BibleProject

The Road to Christmas

24-Day Advent Reading Plan

You know how the Christmas story ends. But do you know where it started? Welcome to our Christmas reading plan, where we'll trace the foundational stories, symbolic images, key themes, and literary patterns that all lead to Jesus—when God first joins humanity as a newborn in Bethlehem. We've designed each session for deeper reflection on your own or in a group.



DAY 1

The Big Reveal That's Still Mysterious

As a kid, did you ever sit by the Christmas tree shaking a box, trying to guess what was inside? Sometimes it was easy—the jangle of Lego, the squish of socks. Other times, you could guess all day and still be guessing. You just had to wait for the reveal.

Christmas is like the second kind of present. It's the big reveal in a story God's been building since Genesis. It's where foundational moments, images, and patterns scattered across Scripture converge in one mysterious, impossible night in Bethlehem when God became one of us. This reading plan unwraps that story part by part to show how the whole Hebrew Bible was pointing to Jesus all along.

But the big reveal deepens the mystery because God doesn't just show up; he becomes human. The question "Who is God?" takes new shape, as today's video explores. People have spent two thousand years trying to work out what it means for Jesus to be fully God and fully human, a mystery that draws us in more than it satisfies.

The gospels show us both sides. Jesus demonstrates unprecedented power by healing sicknesses or providing a meal out of thin air to nourish thousands. Other times, he asks people to share their food with him because he's hungry. He washes feet, suffers exhaustion, sheds tears, and bleeds red blood. Divine power and human weakness are fully present simultaneously.

So Christmas isn't a standalone story. It's one chapter in a bigger narrative about who God is and how he loves creation and everyone in it with self-giving, unbreakable love.

Video

God

Scripture

John 1:1–4, 14–18
Hebrews 1:1–3

Reflection Exercises

If Jesus really is God in human flesh—not just a messenger sent from God but God himself—and he chose to come to Earth to experience and feel what you feel, how might that change what you talk to him about? Is there a hunger, an exhaustion, or a sorrow in your life that you've been hesitant to bring to God, thinking he's too distant or too holy to understand it firsthand?

John doesn't open his Christmas story with a manger but with "In the beginning" (John 1:1), tracing Jesus's existence to before creation. How does knowing that the baby in the manger is also the God of all creation change how you view Christmas?

DAY 2

The Son of Man: More than a Nickname

You probably know someone who has a nickname. Maybe your coworker Elizabeth prefers "Liz" or your cousin Matthew goes by "Junior."

Jesus has a nickname too. Throughout the gospels, he calls himself "the Son of Man." The gospel writers use this name to describe Jesus more than any other title—over eighty times. But why pick this one?

The answer is in the Hebrew Bible, where "son of man" is sometimes used as a generic term for "human being" (more than ninety times in Ezekiel). In that sense, Mary would agree that Jesus fits the bill as a real human. She probably never forgot those first swaddling moments in Bethlehem.

But the title "son of man" takes on a specific meaning in Daniel 7, as today's video shows, where it seems to refer to more than a generic human. In Daniel's vision, he's an otherworldly figure who has total authority and rules an indestructible kingdom.

Daniel 7's son of man takes a seat next to God's throne and is served by all peoples and nations. By using the term "Son of Man," Jesus shows his connection to this figure. He preaches about his own everlasting Kingdom and claims total authority over Heaven and Earth.

One simple title sparks wonder for everyone who hears Jesus say it. Is this human being also truly God, humble and weak while simultaneously ruler over Heaven and Earth?

Turns out, Jesus's favorite nickname was never just a nickname.

Video

Son of Man

Scripture

Daniel 7:13–14
Mark 10:42–45
Mark 14:60–62

Reflection Exercises

If Jesus's "nickname" was actually a quiet claim to divine authority, what does it say about him that he chose to reveal his identity so subtly rather than announcing it outright?

Jesus claimed the authority of Daniel's "son of man," but he used his power to wash feet and serve, not to be served. Where in life do we tend to think that power means being served rather than serving?

DAY 3

Hope for the Exhausted

If you've heard the carol "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," you've probably noticed that, unlike most Christmas songs, its lyrics are pretty bleak.

"O come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here,
until the Son of God appear."

Captivity. Lonesome exile. Mourning. Not exactly the holly, jolly vibe you'd expect. But it captures an essential Christmas theme: hope. Not wishful optimism but, as you'll see in today's video, a complex and much stronger biblical hope.

Jesus was born under Roman occupation. Crushing taxation and a constant military presence made times genuinely bleak for Jewish people. They were captives, waiting for God to change the world again like he had at the exodus from Egypt.

Hope is hard when waiting brings more waiting. That's exactly why Christmas hope matters. Jesus is called Emmanuel, "God with us," and he promises that oppression will cease as God's presence occupies the whole world.

Jesus didn't come to overthrow Roman occupation because Rome wasn't the real problem. Distance from God was, and Emmanuel means God closed that distance for good—not with an army but with his own life, born in a barn.

Isaiah promises that God never grows tired and always gives strength to the weary (Isa. 40:28–29). Those who wait on him rise up like eagles, run without giving out, and walk without giving up (Isa. 40:31). That was Israel's hope for generations, and on a quiet night in Bethlehem, it finally showed up in person—though, even now, we're still singing that same carol, still waiting on the rest of the promise to arrive.

Video

Yakhal/Hope (Advent 1)

Scripture

Psalm 130:1–5
Isaiah 40:21–22, 28–31
1 Peter 1:3–9

Reflection Exercises

How does the description of hope in the video differ from how you may have thought about hope in the past?

