



**This is my
favorite time of
the year, but not
for the reason
you think.**

Advent makes me go deeper into the love initiative that brought us the first Christmas. These devotionals, based on the prayers of Zechariah, Mary, Simeon, and John, remind me that prayer will take me to Christmas better than a lot of other activities. These pieces are the result of many Decembers and many prayers. I hope they bring you to new understandings as they do for me.

May the One Who came that first Christmas bring you to the place of your deepest prayer and His best answer!

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DECEMBER PRAYERS

Taking a Prayerful Journey to Christmas

By Debbie Salter Goodwin

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Week 1-Sunday: Which Prayer

Your prayer has been heard. Luke 1:13b

Which prayer has God answered for you?

Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, were simple, God-trusting people. They had the right family heritage because they were distant relatives of Aaron, the first High Priest. They obeyed God with complete trust. I think they would have been good neighbors.

Only one thing was wrong: they had no children. In a day when barrenness was a curse, when childlessness made people ask why God was punishing them; Zechariah and Elizabeth did not allow their questions about unanswered prayer to cloud their hearts or their love for God.

On the day when Zechariah reported for his turn to burn incense in the temple, he did it with the same attitude of unquestioned obedience that he lived. For him, it was just another day to report for duty.

Except this day was going to be different. This was the day God would answer a long-ago prayer.

Zechariah washed and donned the prescribed attire, the decorated tunic and the blue corded turban, each piece weighted with the history of God's faithfulness. He entered the room where he would light the incense, the symbolic offering of prayers for the nation. To this point nothing was different. Then,

Gabriel made his presence known and announced to Zechariah that, "Your prayer has been heard."

Would I have known which prayer God answered? I have prayed so many prayers. From this story, I learn that God does not forget our prayers, even if we stop praying them. God will answer any prayer that aligns with his will for our lives no matter how long it takes.

God does not forget our prayers even if we stop praying them.

I wonder, how many of the Jews had stopped praying for Messiah? I wonder if I would have been one of them. Today, I use this story to remind me to never stop praying the prayers of my heart. Not in December. Not ever. I would rather live in expectant wonder with the unshakable belief that God knows my heart and will never refuse me anything that He knows will bring His will and purpose.

It means that today is a day of answered prayer. Do you know which prayer He has answered for you today?

My December Prayer

*Listening God,
Will you make of this season
many days of answered prayer?
I wait to see what You know
will make the biggest difference.
Amen.*



Week 1-Monday: Waiting

*Both of them were upright in the sight of God
...but they had no children. Luke 1:6, 7*

Do you like to wait?

We complain about waiting for appointments, lights to turn, or the long lines. Waiting feels useless, unproductive, and without control.

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth and their prayers for a child is a story of empty longing and private pain without bitterness, complaint, or self-pity. They connect to the nearly seven million in the world who face infertility today. By the time we read this story in Luke, they no longer expect a baby and stop asking for one. Consider how many births they and ask yourself, *How did they wait without becoming bitter and self-absorbed?* This is more than an Advent lesson; this life-training.

The key is how you fill your waiting. Zechariah and Elizabeth filled their waiting with obedience, trust, and faithful living. They did not accuse God of being tight-fisted or inattentive. They continued to serve at the Temple exactly as they would have, had there been a child. Their focus was not on what they did not have, but what God *had* provided.

Waiting is a tool God uses to ripen His gifts. No one wants to eat fruit before it turns sweet and flavorful. Why do we interpret waiting as punishment instead of God's refusal to bring something into our lives before He says it is time? God does not believe in empty waiting. Neither should we.

God does not believe in empty waiting.

Waiting grows us. Waiting makes the best use of God's gift when it comes.

We are all waiting for something. We wait for family changes, financial solutions, political peace, a new job, something good to happen. Waiting calls into question our deepest beliefs about who God is.

When we don't get what we think is a reasonable answer to a long-held prayer, we tend to question God, ourselves, or both. What does it take to wait with hope that focuses on God instead of a specific desired answer?

Impatience is the enemy of everything God wants to create in us as we wait. Impatience makes us act *before* God acts instead of *with* Him. Where is your heart weary from waiting? If Advent teaches us anything it is that waiting produces the right answer at the right time.

Instead of filling waiting with frustration and questions, perhaps it is time to use it to produce *in* you what God needs. Don't be afraid of waiting. Grow. Learn. Serve. Love. Be faithful. God has something for you while you wait. Don't miss it!

My December Prayer

*God of my waiting,
You created time to be a friend, not an enemy.
Stop me when I move forward too fast.
Comfort me when emptiness overwhelms.
Remind me that your answer
always comes at the right time.
Amen*



Week 1-Tuesday: Silenced

I have been sent to speak to you...now you will be silent. Luke 1:19b-20

Do you long for quiet?

Quiet. Soul-settling, heart-keeping, mind-freeing quiet is a scarce commodity in our world. We can't hear ourselves think and blame it on kids, traffic, TV, neighbors, and machines. We never think to label the chaos of our own thoughts as noisy. But God does, because it makes His voice hard to hear.

As faithful and good as Zechariah was, he didn't get it right. He responded to the angel's message of good news from his own thoughts so noisy in his head that he said them out loud. He didn't really hear the message of Gabriel:

Your prayer has been heard. You will have a son. He will bring you joy!

Everything about the angel message should have been reason for praise and gratitude. Gabriel wasn't asking Zechariah to champion a cause, go against some cultural excess, or move away from everything familiar. Gabriel delivered *good news!* *Your prayer has been answered.* Did Zechariah need to know anything else? Just like us, he thought he did.

But I don't understand. How can I be sure?

I want to tell Zechariah, "God sent you an angel; what more proof do you need?" But then I think about the times I have responded to God's messages the same way, wanting more details.

Zechariah's lack of faith cost him his speech. Just as

quickly as Gabriel delivered his good news, he announced that Zechariah would not be able to speak for the entire nine months of Elizabeth's pregnancy.

I always thought this silence was God's punishment as if God sent Zechariah to the corner for misbehaving. However, I have begun to realize that God had more to tell Zechariah and He would be able to hear it only if he could lasso his insecure thoughts. God wanted Zechariah to be quiet so he could hear Him. Without the distraction of making words, a silenced servant was ready to hear the words that really mattered.

What better time than at Christmas to be still and know what God is trying to say to you by sending His son into this world? What better time to pray the prayer He wants to answer in your life right now?

Silence . . . prepares the heart to hear

what the ear cannot

Make time for silence. Listen with your heart. Silence is a powerful quiet that prepares the heart to hear what the ear cannot. Whatever God says in the silence will bring all the comfort and joy you need.

