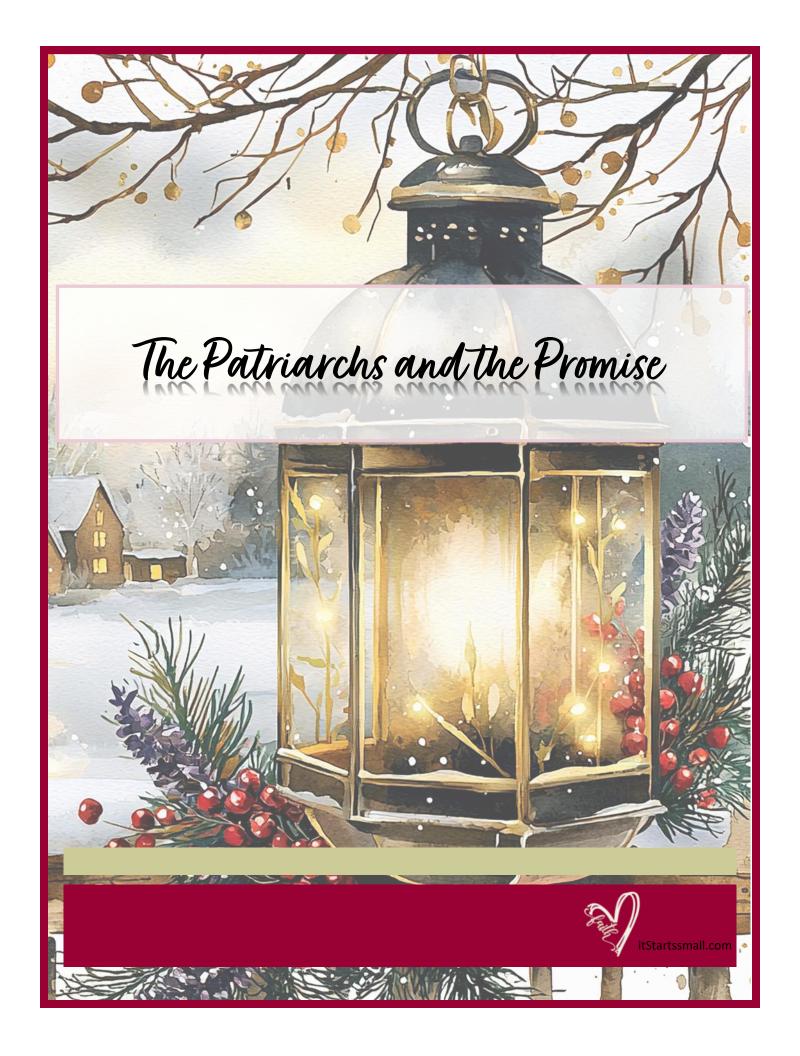
- How can you be a witness to God's faithfulness to others who may be struggling or lost?
- In what ways are you sharing the hope and comfort that God's promises offer, particularly to those navigating personal trials?
- How can you live in such a way that reflects the beauty of God's grace and mercy, inspiring others to seek his presence and trust in his plan?

4. Acknowledging God's glory:

- Do you regularly take time to reflect on God's glory and his incredible love for humanity?
- What are some of the "rainbows" or signs of God's covenant that you see in your own life, reminding you of his presence and his promises?
- How can you cultivate a sense of awe and wonder as you witness God's goodness and majesty in your daily life?

By immersing yourself in the profound narrative of Noah's Ark, you can truly awaken a powerful appreciation for God's unwavering faithfulness. The vibrant symbol of the rainbow highlights his boundless love. It also reflects the radiant hope he extends through his glorious promises. This deep reflection can ignite

| your faith. It can embolden you to face life's challenges with an unshakeable trust in his unchanging goodness. |
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| Read | the | Fol | lowing | Scri | ptures: |
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♦ Galatians 3:7

♦ Matthew 1

♦ Luke 3

♦ Genesis 12:1-3

♦ Genesis 15:5

- ♦ James 2:23
- ♦ Genesis 22:208
- ♦ Romans 8:32
- ♦ Genesis 27
- ♦ Genesis 28
- ♦ Genesis 49:8**-**10

⁷ You know, then, that those who have faith, these are Abraham's sons.

Galatians 3:7

The Genealogies of Jesus listed in Matthew 1 and Luke 3 showcase towering biblical figures. These figures paint a vibrant portrait that resonates through the ages. This family tree includes revered kings like David, Solomon, and Josiah. It also features extraordinary pillars of faith like Noah and Boaz. This family tree bursts with the vitality of divine legacy. Yet, overshadowing them all, no name shines more significant than that of Abraham. His unwavering faith ignited a covenant that changed humanity forever.

Abraham is called the father of faith, patriarch of the people of Israel, the friend of God...

It all began in Genesis 12. This pivotal moment occurred when God called upon a man named Abram. Abram was a remarkable descendant of Noah through Shem. God urged him to leave his homeland and embark on a journey to a divinely chosen land (Genesis 12:1). With this life-altering command came an extraordinary promise: "I will make you a great nation... all families will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:2-3). At the vibrant age of 75, Abraham embraced the call of the Lord with an open heart. What captivates us in this incredible narrative is that, at this juncture, Abram and Sari were childless. How could God possibly forge a great nation from two elderly individuals without

offspring? Abram pondered this same bewildering question!

So, God revealed His plan.

⁵ He took him outside and said, "Look at the sky and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "Your offspring will be that numerous."

Genesis 15:5

Despite the seemingly impossible situation, Abram believed and God counted Him righteous because of his faith (James 2:23). And guess what? A few many years later, Sari gave birth to Isaac. Isaac was the son of promise. Isaac went on to become the clearest picture of God's plan. God instructed Abraham to take Isaac up the mountain and sacrifice him (Gen 22). Without hesitation, Abraham took his only son, a promised son up the mountain.

This is where we see the true nature of faith: it does not demand explanations but instead rests on promises. Abraham knew God could not contradict Himself. Abraham trusted God had a plan. Abraham knew God would provide a lamb to sacrifice. Just as Abraham was going to strike a blow to his son, an angel cried out... look, a ram to sacrifice.

Do you see a clear picture of God's plan?

Except His plan would be through His Son Jesus, the Lamb of God who would bear the sins of the world. It is believed that Isaac was between 18-30 years old. He was old enough to know what was going on and to carry his own wood for his own sacrifice. Isaac remained silent as his father tied him to the alter. He did not protest. He was willingly going to give himself up...just like Jesus!

In the end, the Lord stayed Abraham's hand and provided another sacrifice. He kept His promise and gave us a glimpse of what was to come.

³² He did not even spare his own Son but gave him up for us all. How will he not also with him grant us everything?

Romans 8:32

God would later reaffirm His magnificent promise of redemption through the seed of Abraham to Isaac's son Jacob (Genesis 27-28). He also made this promise

| to Jacob's son Judah (Genesis 49:8-10). The legacy of the patriarchs is not merely instrumental to the Christmas story; it is the very heartbeat of it! They are the catalysts through which the promise of the Messiah took glorious shape. They also embody unwavering faith and true righteousness. Their lives provide some powerful and inspiring examples of God's faithfulness. These examples ignite our hearts with hope and devotion. |
|---|
| Today, despite the storms you might be weathering, take refuge in the unwavering faithfulness of God. No matter what whirlwind this season has thrown your way, rely on His faithfulness! As a united family, let us cling to His promises and the profound truths found in His Word. Let us find our rest in Him, confidently assured that He will never abandon or forsake us! |
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Reflecting on God's Faithfulness and Promises

God's faithfulness is the unwavering cornerstone of our faith. It is a beacon that assures us of His trustworthiness in every stratum of our lives. It is an unshakeable promise that He will always keep His word! Reflecting on the magnitude of God's faithfulness in His promises ignites a fiery passion within us. It also deepens our faith. This reflection provides profound comfort in times of uncertainty. Here are some thought-provoking questions to ignite your pondering, mediation or journaling:

1. Understanding God's character

- How does God's faithfulness, as demonstrated in His promises, reveal His unchanging and trustworthy nature?
- What does it mean for you personally that God is a God who keeps His promises?
- How does the realization of God's perfect faithfulness affect your perception of yourself and your place in His plan?

2. Evidence of God's faithfulness

- Where have you seen examples of God fulfilling His promises throughout the Bible?
- What specific promises from God's Word resonate with you and why?
- How has God demonstrated His faithfulness in your own life? What evidence can you point to that assures you of His unwavering commitment?

Trusting God in times of doubt

- How can reflecting on God's faithfulness help you navigate seasons of doubt or uncertainty?
- When facing challenges, how can you draw on past experiences of God's faithfulness to strengthen your trust in Him for the present and future?
- What steps can you take to deepen your trust in God's promises, especially when you face difficult circumstances?

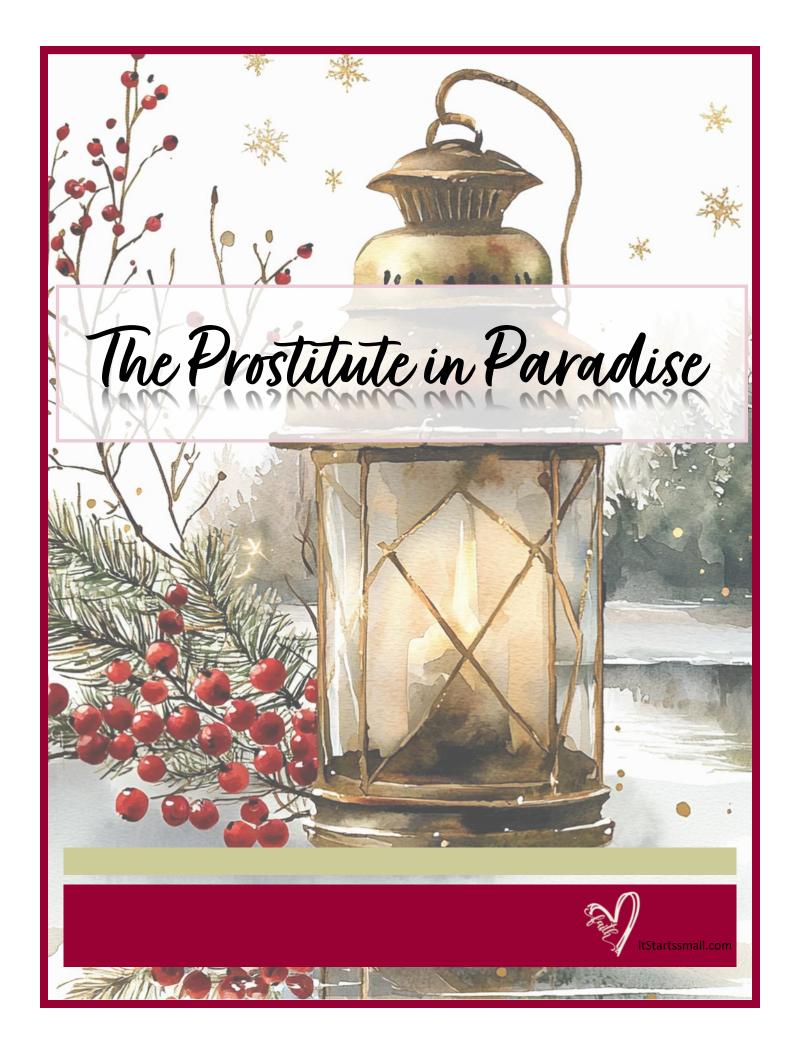
4. Living in light of God's faithfulness

- How does knowing that God is faithful impact the way you approach your daily life and your decisions?
- In what ways can you reflect God's faithfulness in your interactions with others, demonstrating the trustworthiness and love of God?
- How can focusing on God's faithfulness inspire you to persevere in areas where you may be struggling or where your faith is being tested?

5. Future hope in God's faithfulness

- What promises of God give you hope for the future?
- How does the faithfulness of God reassure you about your eternal future and the ultimate fulfillment of His plan?
- How can you live in expectation of God's future promises, trusting that He will bring them to pass in His perfect time?

Ponder these profound questions. Immerse yourself in Scripture. This can ignite an extraordinary journey towards a deeper understanding of God's unwavering faithfulness. It empowers you to wholeheartedly trust in His magnificent promises. Remember, even in moments of doubt or faithlessness, God's faithfulness shines brighter than ever!





Read the Following Scriptures:

- ♦ Hebrews 11:31
- ♦ Matthew 1:5

³¹ By faith Rahab the prostitute welcomed the spies in peace and didn't perish with those who disobeyed.

Hebrews 11:31

Ponder a moment: How far can God's grace reach?

Deep within our very souls, an intense yearning compels us to seek the answer to this profound question. Deep down, we crave that answer, for it holds the key to our longing. When we grasp this truth, we realize that we would never want to be "outside looking in" at the boundless grace of God. We forever desire to be enveloped in that divine embrace.

So how far can God's grace reach?

The answer is powerfully clear: There is no distance on this earth that can hinder God's incredible grace! No person, no place, and no predicament lies beyond His unwavering reach. Nothing you have ever done can push you out of His embrace. Nothing you will ever do can disqualify you from His boundless grace. You need not remain an outsider gazing in! If this seems like just a cliché, I assure you, this truth is alive. Followers of Christ are not merely parroting teachings. This reality is as tangible as flesh and blood. An inspiring example stands right before us in the story of Christ's genealogy... Rehab!

We are first introduced to her in the captivating pages of Joshua. You may remember the awe-inspiring story of Jericho. This remarkable book narrates the powerful transition of God's people, the Israelites. They move from their long, arduous wandering in the wilderness. It leads to the triumphant moment of claiming the promised land. It stands as a pivotal testament to faith and destiny. In an astonishing twist, Rahab becomes a critical player in God's plan for His people. She leaves an indelible mark on their journey towards redemption.

There is a detail we cannot overlook. When it comes to this woman, there is no way to delicately say it. She was a prostitute. Not just that, but she was a Canaanite. She was part of a pagan society that God was about to judge through Israel's conquest of Canaan. In a natural sense, she was the least kind of person. She was an unlikely candidate to receive, much less reflect, God's grace that you could come up with. Right now in your mind, imagine that person who is the polar opposite of godliness. That's Rehab.

Her chosen profession could not deter the Lord's divine purpose. He poured out abundant grace upon her. She was saved from utter destruction. She placed her unwavering faith in the miraculous work of God through the nation of Israel. Her confidence was not in the crumbling city walls, but deeply anchored in the mighty hand of God at work. In an astonishing display of divine mercy, grace went beyond all expectations. It embraced a prostitute. It rescued her and granted her an invaluable place in the promised land.

⁸ Before the men fell asleep, she went up on the roof ⁹ and said to them, "I know that the Lord has given you this land and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and everyone who lives in the land is panicking because of you. ¹⁰ For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two Amorite kings you completely destroyed across the Jordan. ¹¹ When we heard this, we lost heart, and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on earth below.

Joshua 2:8-11

News spread fast about this "mob" traveling in the wilderness. These people's God had destroyed Egypt and parted the Red Sea for them to safely get away from the Pharoah's army. This same God allowed them to destroy the Amorite kings before crossing the Jordan. Then, they watched with their own eyes as this same God pushed the waters back of the Jordan and this "mob" crossed over.

Imagine the sheer gravity of that moment! The heart-stopping news spread through the air. The once-mighty Egypt—the greatest city of its time—had been utterly decimated. The plagues were unleashed by the God of Israel! Picture the

awe of their deliverance as the Red Sea miraculously parted before them, a testament to divine power. Skeptics may have dismissed it as mere exaggeration or a fanciful tale... until that fateful day they witnessed the "mob" gather at the river. Picture it clearly: these brave souls had just vanquished the formidable Amorite kings. With fierce determination, they stood ready to cross the Jordan. They were only a stone's throw away from the imposing walls of Jericho!

Most of the city probably stood that day on those towering "impenetrable" walls. They were filled with arrogance and contempt. The Jordan River swelled to its maddening peak. They reveled in anticipation. They were eager to witness the tragic spectacle of humanity succumbing to the wrath of nature. Men, women, and children alike were swept away in the merciless flood. Little did they realize that they mocked the very God ready to perform a breathtaking miracle. He would push back the waters and create a miraculous path for His people. Picture the scene unfolding before your eyes. It was not merely a handful of souls with a few cattle. No, it was an entire nation crossing triumphantly on dry ground! It wasn't a fleeting moment. It unfolded throughout an entire day. Not a single life was lost. No soul was soaked in the murky waters. As soon as the priests bearing the sacred ark emerged from the river's depths, God withdrew His mighty hand. Then the river resumed its furious flow.

Let us dive into the incredible story of Rehab! While we may not know for certain if she witnessed the miraculous events with her own eyes but imagine her lowering the spies from her window, a bold move that defied her world! From that same window she witnessed from her own eyes, the power of the Lord God Almighty. Yet, it was something deeper, something profound about the testimony of this Almighty God that gripped her heart with undeniable fervor. A Canaanite pagan, she had been raised amidst the worship of false deities—gods of crops, fertility, and weather, each more hollow than the last. She had seen the horrors of animal and child sacrifices, a bleak reality devoid of hope. But here, in this moment, she recognized the one true God, the Creator of heaven and earth! While others trembled with fear, she was struck with the exhilarating realization that this God was her salvation. Her faith ignited a fire within her; she believed that this God would not only spare her but also rescue her entire family from the impending wrath and judgment.

In the Jewish mindset, pedigree held monumental significance—your lineage defined your worth. The nobler your ancestors, the more radiant the glory that enveloped you. Yet, in a stunning twist, we encounter Jesus, the beloved friend of

sinners. The remarkable story of Rehab unfolds within the grand narrative of redemption and salvation. Were it not for the divine truth revealed in scripture, such an incredible tale might seem too audacious to believe!

⁵ Salmon fathered Boaz by Rahab, Boaz fathered Obed by Ruth, Obed fathered Jesse,

Matthew 1:5

God could have selected anyone, from any place, to be part of the Savior's lineage. Yet, in His boundless grace, He chose someone defined by sin and shame! This was no mere coincidence; nothing God does is! He chose Rahab to remind all of humanity that NO ONE is beyond the reach of HIS GRACE! Christ came to stand in solidarity with sinners—people like Rahab, people like you, and people like me!

Remember this when you find yourself vulnerable to the whispers that you are beyond the hand of grace! Reflect on Rahab's astonishing inclusion in the greatest story ever told! Take heart in the truth that her place in Christ's lineage is powerful. It illustrates that you will never have to stand on the outside looking in!

Reflecting on God's Testimony in My Life

Rahab was a bold and fearless Canaanite prostitute. She made a remarkable choice to place her unwavering trust in the God of Israel. She did this by safeguarding the Israelite spies. This extraordinary act of faith ensured her own salvation. It also saved her entire family from the impending doom of Jericho. Her story offers profound lessons on faith, courage, and the limitless grace of God. It invites you to deeply reflect on your own journey of belief.

Here are some questions you can ponder, meditate upon or Journal:

1. Recognizing God's power and choosing to trust Him

- Rahab recognized God's power and His intention to give the land to the Israelites. Are you actively seeking to recognize God's work and power in your own life and in the world around you?
- What "fortified cities" or seemingly insurmountable obstacles are you facing right now that are tempting you to doubt God's promises? How can you shift your focus from these problems to God's faithfulness and power to overcome them?
- How does Rahab's story challenge you to acknowledge God's sovereignty over all nations and circumstances, including your own?

2. Demonstrating faith through action

- Rahab's faith wasn't just a belief; it was a belief that led to action, even at great personal risk. Are there areas in your life where you need to move beyond intellectual assent and put your faith into action?
- What specific actions, however small, could you take this week to live out your faith more courageously?
- How can your actions demonstrate to others the reality and transforming power of your faith in God?

3. Embracing God's grace and redemption

Rahab, a marginalized woman with a questionable past, was not only

saved but also included in the lineage of Jesus Christ. Does anything in your past make you feel unworthy or disqualified from God's grace or purpose? How can Rahab's story remind you that God's grace extends to all and that your past does not define your future in God's kingdom?

- How can you embrace a new identity in Christ, letting go of past mistakes and stepping into the plans God has for you?
- How can you support and encourage others who may feel unworthy or inadequate, helping them see their potential in God's plan?