What "Rome" are you hoping for God to overthrow—perhaps a circumstance, a person, a diagnosis? How does it change things to see God's deeper hope as his gift of nearness and strength to endure, rather than an immediate fix for that problem?

DAY 4

Withering No More

Christmas trees don't last forever. No matter how much you water them, once they're cut down, you've got a few weeks, tops, before they're shedding needles on your carpet.

Today's video shows how sin's entry into the world brought decay and severed humanity from God's tree of life, and we've been shedding needles ever since. So how does that connection to the source of life get restored?

It now starts with Christmas, because Jesus's birth is the beginning of God's ultimate step toward fixing what sin cut down. God enters the world as a human to mend what separates humanity from him.

Jesus explains what this looks like in John 15. He describes himself as a vine, echoing Eden's tree of life, and identifies us as its branches. Cut off from the vine, branches wither and die, but when they're connected, they receive its life and produce good fruit.

Jesus grafts broken branches, each of us, into the vine himself. What was dying starts growing again, unlike our Christmas trees, because life from the true vine doesn't end. It keeps producing something real: love, joy, peace—the kind of fruit you can actually hand someone else.

Video

Tree of Life

Scripture

John 15:1–5
Romans 11:17–24
Revelation 22:1–5

Reflection Exercises

Jesus says apart from him, a branch "can do nothing" (John 15:5). Where in your life have you been trying to produce peace, patience, or love according to your own wisdom instead of staying connected to Jesus and trusting God's wisdom?

A cut Christmas tree stays green and looks alive for weeks before it starts obviously dying. Is there a part of your life that looks fine on the outside but has quietly been cut off from God for a while?

DAY 5

Christmas and the Snake Crusher

So why do we call Christmas "Christmas" anyways?

For centuries, Christians called the celebration of Jesus's birth the Feast of the Nativity ("nativity" comes from the Latin *nativitas,* meaning "birth"). By medieval times, some had begun calling this feast "Christ's Mass," which was later shortened to "Christmas."

The key word, of course, is "Christ." It comes from the Greek *khristos,* meaning "anointed one" or "chosen one," as today's video explores. Biblical authors use *khristos* to translate the Hebrew word *mashiakh,* the root of "Messiah." In other words, Christ isn't Jesus's last name. It means he's the anointed, chosen Messiah—the one God promised would heal the world.

By Jesus's day, Jewish people had hoped for this Messiah for centuries. But no one agreed on what he would look like. A warrior king or a righteous teacher? A priestly leader or an apocalyptic prophet?

Isaiah pictured him ruling not by force but with such perfect justice that he will "strike the earth with the rod of his mouth" (Isa. 11:4 NET). In other words, truth is the only weapon he needs. In his renewed world, a wolf naps beside a lamb and a lion shares straw with cattle, "for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord" (Isa. 11:6–9 ESV). Not a kingdom of corpses or winners and losers—a kingdom with everyone sharing a meal.

That's Jesus-style ruling. Without treasure or armies, he destroys evil by healing lepers, forgiving even the soldiers who killed him, and telling his followers to love enemies, not wipe them out. So "Merry Christmas" isn't just a happy holiday greeting—it's celebrating God's promised, anointed king who brings peace to everything and everyone on Earth.

Video

The Messiah

Scripture

Genesis 49:10
Micah 5:2–4
Isaiah 11:1–9

Reflection Exercises

Micah 5:2 said the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, a small, backwater town in Judah. Where in your own life might God be working powerfully in something that looks small, ordinary, or easy to overlook?

Isaiah says the Messiah rules with "the rod of his mouth" (Isa. 11:4), not a sword—truth instead of force. Are there times when you are tempted to control or overpower a situation rather than to tell the truth with love and let that be enough?

DAY 6

The Divine Relocation Project

Christmas breaks expectations. The God of the universe gets close, arriving as a helpless infant born to a working-class mother in a stable. Jerusalem's massive, beautiful temple was only about six miles away, but God chose a barn to make his entrance.

In Jesus's time, as today's video notes, the Jerusalem temple was the sacred space where Heaven met Earth. It was God's house, the one place his presence lived closest to people. That's why the Hebrew Bible spends so much time on purity laws and temple sacrifices. Meeting God there required purification rituals, priests, and proper offerings.

Jesus's arrival changes that because, as John's gospel says, in Jesus "the Word became flesh and took up residence among us" (1:14 NET). God's dwelling space moves from within Jerusalem's temple walls to people everywhere. Paul says our bodies are God's temple now, so people encounter God through relationships with others who follow the way of Jesus.

Matthew says that when Jesus died on the cross, the massive curtain covering the entrance to the temple's holy of holies ripped from top to bottom. The barrier separating God's dwelling space from humanity was not needed anymore.

We no longer need a pilgrimage to honor God or meet with God at a specific geographic location. God comes to us in Jesus and then through people, human beings who each bear God's own image. It's why Jesus describes love for God and love for others as the same thing. God's remarkable plan is nothing we could have expected.

Video

Heaven & Earth

Scripture

John 1:1–5, 14–18
1 Corinthians 6:19
Ephesians 2:17–22

Reflection Exercises

John 1:14 says God made his "dwelling" or "residence" among us—God moving in, not visiting. Does God sometimes feel distant, like you have to find him? How would your life change if you saw God as having already moved in with you?

Christmas is about God showing up small, poor, and unexpected. Where in your life might God be showing up in a way that looks small, ordinary, or unlikely?

