
ADVENT
FROM THE GRAND NARRATIVE SERIES
C
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PREFACE

We've heard the story before. Every December, we hear it recited in church services and see it in roadside nativity scenes, cards, TV specials—even on cookies. A rosy-cheeked newborn in a manger beneath the gaze of adoring parents, surrounded by surprised shepherds, bowing magi, glowing angels, sheep, donkeys, and camels.

It's familiar. Perhaps too familiar.

Much like how our minds block out our noses from our field of vision—though they are always there between our eyes—our familiarity with this story can dull our awareness of its significance. The fundamental claim of the Christmas story is that God became man and dwelled among us. That claim is provocative and perplexing—yet gloriously beautiful. If it's true, it changes everything. As Tim Keller explains, "It's almost too limiting to say that we 'celebrate' this at Christmas. We stare dumbstruck, lost in wonder, love, and praise." But because we've grown so accustomed to this story, we risk losing our ability to be astonished by it.

We risk missing its historical reality. Jesus was not born "once upon a time." He was born at a particular moment in human history—the beginning of the first century when Caesar Augustus reigned over the vast Roman Empire. And in a particular place—Bethlehem, a town easily found today on Google Maps. Mary is not a character in a fairy tale. She was a young woman who experienced the same set of human emotions as us—hope, anxiety, embarrassment, joy. Unlike the sentimental portrayals we're used to, what she experienced was gritty and daunting. With dirt, sweat, pain, and blood. Jesus was born into real life—time and space. And when the shepherds proclaimed what they had seen and heard, their audience would have been just as skeptical as we often are in the twenty-first century.

We risk missing its surprising wonder. God became man. It's a shocking truth. It means that when Mary gave birth, the one who breathed life into the first man took his first breath as a man in the world he had made. It means that God himself stooped into the story of humanity to redeem us, restore us, and bring us back to himself. No matter how many times we've heard the story, it should always

surprise us. The surprise is rooted not only in *what* happened but *how*. God came not as a mighty warrior but as a helpless baby, born not in an ornate palace but among hay and straw and bleating sheep. The king of heaven and earth was placed in an animal's feeding trough. His first visitors were not high-ranking officials but working-class shepherds. This king grew up in a small, forgotten town. He worked as a carpenter. He dined with sinners and outcasts and washed his followers' feet. He ascended not to a throne but to a cross, where he died wearing a crown not of gold but of thorns. Who can comprehend a God who displays his glory in humility? In the words of theologian Karl Barth, "Christ is that infinitely wondrous event which compels a person, so far as he experiences and comprehends this event, to be necessarily, profoundly, wholly, and irrevocably astonished."

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, light dawned in the darkness. We pray this retelling of that story helps you see the reality, the significance, and the wonder of that light with fresh eyes.

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JESUS'S BIRTH FORETOLD

A young girl named Mary sat alone in Nazareth, a small, forgotten village nestled in the hills of Galilee. The unremarkable little town was situated in the north of the land promised to her ancient ancestor Abraham—land now controlled by the mighty Roman Empire and governed by Herod, a ruthless ruler crowned "King of the Jews" by the Roman Senate to secure Rome's grip on the region.

Mary came from a family of modest means, not blessed with wealth or prestige. She grew up steeped in the story of her people—the people of Israel. She had learned how God spoke the world into being and placed the first humans, Adam and Eve, in a lush garden of perfect peace. Lured by a deceitful serpent, Adam and Eve sinned against God, sinking their teeth into the forbidden fruit. Their sin shattered the garden's peace, introducing pain and death into God's creation. Yet, even as Adam and Eve were banished from the garden, God made a promise: one day, a descendant of Eve would crush the evil serpent's head.

