

Because of Christmas

*A 12 Days of Christmas Reflection
on Our Savior's Birth*



Pastor Timothy R. Butler



littlehills.church



faithtreecf.org

Introduction

ADVENT REMINDS US OF HOW THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL CRIED OUT FOR THE PROMISED KING, the Messiah, who would rescue them. While He was born in Bethlehem two millennia ago, we too find ourselves awaiting when He restores all things, for our world still deeply needs rescuing. He promises to do just that (Rev. 21:5), but as we enter the Twelve Days of Christmas and dwell in the joy that we celebrate on Christmas Day, what do we do in the wait for that all-things-new time with our Savior?

Two figures that appear *just after* Jesus's birth, Simeon and Anna, give us a taste of what we do. After all, as they encountered Jesus, they didn't see what He would do, they simply saw a baby. But they heard God's promises and His Spirit and recognized that while they saw "just a baby," whom they were seeing was so much more. They got to see God Himself.

Today, because of the One who came on Christmas, we get to experience God Himself as He gives us His Holy Spirit. Jesus didn't just come into the world for a few years: He sent His Spirit to be with us in all the years that will pass before He returns. And while we too see just a glimmer, as we go through this journey and reflect on the words of Simeon and Anna, we are reminded of how our God is with us and all the things that are true *because of Christmas*.

Timothy Butler
Christmas Eve 2021
St. Charles, Missouri

Part I



Because of Christmas...

We Have Peace with God

Day 1: Peace in God's Promises

“Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.”

– Luke 2:25-26

Simeon had been given a special promise by God: he would live to see the coming of the Messiah, the promised one Israel had longed for. How amazing it is to be given such a promise! Can you imagine God telling you that a key part of His plans for humanity would be something that would happen during your lifetime?

In a way, we know what that is like more than we might realize. We have countless promises God gives every one of us who believes in Him. Waiting for the fulfillment to the promise is not always easy. Sometimes Christmas makes those promises easier to hold onto: we gather with family and friends, we hear the familiar story of Jesus's birth and everything feels *right*. Other times, things go wrong – lost loved ones, broken relationships, circumstances that fragment our plans – and even as we transition from the Advent longing “O Come O Come Emmanuel” to “Joy to the World,” we feel stuck far more on “O Come” than “Joy” in our lives.

We know very little about Simeon, but we know he experienced the same world we do and so there were surely times that promise God has given him felt more like an illusory flicker than a nearby flame he could warm himself with. However, God is faithful and as we will see frequently in Scripture, those are precisely the moments God calls us to double down on reflecting on His promises and trusting that what He promises He does.

This Christmastime, like every year, the promises we share in exploring in God's Word are meant to remind us that we can have peace in the wait. The wait when life, and even Christmas Day, may not be exactly how we would imagine. Because God is faithful and His promises for you are as certain as those He gave Simeon.

PRAYER: Lord, thank you for giving me your faithful promises even when I am not faithful. Thank you for reminding me of your promises over and over in your Word. As I turn from Christmas Day to the rest of the Christmas season, help me to have peace in the waiting, knowing that while so much in this world remains unresolved, what you promise is what you do. I pray this in the precious name of Jesus. Amen.

Day 2: Peace in God's Calling

And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law [...] Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace...

– Luke 2:27, 29

Waiting on God's acting can often lead us into a challenging state of mind. We might wonder if we really understood where God had called us to. Even when God's timing arrives, we might struggle to understand what He is doing because we've quit waiting and just become numb. Simeon, for his part, was not numb.

Believing that God's promise was true no matter how long he had to wait for the fulfillment, he was ready to respond when the Holy Spirit called him to the temple the day Joseph and Mary arrived with baby Jesus for the prescribed sacrifices a mother was to offer after giving birth. Being ready for that call to action, Simeon got to experience something wonderful years before most of the world did: he got to experience the presence of Jesus, God made Flesh, and to know that God's promise was coming true before his eyes.