My December Prayer

*Oh God,
My heart is noisy and unsettles me.
Quiet me so deeply that when I hear your words,
they are honey to my heart
And I will protect the silence that brought them.
Amen*



Week 1-Wednesday: Silence is Broken

Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. Luke 1:64

What difference do first words make?

First words. We collect them from babies as if they were gold. We coax, bribe, celebrate and reward them for the simplest syllables they utter.

Other broken silences are different. The first words after a ruptured relationship could heal or separate more. The first words of a surgeon's report could still a storm or start one.

What your first words are after a long time of silence depends on what you have been thinking or what you have been hearing during the silence.

What do you think Zechariah had been thinking about during his nine months of forced silence? Did he replay his time before Gabriel and wish he could have taken back the words that brought the silence? Or did he use the silence to listen deeply to the God who had heard his prayer?

We find a hint by remembering what Zechariah's first words were: *praise be to the Lord!* (Luke 1:67) Zechariah used the first words to thank God for redemption, salvation, mercy, and promise-keeping. Zechariah used his silence well. He was a temple priest, benched for nine months, now eloquent and noteworthy.

Zechariah turned this miracle moment into a praise service. He found more than his voice: he found his message.

He found more than his voice; he found his message.

This was not just a proud papa relieved that he could speak. Nor was it a frustrated man who felt his words had been unfairly stolen from him. This was a man who had learned something in the silence. He had learned that his words were not as necessary as he thought. He came to this moment as a new father after expected childlessness, a man who knew His God had heard him even when he feared he had not; and he used his fresh words to praise God.

We can learn something from Zechariah. What would happen if we broke the night's silence with words of praise? What if we gathered at church to be the first to break someone's lonely silence by affirming who God is and why we have come to worship.

As you begin this journey to Christmas, think about the power of what God might say to you. Listen for it. Then, your words will be pleasing to God and everyone who hears them.

My December Prayer

*God of perfect words,
I am too quick with mine.
They rush and push without substance.
I would fill my mouth with your words,
but I must hear them first.
Here's my mouth, fill it before I do
that I may speak from the overflow.
Amen.*



Week 1-Thursday: A Horn of Salvation

He has raised up a horn of salvation for us.

Luke 1:69a

Who fights for you?

Zechariah began his prayer with a clear and resonant tone that came from confidence, not fear. His focus was God and what He was doing for His people. Silence taught him that God was not only answering his prayer for a child; God was answering the long, desperate prayers of His people. He spoke of redemption and salvation in present tense. He compared it to the battle image of lifting a horn to signal a readied army.

The image also refers to horned animals in a fight to the death. Horn to powerful horn, they brought their A-game. Zechariah had grown up on the hope that God would raise his horn of salvation for His people and that God's horn was powerful enough to defeat all enemies.

The baby boy sleeping in his mother's arms was unmistakable evidence that help, as they had never known it, was on the way.

Where do you need God to raise His horn of salvation for you? Does fear wait like some trap to snare you at the worst possible moment? Are you mired in relationship dysfunction where love should reign? Are you caught in moral imbalance tilted toward cultural acceptance without understanding the spiritual implications? These are more dangerous enemies than any terrorist. How does God's horn of salvation signal war against these enemies of His peace?

God raised his powerful horn of help through incarnation. God came in the flesh. Jesus butted heads with rejection, legalism, tradition, self-centeredness, spiritual poverty, and death. Through resurrection, he raised his horn for us so that we already know that victory waits.

Advent calls us to live in the power of that victory.

Advent calls us to live in the power of that victory. No earthly circumstance, however grim, has more power than what God did for you through Jesus. When you understand the depth of your helplessness to defeat whatever enemy you face, you will be ready to receive Jesus as your horn of salvation.

While you sleep, struggle, fret, or wait; God raises his horn of salvation for you. Know this: Jesus will always be the last one standing for you in any fight that would rob you of what He came to bring.

My December Prayer

*God of all victory,
I am helpless in the middle of so many messes.
They blind me from your deliverance.
You are the only power play I need.
You have raised your horn for me
and I will never fight alone.
Amen*



Week 1 Friday: A Go-Before Prayer

You will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for Him. Luke 1:76

Who goes before you?

When you are headed toward something big, whether it is a problem or a project, don't you hope someone has prepared the way? Maybe it is an assistant that sets up a room. Maybe it is a medical team who has trained carefully for your surgery. Those who work ahead of you, make your work easier and your outcome better.

That was Gabriel's message to Zechariah nine months earlier, that the baby born to them was marked for the sole mission to "go on before the Lord." Zechariah had accepted this fact and added his prayer to baby John's God-given purpose. While Zechariah does not understand what this mission will cost them, he seems to have adopted it as his best dream for his son.

What better dream could you pray for your child, grandchild, niece, or nephew than God's dream, the very dream God put together that incorporates every good and perfect gift He would make available? How could anyone's dream be better than God's? And yet, many struggle against God's dream for them or for those they love.

A go-before prayer is a good way to address the disconnection between your dream and God's. A go-before prayer makes your life an arrow point to Jesus. Parents are go-before emissaries to bring their children to God. Sunday school teachers are go-before messengers to point their listeners to

How could anyone's dream be better than God's?

The Word made flesh. Everyone has a part in a go-before mission.

Here's why it was important for Zechariah to pray this go-before prayer for his son. Unless John came to know the God who gave him this mission, he would only be able to point people to his best ideas about God and Messiah. New father Zechariah needed to dedicate himself to going before his son with the right example and words. He had to commit to demonstrate the love and worship for God in an authentic and winsome way to point his son toward this go-before path.

Our crazy, chaotic world needs go-before messengers. Our words don't save anybody. We need to pray for ourselves before we pray a go-before prayer for anyone else.

The go-before prayer makes us aware that we are on duty for Christ. We must become the shepherd that rushes from the stable with Good News. We must be a Magi who never tires of telling the story of the journey that brought him to Jesus. We must be go-before witnesses in everything we do and say.

Just like John.

My December Prayer

*Jesus,
As you called John to go before you,
help me understand my go-before work.
The more I allow your truth to live in me,
the better I will be as your go-before messenger.
O, Lord, send me!*



Week 1-Saturday. For Peace

To guide our feet into the path of peace. Luke 1:79b

What does it take to make you peaceful?

Just because Zechariah spent his days with no words to share, did that mean he was filled with peace? Not unless his heart was just as quiet as his mouth. How many times did frustration make him impatient and downright cranky?

Yet, he ends this first spoken prayer in nine months with a prayer for peace. His forced silence taught him the importance of living in tune with peace.

It's a good reminder for us, don't you think? But here's the difficulty: try to make a peaceful night and someone will destroy it for you because peace won't cover up stress you will not address. Peace comes from allowing God's Spirit of Truth to re-order your heart and mind. It requires a housecleaning of sorts.