Mary was taught how God called Abraham to leave his home and head west to Canaan. God promised Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars, land to call home, a lineage of kings, and, through his line, blessing to the whole world. She learned how God preserved that promise through generations. When Abraham's descendants were enslaved and oppressed in Egypt, God raised up Moses to deliver them. Mary observed the Passover, remembering how God used the blood of a spotless lamb to spare her people from death, leading them to freedom through the Red Sea's parted waters. She could almost hear the thunder at Mount Sinai, where God descended in fire and cloud to give his law and unite himself in covenant to his people. God dwelled with them in the tabernacle, guided them through the wilderness, and led them into the promised land. He fought for his people as they followed Joshua to victory over their enemies.

She knew how her people had turned from the God who called them his own, worshipping idols of wood and stone. She had heard the stories of the deliverers God sent to rescue his people

from oppression when they cried out for deliverance. She had heard, too, of David, the shepherd from Bethlehem who vanquished the Philistine giant. Chosen by God, David became a great king over a powerful nation. God promised David that his throne would endure forever.

But God's promises now felt fragile and distant. Many centuries had passed since God's glory—in a dark cloud and blazing fire—descended on Solomon's temple in Jerusalem. Spurning the warnings of God's prophets, wayward kings had led Israel into evil and idolatry. Judgment came. Foreign armies invaded, carrying God's people into exile and burning the temple. Though some had returned, many remained scattered across the earth. Subjected to Roman rule, the hope of Mary's people rested on prophecies of a coming savior—a king from the line of David who would rescue God's people and bring peace on earth. But four hundred years had passed since the last prophet spoke God's words to his people, and no king had arrived to save them.

Though Mary revered the God of her people, her mind was also occupied with concerns typical of a woman her age in Nazareth. She was engaged to a man named Joseph, a humble craftsman from the tribe of Judah. Her approaching marriage meant her life would soon change. But Mary never imagined what God had in store for her.

An angel appeared. Mary heard his voice. "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"

Gripped with fear, Mary strained to process the heavenly sight before her eyes. The angel—Gabriel—spoke softly, trying to quell her troubled heart. "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Awed and confused, Mary asked, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you," Gabriel answered, "and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the

child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. For nothing will be impossible with God."

"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord," Mary replied, submitting herself to God's plan. "Let it be to me according to your word." The angel vanished, leaving Mary alone to ponder the mystifying encounter.

Soon, the promised miracle occurred. A child—the Son of God—grew in Mary's womb. As the shocking reality of the beautiful gift settled in her soul, she lifted her voice in praise. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever." The child in her womb was evidence that God had not forgotten his promises.

Luke 1

Centuries earlier, the prophet Isaiah proclaimed, "The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." Immanuel means "God with us." The child in Mary's womb was God himself, dwelling within his creation. He would one day say, "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Isaiah 7:14; Colossians 1:15; Matthew 28:20













JOSEPH'S DECISION

Joseph was a carpenter in Nazareth, his calloused hands working to earn a modest living so he could provide for Mary, his bride-to-be. Like Mary, he came from a humble family living in a modest town. But the thread of God's providence wove through his ancestral line.

He came from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the fathers of the nation of Israel. But his ancestors included foreigners too: Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute who hid Joshua's spies in the walls of Jericho, and Ruth, the faithful Moabite redeemed by the kindness of Boaz.

There was royalty in Joseph's blood. His lineage passed through Judah, the son Jacob blessed by saying, "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples." It passed also through David, the shepherd king to whom God promised a descendant who would sit on his throne forever.

But sin, too, had left its mark on his family tree. He came from Solomon, David's son by Bathsheba, the wife David stole through deceit and murder. He came also from Manasseh, the evil king of Judah, who worshipped idols and stained the soil of the promised land with innocent blood.

The child in Mary's womb posed a pressing problem for Joseph. He stressed about what his friends and family might think. They might see Mary's growing belly as evidence of some hidden sin, or worse, accuse Mary of unfaithfulness. The consequences were dire—rejection, social exclusion, unbearable shame. He wrestled with what to do.

With much consternation, he decided to pursue the most just and gracious course of action he could think of. He would divorce Mary quietly, attempting to shield her as much as he could from the shame and consequences she was sure to face. He laid down to sleep, his mind still racing with worry.