Each of us has a calling from God. We may not have the Spirit give us specifics in the way that Simeon did, but through our lives, God brings us to places He intends for us to serve, using our talents and abilities. Sometimes, those callings feel almost void in the wait: something in us tells us *God has called me to this*, but nothing is happening. Other times, the Spirit is nudging us onward, but we have been in that place of waiting we feel too stiff to move.

Wherever we might be, Christmas is a part of our calling. After all, wherever we are, whatever we might be waiting for, God calls us to share the hope of our Savior. Immanuel, God with us, gives us reason to be able to join Simeon in having peace in life and even peace at when we depart this life.

PRAYER: *Jesus, help me to have peace in the calling you've given to me. The calling in my work, with my family and friends and, most of all, my calling as yours. Help me in the times of waiting to still see where you are leading me. It is in your name that I pray. Amen.*

Day 3: Peace with God's Leadership

...and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law,²⁸ he took him up in his arms and blessed God...

– Luke 2:27-28

God's leadership often does not look like how we want it to or imagine it to. We imagine a strong figure, perhaps a politician or a business leader, who commands great respect or fear in this world. *That's how the world works, right?* In Scripture, we find that God doesn't work how the world works; instead, He promises to change the world to work like He does.

In Simeon's joy at the fulfillment of God's promises, he was led to the temple not to meet a fearsome king in armor, but a little baby. Yes, Jesus is God incarnate, but in the Gospels we have no reason to imagine that he had some sort of visible aura like we see in paintings. Simeon saw *just a baby*. Was he really getting to see the fulfillment of God's promises in his lifetime? Oh, yes; but whether he lived long enough or not to see Jesus grow up and teach with the authority only God could possibly have, he shows peace with God's leadership in that moment when no worldly measure would show Jesus to be a notable leader at all. Babies don't lead, after all.

Jesus did grow up, but even then many of those around him looked and wondered when the *real* leader was going to show up. The people wanted a leader who would overturn Rome, who would talk in the language of the world: power. Instead, Jesus led as a servant and as a servant He died for us. We're told that Jesus will come again in power (Rev. 1:16), but just as with Simeon, we are called to look at the Servant King and take joy in *Him* even though He adamantly refuses to fit our leadership molds.

A funny thing happens when we come to peace with God's leadership: we don't suddenly find ourselves fabulously wealthy or in a life of influence, but we do find ourselves rich with joy in the Savior born on Christmas Day and at peace with the idea that while the world continues to demonstrate its brokenness, our God will someday restore it all to a beauty more resplendent than the best Christmas memories.

PRAYER: *Father, forgive me when I want to follow the ways of worldly leadership rather than your ways. Give me peace in what you are doing, as contrary to worldly reason as your ways often seem. Help me this day and every day to find my joy in you and not worldly success. I pray this in the name of the Servant King, Jesus. Amen.*

Day 4: Peace in God's Salvation

For my eyes have seen your salvation...

– Luke 2:30

Simeon doesn't just see Jesus as the Messiah in the sense many of his fellow faithful imagined the Messiah. Even if they were open to the Messiah looking different than they had imagined the King would look, the people were anticipating a human king, descended from King David. Full stop.

As Simeon holds the baby, he sees more: he sees God's gift of salvation in all its grandeur. This was clearly a gift of the continued work of the Holy Spirit in leading that faithful man to see what wasn't obvious by human observation. When we see Jesus as truly bringing God's salvation to us, it is that continued work of the Spirit in our lives, too.

How do we see Jesus as we reflect on Christmas? Is He just the baby placed in a manger under the family tree? Is He the wise teacher with memorable turns of phrase? Is He a leader before His time standing up for the poor and oppressed? He was indeed a baby on that first Christmas and He was most certainly wise and a leader before His time, but Luke tells us Simeon's response to reinforce something really, really important: He wasn't *only* those things.