DAY 7

A (Not-So) Silent Night

One of the most famous scenes in the Christmas story is the angels announcing the Messiah's birth to shepherds at night. In Luke's gospel, this encounter ends with a sky full of angels singing glory to God in Heaven and proclaiming peace on Earth among those whom God is happy about (2:14).

Peace sometimes gets skimmed over. It's viewed as a synonym for calm and quiet, like the song "Silent Night" depicts: "All is calm, all is bright." But as today's video shows, the biblical idea of peace means something more.

In the Hebrew Bible, the word for "peace," *shalom,* expresses the idea of wholeness, completeness, harmony—everything working as God intended, from physical health to friendships to political alliances to a person's relationship with God.

Shalom is flourishing, the way things were meant to be.

So when the angels announce peace on Earth, they're promising something better than a calm, quiet night. They're proclaiming the arrival of the one who will fix our broken world and make it whole again—harmonious and functioning well.

Jesus's peace touches every part of life. It restores our relationship with God and calls us to extend that same peace to friends and strangers alike.

The peace God's angels announced that night wasn't silent or calm, but it was bright—a loud promise that everything will change as Jesus brings peace on Earth as it is in Heaven.

Video

Shalom/Peace (Advent 2)

Scripture

Isaiah 9:6–7
Luke 2:8–16
Matthew 5:9

Reflection Exercises

Isaiah calls the Messiah the "Prince of Peace" who will bring endless peace through justice and righteousness (Isa. 9:6–7). Where do you long for justice, not just calm, in your own life or in the world around you?

Jesus calls everyone to extend his peace to friends, strangers, and enemies constantly, until it fills the earth. Who's someone in your life (a neighbor, a difficult coworker, a distant relative) you could extend peace to this week, and what could that look like?

DAY 8

Redefining Good News

The angels who meet with the Bethlehem shepherds say they're bringing good news of great joy for all people—everyone. And who doesn't like good news? But this specific term, "good news," means more than a positive report, as you'll see in today's video. It's about a new ruler taking power.

The Greek verb *euangelizo* means "to bring good news," and its corresponding noun, *euangelion,* is often translated "Gospel," "good news," or "good tidings." In Jesus's day, *euangelion* described a kind of announcement—the proclamation of military victory, birth of a royal heir, or the crowning of a new ruler.

In other words, this "good news" was imperial propaganda—an announcement stressing the emperor's identity as the one true savior of the people.

The angels' *euangelion* flips the script. It announces the birth of a king different from any earthly emperor, one whose power rests in love rather than royal force. It proclaims a kingdom defined by healing and peace, forgiveness and love of our enemies, not conquest.

Emperors and presidents demand your loyalty. King Jesus asks for something else: your trust, your forgiveness, your love for people who don't deserve it. That's the kingdom Christmas announces, one where showing mercy to the person who wronged you is the victory, where loving the neighbor who annoys you is the conquest.

And that's the throne we're all invited to serve this Christmas, one small act of love at a time.

Video

Gospel of the Kingdom

Scripture

Isaiah 52:7–10
Matthew 4:23–24
Matthew 18:1–5

Reflection Exercises

Isaiah describes a messenger bringing good news of peace as having "beautiful . . . feet" (Isa. 52:7 ESV), an image of someone worth celebrating. Who in your life has been that kind of messenger to you, someone whose presence itself brought relief or hope?

We said that Jesus's Kingdom runs on trust, forgiveness, and love for people who don't deserve it—the opposite of what emperors demand. Where in life might you be more focused on loyalty to power (a boss, a status, an image) than on extending forgiveness and love?

DAY 9

Water for Very Dry Souls

There's a constant temptation at Christmas to get wrapped up in consumption—more presents and parties, more tinsel and TV specials. Jesus's manger can get buried under all the "stuff."

That thirst for more stands in stark contrast to what Christmas actually offers: *living water.* Stories in Scripture are filled with people thirsting for true life. But like us, they try to satisfy that thirst with other stuff like power, wealth, self-gratification. None of it works. Life decomposes, and all that's left are sun-scorched bones.

Ezekiel saw something like this in his vision of a valley littered with "very dry" bones (Ezek. 37:2), a nation entirely sapped of life. Not thirsty. *Dead.* And God asks the impossible: "Can these bones live?" (37:3). Then divine breath enters them like water during a drought, and they come to life (37:10).

In John's gospel, Jesus taps into that death-to-life experience by inviting people to drink living water from him (see more about this "water of life" in today's video). It's not a sip for the mildly parched but renewed life for the utterly dried out.

Christmas invites reflection on what we're actually drinking from this year. Something that quiets the thirst for a night, or the water that quenches—the life of God that raises dry bones? Christmas isn't asking us to add one more thing to our cup. It's asking whether we're ready to come back to life.

Video

Water of Life

Scripture

Ezekiel 37:1–14
John 7:37–38

Reflection Exercises

God asks Ezekiel an impossible-sounding question: "Can these [dead, dry] bones live?" (37:3). Where in life might you want to ask a similar question—somewhere you've maybe written off as hopeless or too far gone to come back?

John 7:38 says that those who believe in Jesus will have "rivers of living water" flowing from *within* them, indicating not just relief for yourself, but overflow intended for others. What does it look like this week to "overflow" with Jesus's life and love for others?

DAY 10

The God Who Respects You

"Hark! the herald angels sing, 'Glory to the newborn King!'" Yes, he's a nursing newborn who maybe needs a change. But he's a newborn *king* as well, and that could get gnarly. Kings crave control.