That night, an angel sent by God burst into his troubled sleep. In a dream, he heard the angel's voice address him by name. "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear

a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Joseph awoke with a decision to make. Who would believe him when he claimed that the child in Mary's body came from the Holy Spirit? Yet despite the scorn he knew he would face, he chose to follow God's command. He took Mary as his wife and cared for her as the divine child grew in her womb.

Matthew 1

Mary carried inside her the child of promise. As the son of Mary, he was the offspring of Eve, to whom God promised a descendant who would crush the evil serpent's head. With Joseph as his earthly father, he was the Son of David, to whom God promised an everlasting throne. Conceived by the Holy Spirit, he was the Son of God, descending into the world from a throne in heaven to bring the kingdom of God to earth.

Genesis 3:15 & 24; 2 Samuel 7:12–13; Revelation 22:1–5





THE BIRTH OF JESUS

Mary's steps grew heavy as her pregnancy progressed. She felt the Son of God—the child the angel said would reign on the throne of David forever—stirring within her. She knew the time approached for this long-promised savior to leave the safety of her womb.

A decree from Rome—where Caesar Augustus ruled over the world's most dominant empire—reached the humble town of Nazareth. It commanded all his subjects to return to the town of their ancestors to register for a census. Joseph and his pregnant wife began the long journey—almost 100 miles—from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the town where the prophet Samuel once anointed a forgotten shepherd boy as Israel's king.

The trek was arduous, especially for Mary. Traveling south, they passed to the west of Jericho, where God had crumbled the walls of their people's ancient enemies, by Samaria, where Israel's kings turned toward idols and hunted God's prophets, and through Jerusalem, where King David once reigned before the nation fractured and fell beneath the swords and torches of the army of Babylon.

They arrived at last in Bethlehem. The quiet town in the hills of Judea now bustled with travelers arriving in response to Caesar's edict. Exhausted from the journey, they sought refuge in a guest room but found it packed to the brim. Denied entry, they scrambled to find shelter and finally settled for a humble room housing animals, resting their weary feet amid straw and hay.

They arrived just in time; the child was coming. With pain and groaning, Mary grimaced as she labored under Eve's curse, until, finally, the child emerged, drawing his first breath in the world he had made. The child blinked, his cries blending with the sound of bleating animals. Mary, wearied yet overcome with joy, held her newborn son in her arms. She swaddled the child in cloth and laid him down to rest in a manger—a feeding trough for the animals. Joseph looked upon the child and announced his name: Jesus.

Luke 2

By his Word, God spoke light and life into being. Sin shrouded God's creation in darkness and marred it with death. That night in Bethlehem, God entered the world he made. The Word of God, through which all things were created, arrived in the form of a helpless baby placed in a manger. Light dawned in the darkness.

John 1:1–18; Genesis 1:3; Isaiah 9:2



SHEPHERDS & ANGELS

Under the night sky, lowly shepherds tended their sheep in an open field not far from where Mary and Joseph rested in the quiet moments after Jesus's birth. Suddenly, a blaze of brilliant light broke through the darkness. An angel stood before them, radiant with the glory of God. The shepherds cowered before the marvelous sight.

"Fear not," the angel said, "for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." The shepherds listened, trying to comprehend amid the shock of wonder. "And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

Like a burst of overwhelming joy issuing forth from the gates of heaven, thousands of angels appeared before the shepherds' eyes, their voices filling the open fields with a resounding song of praise. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

The shepherds watched with awe as the throng of angels ascended into heaven, leaving them speechless. "Let us go over to Bethlehem," they decided, "and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."

They rushed into Bethlehem eager to confirm the heavenly report. They found Mary and Joseph and entered their room, the scent of sheep clinging to their clothes. They saw the child right where the angel told them they would—in a manger, wrapped in cloth. Struck with wonder, they relayed the angel's announcement. The child before their eyes—feeble and dependent—was the long-awaited savior of their people.