When we minimize Jesus into a package that's easier to wrap our minds around, we can turn Him into a convenient vehicle for our whims. Or, we can ultimately find ourselves feeling very alone, since wise teachers or tragic leaders cannot unbreak the things broken in our hearts. Because of Christmas, however, we have the opportunity for true peace with God. Peace, as we've seen in the first three days in His promises, His calling and His leadership – but most of all, peace in His Salvation.

PRAYER: Father, thank you for sending your Son so that each of us can experience peace in your Salvation. This Christmas season, help us to root our hope in the peace that comes only through that salvation. I pray this in the name of my Savior, Jesus. Amen.

Part II



Because of Christmas...

We Belong

Day 5: We Have a Country to Call Home

[I have seen your salvation] that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.

– Luke 2:31-32

Over the first part of these Twelve Days, we have been thinking about the peace that God gives us because of the miracle of Christmas – God in the World. But how can we know that salvation, that hope is *for you and me*?

As Simeon continues his Spirit-guided song, he remarks on what the prophets had foretold, but the teachers of the Law often sought to ignore: that God plan was to use His people to bring far more people into that fold, not to exclude those outside of Abraham’s descendants. In a world up to this point in Scripture divided clearly between Israelites and non-Israelites (Gentiles), that could seem counterintuitive, yet in Jesus we see how God was planning to pull it all together all along: He gathered a people who would declare who He is and out of whom would come the one, eternal King.

Many kings over time have sought to conquer well beyond their home territory, but none so successfully as Jesus. While Alexander rolled over many cities and Julius Caesar likewise had the drive for constant expansion, only Jesus’s reign has been extended the globe over and only He rightly asserts that the entirety of creation is His (John 1:3) Some kings, as they conquered were kinder than others to those conquered, but as Jesus expanded His people’s territory limitlessly, he was kindest of all: He made us full citizens loved by our faithful King.

Christmas declares not just that *a* Savior is born, but *our* Savior. Whether we, like Jesus Himself, descend from Abraham, or we are part of those Gentiles that Simeon’s song declares Jesus was a revelation for – we all get to call Him “my Savior and King.” And with our King right there with us, we can face the things before us, even when we feel the most alienated and uncertain. After all, we know we have a home to call our own, because the gift of Christmas doesn’t end.

PRAYER: *Lord Jesus, thank you for giving me citizenship in your kingdom. Thank you for calling me yours, no matter what my earthly citizenship may be. Help me to approach all the situations in life with confidence that you give a card of Heavenly Kingdom citizenship to your people that can never be taken away. Help me to shine the light of that citizenship to the world this day. Amen.*

Day 6: We Have a Family that Never Fails

...he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will...

– Ephesians 1:5

What does it mean that Jesus calls us into His Kingdom? It means more than what we considered yesterday. Many ancient conquerors at least extracted a tribute of some sort from those whom they conquered, but the King born on Christmas Day asked only one thing: that we follow Him. Citizenship is just the beginning of the blessings He offers to those who do. If we turn to the rest of the New Testament, we learn that we are also adopted as children, sons and daughters, of God.

To be in the King's country with His blessing is one thing, but we understand more about the "salvation" that Simeon sung about when we recognize how fully orbed Jesus's call to us is. We are rightful heirs (Gal 4:7). It's no coincidence that Jesus had a meal with the disciples before He went to the Cross (John 13-17) or that the Bible's closing chapters speak of a banquet with God in the New Heavens and New Earth after Jesus's return.

We may treasure moments around the family table at holidays. Many of us can think back on some of the best moments in our lives as being those shared on days like Christmas with those whom we love. God invites us to see the warmest of those moments as a mere preview of the warmth we will experience before a God who loves us, whom we can call not only "Lord," but also "Father."

PRAYER: *Immanuel, my God with me, thank you for coming to all of us so that I could come into your presence. Thank you for not merely coming to "visit us," but to invite me and to invite all of your people to call your household our home. When I reflect on Christmas memories recent or distant, help me to see the best moments of our family gatherings as a preview of being at your family table at the end of time. Amen.*

Day 7: Our Lives Matter

Oh sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things! His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. ² The LORD has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.