4. Trusting God with the unknown and the future

- Rahab trusted God's promises even before the walls of Jericho fell. Are you willing to trust God and obey His instructions, even when you don't see the full picture or the immediate results?
- What areas of your life require you to step out of your comfort zone and trust God with the unknown?
- How can you lean into God's providential hand and timing, knowing that He is working out His purposes, even through seemingly insignificant events?

5. The ripple effect of faith

- Rahab's act of faith not only saved her but also her family and ultimately placed her in the lineage of Jesus Christ. How might your seemingly small acts of faith today have a profound impact on others and even on future generations?
- How can you actively seek to be part of God's larger story, impacting the world around you for His glory?
- In what ways are you sharing the hope and transforming power of God's love and redemption with those in your sphere of influence?

Immerse yourself in Rahab's compelling story. Dive into these thought-provoking reflection questions. Unlock the transformative potential of living a life fueled by active faith. Embrace the breathtaking depth of God's grace. Ignite your trust in His incredible power to mold you for His divine purposes. This remains true no matter what shadows your past or the challenges of your present may hold.





Read the Following Scriptures:

♦ 2 Samuel 7:13

♦ 2 Samuel 7

♦ Matthew 1:6-16

♦ Luke 3:23**-**31

♦ Revelation 19:16

♦ Colossians 1:16

♦ Romans 6:9

♦ Philippians 4:19

¹³ He is the one who will build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

2 Samuel 7:13

God Keeps His promises.

Say that again to yourself. God KEEPS HIS PROMISES!

In the Old Testament, God made several promises, or covenants, with His people -- Adam, Noah, Abraham, the Israelites, and David to name a few.

David.

David's journey was an interesting and colorful rollercoaster ride. From the modest of upbringings as a shepherd boy to the courageous Israelite who took down a giant. He spent a good amount of his life on the run from a jealous wicked king whom he refused to slay. When the crown was finally placed on his head, at the peak of his reign, he became a murderer and adulterer. He was a king who allowed dysfunction in his home that eventually led his son to rebel against the throne and sent a domino effect ending the life of each of his son.

David bravely navigated the daunting gauntlet of life, a true warrior of faith. Today, we revere him as the man after God's own heart, a shining beacon of unwavering devotion. With fiery passion, he shows what it means to love the Lord deeply. Through his own fervent words, he crafted countless beautiful and

evocative Psalms. These Psalms continue to resonate with our souls.

David encountered many trials and tribulations along his incredible journey. Yet, not once do we see God turning His back on him. God never withdrew His favor. David had unwavering faith. He patiently awaited the promises of the Lord. He held fiercely to the expectation that all God declared would come to pass in His perfect timing. In the pages of 2 Samuel, we uncover the greatest promise ever given to David. It is a testament to his unshakeable faith and the divine plan set in motion.

David yearned to construct a magnificent temple for the Lord—a majestic house where the Divine could reside among His people. Yet, the Almighty had a different vision. Why, you ask? God revealed to David that the weight of blood stained his hands. This disqualified him from building a sanctuary for the Most High. However, from the lineage of David, the Lord made an extraordinary promise. Through his very seed, He vowed to establish an everlasting kingdom. This kingdom would endure through Eternity.

"The Lord declares to you: The Lord himself will make a house for you. ¹² When your time comes and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up after you your descendant, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He is the one who will build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴ I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will discipline him with a rod of men and blows from mortals. ¹⁵ But my faithful love will never leave him as it did when I removed it from Saul, whom I removed from before you. ¹⁶ Your house and kingdom will endure before me forever, and your throne will be established forever.'"

2 Samuel 7:12-16

Today's scripture in 2 Samuel 7 echoes the awe-inspiring promise of the Messiah! It speaks of the seed of Abraham—the one through whom all nations would be abundantly blessed. With undeniable clarity, God bestowed a magnificent promise upon David, declaring that a Savior would emerge from his lineage. Just as the Abrahamic covenant assured, the time for mankind's redemption is drawing near. God's plan of salvation is unfolding before our very eyes!

Can you feel the weight of being David? Picture this profound moment when Nathan, a messenger from the Lord, delivers words that echo through eternity!

The God of the universe knows every secret. He hears every heartbeat from beginning to end. He boldly proclaims that David's lineage will reign forever! This isn't just a promise; it's a divine legacy like no other! A thousand years later, David had passed away. In the fullness of time, the world witnessed the glorious fulfillment of this promise. Jesus of Nazareth, the long-awaited King of kings, has arrived!

We learn from both Matthew and Luke that Jesus was heir to the throne. Matthew traces Jesus' legal claim through his stepfather, Joseph (Matthew 1:6-16). Luke traces Jesus' genetic connection to David through Mary (Luke 3:23-31). Mary is not mentioned, but most scholars maintain that Heli was Mary's father. Joseph is mentioned because he is Jesus' earthy father and genealogy only mentions males. We can go as far as to say that Jesus was twice from David's line.

Of course, Jesus elevated David's rule to a breathtaking pinnacle! He is not just any fleeting king like those who came before. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords (Revelation 19:16)! Christ's kingdom stretches across the entire universe, for all things were crafted by Him and for Him (Colossians 1:16)! Since He has conquered death and risen again, His reign will NEVER end (Romans 6:9)!

Through the breathtaking and glorious realities of who Jesus is and what He has accomplished, the awe-inspiring promise to David has been triumphantly fulfilled! David's throne stands unshakably established for all eternity. His divine power has been magnificently passed down through the generations to the eternal Christ! No earthly legacy, no matter how grand, can even begin to compare with this extraordinary truth!

What promises of God do you rest on? How have you seen these fulfilled in your life? Today we reflect upon Philippians 4:19:

¹⁹ And my God will supply all your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:19

Digging Deeper Into Philippians 4:19

Philippians 4:19 (NIV) states:

¹⁹ And my God will supply all your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:19

This breathtaking promise from the Apostle Paul to the Philippian believers stands as a profound source of comfort. Those believers fervently supported his ministry with unwavering generosity. It is also a stirring challenge for believers today.

1. Pondering the verse's meaning

- God's identity as Provider: Paul introduces the verse with "my God," emphasizing a personal and intimate relationship with the all-powerful and faithful God. How does this personal connection deepen your trust in God's provision? Do you believe He is your God, intimately aware of your needs and committed to meeting them?
- **Defining "needs":** The Greek word for "need" in this verse, *chreia*, refers to necessities or business. This suggests that God's provision extends beyond mere wants and focuses on what is truly essential for our physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. What are your true needs in life, compared to your wants? How can you differentiate between them and prioritize what truly matters?
- The extent of God's provision: God promises to supply "all your needs," not just out of His riches, but according to His riches in glory. This implies a generous and abundant provision that reflects His infinite resources and power. How does recognizing God's vast and unlimited resources empower you to trust Him with even the most daunting needs?
- **The channel of God's provision:** The phrase "in Christ Jesus" highlights that all of God's blessings and provisions flow through our relationship with Christ. How does being "in Christ" ensure that your needs are met,

not merely based on your actions or merits, but on God's grace and love?

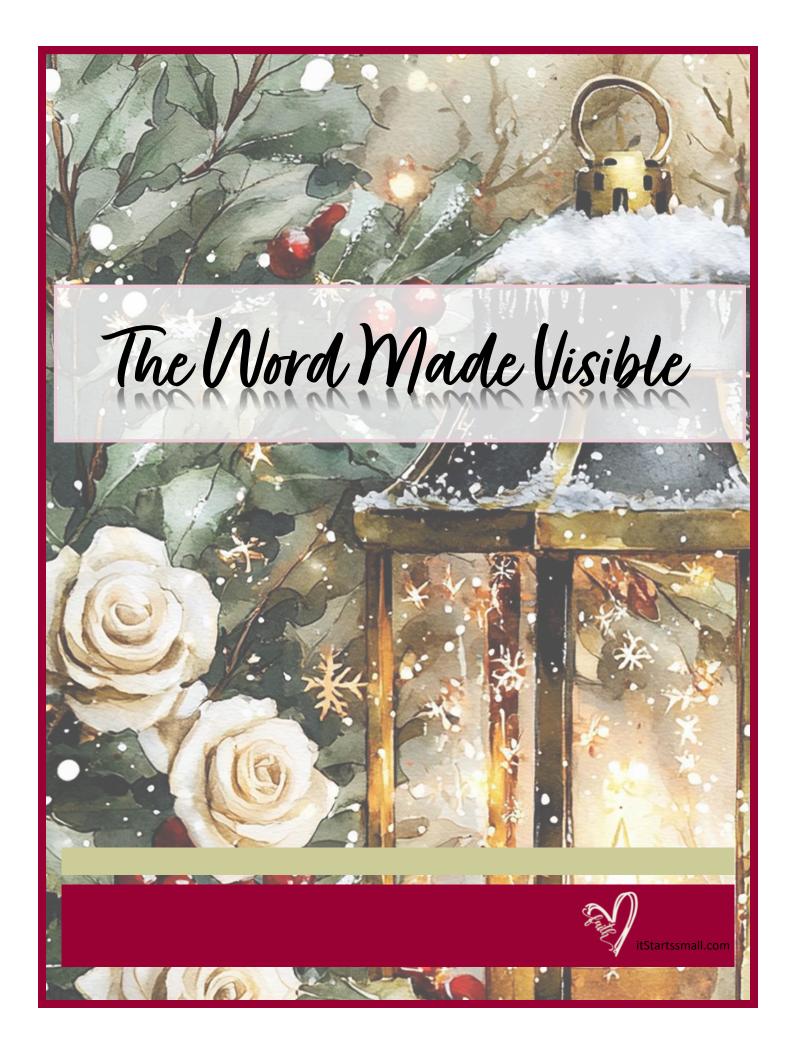
2. Reflecting on the application in your life

- Past experiences of God's provision: Think back to times when God has faithfully met your needs, both large and small. What lessons have you learned from those experiences about God's trustworthiness? How can you apply those lessons to your current situations?
- Current needs and anxieties: What specific needs are weighing on your heart and mind right now? Are you experiencing anxiety or fear about your future provision? How can you actively choose to surrender those worries to God and trust in His promise?
- Your perspective on "needs" versus "wants": In our materialistic society, the line between needs and wants can become blurred. Are you seeking God for what you truly need, or are your requests driven by desires that may not align with His will for your life?
- Your role in God's provision: While God promises to supply our needs, He often does so through our diligent work, wise stewardship, and the generosity of the Christian community. Are you being a faithful steward of the resources God has entrusted to you? Are you open to being a channel of His provision for others?

3. Challenging yourself in light of Philippians 4:19

- **Deepen your dependence:** How can you cultivate a deeper dependence on God as your ultimate provider rather than relying solely on your own efforts or earthly resources?
- **Practice contentment and gratitude:** Paul emphasizes being content in both abundance and scarcity. How can you develop a heart of gratitude for God's provision, even in challenging circumstances? How can reflecting on Philippians 4:19 help you to embrace contentment in every situation?
- **Strengthen your prayer life:** Bring your needs before God in prayer and align your desires with His will. Do you truly believe that God hears and cares about your requests, and that He delights in providing for His children?
- Live with generosity and faith: Paul's promise to the Philippians came after their sacrificial giving. How does this connection between giving

and receiving challenge you to be more generous in supporting God's work and meeting the needs of others? How can you step out in faith and trust God for His provision, even when it feels risky or impossible? By passionately engaging with these questions, you can move beyond a simple understanding of Philippians 4:19. You can embrace its powerful truth. This allows it to ignite a profound transformation in your heart, mind, and actions. This journey will cultivate a deeper faith and empower you with a bold, unwavering reliance on God's faithful provision.





Read the Following Scriptures:

- ♦ 2 Kings 22:11
- ♦ 2 Kings 22:1
- ♦ 2 Chronicles 35
- ♦ John 1:1**-**18

¹¹ When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes.

2 Kings 22:11

Do you remember what you were dong at the age of 8?

I barely remember most of my childhood, but I remember having a bike. That bike was my freedom from a dysfunctional home. I would carry me miles away from the violence, even if it was just simply riding in the same circles around the driveway. What about you? Whatever we were doing, a young 8 year old boy had us all beat.

22 Josiah was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned thirty-one years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Jedidah the daughter of Adaiah; she was from Bozkath. ² He did what was right in the Lord's sight and walked in all the ways of his ancestor David; he did not turn to the right or the left.

2 Kings 22:1-2

That's right! An 8-year-old boy, a descendant of David, had courageously ascended the throne of Israel. He hadn't even reached his Bar Mitzvah yet! What is even more awe-inspiring is that he was one of the rare few in Israel. His heart truly chased after the Lord.

His reign emerged from the ashes of long-neglected kingdoms, igniting a fervent spirit for restoration. A monumental task lay ahead. It all began with the sacred

act of rebuilding the temple. The temple had fallen into disrepair. With unwavering resolve, Josiah championed a transformative program to restore the temple to its former glory. This remarkable young man stands as one of the most pivotal kings to have governed God's chosen people. He led dynamically. Through his leadership, a powerful revival swept through the land. The hearts of the people turned passionately back to the Lord. His reign, by all accounts, shone brightly with success. Yet, as we delve deeper, we see that his political legacy was not just a series of achievements. It was a profound testament to his remarkable character.

The workmen fervently began to excavate the debris of the ancient temple. They stumbled upon a treasure profoundly vital to the people. It was indispensable. What revelation awaited them? What profound legacy had been forsaken amidst the ruins? A copy of the sacred scriptures! As the life-giving Word of God was unveiled, Josiah's heart was gripped with a powerful realization. He understood how tragically astray he and his people had wandered from the Lord (2 Kings 22).

Josiah was profoundly moved by God's Word, inspiring him to accomplish what countless kings before him had failed to achieve. He boldly restored the visibility of Scripture, igniting a spiritual revival throughout the land. With determination, he meticulously cleaned house in his kingdom. He decisively abolished all customs, practices, and rituals that stood in opposition to God's truth. He passionately ensured that the entire realm joyously celebrated the Passover Feast. He left no stone unturned in his quest to honor God as He rightfully deserves (2 Chronicles 35).

Everything in the kingdom transformed radically and dramatically! Why, you ask? All because of the profound discovery of God's Word! Scripture ignited a fire within Josiah, and once it filled his heart and mind, he was forever changed. That is the incredible power of God's Word! When you truly encounter His words, you inscribe them deep within your heart. This action unleashes a power. It brings about a radical transformation of your heart, mind, and spirit. A genuine encounter with the Lord results in a true metamorphosis. If there is no change, then there has been no authentic encounter!

In John 1 we read:

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We observed his glory, the glory as the one and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

God made His Word visible for the entire world to see in the person of Jesus Christ!

The Christmas season bursts forth as a radiant celebration. It reminds us that God has graced us with the Light of the world. The living Word is embodied in flesh to restore our relationship with Him. Just as the Word profoundly transformed King Josiah, it should ignite our hearts with fervor. It should compel us to take action. We should embrace the divine love that surrounds us.

God's Word should be the powerful catalyst for profound life-change. It should pierce us to our very core. It compels us to confront sin with a seriousness that drives us to "clean our own house!" It should ignite a passionate fire within us. It urges us to pull out all the stops. We should passionately remember and celebrate the majesty of who God is. We should honor all that He has magnificently accomplished for us. God's Word should propel us to a place of fervent conviction. It should inspire us to witness its transformative impact in the lives of everyone around us. This includes our families, loved ones, neighbors, coworkers, and anyone else we encounter on this incredible journey!

Everyday we should be like Josiah: making the Word of God visible for the people in your life to see. Allow the light of the world to shine brightly through you, letting it guide people to Jesus!

Encountering the Word

Encountering the Word of God, the Bible, is not merely a task of reading; it's a profound journey of transformation that beckons you to engage your heart and soul. Immersing yourself in Scripture, pondering its profound truths, and reflecting on your personal encounters with it ignites a fire within you, empowering you to weave its teachings into the very fabric of your daily walk with God.

Here are some ways you can ponder and reflect on how you encounter the Word of God:

1. Deepen your Bible reading practice

- Commit to regular reading: Consistency in reading the Bible is foundational to spiritual growth. Decide on a specific time each day to read and study God's Word, and stick to it.
- **Seek the Holy Spirit's guidance:** The Bible is God-breathed and the Holy Spirit inspired its writing. Before you begin reading, pray for the Holy Spirit to open your mind and heart to understand the truths within its pages.
- **Read with a purpose:** As you approach Scripture, ask yourself: What does this passage reveal about God's character? What does it teach you about humanity? What does it call you to do or change? This intentionality will transform your reading into a deeper encounter.
- Don't rush the process: Allow yourself time to slowly read and meditate
 on the verses. Reflecting on the verses is crucial for understanding and
 applying the Bible. Pause when something resonates with you and consider its significance for your life today.

2. Engage in reflective practices

• **Journaling and Note-taking:** As you read, write down verses that stand out to you, along with your reflections, questions, and insights. You can also journal prayers in response to what you've read.

- Meditation and Prayer: After reading, spend time meditating on the
 passage, repeating verses in your mind and allowing the truths to sink
 into your heart and spirit. Use your time in prayer to talk to God about
 what you've read and ask for His guidance on how to apply it in your
 life.
- **Scripture Writing:** Physically hand-copying Bible passages helps you to slow down and focus on each word, prompting deeper reflection.
- **Creative Responses:** Some people find it helpful to express their encounters with God's Word through creative outlets like drawing, painting, or creating collages inspired by the passages they read.

3. Find ways to apply biblical truths

- **Identify specific actions:** Once a biblical teaching is understood, consider how to apply it to daily life. For example, if a passage highlights the importance of kindness, look for opportunities to practice kindness in your interactions with others.
- Let Scripture shape your decisions: When making decisions, consider what the Bible says and how God would want you to respond.
- **Live out your convictions:** Living out the truths you learn demonstrates commitment to God and allows His Word to transform your life.

4. Seek community and accountability

- **Join a Bible study group or small group:** Studying Scripture with others can enrich understanding and provide accountability.
- **Share what you're learning:** Discuss insights and questions with trusted friends or mentors. This strengthens your faith and helps to live out what you're learning.
- Attend church regularly: Hearing the Word preached and taught in a communal setting can be a powerful way to encounter God's truth. Actively listen and reflect on how the message applies to your life.

By fervently incorporating these practices into our daily lives, our encounters with the Word of God can be profoundly transformed. They change from mere routine activities into incredibly transformative experiences. These experiences deeply nurture our souls and powerfully strengthen our relationship with the Lord.





Read the Following Scriptures:

♦ Matthew 1:24-25

"If only..."

These two words are among the most devastating combinations in the entire English language. They are seemingly innocuous, simple words. Yet when merged, they possess the power to paralyze an individual. Indeed, they can bring progress to an agonizing standstill. They halt the very will of God at a torturous pace.

"if only..."

These words represent a person's belief that they do not have what it takes to overcome life's challenges and fulfill the calling God has given them.

- If only I had.....this
- If only I had.....that
- If only I were....born there
- If only I lived....over there
- If only I were....more like
- If only I had.....done it that way or this way

Once this mindset permeates a person's self-image, its grip becomes unyielding. It whirls endlessly like a warped merry-go-round, trapping us in its cycle. These two simple words have stifled the advancement of God's mighty work more than we could ever conceive. The staggering truth is that this doesn't have to be our reality if we embrace the truth. Do you understand what triumphs over "if only..."?

"But God..."

No matter how inadequate or inept we may feel about ourselves, when the Lord calls us to specific tasks, He passionately ensures they are completed. The lives of Joseph and Mary provide a vivid illustration of this profound spiritual truth. In hindsight, it can be all too easy for us to breeze past their incredible story.

We long to leap over the preliminary preparations and dive straight into the miraculous birth of Jesus. Yet, in our haste, we often overlook the profound sense of inadequacy that surely plagued these two remarkable individuals. Can you fathom the weight of being entrusted with the care and upbringing of the Savior of the world? What an awe-inspiring yet daunting responsibility! In their very human hearts, this must have stirred immense pressure and anxiety. At some point, they must have felt overwhelmed and inept, grappling with the monumental task assigned to them.