Even developing the discipline of quiet words isn't the answer because you can focus so much on the discipline that you forget to ask Jesus to fill your quiet space with what He says will bring peace.

Re-examine schedule, focus, and relationships to evaluate whether they bring the peace God wants to give. Sometimes less is more of what God wants you to have. When you allow God to put His more into your less you will find the peace that makes the biggest difference.

Be careful. Praying for peace is a dangerous prayer. When Jesus, the Prince of Peace, preached about it; he was crucified. God does not trivialize His peace into some comfortable quiet when it cost His son such suffering. Instead, He points out anything that disturbs His peace and expects you to address it. Perhaps, if there was more peace in our hearts, there might be more peace in our world.

God does not trivialize His peace . . . when it cost His son such suffering.

As you end this first week of Advent and prepare for worship on Sunday, take time for peace. Inventory your heart and make room for everything Jesus came to give you in order to find peace and make peace. Your worship will come from a fresh place and so will your prayers.

My December Prayer

*God of all peace,
I live in a world without peace.
and I fear I am the poster child to prove it.
Guide me to your peace,
for nothing I stress to finish, even for Christmas,
will bring me more peace than what You give.
Amen!*



Week 2- Sunday: Favored

The Lord is with you. Luke 1:28b

Have you ever felt favored?

We know so little about Mary, and yet everything that happened to her changed our world forever. Interrupted in some daily task, she listens, startled for sure; but listens more than speaks. She stands before an angel and waits. The encounter must have been so unmistakably personal and arresting.

Gabriel addressed her as *highly favored* and as one whom God had blessed. That someone she had never met addressed her, a woman, as if he knew her and had been watching her; was troubling. I'm not sure it was words that settled her. I think it was his calming confidence that what he said was true. Mary did not refute him; she just listened for more.

Had you or I stood before an angel of God and heard the confident pronouncement on our lives as favored and blessed, what would we have said? Would we take over the conversation by sharing all the reasons the angel must have read the wrong report? Would we deny a new blessing before hearing it?

The words *highly favored* also mean *graced*. Mary received grace from God, His unearned favor, a gift completely undeserved. She stood before God and his messenger without the need to prove her worth. Did she already know how unnecessary that activity was?

Emanuel, the angel affirmed, *God is with you*. *Emanuel*--one word that hovers to share the reason for no fear. Without understanding how these words of Gabriel will change Mary's life, and not always in comfortable ways, she hears the most important reason for no fear. God of angel armies, God of prophets and priests, God of all

power and knowledge stood with her. She had no need of fear.

If we learn anything from these first moments with Mary, we must wonder how many times God has sent us the same message: *you are graced with Immanuel. There is no need for fear.*

In these days of unpredictability, in the middle of life's complications and broken dreams; we can know that we are favored, graced, and chosen by God to receive all His unfailing love. We have no reason to fear. If we can be still and know God is with us, fighting for us, always leading us to His heart; can anything bring us down?

God is not with us just to do what we ask.

God is not with us just to do what we ask for. God is with us to help us ask for the right things. He is with us to give us His will. He is with us to favor us with a grace so completing that we can rest in the middle of any unknowable situation with hope in the God who knows all about it.

Stand with Mary in the middle of your daily routine. Let God interrupt your activities for His most important announcement to you: *You are my favored child and I am with you.*

My December Prayer

*God
I would know your hovering today that I may
remember how your favor embraces me
and gives me worth.
and nothing this world
says or does robs me of your choosing.
Amen.*



Week 2-Monday: Overshadowed

*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.
Luke 1:35*

What does it mean to be "overshadowed?"

When a great cloud covers the day, hides the sun and brings early darkness, we complain about it. When we anticipate a hard time, dread a surgery or next chemotherapy, we would do anything to prevent it from happening. The big event so holds us hostage that it puts a cloud of darkness over our lives. But what about cloud cover that isn't gloom and doom? What happens when the cloud is what empowers you?

When Mary heard the news about having a baby, Gabriel talked about who this child would be. Mary asked the unaddressed question, "How will this be?" She does not ask with doubt or disbelief. Her question comes more from unexamined wonder and innocent curiosity. Gabriel does not deny her the answer, though it is veiled in more mystery than details. "The Holy Spirit will overshadow you," the angel promised. This overshadowing was not an assault; it was an embrace. God would place Mary in the background of His power, not by bullying push; but with the same creative work that brought this world into being. God would do in Mary something so new, that His very act would overshadow her in its unprecedented innovation. It would point to God in every way.

To be overshadowed by gloom and fear of coming catastrophe is one thing, but to be overshadowed by God in a way that makes out of you, a magnifying glass for His work

Christmas is the Great Overshadowing.

is a humbling honor. This is grace, unmerited gift and unexpected empowerment. It is a welcome cloud that rests you from the need to earn your significance. It is God in you in every way.

We need this overshadowing. We need to be reminded of God's great power and what He can do. Christmas is the Great Overshadowing. God came down and covered us with His power, wrapped Himself in flesh, surrendered glory to deliver His message that no one stands outside of His love except by choice.

Don't let Christmas chaos be your great cloud of undoing. Find your *Quiet Circle* and ask God how this Christmas can be the powerful embrace God intended. Stand as Mary, enveloped in awe and let God overshadow you.

My December Prayer

*Oh God of the Great Cloud,
Overshadow me.
Help me know how Emanuel of Christmas truth,
Covers me with Your unfailing love
So that nothing finds me
Uncovered or undone.
Amen*



Week 2-Tuesday: Your Servant

I am the Lord's Servant. Luke 1:38

How willing are you to be a servant?

When you are given the biggest job of your life, how do you respond? I don't know about you, but I need details and timeline. I immediately begin to plan my "how" so I will know whether to accept the assignment.

Look at Mary's response to everything Gabriel said that would change her life and dreams. Mary had only one response that goes down for all time as the best way to answer God's call, "I am the Lord's servant." Do you hear what Mary knows in these five words? She knows who she is and she knows who God is. It is a bold and beautiful moment to witness.

The gift of true submission happens when everything we don't know about a circumstance pales by what we do know about God. True submission wrests from our too greedy hands and distressed heart anything that confuses or frightens us and replaces it with the empowering reminders of God's faithfulness, integrity, and unfailing love. Then, the question of obedience is not whether we are *able* to do something, but whether we are willing to be *enabled*.

I have come to this passage over and over in my life with more weakness than strength. Mostly it involved some unknown about our daughter's future or upcoming surgery. My fears about the unknowable could have swallowed me whole. It took a determined focus to come to God and say, "I am your servant." If I learned anything it is that submission changes

Submission changes my questions.

my questions. Submission readies me to hear what I need to hear so that I can take the next step of obedience. Submission puts my control into the hands of the God of all control. In submission, I take a deep breath and say, "Okay, what's next?" Then, God knows I am ready to do "next."