But that's just it. The King the angels are harking and heralding about is humble, not dominating. Notice how today's video unpacks the choice that Jesus offers (later, when he's a grown-up). He doesn't force or threaten anyone. Instead, he offers options and explains what's at stake.

Jesus describes two gates. One is wide and lets crowds comfortably pour through. The other is narrow, and few take it (Matt. 7:13–14). But nobody gets pushed through either gate.

Or take two house builders (Matt. 7:24–27). One builds on rock while the other chooses a sand foundation. Jesus says the rock guy is like one who hears and follows his instructions. But the one who hears him and doesn't listen is like the sand guy, vulnerable to chaos. Either way, you get to pick.

That's the God Christmas glorifies: not a dictator who conquers you, but a king who respects you enough to let you say no. He won't drag you through the gate or build the house for you.

This Christmas, "Let earth receive her King" can be more than a pretty lyric. It can signal a genuine fork in the road, because even when this newborn becomes the ultimate ruler over Heaven and Earth, King Jesus still respects us and lets us choose.

Beware, however: He's been known to love people relentlessly, until the good choice becomes more and more obvious.

Video

The Choice

Scripture

Matthew 7:13–27

Reflection Exercises

Both builders in Matthew 7 hear Jesus's words, but only one acts on what he hears. Where do you find yourself agreeing with something Jesus says, but still choosing to do something else?

If God wanted total control, he could have made humans incapable of choosing wrong. Instead, Eden had two trees. Matthew has two gates. What does that reveal about what God actually values, control or something else?

DAY 11

Love That Won't Quit

Picture a toddler mid-meltdown, screaming that they hate broccoli, hate bedtime, hate you! Now picture the parent who scoops them up anyway. That's not weakness. That's *khesed,* the Hebrew word for "loyal love" or "lovingkindness." The Bible uses it to describe the way God loves everything—and everyone—he created, and when you understand it more, you'll see the Christmas story from a fresh perspective.

Khesed is a packed term that can refer to everything from lovingkindness and favor to faithfulness and mercy. As today's video explains, it also describes the love God gives freely, without receiving anything in return.

In the Hebrew Bible, people like Abraham, Moses, and David all praise God's enduring *khesed,* including in situations where God remains loyal to people even as they actively ignore or reject him. God describes his own character as "abounding in loyal love [*khesed*] and faithfulness," and also as "compassionate and gracious" (Exod. 34:6).

God's *khesed* has no limit or end. We are changing, but his love is not.

Christmas is the unique moment when God's *khesed* shows up in the flesh. God didn't just send *khesed.* He became it, wrapped in tender skin, resting in a manger, later loving people who would scream that they hated him too.

That's the love we've all been given. And it's the same love you're now free to hand to someone else, especially the next time they're mid-tantrum and refusing to love you back. Maybe the world says we don't "deserve" it, but God sees you and everyone else as beloved children, people worth loving no matter what.

Video

Khesed/Loyal Love

Scripture

Exodus 34:–6
Psalm 136:1–9, 25–26

Reflection Exercises

Exodus 34:6 says God is "slow to anger." Where in life is your own patience running short lately, and what might it look like to borrow some of God's *khesed* (loyal love) there?

Psalm 136 praises God's *khesed* alongside creation—sun, moon, stars (136:7–9). Where do you see God's steady love showing up in ordinary, everyday things, not just big spiritual moments?

DAY 12

Rugged Joy to the World

Joy in the Bible shows up in strange places. Sometimes it's Israel on the shore of an ocean they just walked through, singing praises after God parts the Red Sea. Other times it's lonesome exiles, captive and exhausted, but still learning to sing anyway.

The rugged joy Scripture describes doesn't wait for everything to get fixed first, which is true even at Christmas—maybe *especially* at Christmas. Mary sings with a smile about her pregnancy. Angels announce glory and peace, and shepherds run through fields to see a newborn king. But conflict is coming.

That same baby will eventually trade his manger for a cross, and Mary's singing in Luke 1 will become weeping at her son's death. Christmas joy eventually leads to Good Friday's pain, yet joy saturates *both* scenes.

We're not talking about joy as shallow optimism, a distraction from suffering, or proof that everything's fine. Real joy is sturdier, rooted in rugged trust that God is near, especially during the hardest chapters.

Jesus told his disciples before his death that they'd grieve, the way a mother suffers in labor before holding her baby in peace (John 16:20–22). You can grieve and still hold on to hope, as today's video explains, because joy anchors itself in God's promises. It remembers how he rescued before, and it leans toward the day when he will rescue again and wipe away every tear.

That's the pattern Christmas invites you into. Not joy instead of sorrow, but joy that endures alongside sorrow, grows through it, and comes out stronger.

This Christmas, you don't have to fake happiness or wait for your circumstances to improve. Trust that the rugged joy growing in you will keep growing until it's permanent.

Video

Chara/Joy (Advent 3)

Scripture

Habakkuk 3:17–19
Isaiah 61:1–4
John 16:16–22

Reflection Exercises

Habakkuk says he'll rejoice in God even if the crops fail and the fields stand empty (3:17–19). What's your version of "empty fields" right now, and what would it look like to rejoice in the middle of it, not only after it's fixed?

Isaiah says God sends good news to the brokenhearted and freedom to captives (61:1). Who do you know, maybe even yourself, who needs to hear that good news this Christmas?

DAY 13

The Infinite Power of Humility

Here's a strange pattern running through the Bible: God keeps choosing weakness that turns out to be the strongest thing in the room.

