

WHO IS *Jesus?*

*AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL
FROM THE GLOBAL CHURCH*

WITH AN INTRODUCTION FROM
CHRISTOPHER J. H. WRIGHT

GLOBAL AMBASSADOR FOR LANGHAM PARTNERSHIP

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Who is Jesus? An Advent Devotional from the Global Church

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Langham Partnership is a global fellowship working in pursuit of the vision God entrusted to its founder, John Stott, to raise the standard of biblical preaching and teaching where the church is under pressure, in poverty, and yet full of potential.

Our vision is to see churches in the Majority World equipped for mission and growing in maturity through the ministry of pastors and leaders who believe and live by the Word of God.

Our mission is to strengthen the ministry of the Word of God through:

- Nurturing national movements for biblical preaching (Langham Preaching)
- Fostering the creation and distribution of evangelical literature (Langham Literature)
- Strengthening the theological training of pastors and leaders by qualified evangelical teachers (Langham Scholars)

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
DAY 1: JESUS IS GOD (JOHN 1:1-2)	4
DAY 2: JESUS IS THE SON OF GOD (JOHN 1:49)	6
DAY 3: JESUS IS THE SON OF DAVID (LUKE 18:39)	8
DAY 4: JESUS IS THE GOOD SHEPHERD (JOHN 10:11-14)	10
DAY 5: JESUS IS THE BREAD OF LIFE (JOHN 6:35)	12
DAY 6: JESUS IS THE LAMB OF GOD (JOHN 1:29)	14
DAY 7: JESUS IS THE ADVOCATE (1 JOHN 2:1)	16
DAY 8: JESUS IS THE GREAT HIGH PRIEST (HEBREWS 4:14)	18
DAY 9: JESUS IS THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH (EPHESIANS 4:15)	20
DAY 10: JESUS IS IMMANUEL (MATTHEW 1:23)	22
DAY 11: JESUS IS THE KING OF KINGS (1 TIMOTHY 6:15)	24
DAY 12: JESUS IS THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD (JOHN 8:12)	26
DAY 13: JESUS IS THE ALPHA AND OMEGA (REVELATION 1:8)	28
DAY 14: JESUS IS THE LION OF THE TRIBE OF JUDAH (REVELATION 5:5)	30
DAY 15: JESUS IS MESSIAH (JOHN 4:25-26)	32
DAY 16: JESUS IS MEDIATOR (HEBREWS 9:15)	34
DAY 17: JESUS IS REDEEMER (GALATIANS 4:4-7)	36
DAY 18: JESUS IS RISEN (1 CORINTHIANS 15:16-20)	38
DAY 19: JESUS IS THE SON OF MAN (MATTHEW 8:20)	40
DAY 20: JESUS IS THE WORD (JOHN 1:1-2, 14)	42
DAY 21: JESUS IS THE VINE (JOHN 15:1)	44
DAY 22: JESUS IS THE WAY (JOHN 14:6)	46
DAY 23: JESUS IS LORD (PHILIPPIANS 2:9-11)	48
DAY 24: JESUS IS THE LAST ADAM (1 CORINTHIANS 15:45)	50
DAY 25: JESUS IS ETERNAL LIFE (1 JOHN 5:20)	52

INTRODUCTION

The clue is in the name, “Advent.” It means “a coming.” And, of course, we celebrate it at a time of year when Christmas is coming—and that’s the problem. We tend to associate it only with the first coming of Christ. But in fact, the God of the Bible is the Advent God throughout. God keeps on coming—past, present, and future.

God comes in every act of the great drama of Scripture (as I explore in my own small Advent devotional, *Rejoice! Advent in All the Scriptures*, InterVarsity, 2019). God came in creative power “in the beginning.” God came to Adam and Eve in their rebellion. God came to Abraham and Sarah promising blessing to all nations on earth. God the Son came as the Word made flesh. God comes as the Spirit empowering the church for mission till the end of the age. And God will come again to judge and cleanse the earth and dwell with us in the new creation.

But it was not always obvious—even to those who longed and looked for God’s coming. “Are you the Coming One,” John the Baptist told his disciples to ask Jesus, “or should we look for somebody else?” And Jesus answered by pointing to what was happening all around Him in His ministry, while quoting words of Scripture which had prophesied that those very things would happen when God Himself showed up (Luke 7:18-23).

Say to those with fearful hearts,

“Be strong, do not fear;

Your God will come ...

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened

And the ears of the deaf unstopped.

Then the lame will leap like the deer,

And the mute tongue shout for joy” (Isaiah 35:4-6).

Who then is Jesus? Nothing less than the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, come in the flesh of the Messiah. The One who came repeatedly to rescue His people has now come in person to save the world. Advent indeed!

That is why it is so important for us to spend Advent focusing on Jesus, as the multiple portraits and titles in this book help us to do. For in Jesus, we meet the God who came as promised in the Scriptures, who keeps on coming as promised through His Spirit, and will come again in glory as promised by Himself and His apostles. Here indeed is the God of Israel in our midst,

who “tabernacled among us” at His first coming. And here is the Lamb on the throne of the universe who, at His second coming, will be truly and fully Immanuel, “God with us,” when God’s dwelling place will be with us forever (Revelation 21:3). “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20)!

The great thing about this book, however, is not just that it gives us multiple portraits of Jesus, but that it does so through multiple eyes and voices from around the whole global body of Christ, and especially from the Majority World. We need that kaleidoscopic lens on Jesus, for our own eyes are often blinkered and the voices we listen to in our own culture may be only echoes of ourselves. Langham Partnership is privileged to be giving voice to sisters and brothers from all over the world, and we pray that you will be blessed as you walk with Jesus in their company this Advent.