This was an ordinary Jewish couple living within the constraints of modest means. They barely scraped by, their lives defined by struggle and perseverance. Yet, amidst their challenges, they were chosen to bear the incredible calling of being Christ's parents. This destiny would require them to undertake a daunting journey. They would face obstacles that many first-time parents could hardly I magine. If we can't hear the "If only..." softly resonating in the deepest corners of their souls, we aren't truly paying attention.

"But God..."

God knows all things and is all-powerful. He would take this couple of humble means. He used them to turn the tide of human history in astonishing ways. Everything was the breathtaking outcome of their willingness to participate. The Lord had magnificent plans in store for them. He would equip them for the unprecedented calling placed on their lives. They didn't need to transform into someone else. They just had to wholeheartedly follow the directions given to them. And that's exactly what they did!

The application for our lives couldn't be more profound! Joseph and Mary powerfully illustrate that God desires to use our lives in extraordinary ways. This desire far surpasses our own feelings of inadequacy. When He calls upon us, our human nature often clings to thoughts of "If only..." This thought makes us believe we lack the ability to obey. It becomes an excuse that stops us from

| fulfilling His great commission. |
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| But that is also where Joseph and Mary powerfully remind us. They demonstrate the profound truth that it's not about "If only" but rather "But God!" We can courageously exchange our default feelings of inadequacy for unwavering trust in the Lord's boundless sufficiency. When we do this, there truly is no limit to what we can achieve through Him. We can fulfill every divine calling God places on our lives just like the extraordinary examples set by Joseph and Mary. |
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Humanity's inherent inadequacy

...God's sufficiency and grace

The Bible teaches that humans are inherently inadequate and depend entirely on God for existence and salvation. This is evident throughout scripture:

1. Our fallen state

- The fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 illustrates the inherent weakness and susceptibility to sin in humanity, even in a state of perfection.
- Isaiah 64:6 describes righteous acts as "filthy rags," emphasizing the insufficiency of human righteousness and the need for divine intervention.
- Romans 3:12 states that all have turned aside and become worthless, and no one does good, not even one.
- Romans 6:23 emphasizes that the wages of sin is death, highlighting the inability of humans to save themselves.

2. Our dependence on God

- **Salvation:** The Bible is clear that salvation is a gift from God, received through grace by faith, not by works. Salvation cannot be earned.
- **Strength and guidance:** It is necessary to recognize inadequacy and rely on God for strength, provision, and wisdom.
 - * 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 reminds that God's grace is sufficient, and His power is made perfect in weakness.
 - * Psalm 73:26 declares that when "flesh and heart may fail," God is "the strength of my heart and my portion forever".
 - * Proverbs 3:5 encourages trust in the Lord with all your heart, rather than leaning on your own understanding.
- **Purpose and meaning:** Lives find meaning and purpose in serving God and fulfilling His will. "The Bible affirms repeatedly that all human life is valuable, a claim grounded in humanity's creation by God in his image and likeness (Gen 1:26–27, 9:6)".

3. Biblical examples

- Moses: Moses expressed his inadequacy when called by God to lead the Israelites, but God assured him of His presence and sufficiency.
- **Gideon:** Gideon felt inadequate and weak, but God empowered him beyond his natural capabilities to deliver Israel.
- Apostle Paul: Paul learned to boast in his weaknesses, knowing that God's power is made perfect in weakness.

4. Our relationship with God

God desires a deep and intimate relationship with humanity, similar to a father and child. He is the creator, redeemer, and sustainer, and the greatest joy and fulfillment are found in Him. Love for God and neighbor is a reflection of the relationship with Him.

How can I challenge my perception of my own adequacies in light of God's Word?

You have the incredible opportunity to confront your perception of your own worthiness. Redefine it by aligning with the divine perspective of God. Embrace humility wholeheartedly and fervently seek a deeper reliance on Him. Here are powerful and practical ways to embark on this transformative journey:

1. Daily Scripture meditation

- Start your day by reading God's word and allowing His truths to reshape your thoughts and perceptions about yourself.
- Choose scriptures that speak to your worth in Christ, such as 1 Peter 2:9, which calls believers "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession", and Ephesians 2:10, which identifies believers as God's "handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do",.
- Meditate on these verses throughout the day, letting them sink into your heart and mind.

2. Affirmations of truth

Use scripture-based affirmations to combat negative self-talk and reinforce

- your true identity in Christ.
- Repeat these affirmations often, such as "I am God's masterpiece, created anew in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:10).

3. Prayer and thanksgiving

- Regularly communicate with God through prayer, expressing feelings of inadequacy and asking for the grace to see yourself as He sees you.
- Give thanks to God for His unwavering love and acceptance, even in your weaknesses.

4. Seek wise counsel

- Surround yourself with trusted, biblically grounded friends or a spiritual mentor who can offer encouragement, prayer, and accountability as you challenge your self-perception.
- They can help you recognize God's work in your life and offer a godly perspective on your strengths and weaknesses.

5. Embrace your inadequacy

- Acknowledge and accept human limitations, recognizing that weakness is a normal part of the human experience.
- See inadequacy not as a flaw, but as an opportunity for God's power to be displayed in and through you.
- Remember the apostle Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, where he boasts in his weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon him.

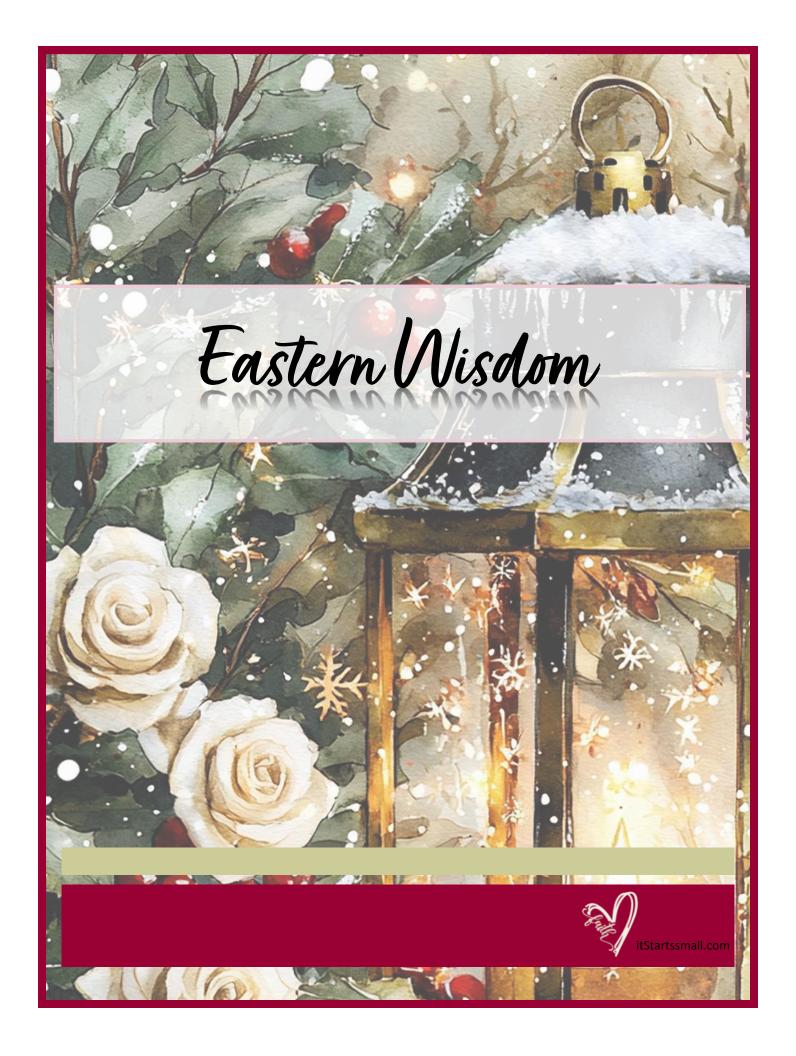
Depend on God's sufficiency

- When feelings of inadequacy arise, remind yourself of God's promises and His unfailing faithfulness.
- Trust that God is more than sufficient to meet your needs and empower you for whatever tasks He calls you to do.
- As the proverb says, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding".

7. Step out in faith

- Take action in obedience to God's calling, even when you feel ill-equipped or unsure.
- God honors obedience and will empower you as you step out in faith.

| • | Remember the example of Moses, who despite his feelings of inadequacy, was used powerfully by God to lead the Israelites. |
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| By intentionally practicing these steps, you can cultivate a new self-perception rooted in God's truth. Recognize that your worth and adequacy come from Him alone. | |
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Read the Following Scriptures:

- ♦ Matthew 2:1-2
- ♦ Daniel 9:24-26
- ♦ Numbers 24:17

2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, wise men from the east arrived in Jerusalem, ² saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star at its rising and have come to worship him."

Matthew 2:1-2

Searching.

Some people spend their whole lives searching. They are searching for the perfect job, perfect life partner, perfect house, perfect car, perfect town, perfect friends, perfect church...

They search and search, yet often times discover that it is not easy to find what they are looking for. Sometimes, the searches take us far from home, across the country or even world. It takes us to new and unfamiliar territory.

The wisemen were in search of a king. Not just any king, but the King.

Who were these men who bravely travel from the East?

They are referred to often as a group of "wise men." They were likely Persian or Babylonian ("the East") priests. These priests were astrologers who devoted their time to interpreting signs and prophecies. What an "odd" group of people. I mean think about it. God using pagan astrologist and priests? Let us dive into the details!

600 years prior to this event, Daniel had great influence on the government of Babylon and Persia. I wished we had time to explore all of Daniel's story, but I encourage you to study him! He actually taught the priests and "wise men" of his day, detailed prophecies of the coming King (Daniel 9:24-26). He taught them Hebrew scriptures and a large number of Jews actually maintained a presence in the area after their return from exile. It makes sense that these magi would look to the Scriptures for great signs and miracles.

What I find significant and fascinating is that for 600 years they kept looking! This was not a new fresh thing to them. For 6 centuries they looked for the sign the King was coming. A number of scholars believe the wisemen knew to look for the star because of the reference made in Numbers 24:17:

¹⁷ I see him, but not now; I perceive him, but not near. A star will come from Jacob, and a scepter will arise from Israel. He will smash the forehead of Moab and strike down all the Shethites

Numbers 24:17

Did they believe the God of Abraham was the true God? It s very possible. Many events occurred during the time of Daniel. These events range from the great dreams of Nebuchadnezzar to the fiery furnace and the lion's den. It is very likely that a pocket of Babylonian and Persian priests and scholars had been converted. They likely passed down this prophecy from generation to generation.

These wise men had devoted their lives to finding the King. Consider that these men, who knew to look for the star as a sign of the Messiah's coming, were gentiles. Gentiles who had trusted the Word of God as truth. They trusted it so much. They left their homeland. They embarked on a long journey in search of the promised King and Messiah. They sought Him in faith and with all their hearts. When they found Him, they were filled with great joy at all His humble splendor.

Everyone's journey is different. Sometimes the journey is smooth and stead with minimal traffic. Sometimes it's rough, filled with speed bumps, detours, twists, and turns. Sadly, many people search their entre lives without finding the truth. But if their is one thing that we all have in common, it is that our journey will end.

| The big questions is where? For those who seek the King and find Him, find eternal life along the way. We should embrace the passion and enthusiasm as the wise men who fervently sought the King and offered Him the most precious gifts they had. You can offer the most precious thing you have - your life. |
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Evaluating life goals through a biblical lens

Discerning what you're passionately searching for in life through the transformative lens of God's Word involves careful examination. You must fervently examine your desires, motivations, and priorities. Compare these against the profound biblical principles and the magnificent purpose God has for humanity. It's vital to embrace the truth. Your choices and actions hold significance. However, God's divine sovereignty guarantees that He will ultimately fulfill His extraordinary purpose for you.

Here are key aspects to consider when evaluating your life goals:

1. Seek God and His will above all else

- Embrace an intimate relationship with God: Dive deep into the profound truth that ultimate fulfillment and a purpose that endures is found in knowing and wholeheartedly serving our Creator.
- Align your deepest desires with His divine will: Find joy in the richness of the Lord; let your aspirations be molded by His magnificent plans for your extraordinary life.
- Place unwavering trust in His divine sovereignty: Open your heart to the powerful truth that God's plans are intricately designed for your good and His glorious purpose, even when they surprise you in unexpected ways.

2. Check your motives and intentions

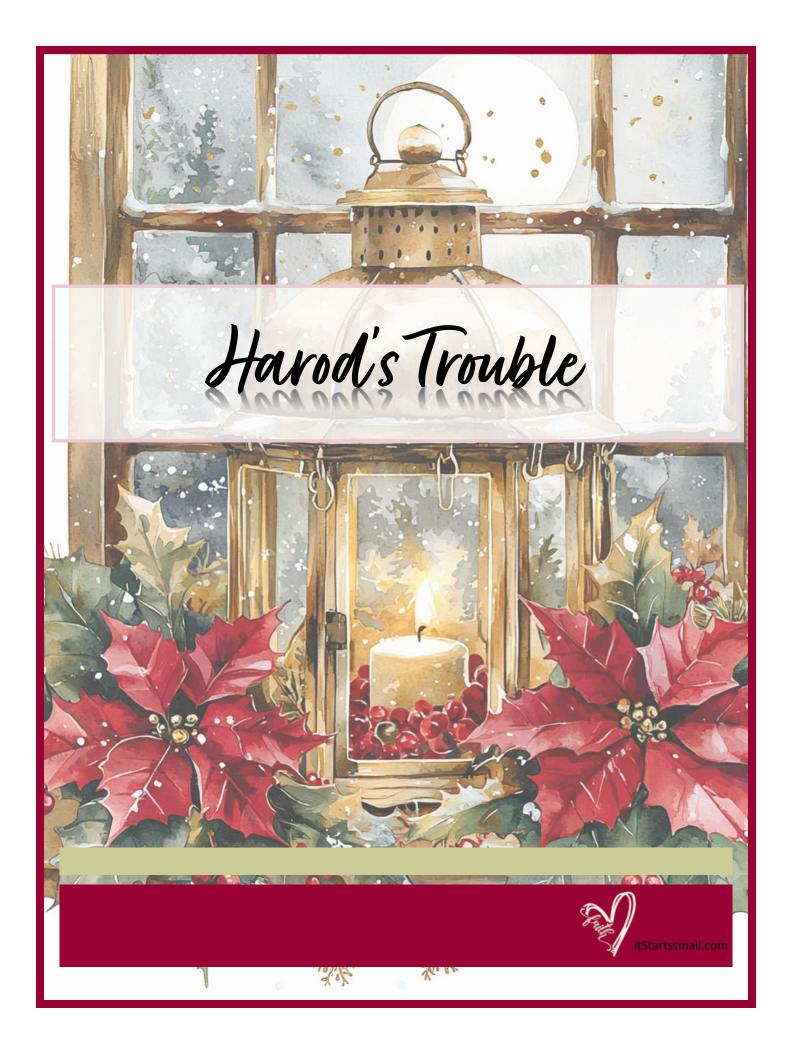
- **Examine your heart:** Honestly evaluate your motivations for pursuing certain goals. Are they rooted in self-glory or a desire to honor God?
- **Reject worldly pursuits:** Be aware of the fleeting nature of worldly success and material possessions and their potential to distract you from God's plan.
- **Focus on eternal values:** Remember that what truly matters is storing up treasures in heaven and building relationships.

3. Reflect on your unique gifts and calling

- Recognize your God-given purpose: God has created you with unique talents, abilities, and passions that can be used to serve Him and others.
- **Embrace your role in God's kingdom:** Find ways to use your gifts and talents in ministry or in daily life to impact the world for Christ.
- **Do good works:** Remember that you were created for good works, which God prepared beforehand for you to do.

4. Seek wisdom and guidance

- **Engage in prayer and meditation:** Ask God for guidance and wisdom in discerning your purpose.
- **Study God's Word:** The Bible is a lamp to your feet and a light to your path, offering direction and principles for living.
- Seek godly counsel: Talk to trusted spiritual mentors and friends who can
 offer wisdom and accountability as you evaluate your goals.
- **Make decisions in faith:** Don't be paralyzed by indecision, but take action in obedience, trusting that God will direct your steps.





Read the Following Scriptures:

- ♦ Matthew 2:2-3
- ♦ Matthew 2:16-18

For a brief but exhilarating chapter of my life, I dove headfirst into the electrifying world of football drafting for a fantasy football team. Despite my initial ignorance of the sport—only grasping the fundamentals of how the game is played—I found myself captivated. Player stats were a mystery to me, and I couldn't identify the stars from the shadows. Yet, the very concept of sports drafts fascinated me! These events aren't just bureaucratic formalities; they represent the thrilling moment when college athletes transition to the pros. How each team decides who to select is a tantalizing puzzle, leaving me in awe. Just imagine the tension for players already on the roster. They know that a fresh talent is about to be drafted. A potential contender could very well take their place!

What is my point? It must be an utterly overwhelming experience. It is brimming with discomfort and anxiety. There is the heavy burden of impending change. This occurs when your potential replacement steps into the spotlight. Some gracefully surrender their power, nobly passing the torch, while others fight tooth and nail, howling in defiance. This tumultuous battle reverberates throughout history, powerfully illustrated in the tale of King Herod the Great. The gospel reveals that when the wise men arrived, proclaiming the arrival of the "newborn King of the Jews," Herod was not just troubled. He was unmoored and shaken to his very essence.

Imagine yourself in his shoes. You are strolling along. You are enveloped in a world where every desire is fulfilled. Freedom reigns and ambition knows no bounds. You are the sovereign of Israel. You bask in the glory of your reign. Suddenly, a pair of men on camels appears on the horizon. They seek the King—but not you. Your successor has arrived. In that moment, a whirlwind of emotion rushes through you. It ignites a fierce passion for what is "rightfully yours."

I can't help but wonder about your perspective, but let's face it—honesty is crucial. In my own moment of selfishness, a deep worry about my current standing begins to churn within me. There's a powerful quote that echoes in my mind from *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*, where Chancellor Palpatine reveals a stark truth to young Anakin Skywalker: "All who gain power are afraid of losing it."

For the most part, humanity has undeniably demonstrated this truth. Herod was no exception. The Greek term for "troubled" in this context is etarachthe. This word evokes a profound sense of disturbance, anxiety, and terror. It stirs up a whirlwind of inner turmoil and emotional agitation. One grapples with overwhelming feelings that churn intensely from within.

In short, he was consumed by the dread of losing his power. The thought of losing his opulent palace tormented him. He feared losing all the comforts that came with his rule. The thought of relinquishing "his" kingdom ignited a fierce anxiety within him. He had seized this throne through force with the ruthless aid of the Romans. It is no surprise that he feared its potential loss. His worst fears were confirmed; whispers of a newborn savior sent chills down his spine. No sane person would undertake a perilous journey unless driven by undeniable truth. Herod knew the people's belief in this child as the promised Messiah would ignite their fervor. People would rally to rise against him. They would strip him of his crown. Yes, he was not merely troubled—he was gripped by sheer terror.

But Matthew then records something else that was interesting. Did you catch it?

³ When King Herod heard this, he was deeply disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

Matthew 2:3 (Bold for emphasis)

The people were just as deeply disturbed. Why?

They were afraid of the tyranny and horrors that Harod could inflict on the people to find this "newborn" and make sure He would never see the crown on his head. And they were right and justified in their fear. Just keep reading Matthew 2.

¹⁶ Then Herod, when he realized that he had been outwitted by the wise men, flew into a rage. He gave orders to massacre all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, in keeping with the time he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then what was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled:

¹⁸ A voice was heard in Ramah,

weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children; and she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.

Matthew 2:16-18

Harod did was is unthinkable. He did what s known as the massacre of the innocents.

What lesson can we learn here?

Fear can drive us to sin, compelling us to obstruct God's divine plan. This trepidation often results in suffering and pain, not just for ourselves, but for those we care about. Just as it ensnared Jonah and impacted Abraham and Sarah, we too can fall into this trap! Do not let this fate befall you! Cast aside those temporal, worldly distractions—they serve only to bring you trouble and heartache. Embrace faith and step boldly into the light of God's purpose!