Christmas could be the clearest example. Angels announce the arrival of God not to high-status emperors but lowly shepherds, watching their fields by night. God arrives in the weakest form, a human infant, immediately upending popular assumptions about power.

In Colossians, Paul describes Jesus as the God strong enough to hold all creation together—stars in space, atoms, everything (Col. 1:15–17). That's as powerful as it gets.

Then in Philippians, Paul says this same all-powerful Jesus "emptied himself" of the controlling kind of power to take on a servant's life and embrace the greater, serving kind of power (Phil. 2:6–8). His love is so generous, even toward enemies, that he refuses to hurt them even when they're executing him (Luke 23:34).

Because of this, Paul says, God raised him to the highest place of all (Phil. 2:9). Jesus's humility wasn't a detour from power. It was the path to it.

That's the pattern to notice this Christmas: Humility is not the opposite of strength. It's the shape real strength takes.

So when Jesus says the first will be last and the last first, as today's video illustrates, he's not describing a nice ideal. He's describing how the universe actually works, because he's the one who built it that way.

Christmas is about God arriving small, and through vulnerability and "weakness," God gently shows humanity what real power looks like.

Video

The Last Will Be First

Scripture

Colossians 1:15–20
Philippians 2:5–11

Reflection Exercises

We said that humility "is the shape real strength takes." Think of someone you consider truly strong. Does their strength look more like control, or more like humble care for others?

Philippians says Jesus "emptied himself" instead of gripping on to power (Phil. 2:6–7). What's something you're gripping on to right now—control, status, being right—that you could loosen your grasp on by choosing to help others instead?

DAY 14

Mary's Song: The Magnificat

The first Christmas carol—*ever*—is sung before Jesus is born, from the lips of Mary herself. Many call it the *Magnificat,* which is Latin for "praise" or "exalt," because in the first line she sings, "My soul *exalts* the Lord" (Luke 1:46).

Mary's praise is a thankful response to God not only for blessing her as Jesus's mother, but also for coming to set the world right.

The Magnificat sounds different from other Christmas songs we're used to. It strikes hard with a sharp focus on justice, as Mary praises God for crippling the power of the proud while blessing the poor, hungry, and socially outcast. Mary's Christmas carol glorifies God for turning all injustice on its head.

We don't usually associate Christmas with justice. Joy, hopeful anticipation, and peace on Earth feel more familiar. But Jesus's birth is the arrival of God as a human to teach the world his humble way of mercy and self-sacrificial love, a justice so strong that it crushes evil power without lifting a sword.

Perhaps no one puts it better than theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "For those who are great and powerful in this world, there are two places where their courage fails them. . . . These are the manger and the cross of Jesus Christ."

Video

Justice

Scripture

Luke 1:39–55

Reflection Exercises

Mary sings this song of world-altering hope while unmarried and pregnant, socially vulnerable, before any of it has come to pass. Where in your own life might God be inviting you to trust him long before you can see the outcome?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said the powerful fear two places: the manger and the cross. Why do you think humility and weakness are more threatening to power than force is?

DAY 15

All Pretending Aside

Somewhere between the last Christmas party and the candlelight service, maybe you've caught yourself smiling a pretend smile or saying "So blessed" through gritted teeth. December can turn us into performers, reciting the lines of faith and cheer even if our hearts aren't in it.

Jesus knew this temptation well, and in the Sermon on the Mount (which today's video dives into), he names it directly. Giving, praying, fasting—when done to be seen by others instead of done because we mean it, these things have no meaningful effect.

He wasn't criticizing the practices themselves; he wanted people to examine their motives for doing them. When our giving needs an audience and our prayers need applause, worship becomes theater that deceives everyone.

Pretending, even about small things, quietly tells us that our real self isn't acceptable, that only the polished version gets to belong. Trying to maintain both versions is exhausting.

Which might be why Jesus has zero interest in flawless performances. In Matthew 6:1–13, notice how Jesus teaches simple and honest prayer to a loving God who already knows what's hidden within and true about us. No audience required. Nothing to prove. Just open, safe engagement with our creator who, like a good parent, teaches us along the way.

It's the way of Jesus and a picture of the way God built everyone to live. He invites us to let our shoulders down, breathe deep, and know that he can be trusted in real friendship. He's the teacher and healer, not the condemner.

This Christmas, that might be the most countercultural gift you give: showing up as you actually are, trusting God already sees you, and finding out it's enough.

Video

Warnings About Religious Practices

Scripture

Matthew 6:1–13

Reflection Exercises

In the past few weeks, did you say or do something "faithful" mostly to keep things smooth with the people around you? What did that feel like in the moment, and what did it cost you afterward?

Jesus points to giving, praying, and fasting as places our motives often get tested. As you read that list, which one quietly raised your hand? Where does the pull toward being seen show up most for you?

DAY 16

Christmas and the Dragon

Matthew's Christmas story doesn't end with shepherds and a manger. It ends with soldiers going door-to-door in Bethlehem to slaughter every baby boy they can find. Herod hears a king has been born, and he wants him dead. Jesus's family escapes in the night and heads toward Egypt. That's Christmas, according to Matthew—not just a birth, but a massacre.

Have you ever noticed that something similar happened back in Genesis, in Eden's garden? Adam and Eve receive life, but a cruel snake immediately tries to take it. From there, as today's video shows, we see story after story describing the monstrous power of sin with snakey dragon imagery, and a clear pattern emerges.