Christmas gives you the biggest reason to reclaim the gifts that submission brings. It is your moment to rest from the pressure of needing to know what you cannot know, just like Mary. It is your opportunity to take that leap of faith straight into the knowable faithfulness of God. It is a time when the meaning of Emanuel comes close for no one who says "yes" to God is ever alone.

My December Prayer

*I want to be your servant,
Saying yes to your whole will.
I want to be your conduit
Empowered by your fill.*

*I want to make my life
The flame that always burns
That never lets a question
Stumble me or make me turn.*

*Make my life your story.
Make my heart your sand.
I would be your pencil;
You would be the hand.*



Week 2- Wednesday Great Things!

My spirit rejoices . . . For the Mighty One has done great things for me! Luke 1:47,49

Do you ask God for something without reviewing what He has done?

Mary's prayer of praise has been set to music through the centuries. She prays these words sometime during her visit to Elizabeth. The moment is fresh with awe and wonder. Mary, filled with new awareness of who God is, bursts into a hymn of praise. I read it as a prayer for in it she hallows God's name and envisions His kingdom come in very specific ways.

Notice that she does not begin with a list of her needs; she reviews her personal understanding of God. He is *her* Savior. Whatever God is doing, she connects it to His work as her *personal* redeemer. We know it will unfold into a truth with eternal significance for more than Mary understands. But for now, she ties these birth announcements to how God will use it for good. She has child-hearted acceptance with a grown-up faith anchored completely in the unfailing character of God.

Her God is the Mighty One who "has done great things for me." This is the lens through which she attempts to understand what is happening. Already she can list the powerful, God-only acts that have come into her life and she cannot view this new event any other way.

What would happen if we began our prayers this way: reviewing God's rescue of us as an ongoing mighty work?

What would happen if we let our Mighty God use His power His way to re-order our priorities, wants, and routines and set us apart for His Might work?

Today, whatever reversal, waiting, crisis, or grief we experience; aren't they but clay for the Mighty One to use and with unearthly skill to, transform? Shouldn't there be a song of praise for us to sing? There is when we focus on the great things the Mighty One has already done for us as proof there are great things still to come.

Shouldn't there be a song of praise for us to sing?

Whenever we get to that place, that's the true spirit of Christmas. It is dark made light by God's presence. Unknown made livable because God is with us. Weak become strong because God is our Mighty One and has done and will continue to do great things.

Sing that song today and your heart will rejoice with Mary's.

My December Prayer

*Mighty One,
Who destroyed kingdoms and leveled arrogance,
I would know that power turned into redemption.
Rescue me from my insufficiency
So that your Mighty Power
Gives me reason to sing every day.
Amen!*



Week 2- Thursday Mercy

*His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation. Luke 1:49*

How much do you think about God's mercy?

Where did Mary's prayer come from? From everything she already knew about God and how she put that information together with life. Just like with us, crisis doesn't give anyone time to learn new lessons or take a refresher course. Something new and unexpected interrupts routine and we respond the way past experiences and knowledge prepares us to respond.

That's why this prayer tells us so much about Mary. It reveals what she already knew about God and how it worked its way into her prayer. But what astounds me as much as anything is that she understood that whatever God had done, it came from His mercy.

I don't think we depend on God's mercy as much as we should. If we truly believed He was merciful, we wouldn't be so quick to identify our own solutions for complicated situations. It would be enough to throw ourselves at God's mercy and let Him choose what is best.

Is that what Mary was doing at the beginning of this prayer? She acknowledged God's mercy. She trusted in what God knew, though she had no idea what it would cost her. We can turn the pages forward and see the stable birth, the flight to Egypt, the family's confusion, the religious leaders who turned against him and the agony of a mother who sees the torture of her son. There is nothing in that picture we would call mercy.

That is what anchors this moment. In the face of all Mary does not know, she trusts the *mercy* of God. It is another way she lives her earlier prayer, "May it be to me as you have

said." She does not direct God. She doesn't even ask for anything. She doesn't have to when she surrenders to God's mercy.

Mercy is power turned to do the very best for another. When we misplace our trust and give it to someone who uses it to hurt or destroy, we are wounded in ways that lead us to mistrust. But when we learn that complete trust in God, no matter what He does or when He does it, is our best solution, our gift, our privilege; we move forward with a confidence that we cannot, on our own, produce.

When I don't know what prayer to pray, I pray for mercy. When my need overwhelms me or choices confuse me or my way is new and frightening, I pray for mercy. The prayer for mercy unties God's hands in my life, gives Him complete permission to order or re-order anything that will bring me His good.

We need this prayer reminder from Mary. When we learn to trust God's powerful, life-giving mercy, we become mercy-givers. After all, we can't give what we don't know how to receive.

Whatever mercy brings will be exactly what you need.

Today, review the mercy God has shown you. Remember that whatever mercy brings will be exactly what you need.

My December Prayer

*God, I am slow to understand
How mercy empowers.
Surprise me until my heart rejoices in You
And I trust your mercy more than anything
I dream or ask for.
Amen.*



Week 2- Friday: Pray Hungry

*He has filled the hungry with good things.
Luke 1:53a*

What are you hungry for?

I eat more at a meal when I come hungry. I fill my plate too full and chastise myself later. Even when I know a good meal waits within minutes, hunger will tempt me to snack. Hunger is a fierce temptress. She will curb your appetite for good things. She will make you think you can't wait. She will push you to reach for convenience over sustenance.

Mary talked about hunger in her prayer. She described God as the One Who gives good things to satisfy hunger. What good things? It probably wasn't pizza and hamburgers. What God brought solved more than a temporary crave. This was a deeply satisfying fill, an empowering fill, a conquering fill. But it wasn't just any hunger.

What hunger? Could it be more like the hunger Jesus faced in the desert of temptation when God's Word became the bread that broke his fast? Is that how he could stand before a mass of craving people and talk about a hunger for righteousness that God will always fill?

Here's the problem. If we fill our hunger with the wrong things, we stay hungry for the what doesn't last. More lifestyle perks or quick fixes for hard times. More adrenalin highs. More of any simple fix that masks our real need.

But what if our hunger was a passionate craving for the will of God? What if we hungered for what God called right, balanced, true, and beautiful? What if our hunger connected us to the image of

God created in us from the very beginning, that image that we lose in the busy craziness of our upside-down lives? What if we hungered desperately for what God wanted to bring and refused to reach for anything less? What if we greeted each day as the opportunity to fill that hunger again with God's good things? How do we find that craving that pushes all other cravings aside?

Pray hungry. That's what I learn from Mary's prayer. Pray as if everything you want depended on everything God wants to give because it does. Pray with a longing that comes from a place you didn't even know you had. Pray eager to receive what God has already prepared for you. Could it be possible that the hungrier you are for God's good things, the more He can fill you? Then, pray so hungry that God can give you more of Himself.