Evaluating fear of loss

Fear is an inherent human emotion, one that can grip our hearts with an iron fist. Yet, as believers, we find profound solace in God's Word. It illuminates our path through the shadows of fear. Whether it's the anxiety of losing treasured possessions, cherished relationships, our health, or the uncertainty of future events, God's Word offers guidance. Embrace these biblical principles. Use them as powerful tools to confront and evaluate your fear. Transform it into an unwavering faith. Build resilience against loss.

1. Recognize God as your source and ultimate security

- **God owns everything:** Embrace the awe-inspiring truth that everything every resource, every moment belongs to our Creator! This profound understanding ignites a powerful shift from viewing ourselves as mere owners to being entrusted stewards of His divine gifts.
- God provides for your needs: Feel the empowering reassurance of Philippians 4:19—that our God, overflowing with abundance, promises to meet every need according to His glorious riches! Trust in His provision and experience the depth of His care.
- True security rests in God alone: Seek refuge in the eternal truth that real security can only be found in God! Every worldly attachment is fleeting, but His love and faithfulness are unshakeable. Choose the everlasting over the temporary and stand firm in His promise!

2. Shift your perspective from earthly treasures to heavenly ones

- Store up treasures in heaven: Let your heart soar as Matthew 6:18-20 inspires you to invest in treasures that are eternal and invulnerable, not the fleeting earthly possessions that fade away. Choose the heavenly over the temporary, and watch your spirit thrive!
- **Value God's priorities:** Be awakened by the powerful lesson of the rich young ruler—a stark reminder that clinging to material security can blind us to the life-changing beauty of knowing Jesus. Embrace His values and discover true

richness!

• **Detach from material possessions:** Experience the liberating joy of detachment—not a cold indifference, but a passionate release from the chains of over-attachment, empowering you to pursue Christ with an undivided heart and soul.

3. Confront fear with faith

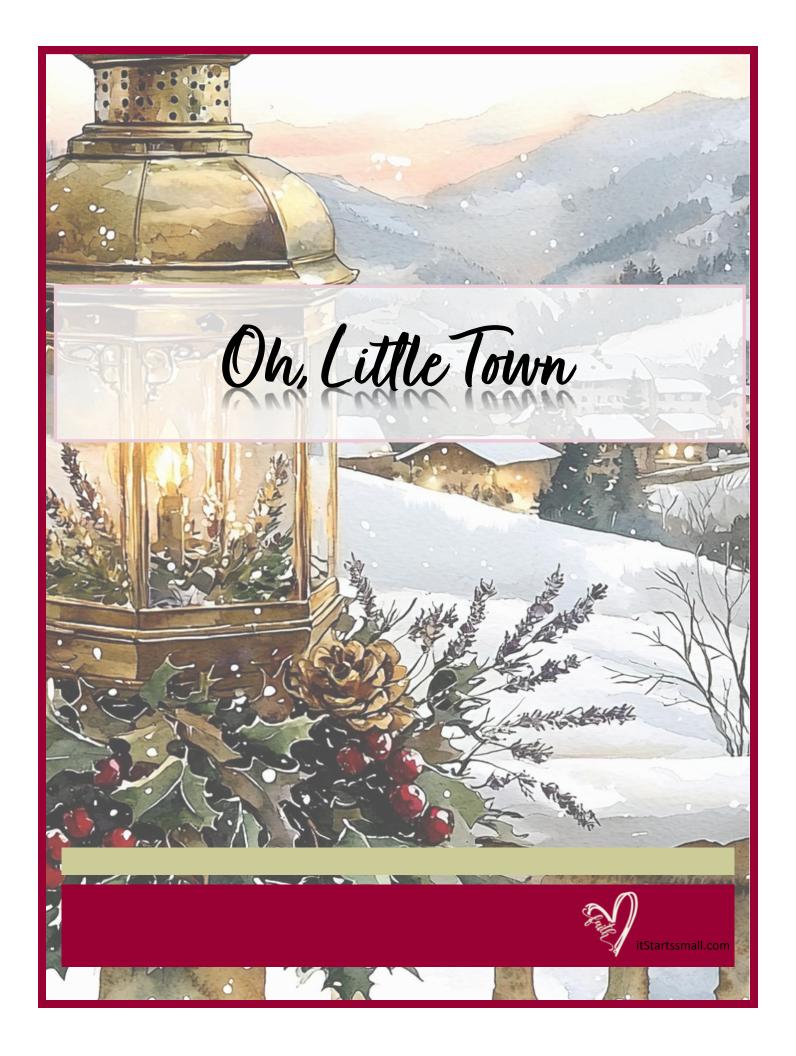
- Acknowledge and confess your fears: Unburden your soul! Lay bare your fears and anxieties before God in fervent prayer, for He cares for you deeply, as proclaimed in 1 Peter 5:7.
- **Trust in God's promises:** Dive into the living Word! Immerse yourself in scripture and let the profound faithfulness of God to His people resonate powerfully in your heart.
- **Embrace dependence on God:** Surrender your yearning for control! Recognize that true strength lies in God's glorious sovereignty and unmatched wisdom.

4. Seek support and community

- Share your heartfelt concerns with a trusted community: Seek out a vibrant and supportive community of believers ready to uplift you with encouragement, fervent prayer, and unwavering accountability when the daunting fear of loss rears its head.
- Draw inspiration from biblical giants: Look to the profound examples of Job, David, and Moses—individuals who grappled with tremendous losses yet emerged victorious in their faith, reminding us that perseverance can triumph against all odds.

Embrace stewardship and generosity

- Embrace the stewardship of your resources: With fervor, manage your time, talents, and resources, recognizing the divine gifts they represent. Treat them with wisdom and generosity, as they are entrusted to you by God.
- **Give from the depths of your heart:** Let your giving flow with joy and exuberance! This act of worship is a powerful declaration of your faith in God's abundant provision.





Read the Following Scriptures:

- ♦ Matthew 2:4
- ♦ Micah 5:2
- Daniel 2
- ↑ 1 Kings 19:12

⁴ So he assembled all the chief priests and scribes of the people and asked them where the Messiah would be born.

Matthew 2:4

The arrival of the wise men sent shockwaves through King Herod the Great! He was driven by fear and intrigue. He summoned his own wise men, the scribes, and the chief priests of Israel. He was desperate for answers. He gathered his trusted advisors. He demanded they unveil the mystery unfolding before him. He urged them to enlighten him on the extraordinary events that were transpiring.

Why would he ask them where the Messiah was to be born?

Theologians suggest that he wanted to get information on the place so that he could end the life of the Messiah and put his own mind at ease. I think this is why we should never judge someone because of their position. You would think the king of Israel would have grown up in a house that was spiritually strong and studied the prophesies. You would think someone who called themselves "the Great" would know these things. In his own arrogance and foolishness, power was his goal. He did, after all become king with the help of Rome.

Harod's men answered, "In Bethlehem of Judea." And then they quote the prophet Micah:

⁶ And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah:
Because out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

² Bethlehem Ephrathah, you are small among the clans of Judah; one will come from you to be ruler over Israel for me. His origin is from antiquity, from ancient times.

Matthew 2:6

Micah 5:2

One thought seems to focus my mind: God's Perspective is different than ours.

These verses proclaim that Bethlehem, though small, may seem insignificant from a human perspective. It may appear youthful compared to the thousands within the clans of Judah. Yet, it was in this humble town that God made an astonishing choice. This was the sacred destination for the most monumental moment in all of history — past, present, and future.

Why? Would it not have stirred the hearts of many to believe in Jesus as the Messiah if He had been born in a grander setting? Perhaps His birth in the holy city of Jerusalem would have had a greater impact. If He was destined to reign on David's majestic throne, it would have made more sense for Him to emerge from the very heart of the Jewish nation. Imagine if He had come forth in a powerful Roman city. He could have established His everlasting rule there. He would have stood as the great rock that shatters the kingdoms of men at His feet (Daniel 2)!

No! God deliberately chose the most humble woman and the smallest city for His magnificent entrance into creation. What a profound lesson lies in this choice! From the dawn of humanity, God has been imparting this truth, echoing through time since the very creation of man.

Consider God's revelation to Elijah.

¹² After the earthquake there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire there was a voice, a soft whisper.

1 Kings 19:12

Elijah was eagerly waiting for the Lord to reveal His voice. He was not found in the thundering winds or the raging flames. Instead, He emerged in a gentle, whispering breeze that caressed the soul. No earthquake or fire heralded His presence, but a soft, tranquil breath that spoke volumes of love. God cherishes the humble, using them to create mighty waves of change. He elevates the humble. A humble heart recognizes that every achievement shines in the light of God's glory. Every success and triumph is dedicated wholly to His service. A humble heart doesn't yearn for self-glorification. It seeks to exalt God. All honor, glory, and praise truly belong to Him.

So, God chose to reestablish the line of David. It was once a majestic tree but was reduced to a mere stump. It was humbled beyond measure in the heart of the City of David. The birth of the King, destined for an everlasting reign, would not be heralded by trumpets, harps, or cymbals. Instead, it would unfold amidst the humble presence of livestock and the soft rustle of hay. In this divine simplicity, there lies a profound beauty—God could not have envisioned it any other way!

Man measures by outward appearances, yet God peers into the depths of our souls. The Jews failed to recognize and embrace Jesus as their King. He arrived not in glory but in humility. He embodied true servanthood. He entered Jerusalem on a lowly donkey, proclaiming that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. They longed for regal garments and a lavish crown. Instead, they encountered robes of righteousness. They also encountered a crown of thorns, which was an ineffable testament to His love and sacrifice.

God chose to accomplish extraordinary things in the most humble of circumstances... let this be a poignant reminder as you reflect on the condition of your heart this Christmas season.

Humble Beginnings

Considering Jesus' humble beginnings provides a profound and passionate perspective to reflect on your own life and priorities. "Jesus' humble start is a stirring reminder that God's ways defy our earthly notions of greatness. He measures our worth not by status or wealth, but by the depth of our love, the grace of our humility, and the dedication of our service.

Here's how you can evaluate your life in light of Jesus' humble origins:

1. Reassess your values

- Worldly vs. Kingdom Values: In a world often driven by relentless ambition, overwhelming prestige, and an insatiable hunger for material possessions, Jesus' humble birth dares us to profoundly re-evaluate our definition of greatness. Born in a modest stable, not a lavish palace, He eschewed worldly power and status. Reflect deeply: are your pursuits aligned with the Kingdom values of unwavering humility, selfless service, and boundless love for others, or are you caught in the illusion of chasing fleeting worldly achievements that ultimately leave you unfulfilled?
- **Simplicity and Stewardship:** Jesus' early life was a testament to the beauty of simplicity, far removed from luxury and extravagance. His family embraced a humble existence, emphasizing what is truly vital in life. Now, consider your own lifestyle! Are you living extravagantly, or are you courageously embracing the profound principle of Mission Save Montana committing to be a faithful steward of God's abundance? Challenge yourself to simplify areas of your life, prioritizing Kingdom purposes, and discover the true richness that comes from living with intention and purpose.

2. Embrace humility and servanthood

• **Jesus' Example:** Jesus, the embodiment of divine love, chose to be born in the humble flesh of humanity! He lived a life that radiated service and selflessness. Can you imagine the Savior of the world washing His disciples' feet? His ultimate sacrifice ignited the path to redemption for all of humanity.

• **Humility in Action:** Reflect deeply on where you can open your heart to humility and prioritize the needs of others above your own! What if you immersed yourself in your community, showing kindness to those in desperate need? Are you truly present, listening intently to others? Challenge yourself to serve not for recognition, but with a genuine desire to honor God and bless those around you!

3. Prioritize relationships and love

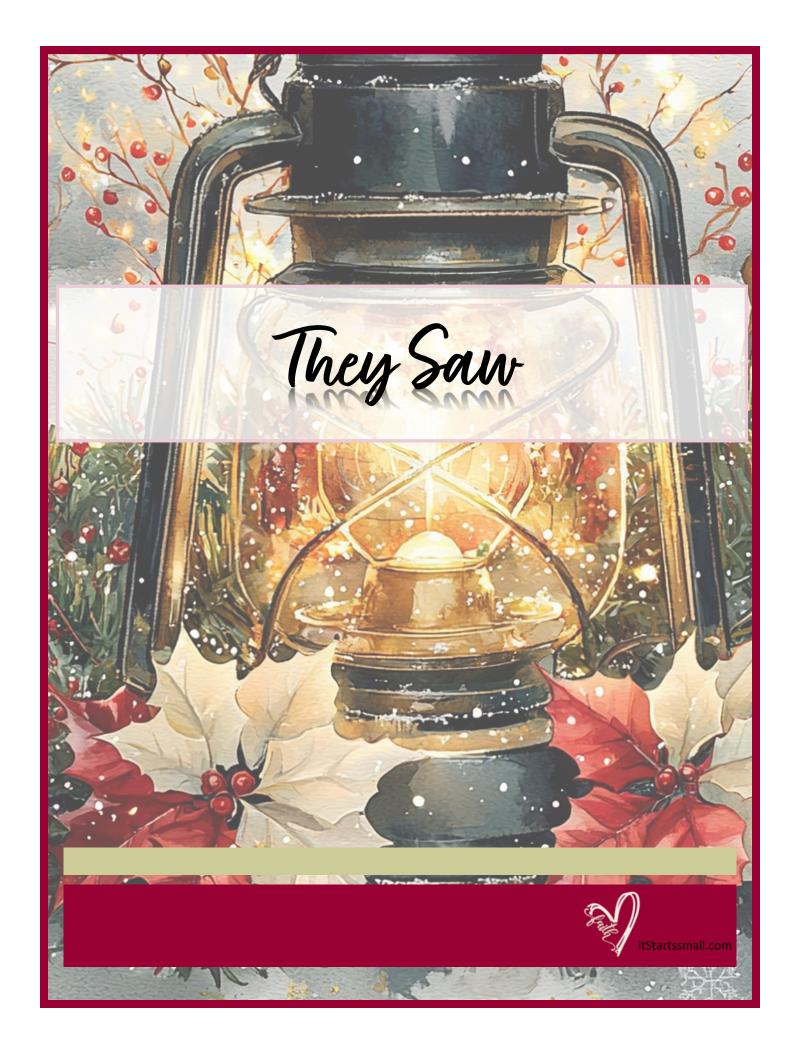
- **Focus on People:** Jesus' ministry was a fierce testament to the power of connection, as he reached out to individuals from every corner of society, particularly those who had been cast aside and forgotten. His remarkable relationships were woven with threads of love, compassion, and unwavering acceptance, demonstrating that every person matters.
- **Building Relationships:** Take a moment to truly evaluate the depth of your relationships. Are you wholeheartedly investing in and nurturing those soul-nourishing connections that bring joy and meaning to your life? Are you pouring out love and compassion to everyone around you, regardless of their circumstances? Challenge yourself to place people before possessions, and use your resources and influence as a force for uplifting and empowering others. Let's ignite the world with love, according to Christian Wake-Up Call.

4. Find contentment in Christ

- Contentment and Trust: Embrace the profound truth that Jesus' life exemplifies finding true contentment not in the ephemeral, but in an unwavering trust in God! He beautifully modeled a life grounded in dependence on His Heavenly Father, shunning the hollow echoes of materiality and seeking security in the Divine.
- Trusting God's Plan: Ignite a fervent spirit of contentment and trust in the magnificent plan that God has woven for your life, even when the storm clouds gather! As Tricia Goyer passionately reminds us, "Instead of focusing on what we've given up, focus on what we've gained—salvation, peace, and eternal life with Christ."

5. Seek God's guidance and purpose

- Prayer and Reflection: Embrace the divine power of prayer and reflection!
 Dedicate fervent moments to connect with God, inviting Him to illuminate the areas in your life that long for alignment with His magnificent purpose and the transformative example of Jesus. Let your heart meditate on Scripture, particularly those soul-stirring passages that unveil Jesus' profound character and ministry.
- Action and Obedience: Boldly take intentional steps to bring God's calling to vibrant life in your everyday existence, placing your unwavering trust in His overwhelming strength and guidance. The call on our lives is to reflect the image of God to this world, to live like Jesus Christ, and therefore the call is always to come up higher, to take up our cross, and to continually repent of sin and walk in His footsteps.





Read the Following Scriptures:

♦ Philippians 2:15-16

- ♦ Matthew 2:10
- ♦ Numbers 24:17
- ♦ Luke 19:38-40
- Philippians 1:27

¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and falling to their knees, they worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Matthew 2:10

Sometimes we receive profound guidance and direction from the most unexpected resources. Some individuals have dramatically transformed their lives. This change came from a fleeting conversation with a stranger in line at the local coffee shop. Others find themselves inspired by a captivating social media reel. Truly, guidance can emerge from the most unconventional places, sparking change when we least anticipate it.

This is the case in Matthew 2 that was also fortold in the book of Numbers.

17 I see him, but not now;
I perceive him, but not near.
A star will come from Jacob,
and a scepter will arise from Israel.
He will smash the forehead of Moab
and strike down all the Shethites.

Numbers 24:17

The Lord unveiled a breathtaking, radiant light in the night sky—so glorious, it might have even shimmered during the day—leading the wise men directly to the feet of Jesus. Theologians passionately speculate that this extraordinary star was, in fact, a meteor, perhaps hovering just above the ground. It's hard to believe they could have lost sight of it once their journey began. It's equally likely that it shone brightly in the direction of Jerusalem. This ignited their hearts with the thrilling revelation that the long-anticipated King had finally been born. This revelation prompted them to embark on their momentous journey without hesitation.

When they finally set foot in Jerusalem, their hearts raced with urgency. They sought the path to where he lay. A radiant star had re-emerged to illuminate their way. This heavenly sign filled them with elation, a profound assurance that they were enveloped in divine guidance. It was this very guidance that would lead them to the long-awaited, newborn King of the Jews.

God, in His infinite wisdom, used the prophets. He employed a magnificent display of the supernatural. These acts guided relentless seekers who yearned for truth. Ultimately, they were led to the Savior, the promised King born in Bethlehem. What a profound lesson this is! The Lord can utilize anything and everything to draw us closer to His Son! When the Pharisees reprimand Jesus for allowing His followers to proclaim, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord" (Luke 19:38), Jesus responds boldly. He says, "If these become silent, the stones will cry out!" (Luke 19:40)!

For the men from the East, it was a brilliant star that lit their path! God can utilize a star, a stone, a book, an advertisement, the beauty of nature, you, and even me! Just think about it — He likely placed someone in your life to lead you toward Jesus. Now, He calls us to join in this divine mission and help guide others toward Him, too!

But here's the truth: for God to truly use us as His instruments in guiding souls to Christ, we must radiate His incredible glory. We must also shine with His brilliance! We are called to live "in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Philippians 1:27). We must embrace the divine mission before us. When we ardently seek Jesus, and when we steadfastly follow His example, we remain in His love. Paul passionately declares that we will "shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the Word of Life" (Philippians 2:15-16)! Let this be our fervent pursuit!

Fellow Brothers and Sisters, this is our most profound calling! This is our mission, our very purpose! God has positioned you in that job. You are enrolled in that school. He has ignited your heart and passion for others. Your life is intertwined with those around you for a reason! If you have aspirations of shining bright as a "star," now is your moment! Be a radiant star for Christ! Be the beacon that guides others to Him! If you've never embarked on this journey before, Christmas is the ideal season to ignite your spirit! Reach out to friends and invite them to church. Organize an outreach in your neighborhood that spreads joy and warmth. Bring together friends, coworkers, and family for a Christmas gathering, and reveal the beauty of this magnificent celebration! Start shining your light today and make a lasting impact!

How do you Shine?

Evaluating your life in relation to Jesus' teachings ignites a fervent journey of self-reflection, fervent prayer, and unwavering engagement with God's word. The objective isn't to attain perfection in an instant, but to earnestly examine the areas where you can flourish and passionately align your life with the profound principles Jesus imparted.

Here are key aspects to consider:

1. Love for God and others

• The Greatest Commandment: Jesus passionately asserted the supreme importance of loving God with every fiber of your being—your heart, soul, mind, and strength—while also embracing the powerful call to love your neighbor as yourself.