People harmed by enemy violence instinctively use the same "dragon" power to return harm and destroy their enemies. But Christmas delivers history's turn: The pattern breaks. The dragon doesn't win this time.

Jesus beats sin at the cross, giving his life to enemies rather than fighting them. He also shows us how to resist evil power every day, not with more violence but the exact opposite. Kindness instead of payback. Peace instead of power grabs. Generous sharing for all neighbors instead of hoarding for me and mine.

Jesus is clear that you can't out-violence violence. Evil doesn't stop evil. It just feeds the same dragon that's been eating people since Eden. The only truly victorious path is Jesus's way of love for everyone God created—which includes enemies.

Video

Chaos Dragon

Scripture

Genesis 3:1–7
Isaiah 51:9–11
Romans 12:17–21

Reflection Exercises

Matthew includes Herod's violence right alongside the Christmas story most of us know. How does that surprise you or grab your attention? What does it change about how you think of Jesus's birth?

We described kindness, peace, and generosity as the opposite of payback, power-grabbing, and hoarding. Which of those feels most possible to practice right now, and which feels furthest away?

DAY 17

How to Fill a Law Full

You've probably heard that Jesus "fulfilled God's law." That sounds better than breaking it, but is there a difference between obeying a law and fulfilling it?

The short version: God never wanted people to mindlessly follow his rules. God gave instructions to transform hearts and create people who *want* to follow. The law taught people how to treat one another—honestly, generously, without stepping on your neighbor to get ahead. But those rules can simply be obeyed or they can be fulfilled—filled full.

In Matthew 5, Jesus says flat-out that he didn't come to break any of God's instructions but to fill them up by living with love.

You can obey "don't murder" but still hate people. To fulfill it, you address the anger inside before it even becomes motivation to act on. Fulfilling God's instruction isn't just avoiding harm but pursuing the best version of loving someone.

In Romans 13, Paul says that every command—don't steal, don't cheat, don't covet—comes down to one thing: Love your neighbor like yourself. Do that, and you've fulfilled the whole law. That's how Jesus fulfilled it.

That's also the heart of "righteousness," a word from the Greek *dikaiosune,* meaning "right relating." To be righteous is to relate rightly with others, and Jesus clarifies that this means living so that love drives every relationship you're in.

That's Jesus's fulfillment of the law. Not just a promise kept in Bethlehem. His Christmas gift is a whole new way of being human, of right relating, ours to practice each day.

Video

Jesus Fulfills the Law

Scripture

Matthew 5:17–20
Romans 13:8–10

Reflection Exercises

In Romans 13:8–10, Paul collapses every command into one: Love your neighbor as yourself. Is there a neighbor—a coworker, a family member, an actual next-door neighbor—you're acting well toward but not really loving? What would it look like to embrace Jesus's kind of love for that person?

What changes when you think of righteousness as personal morality, always doing the right thing according to the rules, versus righteousness as a way of always doing right by others?

DAY 18

Created to Love

You see a Christmas greeting that says, "Jesus loves you," and have to wonder: What does that really mean? You can love a good pizza or love your dog or love a close friend. Everyone loves perfect weather. How does Jesus love people, truly?

Common Greek in the first century CE had multiple words to choose from for "love," which made it easier to know what kind they meant: romance *(eros)*, friendship *(philia)*, family loyalty *(storge)*, even self-love *(philautia)*. To describe Jesus's way of love, New Testament authors used another word, *agape*—unconditional, sacrificial love that seeks the good of another. (See more on *agape* in today's video.)

Agape love isn't something you fall in. It's an active choice to bless and care for the other. In John 3:16, Jesus says God "*loved* the world" not in general but in a specific way, with *agape* love. John wants readers to see that Jesus is God, who selflessly gives his own life to bless the world.

Which highlights a Christmas mystery: None of the birth narratives in Scripture use the word "love." All over the place, authors talk about grace and favor, mercy and compassion, joy and rejoicing, but never "love."

Maybe it's because Jesus *is* love, shown up in person. God's gift of selfless love unites with humanity, and it's not like presents under the tree that you keep for yourself. *Agape* love is supposed to keep moving through us, to every neighbor, every people group and nation—literally everyone—until it fills the earth.

Video

Agape/Love (Advent 4)

Scripture

1 Corinthians 13:1–13
John 15:12–17

Reflection Exercises

1 Corinthians 13:4–5 says love is patient and kind and doesn't seek its own benefit—it's an action and choice more than a passive feeling. Where in life is it easy to mistake a *feeling* of love for the real, active thing?

In John 15:12, Jesus doesn't just describe love, he commands it: "love one another, just as I have loved you." Does it change anything to see love framed as an instruction to follow rather than only an emotion?

DAY 19

Reclaiming What Was Stolen

Imagine someone desperate for money who sells something they love to get it and then scrapes together the cash to buy the item back. That feeling—getting back what was yours—is basically the plot of Christmas.

The Gospel of Luke (and the whole Bible) calls it redemption, and before Luke even gets to Jesus's birth, he sets up the idea through an unlikely character: John the Baptizer.

John's mom, Elizabeth, is Mary's relative. While both women are pregnant, Mary visits her. Soon after, Elizabeth gives birth to John, a kid people quickly sense is marked for something big.

How do they know that? Zechariah, John's father, gets filled with the Holy Spirit and starts prophesying. He says Jesus is the savior that the prophets promised would redeem God's people—that is, return them to the one they belong to. And Zechariah says his own son, John, will be the opening act, the guy who prepares the world for what Jesus is about to do.