– Psalm 98:1-2

Have you ever been over to someone's home for a Christmas celebration and been struck by how the seemingly modest preparations were significant because you realize how much effort the host or hostess put into them? When you know someone goes through effort for you, it tells you about his or her care for you.

And so it is with God, albeit, with preparations that are anything but small. Scripture repeatedly tells us the truth that Simeon's song revealed: the Salvation God has brought into the world is for all people, including us. When we hear the Good News of the Gospel, we are not hearing about God's preparations for "those other, more important people," but the preparations God undertook to redeem you and me.

That tells us something important: your life matters and my life matters. Whether you have had a packed schedule all Christmas week that has culminated in amazing plans this New Year's Eve or not, the One who spoke the universe into creation created an unimaginably wonderful plan for the best Christmas party ever and invited you to it: the one that took place in Bethlehem.

If God thought enough about us that He bothered to know us before we even existed (Ps. 139:14-17), that means our days have meaning. God formed those days for us and then came into the world to ensure even our misuse of those days, filled with our failings and sin, would not bring His plan for us to naught. God's actions throughout history and culminating in the incarnation say this with unquestioned clarity: each of our lives matter to Him.

PRAYER: Father, thank you for caring about me long before I even took my first breath. Thank you for planning out my days and for sending your Son into the world so that even my worst moments will not erase your love for me. Whenever I might fail to see how you value everyone's life, including mine, please remind me of your love that I might always know I belong and I might always see others as belonging, too. I pray this in your precious Son's name. Amen.

Day 8: Our Work Matters

Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men,²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

– Colossians 3:23-24

New Year's Day. On the one hand, it is a day that seems to represent all the potential for the next year. On the other hand, it also represents that we are likely just days away from the normal demands of life, such as work or school. If you had Christmas Week off, it can feel like a letdown: "I've been doing things that seem wonderful and meaningful and now I go back to drudgery."

An extension of knowing that God has prepared salvation for us before all the world and cares about us individually is that He also cares about the ordinary things we do each day. When we think of how Jesus came into the drudgery of a fallen world for us, we are also reminded that as we go through even the things we deem "drudgery," we get to serve Him.

That changes the equation about our work. Notice that in our passage today, Paul doesn't say, "If you do special, religious things, you are working for the Lord." Paul says "whatever" you do. Our service to God isn't just what we do when we help bedeck the church for Christmas (or even take down the greenery afterwards). Our service isn't even just when we do spectacular acts of mercy. When we check people out at the store or fill out the accounting spreadsheets that fall under our purview, those things too serve the Lord who came into the world so that we could be part of His family.

While those ordinary things might not be what we would normally put in a "Christmas letter" mailed out to those on our Christmas card list, they are the sorts of things our Heavenly Father eagerly watches us complete the details of. Without Christmas, without being brought into God's family as His children, drudgery really would be just that. But, because of Christmas, everything we do has meaning.

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank you for coming into the world and going through things that you never deserved to face. Thank you for redeeming me. Now, as I go into another year of the work you have placed before us, help me to see how it is pleasing to you no matter how insignificant it might feel. I pray this in your precious name. Amen.

Part III



Because of Christmas...

We Have Reason to Marvel

Day 9: Hope in Opposition

Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed...

– Luke 2:34

Christmas is when we sing of the proclamation of peace on earth and goodwill to man, but often it feels more fitting to echo the words of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and say, “There is no peace on earth [...] for hate is strong / and mocks the song.” What does it look like to be hopeful in the Christmas and believe that, indeed, so many wonderful things happen *because of Christmas* when so little of the joy of Christmas seems to carry into the darkness of January?

This is even harder when we seek to be faithful to Him and His call on our lives and people respond negatively, even hostilely. How do we experience Christmas as joy beyond the season when so often being a follower of Jesus seems to be an act to remove, not add, peace to our lives? What does not happen immediately, we are told, will happen ultimately.