Self-reflection questions:

- Are you fervently seeking to express your love for God through deep worship, heartfelt prayer, and unwavering obedience?
- Do you actively and consistently radiate love and compassion towards all, even those who challenge your ability to love?
- Are you wholeheartedly prioritizing the needs of others above your own desires?

2. Humility and servanthood

• **Jesus' Example:** With an unwavering spirit of humility, Jesus humbly washed his disciples' feet, embodying servant leadership, and ultimately laid down his life in an awe-inspiring act of love for all humanity.

• Self-reflection questions:

- Are you ready to cast aside pride and kneel in service to others, no matter their status or background, echoing Jesus' profound example?
- Are you more driven by the desire to uplift others than to seek your own comforts and recognition?
- Do you earnestly long to elevate and empower those around you,

striving for their betterment rather than your own glory?

3. Forgiveness and mercy

• **Jesus' Teaching:** In His boundless love, Jesus powerfully illustrates the profound importance of forgiving others, just as we have been forgiven by God.

Self-reflection questions:

- Are you fiercely dedicated to the pursuit of forgiveness and reconciliation in your relationships?
- Are you clinging to grudges or bitterness, or have you courageously released them into the hands of God?
- Are you extending mercy and compassion to those who have caused you pain?

4. Discipleship and spiritual growth

• **Following Jesus:** To become a true disciple is to passionately imitate Jesus, dedicating yourself to a relentless pursuit of growth in faith and striving for Christlikeness every single day!

Self-reflection questions:

- Are you diving deep into God's Word, fervently praying, and embracing spiritual disciplines with a heart fully committed to deepening your faith?
- Are you wholeheartedly living a life of obedience to God's commandments, allowing His will to guide your every step?
- Are you boldly sharing your faith with others and passionately making disciples, igniting a fire of belief in those around you?

5. Priorities and values

• Seeking God's Kingdom First: With fervent hearts, we are called to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness! Jesus promises that when we do, all these things will be given to us abundantly, as proclaimed in Matthew 6:33.

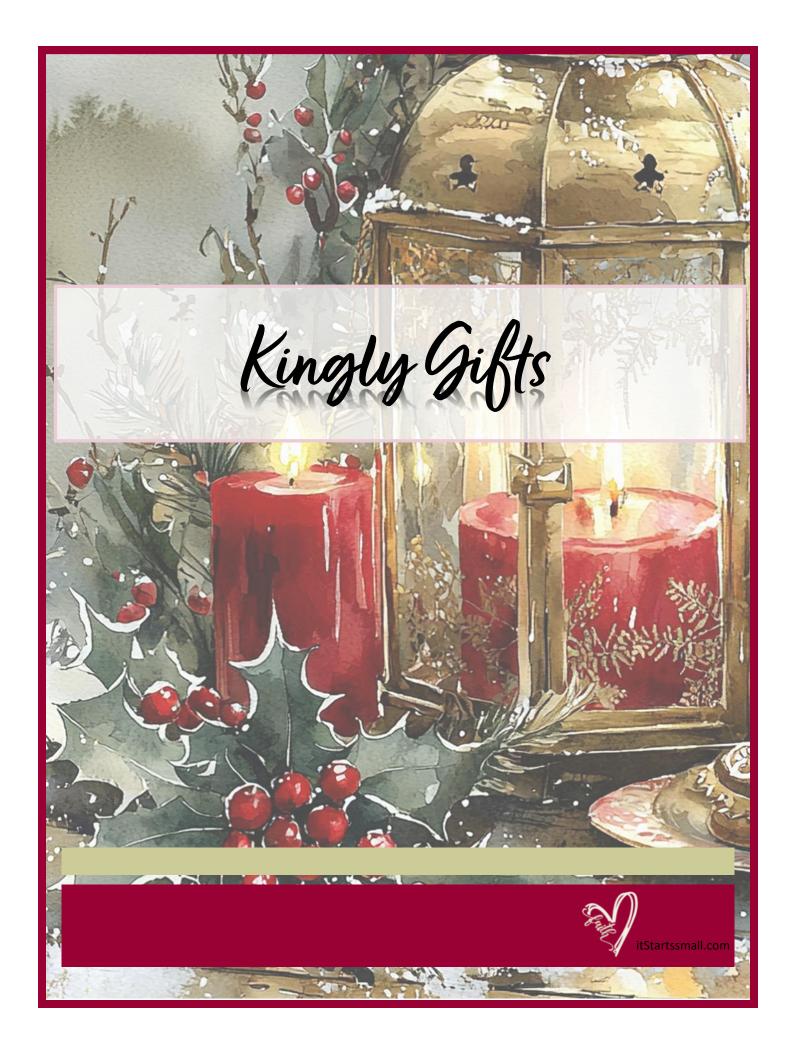
• Self-reflection questions:

 Are your priorities passionately aligned with God's Kingdom, or have you drifted into the allure of worldly pursuits such as wealth, status, or material possessions?

- Are you fully harnessing your time, talents, and resources to advance God's glorious purposes in this world?
- Are you making bold choices that honor God and passionately reflect your deep desire to follow Him?

Practical steps for evaluation

- **Daily Self-Reflection:** Make it a sacred ritual to pause each day and immerse yourself in deep reflection on your actions, attitudes, and motives, weaving them into the profound teachings of Jesus.
- **Journaling:** Pour your heart onto the pages as you document your spiritual journey. Celebrate your victories, confront your challenges, and capture the priceless insights gained along this divine path.
- **Seek Accountability:** Courageously share your reflections with a trusted friend, mentor, or small group leader. Draw strength and encouragement from one another as you hold each other accountable in your spiritual quests.
- **Be Patient with Yourself:** Embrace the beautiful truth that spiritual growth is an exhilarating lifelong journey! Acknowledge the seasons of soaring progress and unexpected setbacks. Be patient, extend grace to yourself, and lean into God's infinite strength and mercy, guiding you every step of the way.





Read the Following Scriptures:

- ♦ Matthew 2:11
- ♦ Matthew 2:13
- ♦ Mathew 2:2

¹¹ Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and falling to their knees, they worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Matthew 2:11

Everyday detail surrounding Christ's birth is profoundly significant. Just like a magnificent masterpiece painted with countless vibrant brushstrokes, each element comes together to reveal something utterly precious and transformative. We must take the time to behold the resplendent beauty of the main subject. Yet, at times; however, we must pause and immerse ourselves in the more subtle nuances in order to truly appreciate the full glory of Christmas.

This is exactly what we're going to immerse ourselves in for the next three days, as we passionately delve into each of the three magnificent gifts brought to Jesus by the wise men. These gifts hold profound significance, infusing rich layers and vibrant depth into the beautiful tapestry of Christ's identity and mission.

Gold.

The first magnificent gift presented was gold. At this juncture of the Christmas story, Jesus is not just a newborn babe; He is a spirited toddler. Imagine the wonder and the perplexity for those wise men who journeyed from the far-off, exotic East, as they humbly knelt before a child and bestowed upon Him gold. It feels so wonderfully out of place, doesn't it? What can a toddler possibly do with gold? Yet, this gift was strikingly appropriate for several compelling reasons.

On the practical side of things, this incredible gift opened the door for Jesus'

family to set off on an unexpected adventure filled with divine purpose. Unbeknownst to them at that moment, God was orchestrating their miraculous relocation to Egypt (Matthew 2:13). Anyone who has ever moved can attest to the daunting expenses involved. A journey of this magnitude would demand financial resources far beyond this couple's grasp. Yet, in His infinite wisdom, God fully understood their impending need. He provided the precious gold. This enabled them to step boldly into His glorious plan for their lives.

Another reason for their visit was the undeniable truth that this was the ultimate gift! These wise men didn't merely see a toddler; they beheld a King—the King! We are certain of this because when they first arrived, their sole purpose was to honor the King (Matthew 2:2). In their hearts and minds, there was no doubt regarding Jesus' identity; He was the anointed and divinely chosen King of God's people. He embodied divine royalty, and all power and authority radiated from Him!

Only a gift of the greatest value would be fitting for a King. Although much about modern society has transformed since Biblical times, one truth remains unmistakably clear: the unparalleled worth of gold. Gold's revered status has endured through the ages, standing as the most precious substance on earth. Personal fortunes and the very fabric of global economies are intricately woven around gold's immense value. Even the phrase "gold standard" resonates deeply, reminding us that gold reigns supreme as the epitome of worldly value and opulence.

In giving gifts, the wise men were making an impassioned proclamation. It was a bold declaration. It revealed their recognition, acceptance, and surrender to Jesus as the unparalleled power and authority on earth. Their gold was merely a faint glimmer of His immense worth. It represented the utmost tribute they could offer in reverence to His majesty and supremacy.

Our familiarity with Jesus can sometimes cloud our perception of His unparalleled supremacy. The intimacy we share with the Almighty enriches our bond with Him. However, it can also dull our recognition of His immense worth. Even as a toddler, He shone brighter than gold! We should remind ourselves of the regal gift of gold bestowed upon Him. This will help us fervently reclaim that profound sense of awe. Let's also reignite our wonder and reverence for Him.

Kingofkings

To challenge your perception of Jesus as the King of Kings, it's beneficial to explore various perspectives and deepen your understanding of the different ways his authority and kingship are understood. Here are some approaches:

Symbolic significance

- What does gold typically symbolize in the Bible and in ancient cultures?
 - * Was it a symbol of kingship, divinity, or both?
 - * How did this gift acknowledge Jesus' royal status, even as a baby?
 - * Could it also represent the value and worth of Jesus as the Son of God?

Practical implications

- Given the circumstances of Jesus' birth (e.g., humble surroundings), what practical purpose might the gold have served for Mary and Joseph?
 - * Could it have helped them financially during their flight to Egypt or upon their return to Nazareth?
 - * Was it a form of divine provision to meet their needs in a challenging time?

Magi's intent

- What motivated the Magi to travel so far to offer this gift?
 - * Did they fully grasp the spiritual significance of Jesus' birth, or were their actions guided by intuition and reverence?
 - * How does their journey and offering demonstrate their worship and recognition of Jesus' importance?

Theological reflections

 What does the offering of gold, a worldly treasure, to Jesus reveal about the nature of his kingship?

- How might this event foreshadow the ultimate act of giving Jesus' sacrifice on the cross?
- How can individuals, like the Magi, offer their "gold" their best resources, talents, and devotion to Jesus today?

Personal reflections

- What gifts could one have brought to Jesus, and why?
- How does the worldly value of gold reconcile with the spiritual and eternal nature of Jesus' kingdom?
- What does the story of the Magi and their gifts teach about generosity and honoring God?





• 1 Timothy 2:5

- Matthew 2:11
- Psalm 141:2
- Hebrews 7:25

¹¹ Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and falling to their knees, they worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Matthew 2:11

We find ourselves deeply immersed in the profound significance of the three gifts the wise men bestowed upon Jesus. The first gift, perfectly suited for a King, resonates powerfully within us. Today, we turn our hearts to the sacred gift of frankincense, a treasure fitting for a priest. Frankincense may seem distant in our modern lives. However, it carries a precious significance in Christ's existence. This is something we simply cannot overlook.

Frankincense is often lovingly referred to as olibanum. It is a captivating aromatic resin. This resin is drawn from the majestic trees of the genus *Boswellia*. They are part of the enchanting Burseraceae family. These ancient trees thrive in the sun-kissed arid landscapes of Africa and Asia. They grace countries like Somalia, Ethiopia, Oman, Yemen, India, and Eritrea. With reverent skill, harvesters carefully carve into the trunks. This allows the precious milky sap to flow forth. It gradually hardens into exquisite tear-shaped droplets. As these drops crystallize, they tell a story of nature's magic. When this revered resin is set ablaze, it releases an ethereal fragrance. This fragrance envelops us in its heavenly embrace.

The extraordinary nature of it linked it powerfully to sacred priestly activities. Incense, a divine offering, was burned with fervor as an intrinsic part of their sacred duties. In the hallowed spaces of the Tabernacle and temple, its fragrant plumes ascended. These plumes symbolized the heartfelt prayers of the people

reaching out to Him (Psalm 141:2). In the biblical era, sensory offerings were far more limited. We must remember this fact. The aroma of the incense stood out like a beacon among the mundane. God intended it this way, desiring to evoke something truly singular and unique in the hearts of His people.

God designed incense to be a powerful trigger. It reminded every Jewish man, woman, and child that their heartfelt prayers were ascending toward Him. The aromatic embrace of incense was not merely a scent. It served as a sacred bridge. The incense connected the faithful with their Divine Creator. That enticing fragrance signified a profound bond between heaven and earth, a reminder of their spiritual union. The sacred responsibility of the priests was to offer this sacred incense. They also carefully tended to it. This ensured that the divine connection remained alive and vibrant.

The wise men were boldly declaring that, in addition to being a King, Jesus is not merely a head priest. He is not even just the High Priest. He is the Highest Priest! The book of Hebrews reveals the profound depth of this truth. In ancient Israel, the High Priest was the vital link between God's people and God. He interceded for sinful souls to the Holy One. Yet, every High Priest was just a fallible man, constrained by time. No matter how dedicated they were, their ministry was destined to be temporary. They were always bound to be replaced.

But when Jesus died, rose, and ascended to heaven, He transformed into something profoundly unique. He became our eternal high priest, relentlessly interceding for humanity in the glorious presence of God Himself (Hebrews 7:25). Even now, over 2,000 years later, Jesus stands as the passionate mediator, representing God to mankind and mankind to God:

⁵ For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus,

1 Timothy 2:5

Frankincense symbolizes and foretells the magnificent role that Jesus embodies now and forever. It powerfully illustrates how Christ serves as the divine connector between humanity and God. As our intercessor, He doesn't serve for a fleeting moment, but eternally and unyieldingly. We are assured that our prayers ascend to the Father. This happens because of His unwavering commitment. They are cradled in the loving hands of the Highest Priest.

Highest Priest

Considering Jesus as the High Priest of believers ignites a passion within us that invites deep contemplation of our personal relationship with Him and God. Here are some thought-provoking questions and areas to fervently ponder:

1. Access to God

- How does Jesus' role as High Priest change access to God? The old covenant involved High Priests mediating for the people, offering sacrifices and entering the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. What does Jesus as the **perfect** High Priest mean for confidence in approaching God's presence, according to Hebrews 4:14-16?
- Does one live with the confidence and boldness available through Jesus? The author of Hebrews exhorts believers to "draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need".
- What might hold one back from approaching God with confidence? Are there feelings of unworthiness, guilt, or fear? How can one be reminded of Jesus' faithfulness and the completeness of his sacrifice?

2. Empathy and understanding

- How does Jesus' humanity affect his role as High Priest? The fact that Jesus was "tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin" makes him uniquely qualified to sympathize with our weaknesses.
- How does knowing that Jesus understands struggles impact the relationship with him? Does one feel more comfortable sharing anxieties, fears, and temptations with him? How does his empathy encourage perseverance in difficult times?

3. Intercession and advocacy

• What comfort is there in knowing that Jesus is interceding for believers? He "always lives to make intercession" for those who draw near to God through

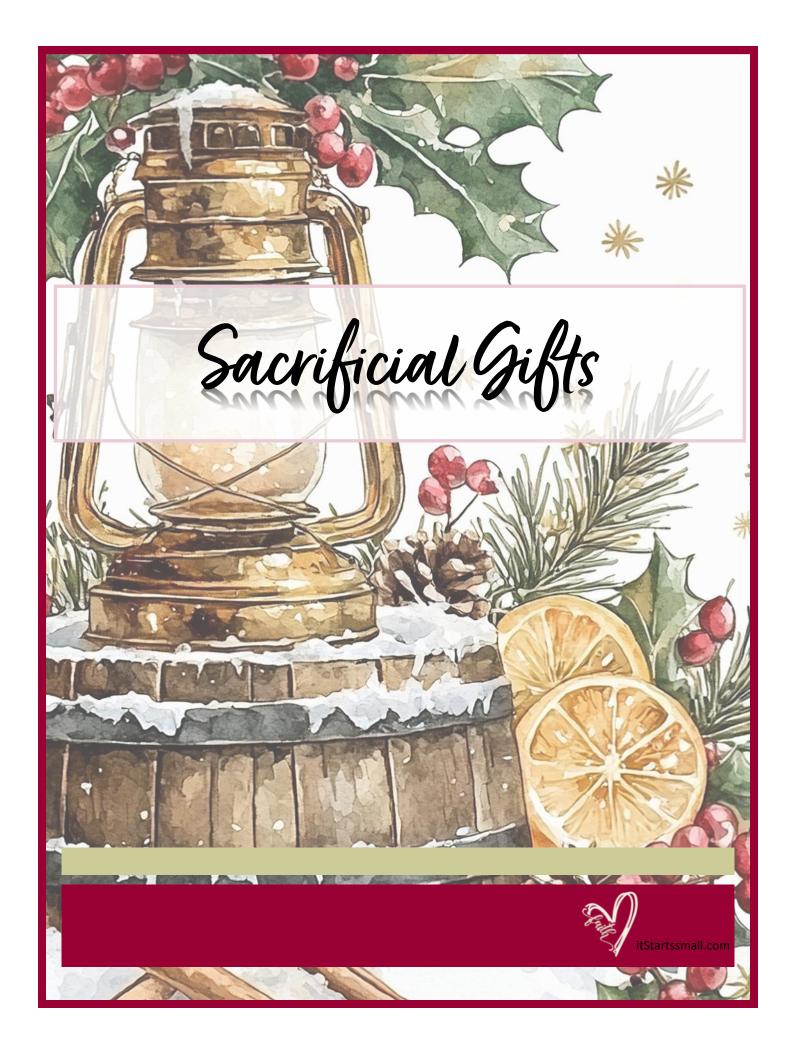
- him, according to Harvest Bible Chapel Des Moines. How does his ongoing advocacy affect the sense of security and assurance in faith?
- Do believers rely on Jesus' intercession in daily life? Do they acknowledge
 and trust that he is continually representing their needs and concerns before
 the Father?
- What does Jesus' intercession teach about the power of prayer? If Jesus, the High Priest, prays, how should that inspire and motivate prayer life?

4. The finished work and the new covenant

- How does Jesus' role as the High Priest of a better covenant impact salvation? He offered himself once for all, securing eternal redemption and replacing the need for repeated sacrifices. What are the implications for the assurance of salvation and the sense of being forgiven?
- What does it mean that Jesus' sacrifice "perfected forever those who are being sanctified"? How does this truth impact the view of growth and progress in the walk with Christ?

5. Living as a royal priesthood

- What does it mean to be a part of a "royal priesthood"? How does this calling impact daily life, relationships, and service to God and others?
- What "spiritual sacrifices" is one called to offer to God through Jesus Christ? How does understanding of Jesus' High Priesthood inform and empower worship, service, and evangelism?





- Matthew 2:11
- Mark 15:22-23
- John 19:38-40
- Revelation 13:8
- Romans 6:23

¹¹ Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and falling to their knees, they worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and Presented him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Matthew 2:11

Jesus was bestowed with a magnificent gift of gold, a powerful symbol of His divine Kingship. Alongside this treasure, the wise men presented frankincense, acknowledging His exalted role as the Highest Priest. Yet, it is the gift of myrrh that captivates our hearts. This precious resin is harvested from the venerable *Commiphora* trees, particularly *Commiphora* myrrha. These trees thrive in the unforgiving landscapes of northeastern Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Harvesting myrrh is a labor of love. Experts skillfully make incisions in the bark. This allows the aromatic sap to flow and crystallize. The resulting substance can be burned or preserved as a liquid. What makes myrrh distinct from frankincense are its remarkable medicinal properties. Its delightfully pleasant aroma invites us to appreciate its beauty and significance.

Myrrh, when blended with a rich liquid – often the finest wine because it was a very bitter substance – acts as a powerful sedative. It wraps those who partake in

its soothing embrace. Its application goes beyond mere healing. It lovingly cradles wounds. It also delicately graces corpses. It slows the inevitable march of decomposition with reverent care. This extraordinary gift shines brightly. It stands shoulder to shoulder with the treasures of gold and frankincense. This is a testament to its profound significance.

²² They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of the Skull). ²³ They tried to give him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.