That word *redeem* is the key. As today's video shows, it's about reclaiming and restoring. Something you love gets stolen, lost, locked away, and someone pays whatever it costs to get it back. In the Bible's story, humanity has been taken, enslaved by a violent, deadly master who has no rightful ownership of anything. Jesus is God stepping in, returning all creation and each of us to where we belong—redeeming everything God has made.

So Christmas isn't just a birth story. It's God reclaiming his beloved world and providing whatever it costs to complete the redemption. As you go about your week, perhaps ponder in your heart what this means about God's love for *you*.

Video

Redemption

Scripture

Exodus 6:6–8
Luke 1:57–59

Reflection Exercises

Zechariah's prophecy in Luke 1:67–79 praises God for redemption before Jesus is even born. He's celebrating a rescue he can't fully see yet. What are you still waiting to see resolved, even while trusting it's already in motion?

Exodus 6:7 says God will take Israel back (from Pharaoh) and call them "my people," and it ends with God saying "you shall know that I am the Lord your God," suggesting the point of redemption isn't only rescue but also relationship. Has faith felt more like being rescued *from* something or being brought *into* something? What's the difference for you?

DAY 20

How to Give (and Receive) "Sky Stuff"

Technically, Jesus got the very first Christmas gifts. Matthew's gospel has the magi showing up with gold, frankincense, and myrrh to honor Jesus with kingly gifts. The tradition of Christmas gift-giving has changed dramatically since then (a lot less frankincense, for starters). So one has to wonder: *What would Jesus think about this practice today?*

Gold, frankincense, myrrh: The magi didn't show up empty-handed, and it's a beautiful picture. Showing up with your best gift for someone you believe in is a loving instinct. It's probably the reason we still exchange gifts at Christmas.

But Jesus grows up and points to a gift that outlasts all of that. In the Sermon on the Mount, as today's video shows, he warns against chasing "treasures on earth" (Matt. 6:19). Stuff doesn't last. New toys, new clothes, new technology—it's all shiny and promising until it's worn and broken.

Then he goes further: You can't serve both God and stuff. Consumerism and Christ don't share a throne. Instead, Jesus says, go for "sky stuff" or "treasures in heaven."

That latter phrase shows up again when a wealthy man asks Jesus how to inherit eternal life. Their chat goes fine until Jesus tells him to sell everything he owns to bless poor neighbors with what they need. Living with love like that is what it means to receive, or inherit, eternal life. The guy walks away crushed. That's not what he thought Jesus would say.

None of this means material possessions are evil or that gift giving is bad. Our possessions are all gifts from God too. And that's the point: God gives his stuff to bless others and keeps providing for everyone. Jesus says to do likewise, generously and with love. Living like that is taking on, or inheriting, God's own life—incorruptible, eternal. That's the sky stuff, the real gold.

Video

Wealth and Worry

Scripture

Matthew 6:19–34
Luke 18:18–24

Reflection Exercises

Matthew 6:33 says to seek God's Kingdom first, and "these things," or what we need to live, will be provided. What would it look like, practically, to seek God's Kingdom first this Christmas, before the shopping, before the perfect gift?

Matthew 6:25–27 asks why we suffer so much worry over whether or not we'll have enough to survive when God shows through nature that he's already provided more than enough. Even birds are cared for without stockpiling anything. Where does that kind of worry show up for you around the holidays? Is it perhaps related to money, image, or keeping up?

DAY 21

What Does "Eternal Life" Really Mean?

When we hear that Jesus offers "eternal life," it's easy to assume that means living forever, like an existence that never runs out. That's part of the story, but it's not really the main point.

Imagine someone offers you a "long life" versus a "good life." One promises a quantity or duration of life, the other a quality or kind of life. New Testament authors talk about the life that Jesus gives in both ways, and our readings today give examples of both. In John 3:15–16 and 10:28, the idea is quality or kind of life.

Today's video unpacks it more, translating eternal life as "life unto the age." However we make sense of it, it has everything to do with life no longer ruled by death.

John's gospel makes this connection from the beginning. He says Jesus brought life itself into the world, light breaking into the dark (see John 1:4). In John 3:16, the eternal life Jesus gives isn't just so we can carry on forever; it's a kind of life that's like God's: fearless, incorruptible, and loving throughout. And John is clear that this isn't just for some—it's for the whole world (Greek: *kosmos*), which means everything and everyone God has made (3:17).

So when Jesus talks about eternal life, he's not just talking about how long. He's talking about what kind. It's a life where death doesn't get to call any shots anymore.

The best part is, of all places, this infinitely good way of being human starts with a baby in a manger.

Video

Eternal Life

Scripture

John 3:14–17
John 10:27–28
John 11:25–27

Reflection Exercises

"Eternal life" isn't just about some day in the future. It's a different kind of life starting now. It's seen best in Jesus's way of life compelled by love and never fear of death. What would it look like to live like that this week?

John 3:17 says God's unbreakable love is for the whole world, no exceptions. Is there anyone, including you, that you've quietly placed outside that "whole world"? What would it take to bring them back in?

DAY 22

Heaven Comes to Earth

Picture the popular image of "going to Heaven when you die"—sort of floating up into gleaming clouds, leaving Earth behind for good. That's not actually what Jesus described, which means Christmas is less about the Savior who pulls us up and away and (much) more about the Savior who joins Heaven with Earth. It's about God moving in.

Look at the Lord's Prayer, the topic of today's video. Jesus teaches his disciples to ask for God's Kingdom to exist on Earth like it does in Heaven, and for God's will to be done by everyone on Earth. It's not "take us to Heaven" but "bring Heaven here."