The hungrier you are for God's good things, the more He can fill you.

The world was starving when Jesus was born and didn't even realize it. Just like us, they were reaching for temporary fixes. Jesus came with every good thing to satisfy our deep hungers for love, mercy, forgiveness, healing, security, and identity. Let God's great Gift give you reason to know contentment so deep and balancing that nothing else satisfies. Always pray hungry.

My December Prayer

*Jesus,
Today, I pray hungry
That I may be filled with what
you know will satisfy.
Help me to always pray hungry.
Amen.*



Week 2- Saturday: Rejoicing!

*My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.
Luke 1:47*

What wraps around your heart to squeeze out joy?

We can be proud of an accomplishment, achieving a goal, getting a hard thing done; but does it bring Mary's kind of joy? The joy that Mary experienced didn't come from anything she did or asked for. This joy came because God, her Savior, visited her in such a personal, specific, unmistakable way that her soul overflowed and joy came out.

Isn't that true Christmas spirit? God coming to you in such a personal and powerful way that your only response is joy. Joy that re-colors everything that frustrated you or brought you down is richer for the unexpected gift it is. That is joy you can share with your world. Is there any true Christmas spirit without that kind of joy?

God chose Mary for an assignment. Mary accepted it as gift, not a burden. By accepting His choosing; Mary discovered her value, her significance, and her purpose. The source of her joy was not what she would do, but what God would do through her.

This is the gift God would have us know, our value to Him. Our value isn't based on what we can do for Him or how well we can do it. Our value comes from the implanted image of God in us. It is ours at conception and birth. Turn us inside out and somewhere you will find the tag that says: "Made by God." God, Sole Architect of this universe, formed us with a soul that carries His essence better than the created world can.

Mary surrendered *herself* to God. She had nothing else of worth to give. Her surrender was based on what she knew of God, not what she knew about what He was asking. We forget that, too. We're willing to do something for God, but we require a printout so we can evaluate it. It's not blind surrender God asks for; it is *informed* surrender. It is surrender to the God who has had your back since the beginning of time, the God who came with your name written on his heart even before you were born.

We're willing to do something for God, but we require a printout.

Wherever you are right now in the middle of your decorated house and a hope for the best Christmas ever, God wants to visit you. He calls you by name to favor you with an acceptance so deep and satisfying that no other gift could ever match what He gives. When you know the gift of His persistent presence, His enthusiastic choosing, His complete understanding of your journey; you will know why surrender heals you, forms you, and prepares you for what will bring pure, unbounded joy. Then, your soul will sing, too.

My December Prayer

*Lord of my soul's pure song,
I bring my song-less soul to you.
Visit me and teach my soul to sing.
I come with nothing but myself to give
That I may live
My worth through your choosing.
Thank you!*



Week 3 Sunday: Extraordinary Encounter

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. Luke 2:25

Who do you expect to see when you go to church?

The scene is private. Had we been visitors to the temple that day, we would have seen nothing out of the ordinary. A young couple brought their newborn for circumcision and naming according to Jewish law. A man known in Jerusalem as a faithful, God-honoring man approached Mary and Joseph as they were leaving. There is still nothing that would have gathered a curious crowd. He was just an old man adoring a newborn. How many times have we seen the same sight in our churches?

Luke names him for us. He is Simeon and his name comes from a word meaning “to hear.” Simeon enters our Christmas story for a brief visit, but what he shares in that visit brings more confirmation for the evolving story Mary and Joseph were living. Simeon had prayed for a moment like this. I don’t think he was looking for a baby. He was looking for whatever God said he would see before he died.

Stand close because here is where we see God at work at His best. He brings Mary and Joseph with baby Jesus to the Temple as was expected of every Jewish parent. He brings Simeon from his daily prayer walk. But in the crowded context of people unknown to each other, God had set an appointment. These four would have an encounter that gave each something only God could make happen.

No doubt Simeon had learned that when God moves, go. No answer to any question is as important as simple, immediate obedience. And what of the baby we know as our Savior? He would stand in this temple 12 years later and draw attention. He would be back in 30 and draw more, but it would cost him.

These people do nothing out of the ordinary in order to encounter the extraordinary. We need to remember that in our Christmas journey. I think we get it the order mixed up. I know I do. We want the extra-special times, the warm-fuzzies, the all is calm and bright with family circled and at peace. And we try to make it happen.

What this scene reminds me is that we when we do the ordinary first, we see how God fills our ordinary with His extraordinary. We cannot give ourselves what God would give us.

We cannot give ourselves what God would give us.

As we look at Simeon this week, remember that God “moved” him, and he obeyed. It is a simple formula for something extraordinary to happen.

My December Prayer

*God,
I am no Simeon;
But I do understand your nudges.
Move me to go, do, speak, or be still.
Let me find the encounters you have planned
To confirm in my heart
what you want me to know,
And I will find your joy for my world, too.
Amen.*



Week 3 Monday: Waiting, Too

*He was waiting for the consolation of Israel.
Luke 2:25b*

What are you waiting for?

One of the first things we learn about Simeon is that he must have been a patient man. He was waiting for something God had promised. We've already looked at the waiting experience of Zechariah and Elizabeth. If we go further back in the Old Testament, we can find lots of waiting stories. Do you think God is trying to tell us something here? Is there something to waiting we still don't get?

Simeon was waiting for God to console or comfort his people caught in Roman oppression, desperate for hope, and living in fear. Most thought Rome was the problem. However, they were caught in much more than that. They were slaves to tradition and had emptied worship of what God wanted them to experience. Empty worship breeds empty living.

Simeon holds the gift of God in his hands and prays. It was a prayer of consolation that every Jew prayed. They connected it to the prophecies about a coming Messiah. Embedded in the word *consolation* is the word *paraclete*. This is the same word Jesus used to describe the work of the Holy Spirit: a come-along-side comfort, a with-you-in-every-way presence. The consoling that Simeon prayed for would restore hope for the life God had promised.

Unfortunately, many had their own ideas about who Messiah would be and what he would do. I don't think Simeon sank

Empty worship breeds empty living.

into the practice of believing that the answer to his prayer was who he expected Messiah to be. If he had, he would have passed by this unremarkable trio.

But God "moved" him to take this newborn into his arms, look into his face and *know* that in some unmistakable way, this baby was God's answer. This was consolation swaddled in all the prayers he had ever prayed. This was hope breathing all the promises he had ever heard. And Simeon knew he had a new prayer to pray.

What are you waiting for? What kind of consolation? What kind of comfort? Resist the urge to script it. God answers waiting prayers with more than you could have prayed for. If God only gave you what you asked for, it wouldn't be enough. However, when you know with deep confidence and unrelenting hope that God will answer you; you will be ready to recognize heart-deep consolation the way God sends it. And just like Simeon, it will free you to pray new prayers.