Jesus will triumph over those who oppose Him, something Simeon hints at as prophecies to Mary in the verse we read above: many will fall because of Jesus. That might offer some comfort while also proving disquieting to us: as we think of Jesus as the Prince of Peace, how is it that he will cause many to fall?

John Calvin notes that “falling” is tied to those who oppose Him, not just random collateral damage in a war. There is both a challenge and a comfort in Simeon’s words, for those who have not yet called Jesus “Lord,” it is a call not to miss the Christmas gift of His peace. To do so is to stop opposing Him. For those who do trust in Him, it assures us that while, yes, people have and will oppose him, that is a parenthetical detail in the story of time, not the epilogue.

PRAYER: Jesus, whether for the first or thousandth time, I want to be one who calls you “Lord.” And, as I do so, even when there is opposition, help me to have hope: help me to remember that because you loved the world enough to come into it at Christmas, that while there may be trials in this moment, that I can have hope that you will make all things new and right. I pray this in your precious name. Amen.

Day 10: Hope in the Resurrection

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

– 1 Thess. 4:13-14

Simeon in his song sang of how he could “depart in peace” (v. 29), having seen the fulfillment of the promise God told him would be fulfilled before his death. In a world that struggles with the uncertainties of death, it is often easier to understand the sentiment of Dylan Thomas, whose poem exhorts his father to “not go gently into that good night.”

How do we get to a place like Simeon was where instead we can see God has fulfilled His calling in our lives and be at peace facing death? How can we face the deaths of loved ones with peace? It comes to one point: that God was willing to be born into human form for the express purpose of hurdling towards the death that we – but not He – deserve. The other side of Simeon’s prophecy to Mary is that Jesus didn’t come just to fell His opposition, but to cause many to rise (v. 33).

We try not to think a lot about death when we think about the birth of a baby, but in this case, His death was foretold long before His first breath (Isaiah 53:4-5). While death may be an inevitability in this life, it was a mission for Him. The Apostle Paul tells us that this mission bears most wonderful fruit: we can have confidence that death itself is passing just like sleep. That those who trust in the One who was born, suffered, died and rose for us will follow Him in being raised to new life.

That doesn’t take away the pain in the moment, to be sure. After all, even Jesus wept at Lazarus’s death (John 11:35); death is very much a tragic consequence of this fallen world. When we do grieve, we can grieve with a different perspective, however. Because of the child born in Bethlehem, death is akin to bidding love ones farewell before a long trip, not “forever.”

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, death is so hard to face, whether it is my own or that of those whom I love. Yet, I know you are the One who has triumphed over death and made it a horrid interruption, not the end of the story. Even in the darkest of moments, let me experience the hope that comes from your coming into the world to triumph over death. I pray this in your precious name. Amen.

Day 11: Hope in Sharing

And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

– Luke 2:38

We have a tradition at FaithTree of closing our Christmas service (and often our Epiphany service, too) with “Go Tell It on the Mountain.” The song is not only joyful, it also speaks of exactly what all of us are called to do. When Anna encountered the infant Jesus, what did she do? She gave thanks to God and then could not keep her joy bottled up – she told others who were yearning for the day the Savior would arrive.

She saw just the dawn of the era of the Savior, but we live knowing fully how He revealed Himself. We are called to share that joy just as she did. We too often find ourselves waiting for the redemption of our world, just as those she told were, but we know that Jesus has redeemed us and that coming redemption for the world is ever nearer. He is coming back!

The call to share can be a scary one. After all, as we considered a few days ago, there is often the fear of opposition: sometimes people reject us when we share. Our society urges us to just let everyone seek their own “truth.” Yet, no matter how much people may seek their own paths thinking they will offer fulfillment, ultimately every human heart yearns for things to be made “right,” and there is only One who can answer that yearning. In Romans 10, Paul contemplates the need for people to hear the good news so that they can respond, for when people hear and the Holy Spirit applies what people hear to their hearts, then wonderful things can happen (vv. 14-17).