That's exactly what happens at Christmas. In Jesus, God comes to Earth and unites with us. The separation between Heaven and Earth closes in him, a baby in swaddling cloths. Then Mary and Joseph teach him his first steps, and eventually he's walking with neighbors, sharing dinner, and getting his hands dirty in the same dust we're made from.

So when Jesus tells us to pray for God's Kingdom to come and God's will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven, he's talking about our living rooms and locker rooms, our workplaces and schools—the whole creation. That's what started at Christmas. The world is still broken in so many ways, which is why Jesus invites his disciples and everyone else to partner with God in finishing the work.

With Jesus, we stay loving and keep praying like he does in the Lord's Prayer until the Heaven-Earth reunion is complete, when God and everyone are friends again.

Video

The Lord's Prayer

Scripture

Matthew 6:9–13
Luke 11:1–13

Reflection Exercises

We noted that Christmas isn't about God arriving to help us escape Earth, but God moving into the neighborhood to unite Heaven and Earth. How might that change the way you view your own life right now?

Matthew 6:11–13 shows Jesus teaching people that asking God to provide daily bread, forgiveness, and protection is a good way to pray. They're ordinary, everyday needs, not abstract spiritual ones. What's one concrete, unglamorous thing you need God's help with today?

DAY 23

The Creator Enters Creation

You can't really tell the Christmas story without mentioning Bethlehem—the little town, the packed inn, the manger. We picture that setting every time.

Except John skips it entirely. No stable or shepherds, no Bethlehem. Today's video looks at the story John tells in the opening of his gospel, and he's telling the same story from a completely different angle. Instead of zooming in on the manger, John uses a wide-angle lens to zoom way out, starting with a hyperlink to Genesis.

"In the beginning," John writes, letting us know this Jesus story is a creation story just like the first creation story in Genesis, which also starts with "In the beginning" (Gen. 1:1). Before Bethlehem, before Israel, before the first sunrise, there was the Word. That Word, John says, was with God and was God. When God said "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3) and light came to exist, that same creative power of his Word flows through Jesus.

Then John zooms back in. That same Word who spoke galaxies into existence becomes flesh, with skin and a heartbeat and dirty feet. That's John's version of the manger scene: the force behind creation itself, showing up as a newborn you could hold and swaddle. We get real closeness with God now, no longer admiring from a distance. John's big point is that if you want to know what God is like, meet Jesus. He's not just like God, he *is* God.

So John isn't ignoring Christmas in his gospel. He's showing us that it's bigger than a Bethlehem stable. The baby in the manger is the same Word that made the stars. The one who made all things at first is now making all things new.

Video

John 1

Scripture

John 1:1–18

Reflection Exercises

John 1:14 says the Word "became flesh"—or as mentioned above, got skin, a heartbeat, and dirty feet. Does it change how you relate to Jesus to picture him that concretely, rather than as a distant, abstract idea of God?

John opens with "In the beginning," deliberately echoing Genesis. What does it change for you to think of Jesus's birth not as the start of a new story, but as part of the same story that began at creation?

DAY 24

No Palace, No Parade, No Problem

It only makes sense to end this plan with Luke's gospel, the version most of us picture when we think "Christmas." But like we've seen all along, the familiar version can hide the wilder story underneath.

Luke's account completely upends Roman expectations for the birth of a future king. When a Roman heir was born, the empire threw massive parties—parades, games, feasts, and sacrifices, all paid for with freshly minted coins to celebrate the birth. That's how you spread the "good news" of a new king back then: loud, official, everywhere.

God's version of a birth announcement is also called good news, but it looks nothing like that. Instead of a palace, we have a stable, animals, and a dirt floor. No royal advisors—just a handful of shepherds who probably smelled like their sheep. No parade. If you're grading this birth by Roman standards, it barely registers.

Until the angels show up. To Roman ears, that would've been bizarre. Sure, emperors got the occasional dramatic omen, like a comet or a lightning strike. But a full-blown choir of supernatural beings, singing over a poor family's baby in the middle of nowhere? Unheard of. It's a wild, over-the-top announcement for what looked like nothing.

Too often we view the Christmas narrative like a sentimental church pageant: clean, tidy, kids in bathrobes holding a plastic lamb. But look closer, and you see boldness. It's God flipping the script on the way power is supposed to work by becoming a King who operates like a kindhearted friend. He builds his Kingdom on love and mercy instead of armies and thrones.

That's the real Christmas story—not quiet, but jarring, proof that God is remaking our world, you and everyone else included. It's the greatest gift—God's own life—first wrapped in swaddling cloths and finally reigning as true King to teach everyone his way of patience, forgiveness, and unbreakable love.

Video

The Birth of Jesus: Luke 1-2

Scripture

Luke 2:1–20

Reflection Exercises

Rome announced a royal birth with parades and feasts—loud, official, unmistakable. God announced his King's birth to a few shepherds in a field. Why might God's version of good news look almost invisible by the standards the world uses to recognize importance?

After seeing Jesus, the shepherds went back to their ordinary work, "praising God for all they had seen and heard" (Luke 2:20). The experience didn't relocate them, but it changed how they carried on with the same life. What ordinary part of life could use that same kind of quiet transformation, rather than a total change of scenery?

We hope this plan has helped you see Christmas from new angles and, especially, the fuller picture of Scripture's story that leads to Jesus. May your Christmas be full of love, peace, and that same wild hope.