Flooded with hope and praise, the shepherds returned home, mystified by what their ears had heard and their eyes had seen. They spread the glorious news as they went, sparking wonder in the hearts of all who heard it. Meanwhile, Mary rested in the presence of her newborn son. She stored away in her soul every detail of the events she experienced and pondered their significance in the quiet of her heart.

Luke 2

Centuries before, God sent a prophet to Bethlehem to anoint an overlooked shepherd boy as king over his people. Now, God sent poor, marginalized shepherds to Bethlehem to announce that a newborn child would be the savior of his people. The child they found would become the Good Shepherd, who would lay down his life for his sheep; and the Lamb of God, who would take away the sin of the world.

John 1:29; John 10:11; 1 Samuel 16:11–13





THE WISE MEN

The child in Mary's arms was born into a people stripped of power. The Jews lived under Roman rule, governed by Herod, a foreigner Rome had crowned as "King of the Jews." Herod ruled ruthlessly, willing to kill even members of his family to protect his throne.

Many generations earlier, an unlikely prophet proclaimed: "A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel." For centuries, the people of Israel revered these words as a prophecy of a coming king who would deliver them.

In a distant land to the east, the direction where God's people had once been sent into exile, wise men looked toward the heavens, searching for a sign. They observed a star that seemed to glimmer with significance, calling them westward. After a long journey, they arrived in Jerusalem with a question for its inhabitants: "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

Their inquiry reached the ears of King Herod, who shuddered at the thought of a rival king within his realm. He sprang into action, determined to tear out the threat by its roots. But he first needed to know where it sprouted. He gathered the Jewish priests and scribes, asking them where they believed the king they hoped for would be born.

"In Bethlehem of Judea," they replied, "for so it is written by the prophet: 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

Feigning devotion, Herod called the wise men to him in secret. "Go and search diligently for the child," he said, "and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."

The wise men obeyed, following the star in the sky southward. It led their steps not to an ornate palace in a great city but to a humble home in the town of Bethlehem. Stepping inside, they discovered with joy what they had journeyed to find—a child in the

arms of his mother. Falling to the ground, the foreigners worshiped. With reverence, they offered him precious gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they embarked on the long trek back to their homeland in the east by another route, wondering what great deeds the king they beheld would grow up to accomplish.

Matthew 2

Herod feared a rival to his crown. But the child born in Bethlehem had not come to wield swords or seize thrones. He came to feed the hungry, care for the poor, pursue the outcast, redeem the sinner, and shepherd humanity to new life in the kingdom of God. One day, the title "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" would hang above his head—as he died on a cross to bring an end to death itself.

John 19:18–19; Hebrews 2:14–15; Revelation 21:4





ABOUT CHILDLIKE MEDIA

Childlike Media creates film, books, and music designed to bring the story of the Bible to life and inspire wonder for God and the Gospel. Our book series, *The Grand Narrative*, tells the whole story of the Bible from beginning to end as if it were a novel with life-like illustrations. The accompanying film series (published weekly on YouTube) adapts each chapter into a short film. The goal of this project is to draw readers and viewers into the story of the Bible and toward the God that authored it.

This advent series is an adaptation of select chapters from Book III of *The Grand Narrative*. We've produced it as a resource for churches and families to encounter the story of Christmas anew and spark a fresh sense of wonder at the humble arrival of the king of heaven.

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"The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world."
John 1:9



Advent tells the story of Jesus's birth with vivid prose and lifelike illustrations. It synthesizes the gospel accounts and contextualizes them in the broader narrative arc of the Bible. Intended for churches, families, and individuals, our prayer is for *Advent* to spark a renewed sense of wonder for a familiar story at the center of human history.

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"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone."
Isaiah 9:2

CHILDLIKE MEDIA creates films, books, and music designed to bring the Bible to life and inspire wonder for God and the Gospel. We've produced the *Advent* series to help readers of all backgrounds and ages experience the Christmas story anew and marvel at the humble arrival of the King of Heaven. Each chapter of *Advent* will be accompanied by an episode of our *Advent* film series, with new episodes released on our YouTube channel every Sunday leading up to Christmas. To learn more, visit www.childlikemedia.com.

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