My December Prayer

*God,
I pray for comfort, too;
But my short-sighted prayers
Limit your generosity.
Remind me that all I need You sent in Jesus
And I can find in Him a comfort so complete
That I can pray new prayers steeped in hope.
Amen*



Week 3- Tuesday: Sovereign Lord

Simeon took [Jesus] in his arms and praised God, saying, Sovereign Lord, as you have promised.

Luke 2:28-29a

What does God's sovereignty mean to you?

Simeon began his prayer addressing God as Sovereign. In this moment of personal fulfillment, Simeon knew who was responsible for it. This was not coincidence; it was planned. God orchestrated this impromptu meeting, but not just for Simeon. It was for Mary and Joseph, too. That's the way God's sovereignty works. The answer to Simeon's prayer brought confirmation to Simeon at the end of his journey and to these young parents at the beginning of theirs.

What does it mean that God is sovereign? While this word captures God's over-all authority and irrefutable supervision of everything in this world, to make Him a controlling ruler or an uninvolved executive is to miss the truth of His unfailing love. Love is the best expression of God's sovereignty.

Simeon's prayer revealed that he understood God's sovereignty and what it meant in the big picture of Israel as well as in the little picture of Simeon. He had such faith in the integrity of God that he could trust that whatever God was doing for Israel, it was good for him as well. To explain it wasn't as important as trusting it.

More people reduce God to someone He is not at the point of His sovereignty. *If God has sovereign power, why doesn't He use it to help me or prevent war or save people from floods and fires?* They try to understand God's sovereignty from what He doesn't do.

Love is the best expression of God's sovereignty.

That's backwards. We must understand His authority in our lives and in the world by who He is and use that knowledge to examine what we don't understand. We must end with a picture of an all-powerful God working always for our good, even when we don't understand.

Too often we live our little picture lives feeling they will be swallowed up by some Big Picture. We fear that in that swallowing, we will lose more than we win. But that's not the picture of our Sovereign God at work. His Big Picture is His working out details we can't know or control so that He can bring to our little pictures everything good and life-giving.

Christmas embodies this truth in an intimately personal and world-changing way. The One with ultimate power came to use it all for us. Our Sovereign Lord will do everything that contributes to our eternal good. What's not to trust?

My December Prayer

*Sovereign God
Sometimes I don't understand
How your sovereignty impacts me.
But if you can put yourself in a baby
To show what sovereignty looks like,
I can embrace that truth like Simeon did.
I can live with an unshakable trust
That Your Sovereignty
Is my best hope.
Thank you!*



Week 3- Wednesday. Sight Lines

*For my eyes have seen your salvation which
you have prepared in the sight of all people.
Luke 2:30-31*

What does your faith help you see?

Sight is an undervalued gift. We learned that painful truth as we watched the slow vision loss our daughter experienced. It was a loss that compromised independence, required adaptations, removed the simple and replaced it with complicated.

Simeon acknowledged sight as a gift, but it was not just about physical sight. While it was a simple thing to see a new baby, cute and cuddly; Simeon saw more. He saw salvation face to face. God allowed his simple faith to become sight to understand the answer to prayer this infant would become. God had promised he would see the One Israel waited for. What his heart knew would happen, his eye saw. It is the true nature of trust for the heart to be ahead of the eyes. Faith from sight is never a right; it is always a gift.

As Simeon stood before stunned parents and thanked God for keeping His promise, can you imagine the startled awareness Mary and Joseph couldn't even voice. Again, a stranger reinforced what God had already told them about this baby. And can you imagine how Simeon lived the rest of his days knowing salvation had come? Did he see it happening? No. Rome still oppressed. People still lived trapped. The promise was simmering but had not come to full boil. But Simeon wouldn't have talked that way. His heart-eyes overtook his physical eyes. He saw what God wanted him to see. Promise fulfilled. Hope come. Salvation in the making.

Faith from sight is never a right; it is a gift.

Simeon believed *before* he saw. That's why he could connect the dots. His faith took him there. If you try to form your own answer to God's promise, decide what He *must do* and then look for it; your detoured search reduces faith instead of grows it. If you pray your own wants and solutions without asking for God's edit, you could be looking for answers you will never see.

We stumble here more than anywhere. We think that seeing *is* believing, that sight grows faith. But it doesn't. Our sight is limited to what is around us. We need God's vision to remove the boundaries. When God raises the curtain like he did for Simeon to help us see beyond ourselves and make faith connections our logic couldn't, our faith grows. We find an anchored faith in a God whose promise-keeping vision takes us farther than what we can see.

Where are you blind to what God wants you to see? Don't just look for what you expect. God is the Master of the unexpected and Christmas is a good time to improve your sight lines.

My December Prayer

*Be my vision, Lord
My eyes cloud and confuse.
I look for the wrong things.
Move my heart to see your truth
For what I think is true crumbles easily.
Let me see how salvation has come to me
And brings everything I need to see.
Amen.*



Week 3- Thursday: Revealing Light

For my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation. Luke 2:30-32a

What do you need light for?

Have you ever been in a place so dark that you couldn't see anything around you? Cave tours take you where light cannot go. When the guide turns off all artificial light, darkness envelops, disorients, even paralyzes.

Over and over scripture talks about this kind of cave-darkness that had imprisoned God's people. The irony is that much of the darkness was their doing. They lost their vision for God and the world got darker. Interesting how that happens.

From Simeon's prayer we understand that he *sees* this darkness but had not succumbed to it. He also knew that God saw it and had a plan to bring light. On this day in the Temple, he saw the light. It wasn't a blinding brightness because the darkness wasn't something physical eyes could see. Still, he knew that God was bringing light that would overcome the darkness.

Light reveals what darkness hides. That makes a lot of people uncomfortable. Secrets. Rationalizations. Excuses. Light clears the way for truth and allows no dark corners for stowing anything that does not align with God's truth. Anyone who doesn't want the truth keeps a place for the dark.

Simeon announced with prophetic clarity that light had come. He said it was for "all people." However, the *ability* to see the light and the *desire* to see it are often two separate entities. Too many times we make the axiom true: you see what you want to see.

In fact, sight is often more connected to our wants and perceptions than the ability to grasp truth in a situation. Faith is sight that isn't dependent on what physical eyes see. The faith-filled heart has vision for the light of God. The faith-filled heart welcomes revealing light.

The faith-filled heart has vision for the light of God.

What does God want His light to reveal to you? Where have you been waiting in darkness and blaming it on something or someone? Nothing is more comforting than our compassionate and merciful God coming to direct us into His light. Live there this Christmas. Whatever He says must change or be done away with is worth the light you will have in its place. Light, pure, eternal, life-giving Light. That's where Christmas shines the brightest.