Mark 15:22-23

As Jesus was being crucified, they tried to ease His suffering by offering Him a sedative by mixing myrrh and wine together, but He refused. He refused to lessen the severity of pain and punishment for our sin. It is not coincidence that this detail is given given as Jesus was suffering and dying on the cross. Yet, there's another mention of myrrh during this time we can not miss.

³⁸ After this, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus – but secretly because of his fear of the Jews – asked Pilate that he might remove Jesus's body. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and took his body away. ³⁹ Nicodemus (who had previously come to him at night) also came, bringing a mixture of about seventy-five pounds of myrrh and aloes. ⁴⁰ They took Jesus's body and wrapped it in linen cloths with the fragrant spices, according to the burial custom of the Jews.

John 19:38-40 (Bold for emphasis)

Jesus was offered myrrh on the cross. His lifeless body was lovingly anointed with myrrh as He was laid to rest in the sacred tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. These poignant details are imbued with profound significance. God wants us to see myrrh at the cross. He also wants us to see myrrh at the tomb. This highlights myrrh's essential role in Jesus's death and burial narrative.

Now, let us transport ourselves back in time, to the very cradle of Christ's life! Can you sense the profound significance of this incredible gift? If gold symbolizes His Kingship and frankincense points to His divine priesthood, then what does myrrh reveal? It stunningly anticipates His suffering, foreshadowing the ultimate sacrifice He would make—our sacrificial lamb for our sins!

Even as a toddler, it was profoundly understood by God and the wise men that Jesus was destined to die for our sins. This truth reaches back even further! Before the dawn of creation, in the depths of His omniscience, God foresaw our sins and the desperate need for salvation. In the eternal dance of the Godhead, the Son emerged as our sacrificial lamb, slain before the very foundations of the world were laid (Revelation 13:8)!

So this made myrrh an appropriate gift.

We must take a heartfelt moment when we immerse ourselves in the Christmas story. We need to contemplate the significance of the wise men presenting myrrh to Jesus. This gift is a profound symbol, inviting us to reflect on its meaning. God bestowed the ultimate gift upon humanity. It was the very life of God's Son, who, in divine love, willingly sacrificed Himself on the cross. His sacrifice paved the way for our liberation from the grave weight of sin!

²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 6:23

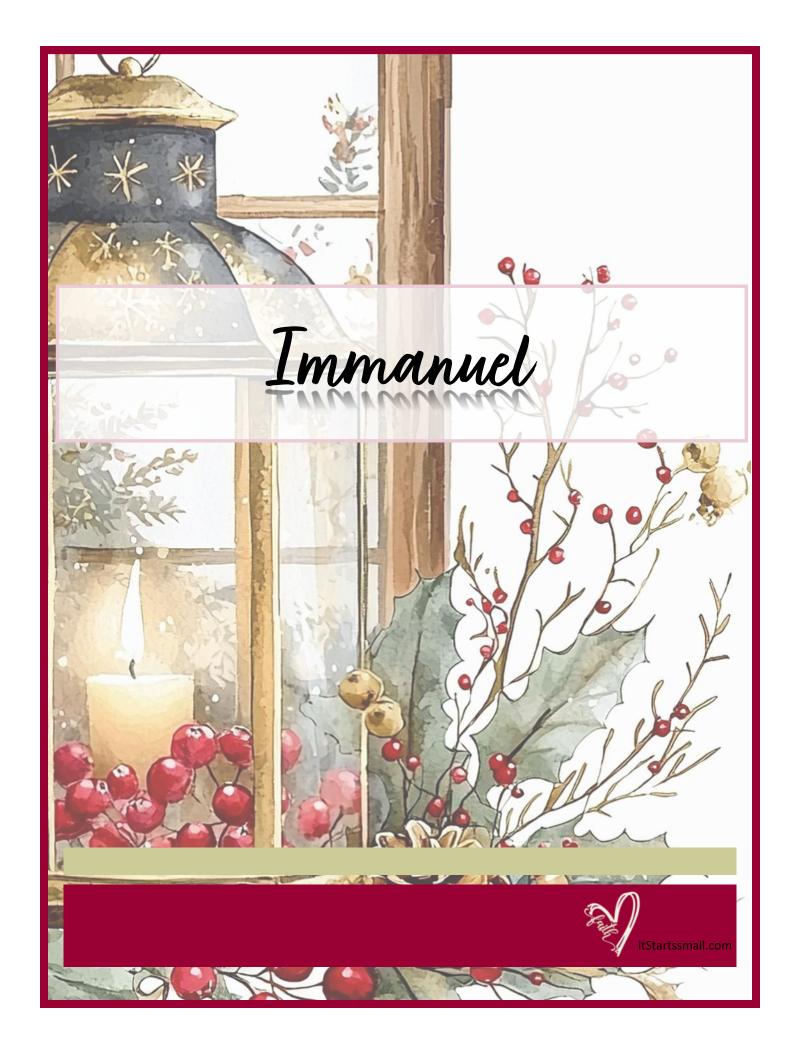
Sacrificial Lamb

Christmas is a heartfelt celebration of the miraculous birth of Jesus, our Savior. The profound sacrifice of Jesus culminated in His crucifixion. It is predominantly honored during the solemn occasions of Easter and Good Friday. We are invited to embrace the essence of His sacrifice during this joyful season. There are countless ways to reflect on the immense significance of Jesus' love and sacrifice at Christmas. His spirit allows us to feel inspired and uplifted in our hearts.

- Reflect on the Purpose of His Birth: Christmas is not just a date on the calendar. It's a powerful celebration of the glorious birth of Jesus! He came to Earth with a divine mission. He offered Himself as the perfect sacrifice for the sins that weigh heavily on humanity. Embrace this purpose during the Christmas season. Feel the profound connection between His miraculous birth and the ultimate sacrifice He made for us!
- Focus on God's Love and Sacrifice: Let the words of John 3:16 resonate in your heart! God's incredible love for the world drove Him to give His one and only Son! The Christmas season calls us to reflect on the immense sacrifice made. Jesus willingly endured the pain and suffering of humanity. He did this for our salvation. This is the time to marvel at such boundless love and grace!
- Engage in Christ-centered Giving: Gift-giving during Christmas isn't just a tradition. It is a beautiful expression of the sacrificial love of Jesus! Let your giving reflect the heart of Christ. Every act of kindness done in Jesus' name intertwines the joy of Christmas with His spirit. It embodies the sacrifice and service that He demonstrated! Cherish moments with family or uplift those in need.
- **Engage in Christ-centered traditions:** Focus on traditions that emphasize Jesus' birth and purpose, such as:
 - Reading the Gospel accounts of Jesus' birth.
 - Setting up a nativity scene and using it as a tool to teach the story of Jesus' birth.
 - Singing hymns and carols that focus on Christ's birth and the meaning of his sacrifice.

Ultimately, embracing Jesus' profound sacrifice during the Christmas season

| ignites within us a fervent Christ-like spirit of love, humility, and selfless service. It calls us to passionately live out our faith. We are inspired to glorify God in |
|---|
| vibrant ways. This also leads us to joyfully bless others. |
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• Matthew 1:23

• Matthew 1:20-21

• Isaiah 7:14

• John 1:14

- John 1:1-2
- Genesis 1
- Genesis 2:1-3
- Psalm 33:9

²³ See, the virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will name him Immanuel,

which is translated "God is with us."

Matthew 1:23

In Shakespeare's iconic *Romeo and Juliet*, the fervent Juliet Capulet poses a profound question: "What is in a name? That which we call a rose by another name would smell as sweet." This pivotal line encapsulates the heart-wrenching struggle and tragedy that permeates the play. Undoubtedly, the impassioned Capulet is right. A person's name should never be a measure of their worth. It should not serve as a basis for stereotypes. It should not lead to the unfounded hatred of someone you have yet to truly know.

However, while our names may have morphed into mere labels, the names ascribed to God resonate with profound significance! From El Shaddai, the "Lord Almighty," to Jehovah Raah, "the Lord is my Shepherd," and to El Olam, which translates to "the everlasting God," every name of the Divine in His Word unveils a beautiful aspect of His nature. Among all His magnificent names, mine is undoubtedly Immanuel, "God is with us!"

After discovering that Mary was carrying a child, Joseph felt an overwhelming turmoil within him, leading him to the heart-wrenching decision to quietly end

their engagement, clinging to his righteous nature. Yet, just when despair threatened to take hold, a celestial messenger, the angel Gabriel, appeared to him in a vivid dream, igniting a flame of hope by affirming the truth of Mary's miraculous story (Matthew 1:20-21)!

²⁰ But after he had considered these things, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

Matthew 1:20-21

I absolutely adore this passage of scripture! The name contained within is so rich with power, comfort, and breathtaking beauty! To me, it boldly declares that this child, Jesus, is unequivocally the Son of God. He is the promised Messiah. He is the cherished seed of Abraham and the eternal heir to David's majestic throne!

This encourages a deep reflection. It highlights a striking passage in the Gospels that vividly proclaims the eternal Word. The Word "became flesh and made His dwellings among us" (John 1:14). Yet, before we delve into that divine mystery, we must passionately immerse ourselves in the powerful message of John 1:1-2:

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning.

John 1:1-2

Here, John passionately reveals that Jesus, the Son of God, is the vibrant embodiment of the Word of God. He is God incarnate; the One whose voice brought forth the divine will of the Lord at the dawn of creation (Genesis 1:1-2:3; Psalm 33:9; Hebrews 11:3). He embodies the character, heart, will, and mind of God the Father, unveiling His glorious essence to the world.

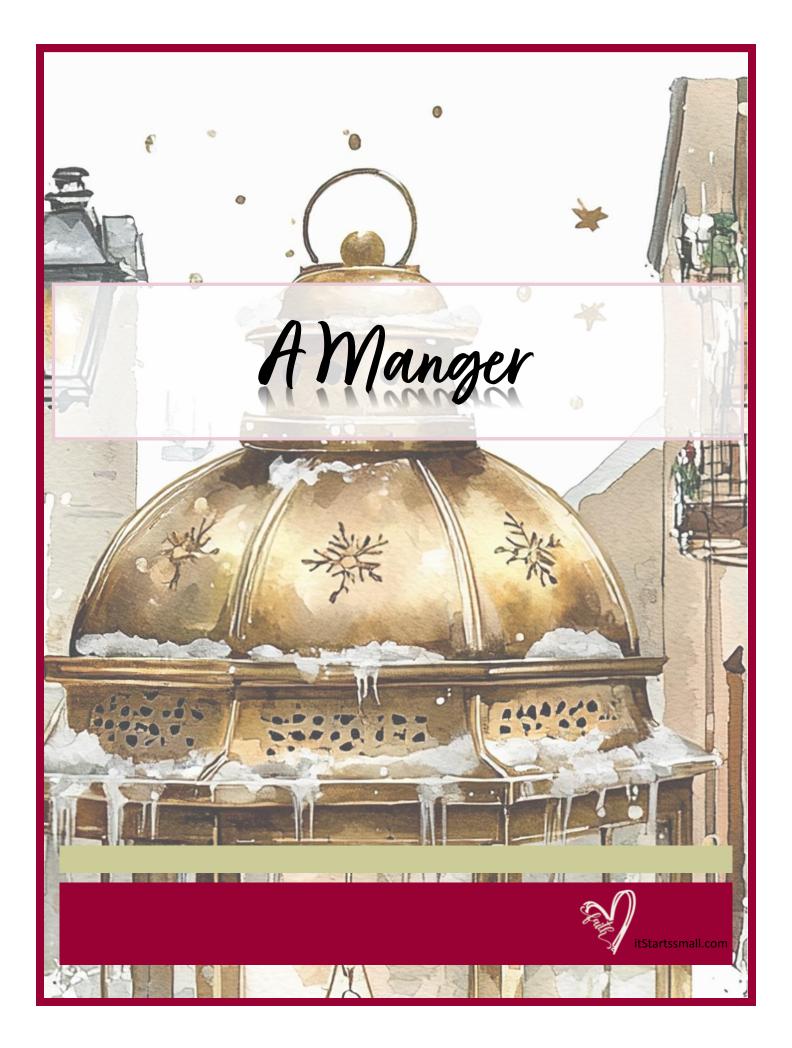
We eagerly prepare to celebrate with beloved family and friends in joyful worship. Let us remember that Immanuel came to forge a path for us all. He wanted us to know God in the most profound and intimate way. He entered our world to save us from our sins. He came to profoundly transform our hearts. He also wanted to breathe life into our spirits (John 1:4-5). The Son of God willingly left the splendor of heaven. He did this so that we could claim "the right to

| become children of God" (John 1:12). He chose to dwell among us. He laid down His life for us. Astonishingly, He now makes His home within each of us. Oh what a beautiful name this is! | |
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Names of God

Incorporating the magnificent names of God into your holiday celebrations enriches the festivities. It also deepens your connection to faith in an extraordinary way! Each name highlights His diverse attributes and roles. It offers a profound reminder of His presence in our lives. Some of the most powerful names are revealed throughout scripture. They illuminate the bond we share with the divine. They invite us to celebrate the richness of our relationship with Him.

- Elohim (God, Creator, Mighty One): This name emphasizes God's power and majesty. (Genesis 1:1, Psalm 77:13-14)
- Yahweh (YHWH, Jehovah, Lord, The Existing One): Considered God's personal covenant name. (Exodus 20:2, Isaiah 42:8, Psalm 135:13)
- **Adonai (Lord, Master):** Highlights God's sovereignty and authority. (Genesis 15:2, Psalm 8:1)
- El Shaddai (God Almighty, All-Sufficient One): This speaks to God's immense power and ability to provide. (Genesis 17:1, Genesis 35:11)
- El Elyon (The Most High God): Emphasizes God's supreme authority. (Genesis 14:18, Psalm 97:9)
- **Jehovah-Jireh (The Lord Will Provide):** This reflects God's provision. (Genesis 22:14)
- **Jehovah-Rapha (The Lord Who Heals):** This indicates God's power and willingness to heal. (Exodus 15:26, Psalm 147:3)
- **Abba (Father, Papa):** An Aramaic term reflecting an intimate relationship with God. (Romans 8:14-16, Mark 14:36)
- Jehovah Nissi (The Lord My Banner) Exodus 17:15
- Jehovah-Raah (The Lord My Shepherd) Psalm 23:1
- **Jehovah-Shalom** (The Lord Is Peace) Judges 6:24
- **Jehovah Shammah** (The Lord Is There) Ezekiel 48:35
- **Jehovah Tsidkenu** (The Lord Our Righteousness) Jeremiah 23:6
- Jehovah Sabaoth (The Lord of Hosts) I Samuel 1:3





- Luke 2:7
- Luke 1:26-55
- Philippians 2:6-8

⁷ Then she gave birth to her firstborn son, and she wrapped him tightly in cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Luke 2:7

While preparing for this series, I was struck by a delightful twist of humor. Have you ever embarked on a quest to uncover the most extravagant cribs in history? My curiosity was ignited! At the pinnacle of opulence stands the Suommo Dodo bassinet, a breathtaking creation crafted from 24-carat solid gold and weighing a staggering 188 kilograms. This masterpiece comes with a mind-boggling price tag of \$12 million, although some sources dare to claim it costs \$16.7 million! This limited edition bassinet is not just a cradle; it is an enchanting mimicry of a mother's embrace, featuring a pod-shaped egg design perched upon a tall stand. The luxurious bedding is a sumptuous blend of silk, Pima cotton, and intricately embroidered gold yarn. With the option for dazzling customization involving diamonds and the finest white or pure gold, the already astronomical price climbs even higher. Other stunning examples I unearthed included:

- The Asnaghi Interiors It3001 Firenze Crib, hand-carved in Italy from solid beechwood with a hand-painted lacquer finish and silk upholstery, is priced at \$22,326.70.
- The Royal Round Luxury Velvet Baby Crib with Rhinestones is available for \$6,000.
- The Princess Tufted Crib in Blush Silk costs \$6,800.
- The King Tut Bed is priced at \$10,000.

When I was pregnant with my precious oldest daughter, I vividly recall the waves of concern surrounding SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) that made headlines everywhere. The flood of information pouring in about cribs, blankets, and pajamas was truly overwhelming. As a first-time mom, my heart ached to provide the absolute best, yet my wallet often dictated my choices. Then, a miracle happened—my daughter's grandmother unearthed a stunning baby set at a garage sale, priced so modestly it felt like fate. It was absolutely perfect, sturdy, and provided the safety we craved. In fact, it became a beloved staple, lovingly used for my son as well.

If we, as ordinary people, can lovingly place our children's heads in a cozy crib, can you even fathom the magnificent cradle befitting a king? Not just any king, but the King of the universe! I dare say even a \$12 million dollar crib would pale in comparison for baby Jesus! And yet, He was not cradled in a golden cot, nor did He rest in a high-tech Intellicot. No, even the simplest Fisher Price or Ikea crib didn't grace His humble beginnings!

Instead, our Savior's head was tenderly laid in a humble manger. Most traditional manger scenes depict a charming little wooden bassinet, evoking warmth and nostalgia. We can easily envision cattle, donkeys, and sheep contentedly feeding from it. Yet, if we look back to biblical times, we discover a stark reality: the mangers were indeed rugged stone rectangular blocks resting upon a pair of cinder blocks. It wasn't the delicate wooden cradle we fantasize about today, but a solid stone block that cradled the King of Kings!

This is where the Creator of the universe and the Savior of the World spent His first night on earth, not in a lavish crib adorned with rhinestones and gold, but upon a cold, hard block of stone—used by animals to eat from, a stark reality. At that time, Caesar had decreed a census, demanding the participation of every Israelite, insisting they return to their ancestral homes for registration. Joseph's family hailed from Bethlehem, so Mary, burdened with the weight of impending motherhood, undertook the arduous journey. Upon their arrival, the crowds swarmed for the census, leaving no room for them to rest, except in a stable—or as some believe, a cave sheltering animals. From the humblest of women, to the most humblest of towns, in the most unassuming of places, the Lord was born and laid to rest each night in the humblest of "cribs."

But the should not suprise us. If we get to know Jesus, we find out that our Savior embodies and exemplifies humility! In Philippians 2:6-8 we read:

6 who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited.

7 Instead he emptied himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity.

And when he had come as a man,

8 he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—

even to death on a cross.

Philippians 2:6-8

Today, as we joyfully celebrate Christmas, let us remember the true essence of this glorious occasion! It is not merely the jingling bells or the dazzling decorations that define this season; rather, it is the overwhelming joy of welcoming our humble King, who came to rescue us from despair. This celebration is a testament to the greatest love of all—the infinite, unconditional, and boundless love of God that led Jesus to the manger and ultimately to the cross.

Comfort vs. Contentment

Today, let us passionately reflect on the profound humility of the place where Christ was born. Mary gave birth to our Savior on the floor of a cave or stable. There was no bed. No birthing chair. There were no midwives, doctors, or nurses. When Jesus took His first breath, it was done in the least preferred place a mother could have a child. What can God teach us about this? Let us earnestly ponder the true essence of comfort and contentment. In the light of God's Word, we discover a remarkable distinction. Comfort is fleeting in nature. Contentment is deep and abiding.

Comfort

- Definition: Comfort is a state of physical or mental ease, often linked to the absence of suffering and can be temporary.
- Biblical Perspective: While God provides comfort, it is not simply the absence of hardship. Biblical comfort is God's strengthening presence and assurance during trials.
- **Examples:** Experiencing physical warmth or financial security can be forms of comfort.
- **Relevant Scriptures:** You can find relevant scriptures in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, Psalm 23:4, and John 14:27.

Contentment

- **Definition:** Contentment is a deep inner satisfaction that is not dependent on external situations. It is rooted in acknowledging God's sufficiency and resting in His provision.
- **Biblical Perspective:** Contentment is a quality believers should strive for (1 Timothy 6:6). It comes from trusting in God's plan rather than worldly success or possessions.
- **Examples:** Finding peace and joy despite difficulties by knowing that God is enough.
- **Relevant Scriptures:** You can find relevant scriptures in Philippians 4:11-13, 1 Timothy 6:6-8, and Hebrews 13:5.