As we near the end of the Twelve Days of Christmas, there is the risk we will take down Christmas decorations and shuffle back with quiet resignation into the harsh winter, breaking out our joy again only when Easter arrives. God calls us to a different path. He calls us to be those who also constantly give thanks to Him and have that joy flow out of us to our friends and family. Hurting as everyone does from the challenges and disappointments of life, our joy serves to invite our loved ones into the lasting joy of knowing the Savior who came into the world for us. The joy that every person who calls on the name of Jesus and confesses Him as Lord will know: His salvation.

PRAYER: Lord, help me not to take down my Christmas joy as I take down my Christmas decorations. Instead, may the decoration of your grace and love that you place on my heart stay up all year long. Help me to be unable to contain that joy, sharing it with those around me. I pray this in Jesus's name. Amen.

Day 12: Hope in the Ordinary

And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

– Luke 2:39-40

Going into a store at Christmas feels “magical.” The beautiful decorations, the joyful displays, the music. The same store in January feels almost completely transformed, and not for the better: the month of clearance sales turned inventorying is frequently devoid of décor, with empty shelves replacing what once held the trimmings for the family gatherings.

Isn't that a metaphor for our experience, too? The rising to crescendo of celebration culminating on Christmas Day, and perhaps extended to New Year's Day, turns back to routine almost as if nothing of the month before even happened. There is a long stretch of “the ordinary” ahead of us before the next big celebration. Yet, God works in the ordinary just as He works in the extraordinary.

As Mary and Joseph went home, all the appearances given in Scripture suggest there were many years of quiet ordinariness before Jesus began His ministry. The days were not filled with more Simeons and Annas rushing up with excitement or angels singing or travelers from afar presenting gifts. They faced the ordinary just like we do, knowing the promises of the future, but needing to busy themselves with everyday life *right now*.

During Jesus's ministry, the extraordinary rescue of the man possessed by a legion of demons is followed up by Jesus's instruction for him to be an ambassador for His Kingdom in the ordinary places of life: “Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you” (Luke 8:39).

Just like those figures in the Bible, that is what we can do in this new year, too: we return to our homes and our workplaces, to our ordinary routines, but we don't forget what has been celebrated. Rather, each of us – offered God's incredible salvation – can declare in the ordinary how much God has done for us. And as we do that, you and I are reminded we truly do have hope in the ordinary. God's plan is still at work. Even today.

PRAYER: *Father, thank you for showing us your love and giving us hope in the future. Though it can be hard to wait, give us a holy expectation this year, looking forward to all that your plans for the future entail. Help us to travel like the wisemen, confident in your promises. We pray in Jesus's precious name. Amen.*

Next Steps

Thank you for joining me on this devotional adventure over the Christmas season. If you are looking to explore the Scriptures further and experience some of that adopted family of God we discussed above, I would like to invite you to take advantage of the following opportunities to do just that from the two ministries I serve with.

Little Hills Church

We are a new church in St. Charles, Missouri and we would love to have you be a part of our beginning. We believe God has called us to start a church that is driven to serve our community with the love of Christ from the beginning. A church that is centered around a deep love of God's Word and a constant expectation that His Word speaks to our lives today. A church that is intentionally multigenerational and stretches across divides in style with elements from both ancient aspects of worship and recent praise songs.

Interested? Please visit us on the web at www.littlehills.church to find out more about how you can get involved. You can also follow us on social media @LittleHillsChurch (on Facebook and Instagram) and @LittleHillsC (on Twitter).

FaithTree Christian Fellowship

FaithTree aims to connect believers from different churches for worship, prayer and thought-provoking conversations about faith, while making a welcoming space for people who are not yet sure what they believe. We are a ministry led by and rooted in local churches; you can learn more about our story at www.faithtreecf.org or on social media @FaithTreeCF. Please check out our calendar of events and join us in the near future!

Questions? Comments?

Are you wanting to know more about who Jesus is? Do you have a question about the Bible? Would you simply like to provide feedback on this devotional booklet? Please feel free to e-mail me at timothy.butler@faithtree.com. I am always happy to hear from you!