My December Prayer

*Revealing Light,
My world can look gray,
Shadowed by many things.
I give Your penetrating Light
Unrestrained access to my heart and mind
Where all my secrets hide.
When I live Your Light there,
I reflect Your Light more.
Amen*



Week 3- Friday: For All.

A light for revelation to the Gentiles. Luke 2:32

Who have you forgotten to invite?

Some invitations are exclusive. I drove past a Christmas-decorated mansion and counted eighty plus cars parked on the street. There had to be more than two hundred people at this event. I wondered what a home party for two hundred would look like? I would never know because I wasn't invited.

In Simeon's world there were only two groups of people: Jews and everyone who wasn't. The identification went farther than that. It became the chosen and the unchosen, which is just another way of saying invited and uninvited. For Simeon to know that this division was ending was a revolutionary thought. For him to announce it in his prayer in the Temple was blasphemy. But that is exactly what he did. Simeon had taken the prophecy of Isaiah to heart for Isaiah had made it clear that Israel was God's object lesson for the Gentile world. Exclusivity was never God's idea!

To share Messiah with Gentiles would remove a separation that had led to prejudice, abuse, isolation, and privilege. It would bring all people together sharing one Light. It could bring a unity that God had wanted since two people shared the Garden of Eden. Talk about a hope that would bring world peace; this was it. In the same way John came to prepare the way for Jesus, Simeon had his role, too. What he announced was world-changing in the most mind-boggling way for the Jew.

Exclusivity was never God's idea!

We know that God so loved the world that He gave His son for all. We know that the invitation for all was born in a stable and written in blood for all. For your neighbor and mine. For the relative no one goes to see. For the troublemaker. For the person who chooses alternative ways to live. For all!

Perhaps we are just as guilty as Simeon's world was in dividing ours. Have we been too cautious about stepping over the line between Christian and non-Christian? Are we guilty of hoarding God's invitation *for all*?

God has only one mission and it is save *everyone*. God commissioned us to share this invitation. All we must do is build the bridges, share our heart, meet a need, show compassion to anyone within your reach as God nudges. Look at the nativity scene you've set up somewhere in your house. See the faithful Jewish couple, the simple shepherds, the turbaned Magi and remember that Jesus came for all. Look around you. Someone you know is missing an invitation.

My December Prayer

*Am I a hoarder, Lord?
Have I kept Your invitation to myself?
Help me see the needy looks, the heavy hearts,
the joy-less lives
Of those who need me to share Your invitation.
I can no longer pray generic
For You have already told me to go.
Amen!*



Week 3 Saturday: For Glory

... and for glory to your people Israel. Luke

What does it take to make you peaceful?

We don't think much about God's glory. Maybe a magnificent sunrise or sunset makes you breathless for a moment, but that's all. However, the Christmas story is filled with the glory of God. It was the glory of God that illuminated the angels so that the shepherds could see them. It was the angel chorus of "Glory in the Highest" that rang in their heads as they rushed into Bethlehem.

I think we look for glory in the wrong places. We want the spectacular, the exceptional, the mind-boggling to enthuse our hearts with a glory-song of our own. But glory is what God wears to show us His otherness. Glory is all of God's holiness, purity, power and knowledge in perfect harmony and consistency. No man or any part of creation bears the glory of God; they only reflect it. We weaken worship if it becomes what makes us *feel* good rather than what makes us see God.

Simeon repeats a timeless prayer. The prophets spoke about how Israel would bring the glory of God to all people. But they missed the message and reduced it to what God would do for them rather than what they would do for God. Sound familiar?

Christmas is second only to Easter in understanding the glory of God. God of Heaven and creation infused all His glory in flesh. Glory walked this earth. Glory touched a leper, redeemed an adulteress. Those who recognized the glory of God could not imagine life any other way.

We weaken worship if it becomes what makes us feel good rather than what makes us see God.

Simeon saw the glory of God in a baby. He saw the Promise, the Wonderful Counselor, the Prince of Peace. This was the only benediction he needed before heaven. Though we don't know how Simeon lived the rest of his days, I believe he lived them in a peace he did not find in the oppressed world around him.

Two thousand years ago, glory came to us. While time separates us from the historical moment, it must not separate us from recognizing the glory God wants to share today. A glimpse of God's glory changes us. We become who God created us to be as we let His glory in. Then, we will live our lives as a doxology singing our own *Glory to God in the Highest!*

My December Prayer

*God
Your glory forces me off balance,
Crumbles my self-focus and
Tumbles me to the ground where,
Knees pasted to earth,
Your glory anchors me.
New-made in heart and mind,
I sigh deeply, all air pushed out, into a shout--
My eyes have seen the glory
Of the coming of the Lord!*



Week 4: Sunday Christmas Worship

I [John] . . . fell down to worship at the feet of the angel. But he said to me, "Do not do it! . . . Worship God!" Revelation 22:8-9, selected

Who deserves your worship and why?

John is the author of our prayer for these last days of Advent. He had been banished to an island after his abrupt removal from a successful pastorate in Ephesus during the beginning of cruel persecution. Early church leaders wrote that he had been placed in forced labor in the island mines. Like Zechariah, John's voice was silenced for a while, though not by God. Because of his silence, we have his recorded revelation where he continues to speak.

John came to the end of the revelation and needed to respond. Overcome by everything he saw, he fell down before the angel who had shared the revelation with him. But the angel would have none of his worship. *Worship God*, he said.

This is our reminder, too. Like John, we fall prey to misplaced worship and don't even realize it. I have often wondered what deep sigh God gives when He sees where we have taken the methods of worship and turned them into something they were never meant to be. Worship is the united voice of the redeemed proclaiming God's worth. Worship is the joyful noise of hearts bursting in awe at the incredulous journey of God who came to us by cell structure and heartbeat. If we can't find a way to worship together, we are a poverty-stricken people in the same darkness God came to address.

The angel's counsel to John was a critical step in getting this revelation right. Misplaced worship skews the message. But John listened. He becomes our model for our worship this Lord's Day.

John turned his heart toward Christ, His Revealer, and worshipped Him. Nothing is a higher priority in worship.

Christmas is a call to worship. Worship is the thread that runs through the Christmas story. Worship is what the shepherds did when they got to the stable. It's what the Magi did when they brought their gifts. Each person whose prayer we have examined found themselves in the middle of the Christmas story by miraculous and surprising ways. As a result, each found their voice and worshipped.

Worship is the thread that runs through the Christmas story.

As your family gathers this last Sunday before Christmas, don't be distracted; worship God. Join the angel song and sing: "Holy, Holy, Holy." Tune your heart to Christ's call and mission. No other activity you participate in will help you live Christmas truth.