In essence, comfort can be fleeting and sourced from the outside world. Yet, true contentment ignites a profound inner peace discovered in Christ. This peace remains unwavering regardless of the stormy circumstances that surround us.

Sometimes during the holiday season we lean into what is most comfortable. Yet that comfort can be shattered by anxiety and fear. Today, let us challenge ourselves by stepping out of the comforts of a routine and seek contentment.

• Cultivate a Spirit of Thankfulness:

- Begin each glorious day by passionately counting your blessings, embracing the smallest joys that fill your heart! This powerful practice shifts your perspective from what seems lacking to the abundance God has already blessed you with.
- Dive deep into the unchanging and majestic character of God, finding unwavering security in His everlasting faithfulness.
- Psalm 100:4 passionately invites us to "Enter into His gates with thanksgiving and into His courts with praise: be thankful unto Him, and bless His name".

• Center Your Heart on Christ:

- Hold dear the real meaning of this beautiful season: the joyous celebration of Jesus' miraculous birth and the hope that He embodies, according to Christianity.com.
- Dedicate your heart to worshipping Christ, breaking free from the distractions of holiday "works" and the chaos that can overwhelm.
- Contemplate the profound mystery of the incarnation God humbling Himself to become man in Jesus Christ and let its incredible significance transform your life.
- Embrace the peace that Jesus offers, a peace that transcends any holiday stress and guards your heart and mind (Philippians 4:6-7).

• Prioritize and Simplify:

- Boldly set healthy boundaries, learning to joyfully decline events or commitments that threaten to pull you away from what truly matters.
- Embrace the beauty of simplifying your holiday celebrations and traditions, creating sacred space for intentional time with God and your loved ones.
- Resist the temptation to overspend, focusing instead on creating unforgettable experiences and sharing meaningful gifts that resonate.

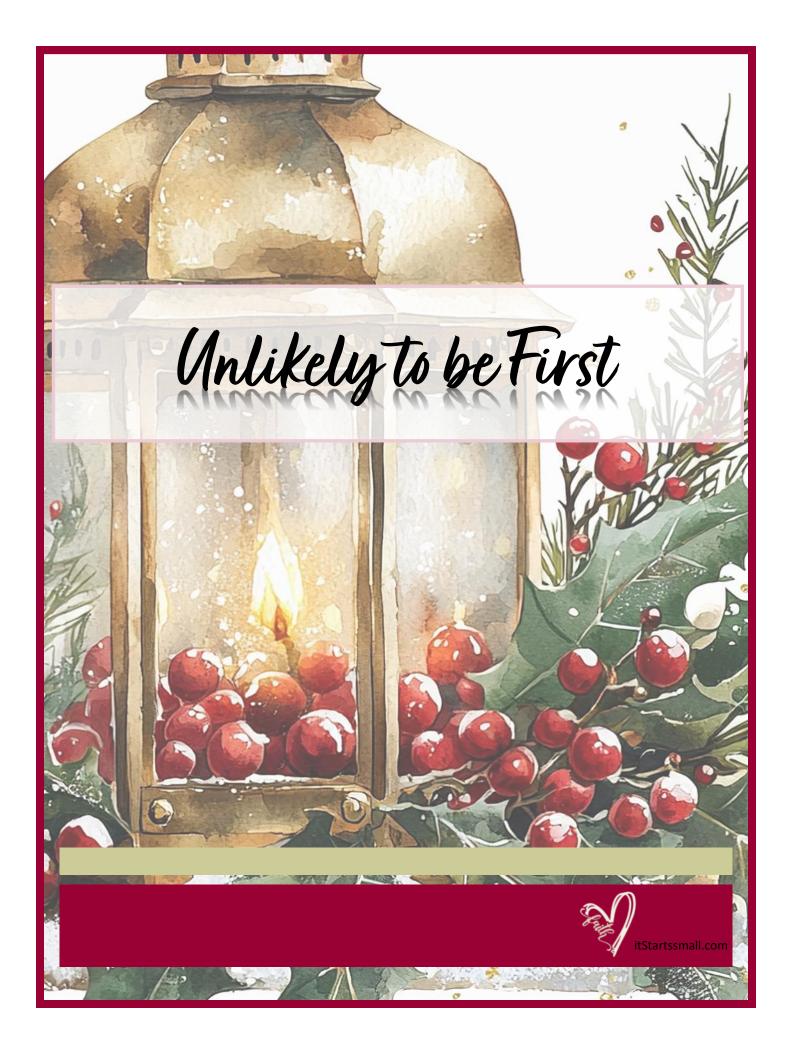
• Remember, true contentment lies not in a picture-perfect holiday but in cherishing faith, love, and vibrant community.

• Embrace Generosity and Service:

- Ignite your spirit of generosity by giving selflessly to others! Whether through volunteering, donating to ministries, or extending loving hospitality to those who might be alone during the holidays, let your light shine bright.
- Acts 20:35 boldly proclaims, "It is more blessed to give than to receive!"
- Share the boundless love of God through acts of kindness and service, discovering that the joy it brings far outweighs any material possessions.

• Lean on God's Strength:

- Acknowledge that your strength to navigate the hustle and bustle of the holidays springs from God alone, not from your own efforts or sheer willpower.
- In moments of overwhelm, boldly cast your cares upon Him in prayer, knowing with certainty that He truly cares for you (1 Peter 5:7).
- Trust profoundly in God's perfect plan and timing, holding on firmly to the promise that He orchestrates every detail for good for those who love Him (Romans 8:28).





• Luke 2:8-12

⁸ In the same region, shepherds were staying out in the fields and keeping watch at night over their flock. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Don't be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people: ¹¹ Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be the sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped tightly in cloth and lying in a manger."

Luke 2:8-12

If you've been keeping up, you might have seen a magnificent pattern unfolding. God operates in ways that defy our understanding! He selects the most flawed and imperfect individuals to be the ancestors of the Holy One. He empowers the underprivileged and inexperienced to place their trust in the Savior of the World. And, in a breathtaking display of humility, He brings the King of kings and Lord of lords into the world as a vulnerable infant.

God embraces the unconventional with fervor! He orchestrates events that defy the natural order of our world. While we might envision a specific path, God boldly forges His own! There's an extraordinary purpose behind His choices. We catch a breathtaking glimpse of it when we encounter the next unexpected players in the miraculous story of Christ's birth: the shepherds.

Imagine, for just a moment, the thrill of receiving incredible news that made your heart race and lit up your soul! Think of that transformative moment, one that rewrote your story in triumph. What was your immediate instinct? Undoubtedly, you wanted to share that exhilarating joy with someone dear. This person holds a cherished place in your life. It wouldn't be the same sharing it with a mere stranger. This is the essence of our connections: we instinctively share our most precious news with those who mean the world to us.

There will never be a more magnificent piece of news to share. The most astounding moment is when the Son of God took on the humble form of the Son of Man. He came forth to rescue humanity from its fallen state! The Messiah has arrived, and nothing—absolutely nothing—compares to this extraordinary event! And just take a moment to marvel at whom God chose to unveil this divine news first! Among all of humanity, God honored the shepherds with the revelation of Christ's birth. They were the diligent guardians of the flock. But....

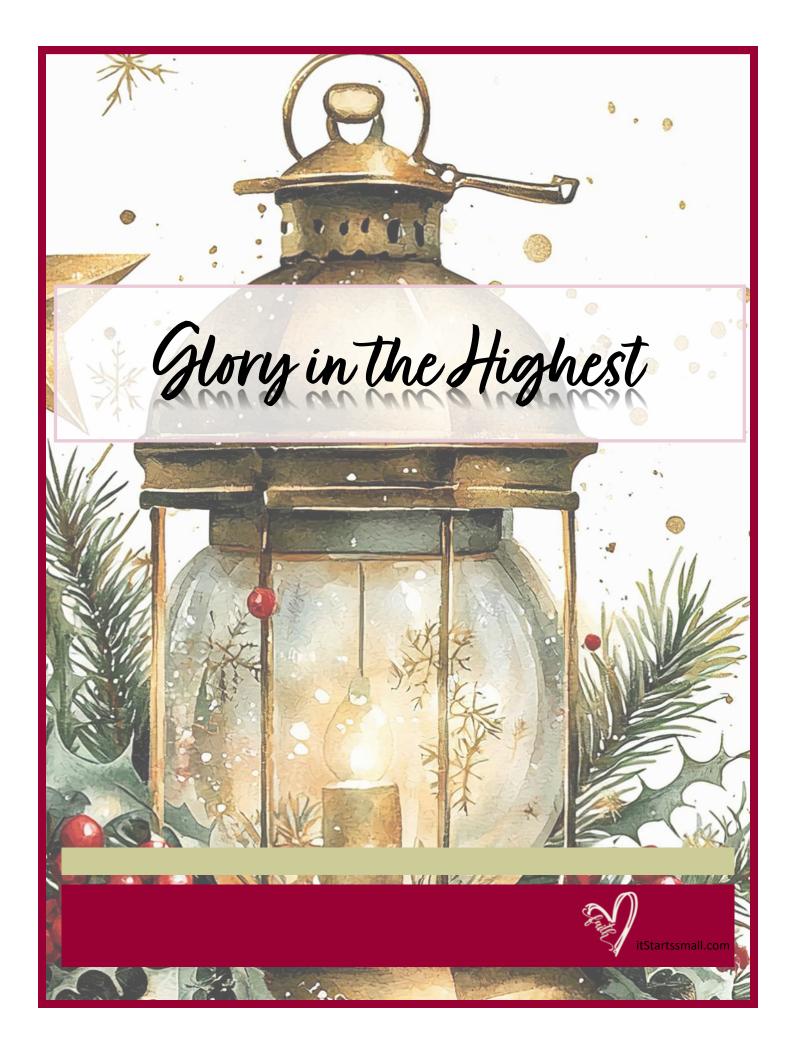
What is wrong with shepherds?

To us, they embody a tender spirit—an endearing collection of well-bearded, animal-loving souls. Let's be honest: in biblical times, shepherds hardly occupied a place of esteem. Day in and day out, they toiled outdoors, fiercely guarding and watching over their sheep. These creatures, often viewed as filthy, cast their guardians into equally grimy surroundings, stained with the marks of their labor. Yes, shepherds lived in a world that was soiled and smelly, but within that grit lies a profound dedication and love for the life they embraced. Some might have thought they were too much like the animals they guarded.

Beneath their rugged exteriors, shepherds were often seen as distant, unreliable, and untrustworthy souls. Many perceived them as being more akin to the flocks they tended than reflections of God's divine image. Yet, witness the awe-inspiring choice God made. He selected these very men to be the first bearers of the most extraordinary news ever! These humble guardians of the fields could never have imagined being entrusted with such monumental tidings. They certainly never expected the Almighty Himself to reveal the arrival of the world's Savior to them!

What does this reveal to us?

It powerfully reveals to us that God operates in a way that is astonishingly different from our own! As we reflect on this truth, we are filled with awe. We realize that this extraordinary aspect of His character is the very foundation of the Christmas story. If God acted according to our limited perspective, He would not have given His beloved Son to suffer and die for us. His boundless mercy would not have triumphed over judgment. Let us fervently praise God for being so remarkably distinct from us! May we wholeheartedly embrace this truth and make this Christmas an unforgettable celebration!





• Luke 2:13-14

• Luke 2:14

• 2 Corinthians 5:17-20

• Luke 2:10-11

¹⁴ Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people he favors!

Luke 2:14

Don't you just adore the thrill of receiving good news? We absolutely revel in it! Why? Because it brings an immense wave of joy that uplifts our spirits! Have you ever experienced the exhilarating moment of delivering a life-altering announcement? To gaze into someone's eyes and share the incredible news that they are about to receive something so extraordinary that it will transform their life for the better? What a profound honor and privilege it is to bring such happiness to someone else!

Throughout God's Word, we encounter magnificent angels, each one a divine messenger carrying profound messages from the Almighty! Some of these messages are warnings, others unveil revelations or impart essential instructions. Yet, among all their sacred duties, they were entrusted with delivering the most extraordinary message of all! In the awe-inspiring account of Luke 2, they received the highest honor and unparalleled opportunity to proclaim the greatest news that would forever change humanity!

As the shepherds were out keep watching over their flock:

¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Don't be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people: ¹¹ Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

Luke 2:10-11

Then, suddenly more angels appeared next to the angel that delivered the message. The angels did something very unique...they broke out in a full-blown worship and praise proclaiming:

¹⁴ Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people he favors!

Luke 2:14

Look at Luke 2:13.

¹³ Suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying:

Luke 2:13

Another way to interpret this scripture is through the awe-inspiring image of an entire army of angels, numbering in the tens of thousands! Imagine this magnificent Army of the Great King, boldly proclaiming His unmatched greatness! They descended upon the earth carrying the most jubilant news for all humanity, spreading the glorious message that peace had arrived in the form of a humble child born in the sacred city of David. The peace they spoke of is the profound peace of God, a divine gift available to everyone who welcomes it... yet only those who embrace its joy fully can experience its wonders!

Today, the Lord has gifted us with an extraordinary opportunity—one that mirrors the divine mission bestowed upon the angels on that sacred night: to fervently share the transformative Gospel message with the world. Like those heavenly beings, we are honored and compelled to proclaim to every heart the ultimate glory that our lives can ever know or experience: the profound joy of knowing Christ.

The Apostle Paul tells us:

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come! ¹⁸ Everything is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. ¹⁹ That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he has committed the message of reconciliation to us.

²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ's behalf, "Be reconciled to God."

Holy Invitation to Others

The holiday season bursts forth with extraordinary chances to passionately share the Gospel message with family, friends, neighbors, and even strangers! Here's a vibrant, multi-faceted approach to embrace this joyful calling:

1. Live the Gospel authentically

- Be a radiant testament to God's unwavering love and boundless grace, especially amid life's stressors! People are closely observing how Christians navigate the demands and pressures of this sacred season.
- Overflow with kindness, compassion, and a serene spirit in every interaction, allowing the "aroma of Christ" to permeate your presence.
- Be fully present and engaged with others. Cherish deep connections instead of a cramped schedule.

2. Leverage holiday traditions and events

- **Christmas cards:** Send beautifully designed cards infused with a powerful Gospel message or uplifting Scripture passages that speak to the heart.
- Holiday gatherings:
 - Host a joyful Christmas gathering where you can passionately share your faith story and cherished traditions in a way that resonates with everyone.
 - Make it a heartfelt tradition to pray before meals, pouring out your thankfulness and weaving in the beautiful message of God's love and the incredible gift of salvation through Christ.
 - Seize every opportunity to engage in heartfelt conversations about the true meaning of the season and the promise of eternal life that we hold dear.
 - Adorn your space with decorations and elements that brilliantly point to Jesus, like a stunning nativity scene.
 - Fill the air with the joy of Christian Christmas music, setting a divine tone for all to enjoy.
- Church events: Invite your neighbors and friends to experience the awe of

- special Christmas services, cantatas, or delightful children's pageants at your church.
- Caroling: Organize or join a spirited caroling group and fervently share the profound meanings behind the songs as you spread joy from house to house.
- **Service projects:** Embrace the spirit of giving by volunteering with your family at a local soup kitchen, nursing home, or charitable organization, and bring hope to those in need.
- **Giving gifts:** Thoughtfully choose gifts that carry a spiritual message, like inspiring devotional books or beautiful ornaments adorned with Bible verses that will touch hearts forever.

3. Engage in thoughtful conversations

- **Ask questions and listen well:** This helps you understand others' perspectives and where they are spiritually.
- **Look for natural openings:** Inquire about their traditions, memories, and what's meaningful to them about the season.
- **Be prepared to share the story:** Explain the Gospel message clearly and concisely, focusing on God's love, our need for salvation, Christ's sacrifice, and the gift of eternal life through faith.
- **Use analogies related to the holidays:** Talk about the ultimate gift God gave in sending Jesus.
- **Share your personal story:** Testify to the difference Jesus has made in your life.

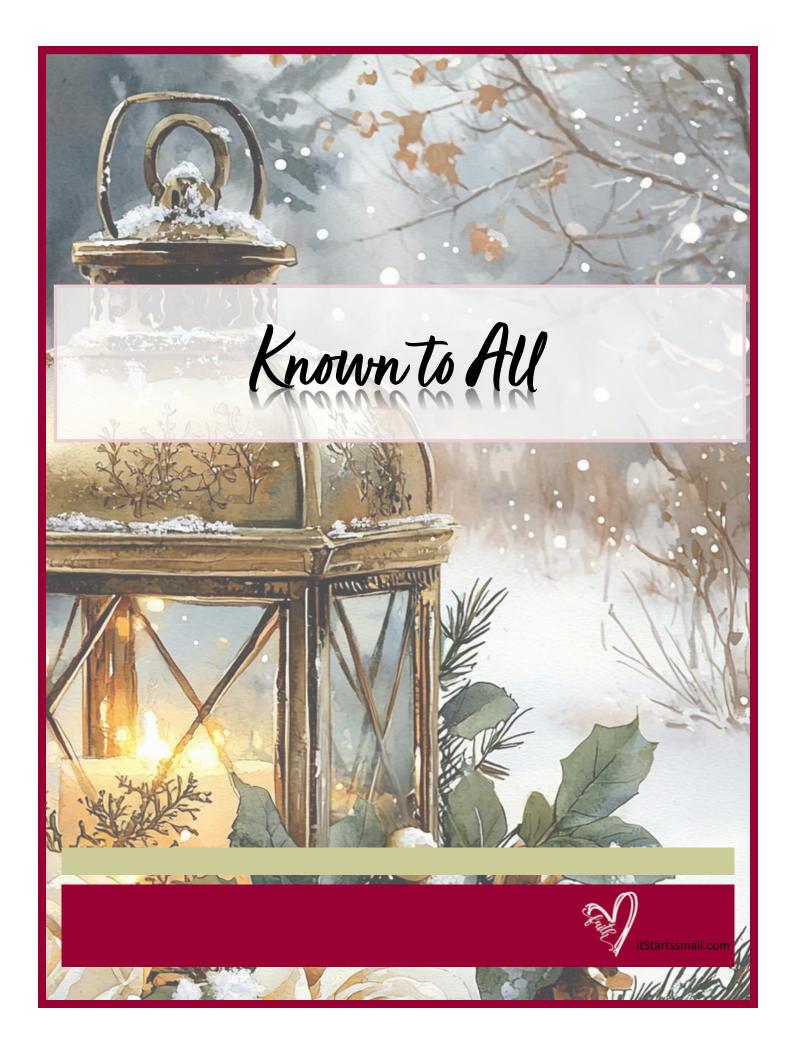
4. Pray faithfully

- Pray for specific individuals that God would open their hearts to the Gospel.
- Pray for boldness and wisdom to recognize and seize opportunities to share your faith.
- Trust that the Holy Spirit is working, even when you feel inadequate or fearful.

5. Be mindful of potential pitfalls

- Avoid awkwardness or being pushy: Share the Gospel within natural conversations, not presentations.
- Don't let the busyness distract you: Intentionally prioritize sharing the Gospel

| above all the other holiday demands. Don't forget your own family: Utilize the time together to build up their faith and share the importance of Jesus in your lives. |
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| Immerse yourself in your faith. Seize every holiday opportunity with creativity. Engage in deep and meaningful conversations. Fervently rely on prayer. In doing so, you can transform this holiday season into a powerful moment. Countless individuals will hear and may even embrace the life-altering message of Jesus Christ. |
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• Luke 2:13-14

• Luke 2:14

• 2 Corinthians 5:17-20

• Luke 2:10-11

¹⁶ They hurried off and found both Mary and Joseph, and the baby who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ After seeing them, they reported the message they were told about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

Luke 2:14-18

Have you ever witnessed something amazing?