My December Prayer

*Christ, I come,
A curious shepherd,
A pilgrim on a journey,
A parent with questions,
A servant with a promise,
An exile with a vision.
Help me find my kneeling place in the stable
That I may bring my humbled heart
As my Magi gift this day.
Christ, I come!*



Week 4 Monday: Need New?

I am making everything new. Rev. 21:5

What do you need when your world has turned upside down?

I sat in the sterile bubble of the hospital world, barely knowing or caring what was happening outside. My sleep was as stolen and fretful as my daughter's. I heard her every moan, restless move, and parched cry. Fever tracked her like a hunter. Night was the worst. It felt like I was moving in molten lead.

And it was Christmas. The disconnect between the drama I was living and every Christmas I had ever lived was unimaginable. I could barely tolerate hearing Christmas music.

That's why John's reminder about God's best work was so important. For the God of the unknown, the God of the not-supposed-to-be, the God of beginnings and endings reminded me that something new waited.

Guessing God's new, predicting it, trying to pray it down is about as helpful as the food my daughter hadn't been able to tolerate for days. But new was what I needed. So I grabbed these words as my last lifeline before going under for the third time.

I am making everything new.

Something new waited. It might not have a Christmas tree and decorations, but God was in His workroom fashioning something new that my heart needed. Of course I know this sentence primarily predicts the new world God will give us when this world is over. However, "I am making" is present participle. To my heavy world as stale as morning breath, new was my desperate need, now.

I began thinking of every verse connected to God's new: new heart, new mercies, new body, new heaven, new earth, new command. New. New. New! God is the specialist of new.

Could I rest in what God's new meant for me as I sat fatigued, drained, and scared? It was a decision I had to make, another chasm that could only be crossed by trust.

Yes, Lord. Your new is my best option. Keep making something new and I will keep looking for it.

Your new is my best option!

This Christmas may have turned your world upside down, too. He wants to do His new for you. And when God's new touches your heart, gives you new strength to persevere, hope, wait, or act; you will know in the deepest way possible that Christmas has come because Emanuel is sitting beside you with all the new you need.

My December Prayer

*God, I need Your new.
Not as some shiny gift
But the new that gives me hope,
It is new that makes me know that
Whatever has strangled my endurance
Or beaten me down
Is not as powerful as the new you are making.
Here . . . I give you my "all things."
Will you keep making Your new out of them!
Thank you!*



Week 4: Christmas Eve: Come, Lord

Come, Lord Jesus. Revelation 22:20

What is your most important part of Christmas celebration?

John's prayer is just three words, but don't be fooled. It embodies a Christmas cry for order, justice, world peace, and unity like no other. It may sound rather open-ended, but it is not. It is a prayer that welcomes the very answer it offers in the act of praying it. *Come, Lord Jesus.* This is a Christmas invitation like no other. We no longer go somewhere to find Jesus. Christmas reminds us that Jesus came to us. The stable represents the beginning of the story but not the end. This prayer is our invitation for Jesus to come again and again and again to us.

John prayed this prayer after his vision of the second coming of Christ, an over-looked part of Advent. Advent comes from the Latin words meaning "to come." As we celebrate his first coming, we must also acknowledge that he promised to come again. We still live in the promise, not the fulfillment. How we treat this promise is also a Christmas message. We live forward with expectation, not dread. We live faithful, because the One Who is faithful will come again. We live ready because we don't want to miss the next Advent.

This prayer also comes with a hidden warning. Don't treat Jesus like you treat others, inviting him only when everything looks good and you're at the top of your game. Jesus wants to come when the house is messy, and the kids are cranky, and you have lost all patience or confidence or made bad Choices. He wants to come to your life the way it is. That's what the stable birth reminds us: that Jesus knows how to redeem messy!

Ready or not, Christmas comes!

Ready or not Christmas is coming. Whatever you hoped Christmas would bring to your heart and family, you get to find out if it worked. Just make sure you've invited Jesus to every meal, every party, every tradition, everything you call Christmas. If Jesus doesn't come along with whatever you have planned for Christmas, why are you celebrating?

Read the story again. Let your family hold a different figure of the nativity as you do. Let this be your invitation for Jesus to come with His encouragement, peace, unity, forgiveness, whatever you need the most. Pray the prayer, *Come, Lord Jesus.*

And he will come!

My December Prayer

*Into my heart, into my heart.
Come into my heart, Lord Jesus.
Come in to today; come in to stay.
Come into my heart, Lord Jesus.*



Week 4- Christmas Day: Soon-time

I am coming soon. Rev. 22:20

How long is soon?

“**S**oon,” the mother said to her crying son who was desperate for her attention. “I will come, soon!” But the young boy only understood *now*, and he kept crying for what he wanted.

How many times are we like that young boy, wanting *soon* to mean *now*. While God does not withhold any part of Himself, He parcels out His gifts and responses to our prayers in timely ways that fit His plan, not ours.

How long is soon? As long as it takes to find a listening Zechariah and a willing Mary, a prayerful Simeon and a visionary John. Soon is not a calendar day; it takes as long as it needs to bring God’s will.

All we must do is stay ready for whenever *soon* comes. It’s the way to live Christmas all year long. Not with decorations and parties, but with the Emanuel of the God who is coming again, *soon*. It means we live with our unanswered questions in the hope that God’s *soon* will either answer our questions or destroy the need for them. We persevere in hard times because God is coming *soon*, and we don’t let anything or anyone distract us.

Soon brings anticipation. The child who waits for his dad to come home *soon*, waits by the door. We need to find our waiting places, too. However, waiting for *soon* is not sit-still waiting. We keep our hearts ready to reach out, share, come alongside, help, forgive, empower, free; do whatever is the work of Jesus in our Jesus-ignorant culture.

Soon is a different way to live Christmas truth. We keep one eye on a calendar and live responsibly in our time-bound world, but we keep our heart beating to soon-time when Jesus will come again. God is making soon-time as we share our Christmas with family and friends. He’s calling people to live in bold submission to His holy ways. He asks for light-bearers to lead people out of darkness in the same way Isaiah and John did. He wants our review of Christmas to be something we live all the time so that we can understand what *soon* means and how much closer it is this Christmas than it was last.

God is making soon-time.

As you celebrate all that God did to send Jesus into our world 2,000 years ago, remember that He is working on the details which will bring Him back again . . . *soon*. Live in the hope of God’s soon as you come against the rough edges of this broken world. Let God turn your heart toward what He’s doing now to make you ready for His *soon* coming. Then, you will join John with a hopeful but sure, “Amen!”

My December Prayer

*God of soon-time,
I don't understand soon
In my time-tethered life.
Reorient my heart
So that soon becomes the music
And helps me sing new Hallelujahs.
Amen!*