I was driving from Texas to Colorado in June of 2022. Texas has these non-native deer called Axis deer. They are much smaller than the native deer and they are easy to spot because they have spots. I missed my exit in the middle of nowhere and my gps re-routed me to take the next exit. No big deal, it would just add an extra few minutes to the drive. The road I was driving on gave roller coaster roads a whole new name. The sun was just barely up and all I saw were these axis deer, everywhere. I slowed down because they were making really bad choices and crossing the road ahead of me. One particular tall hill I came up over, on the other side I could see something small in the middle of it at the bottom. I came ta quick stop and my eyes focused on this barely hours old fawn crossing the road. This baby was so new to the world, it was wet. It was trying to hurry but its little hooves just weren't ready for that kind of hurry. Mama was just on the other side. When it got to the edge of the road, it was a bit steep and it stumbled and fell. At this point my heart ached for the little one to just be with mom. It got up, shook off and started crying for mom. You all! It never occurred to me that fawns make sounds. They sound similar to baby goats crying out for mom. The little one eventually tumbled over to its mom who at this point was in the trees. I actually got it all on video. My cell reception was terrible, but I stumbled upon a sleepy little town.

I decided to stop and use the amenities at the gas station. I couldn't wait to share what I witness with someone who I thought might find the same joy in the experience as I did. I sent them the video and texts of all the details.

When we experience something with great joy, our first instinct is to share it with others. We call, text, and make social media posts. Why? Because we want others to experience and share in our joy. It is why we take pictures at social occasions and events. To share and to remember.

In the Gospel of Luke, we read about one of the most amazing supernatural events, ever! And who did we learn witnessed it? A bunch of humble shepherds! Just try for a moment to imagine what all they saw! Fair warning tho: what you are imagining, does not even come close to the infinitely aw-inspiring scene that took place on the night of Jesus' birth!

Here is what we know: an angel of the Lord appeared and declared the Messiah had arrived. Then a whole host, and army of angels filled the sky and proclaimed:

¹⁴ Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people he favors!

Luke 2:14

The collective skill of Hollywood with all its AI and technology could never capture the majesty of this moment. One minute the shepherds were resting as they did every night and the next minute they are watching one of the most indescribably epic moments in history!

I'm going to do something I try hard not to do while writing. 'm going to rabbit trail. Why can we not describe our own encounter with God and the His Son or Holy Spirit? Have you ever noticed that? Have you ever tried to describe being in the presence of the Lord to others? Or have you ever encountered someone who has just had a life changing encounter and as they are trying to explain it, it does not seem to make sense? I do not know if this would hold up in the curt of the Lord, but I believe it is because we are using corrupted worldly speech to try and describe what is pure and Holy. There are no words to compare Him to. If I told you peace was like a slow rain that pitter patters on the roof (for example), you can imagine that situation. Maybe you do not like rain. Maybe your intellectual and trying to wrap your mind around what or how that is peaceful. Maybe your methodical and and can relate but it doesn't resonate. I believe we can not explain

it because eventually that rain stops. But God does not, so while the fleeting moment may reflect a sense of truth the actual reality is it can not encompass the Holiness of our Lord God.

Okay, back to our story, right now, as we reflect on the moment the shepherds we might think that it was the greatest moment ever. Nothing can top what they saw and heard, right? Let us look deeper.

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and returned to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go straight to Bethlehem and see what has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."

¹⁶ They hurried off and found both Mary and Joseph, and the baby who was lying in the manger.

Luke 2:15-16

God in the flesh. The creator of the universe, King of kings and Lord of lords....right before their very eyes!

They got to meet the Messiah! The got to worship at the feet of the Wonderful Counselor. They may have even gotten to hold in their arms the One who holds the universe together. There is literally nothing in history that can compare to this moment when God became man.

What did they do next?

¹⁷ After seeing them, they reported the message they were told about this child,

Luke 2:17

They went and told everyone who would listen!

"Hey!! The Messiah has come, we have seen Him! The angels told us where to go and I got to hold the Messiah! I was in the very presence of the Lord!"

But let us pause for a moment and think about this for a moment: These men got to see Jesus, but we have Jesus living within our very hearts. While they got to hold Him, we get to be held by Him.

Today everyone shares everything. We have become a society of over-sharers.

| How about we let the Lord use this season as He did with the shepherds, to share the greatest news you have every received! Lets g out and tell the world the Gospel news with the same excitement and joy as we do the rest of our life! |
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The Day I met Jesus

Recalling the unforgettable day you embraced and accepted the invitation from Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior ignites an exhilarating sense of gratitude and boldly reaffirms your unwavering faith. Here's a framework to inspire deep reflection on that pivotal moment in your spiritual journey:

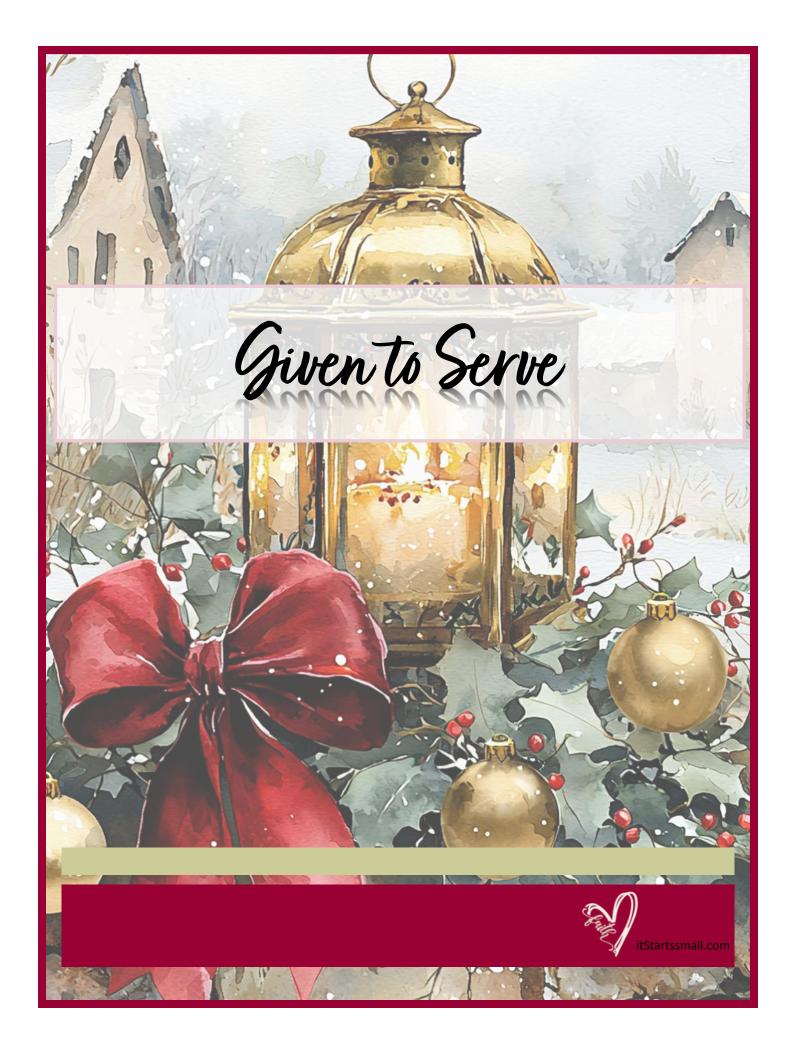
1. Remember life before Jesus

- **Reflect on your spiritual state and understanding:** What were your beliefs about God, life's meaning, and your own purpose?
- Acknowledge your struggles and sin: Consider the consequences of living apart from God, the things you relied on for fulfillment, and how those impacted your life and relationships. Focus on your need for a savior rather than dwelling on past mistakes.

2. Recall the turning point

- What led you to consider Jesus? Were there specific events, circumstances, or people that piqued your interest or caused you to question your previous way of life?
- What was the moment you made the decision? Describe the process of understanding the gospel, repenting of your sin, and accepting Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Some people have a distinct, dateable conversion experience, while others describe a gradual journey of coming to faith.
- **Did you experience any immediate changes?** Many describe a sense of relief, peace, joy, or a feeling of God's presence.
- What scriptures or truths resonated with you most deeply during this time?
- 3. Consider the ongoing impact of knowing Jesus
- **How has your life changed since that day?** Think about transformations in your character, attitude, values, and priorities.
- How has your relationship with God grown? Do you have a deeper understanding of his love, grace, and faithfulness?
- How do you see God working in your life now? What specific instances

| highlight His presence and guidance? How do you continue to grow in your faith? What spiritual practices or church involvement have been important to you? How does this remembrance fuel your gratitude and hope for the future? |
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| How has your conversion empowered you to serve God and others, and to share the Gospel message? |
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Read the Following Scriptures:

- Matthew 20:21-28
- John 13:16
- Romans 12:4-8
- 1 Corinthians 12:4-11
- Ephesians 4:7-13

- Deuteronomy 13:4
- 1 Samuel 12:24
- Psalm 100:2
- Galatians 5:13-14
- 2 Corinthians 5:14-15
- Philippians 2:5

²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Matthew 20:28

Has a parent, sibling, or close friend ever utterly mortified you in front of others? Perhaps they unearthed an excruciatingly cringe-worthy childhood tale or showcased embarrassing home videos that made you wish to vanish into thin air. Maybe they even had an awkward conversation with a coach or instructor to try and push you onto the field or snag that coveted first chair position. Parents, in particular, are notorious for believing their child is a superstar deserving of the spotlight. Whatever the incident, it's likely that your loved ones have sacrificed your cool points for a few laughs. But fear not, you are most certainly not alone in this experience!

In Matthew 20, we read of a story that mirrors cringe. The mother of James and John cost them some major cool points with the other disciples.

²¹ "What do you want?" he asked her.

"Promise, she said to him, "that these two sons of mine may sit, one on your right and the other on your left, in your kingdom."

Matthew 20:21

Suffice to say, the other disciples were visibly furious over this audacious stunt. Yet, as embarrassing as it was, for these "sons of thunder," it marked a pivotal moment packed with a profound lesson. James and John were clearly yearning for greatness, passionate in their quest for authority and to be THE leaders. But Jesus, in His infinite wisdom, flips the script, shining a light on what true greatness looks like in His kingdom. He passionately reveals that what truly grants us authority as His disciples is not dominance, but the profound power of humble servanthood.

²⁶ It must not be like that among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave;

Matthew 20:26-27

Jesus even cites for them the greatest example of this being lived out: Himself.

Jesus arrived not like the tyrants who dominate the earth, lording it over the people and displaying their authority with arrogance (Matthew 20:25). Instead, He came to reveal that genuine leadership is a profound act of love and service. His ultimate expression of this service? The extraordinary sacrifice of His life as a ransom for us—paying the impossibly steep debt of death that we owed by dying in our stead. He demonstrated that true greatness in God's sight is rooted in humility, taking upon Himself our shame and enduring the agony of the cross.

So what does that mean to us?

It means that EVERY DISCIPLE is EXPECTED to SERVE.

So often, we treat serving as merely optional—a side quest that can wait for the right moment, for that fleeting instance when we find time in our busy lives. But let me tell you, it is NOT optional; it is EXPECTED! Serving is not just a personal choice; it is a divine command that resonates deep within us. Service is a calling, and that call reaches out to every single person who dares to call themselves a Christ-follower. Answer that call with fervor and commitment!

If Christ came to serve and gave Himself up, then we too must give ourselves up. Remember,

¹⁶ "Truly I tell you, a servant is not greater than his master, and a messenger is not greater than the one who sent him.

John 13:16

For the believer, there is absolutely no concept of spiritual unemployment or retirement! Following Jesus is an exhilarating journey of walking in His footsteps, diving deep into a vibrant life of service to God and humanity. It compels us to passionately utilize the extraordinary gifts we've been given for impactful acts of service (Romans 12:4-8, 1 Corinthians 12:4, Ephesians 4:7-13).

But how do we do this?

We reflect on the incredible sacrifices the Lord has made for us. He surrendered His beloved Son to endure the most excruciating death imaginable, bearing every \sin – past, present, and future. By His death, He paid the ultimate price for sin. When we truly grasp this profound truth, serving Him should ignite our hearts with joy, not feel like a burden, a drag, or merely an option. If we find ourselves unable to serve the Lord with enthusiasm, something is amiss. I passionately urge you to uncover your spiritual gifts and immerse yourself in the joy of serving at your church.

With Christmas just around the corner and the New Year fast approaching, I urge you to gaze beyond the present moment and embrace the promise of the horizon. I dare you to make a courageous pledge to embody the transformative leadership exemplified by Jesus:

⁵ Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus,

Philippians 2:5

I was born to Serve

cultivate a heart for serving. Just as the physical heart pumps blood and sustains life, a heart for serving is essential for spiritual vitality and reflecting the nature of Christ.

Here's how to apply this analogy:

1. Nurturing the heart (spiritual nourishment)

- **Immerse yourself in scripture**: Just as blood nourishes the body, scripture nourishes the soul. Studying Bible verses about serving, such as Philippians 2:5 -8 and 1 Peter 4:10, provides guidance and inspiration for cultivating a servant's heart.
- Deepen your prayer life: Engage in heartfelt prayer, asking God to open your
 eyes to the needs of others and to fill your heart with compassion and a desire
 to serve.
- Practice humility and gratitude: Recognize that your gifts and abilities are from God and meant to be used for His glory, not for personal gain or recognition.

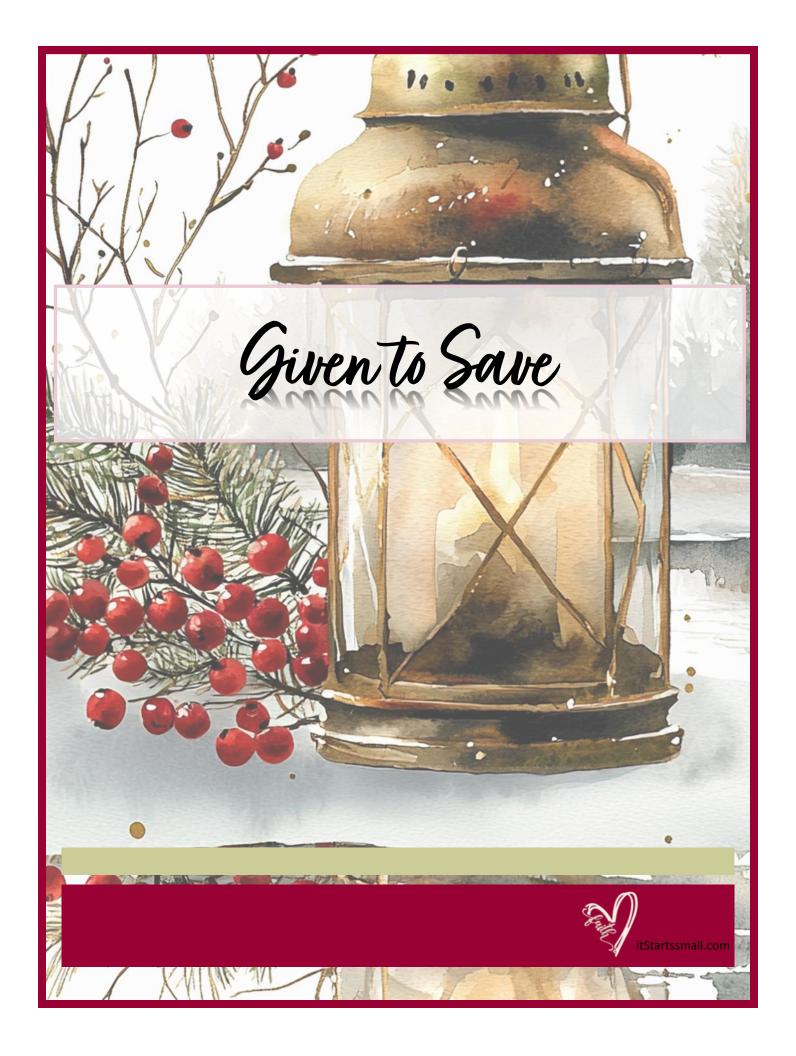
2. Pumping lifeblood outwards (acts of service)

- Seek opportunities to serve: Actively look for ways to help those around you, whether through formal volunteering or simple acts of kindness in your daily life.
- **Use your gifts and talents**: God has given you unique abilities, use them to bless others and contribute to His Kingdom.
- Embrace humility and selflessness: Don't prioritize your own interests or seek recognition, but rather put the needs of others first.
- **Serve with a joyful and willing spirit**: Serve out of love and gratitude, not as a burdensome obligation.

3. The ripple effect (impact of serving)

- **Building up the body of Christ**: Serving fellow believers strengthens the church and helps spread God's love to the world.
- **Transforming lives**: Your acts of service, however small, can have a profound impact on the lives of others, bringing hope, encouragement, and support.
- **Fulfilling God's purpose**: God has created you for good works, and serving others is a key part of fulfilling that purpose.

Having a heart for serving means embracing the profound example of Christ's humility, love, and selflessness. It's about fervently nurturing your spirit and eagerly seeking out every opportunity to shower kindness and support on others, whether through magnificent gestures or the small, heartfelt acts woven into daily life. By doing so, you will not only elevate the lives of those you serve but also embark on a journey of transformative personal growth, fulfilling the divine purpose that God has designed uniquely for your life.





Read the Following Scriptures:

- 1 Timothy 1:15
- Romans 5:12
- Matthew 20:28

- Galatians 1:4
- Romans 5:17
- 1 Timothy 1:15-20
- Romans 3:23

¹⁵ This saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" – and I am the worst of them.

1 Timothy 1:15

Daring rescues are on of the most common narratives found in the world of story telling. It could be a new book series or a film, but the most successful involve a daring rescue of some sort. Rescues are full of exciting, daring and chaotic narratives. One story in mind that was put to film is the story of Saving Private Ryan. It portrays Captain John miller and his ragtag group of soldiers who are tasked with going behind enemy lines to save Private James Ryan. Private Ryan was under orders to be removed and sent home because his three other brothers were killed. The rescue mission pulls us into a captivating tale involving a dynamic hero who would stop at nothing to save the victim from the nefarious antagonist.

What draws us to these types of stories? In an informational age of technology we are bombarded with in the moment stories of daring rescues on the high seas, after disastrous weather events, or even rescues of victims of unspeakable acts of violence. Why do we get so much satisfaction and joy in seeing someone rescued? Maybe it's the excitement and actions, but I think it is something more. I believe it is because as believers in Christ, we are living out the greatest rescue story of all time.

¹² Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, in this way death spread to all people, because all sinned

Romans 5:12

Romans 5:12 tells us that sin made its entry through one man and death was passed on to the whole race of humans. No one could break himself free from sin. In today's verse we learn that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). The Greek word Paul uses, sosai, means to deliver out of danger, to rescue from destruction, to bring into divine safety.

We are, as Paul claims, slaves to sin. Because of this every man is condemned and a hostage to death. There is a ransom over every single human's head.

²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Matthew 20:28

Jesus did not just come to serve, but to pay that ransom.

⁴ who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.

Galatians 1:4

Our hero and Savior, Jesus Christ, came into the world for this very reason! Because He did this, we who believe in Him and receive Him:

¹⁷ If by the one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive the overflow of grace and the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Romans 5:17

This is what makes this time of the year so wonderful!

But let us not miss something Paul says,

¹⁵ This saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" — and I am the worst of them. ¹⁶ But I received mercy for this reason, so that in me, the worst of them, Christ Jesus

might demonstrate his extraordinary patience as an example to those who would believe in him for eternal life. ¹⁷ Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

¹⁸ Timothy, my son, I am giving you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies previously made about you, so that by recalling them you may fight the good fight, ¹⁹ having faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and have shipwrecked the faith. ²⁰ Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have delivered to Satan, so that they may be taught not to blaspheme.

1 Timothy 1:15-20

Each time I read these verses, I put myself in place of Paul. Instead of it saying Christ came to save sinners, of whom Paul was the worst, I read, "And Kimberlee is the worst of them all." I encourage you to do the same. Why? Because we are all equal in our sinfulness. None of us is righteous.

²³ For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God;

Romans 3:23

And if God saved Paul to use him so others could come to the faith, He can use me. He can use you!

The Christmas story is our story. It s the story of how we are rescued by Jesus from the clutches of death. We were guilty. Bu the Christmas story has the power to change the lives of ALL of mankind. Every person, no matter how far from grace thy have fallen, can be rescued! Is in need of rescue! WE should share it with everyone we meet. Not just at this time of the year but every day of the year.

Why?

Do you not want others to experience it, also?

AS we close this series, I pray you have a different look at the season and have discovered the beauty of the Christmas story. I pray ewe will be used this upcoming year to bring change to our homes, neighborhoods, schools, jobs, cities, and the world.







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