- Chris Wright

Global Ambassador and Ministry Director

Langham Partnership

DAY 1

JESUS IS GOD

Lisus este Dumnezeu

(Romanian)

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

The season of Advent is an important time for believers around the world to meditate on the miracle and significance of the birth of Jesus. Who is He and why does it matter that He came? The beginning chapters of each of the four Gospels are a good place to start such a reflection. How do they introduce this Jesus? The first three Gospels start with a similar narrative, but the Gospel of John begins very differently.

By starting with the expression “In the beginning,” John calls to mind the book of Genesis and points to a time prior to creation, to the eternity of God. John’s intention is to affirm that before the beginning of created order, in eternity, was the One who is the centre of his gospel, Jesus Christ. And the four introductory expressions that immediately follow are affirmations that Jesus Christ is God.

1. “In the beginning was the Word” affirms the eternal existence of the One who incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ. He is not part of the created order but is from eternity. The word “was” used by John expresses Christ’s eternal existence outside time and space. Take a few moments and think at the grandeur of Christ’s eternity. This One whose birth in human flesh we celebrate at Christmas has always existed. He brings eternity into humanity so that He can save humanity for eternity. What comfort when the days seem futile and short that the One who has existed from eternity past now wears our humanity for eternity in the future.

2. “The Word was with God” affirms the relationship of Jesus with the eternal Father. The preposition “with” that John uses expresses the eternal co-existence and intimacy of a unique relationship, as well as a distinction between the two divine persons—the Son and the Father. Jesus has a unique relationship with the eternal Father, being with Him from eternity and the One “in closest relationship with the Father” (John 1:18). Take a few moments and meditate on the uniqueness of the relationship between the Father and the Son. Our longing for intimacy and our delight when we enjoy close family relationships (and disappointment when we don’t!) exist because we bear the image of the God who made us. What an encouragement to continue to pursue intimacy with Him and with one another despite the challenges.

3. “The Word was God” affirms the truth that Jesus is of the very essence and nature of God. This affirmation is endorsed by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, who presents Jesus as “...the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being...” (Hebrews 1:3a). Take a few moments and meditate on the affirmation of the Apostle Paul about Jesus: “...in Christ all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form” (Colossians 2 :9). Thank God that as we get to know Jesus as He is revealed to us in the Scriptures, we see and know what God is really like.

4. “He was with God in the beginning” emphasizes the truth that this is a Person (“He”) who “was with God in the beginning” and “was God.” And the rest of John 1:1-18 will spell out that Jesus is that God-in-the-flesh Person. Take a few moments to meditate on the personhood of God. Neither an impersonal force nor an unyielding formula governs all things. Jesus does. In times when we do not understand what is happening and why it is happening, at least we can know the Person who not only understands but upholds and works all things for His purposes, as the writer to the Hebrews testifies (Hebrews 1:3). And we know that we can trust Him because, though God, He came in the flesh to lay down His life that we might live.

Introducing his gospel this way, John signals his intention to prove—so that we can believe and have life—that Jesus Christ is God. For contemporary Christian communities around the world, and for the believers in Central Eastern Europe and Romania in particular, John’s affirmations in the beginning verses of his gospel are of paramount importance. To live a meaningful spiritual life in the contemporary world, with its uncertainties and unexpected tragedies, will mean to rediscover and embrace Jesus’s divine identity. In Jesus, God is for us (Romans 8:31), God is with us (Matthew 1:23), and God is in us (Colossians 1:27). And this is our hope not only for the future glory but also for our daily earthly existence. Understanding and experiencing the divine presence is what makes the difference between a life lived in faith, trusting God in the midst of a troubled world, and a life that is hopeless, full of fear and discouragement.



DR. DANIEL G. OPREAN

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DAY 2

JESUS IS THE SON OF GOD

Yesus, Anak Allah

(Indonesian)

Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel." – John 1:49

The Batak people in North Sumatra, Indonesia, have surnames linked to their parents' identity. Even children born abroad can be established as Batak from their names. When we recognize their surname, we assume that they are hardworking and straightforward people. Hence, a surname can reveal a lot about a person.

How about Jesus's surname? Historically, Jews used Hebrew patronymic names. Their first name is followed by their father's name. By calling Jesus the Son of God, we should recognize His heavenly origin. However, that's often not the case. Many Christians still mention it without understanding or belief. If we truly understand this title, it can strengthen our faith and hope in Him. Advent can be a time of enthusiastic preparation if we know that we are celebrating the birth of the Son of God!

Knowing Jesus through His Word

Usually, we get to know someone through shared experiences. It seems unlikely that we will form close ties with others from just one encounter. Philip met Jesus once in Galilee, and he immediately accepted Jesus's call to become His follower. This seems instantaneous, but it really isn't. Philip, Andrew, and Simon were Jews who read the Scriptures. This was apparent when Philip found Nathanael and told him they had found "the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote" (John 1:45). Their knowledge of the promised Messiah from the Scriptures had them hoping and looking for Him. So, when Nathanael accepted Philip's invitation to "come and see," he was able to recognize Jesus as the Son of God and the King of Israel even though he also knew Him as Joseph of Nazareth's son (John 1:49).

We see three important realities in these interactions from John 1:35-51. First, Jesus is known to us in the Scriptures. Jesus wants us to know Him, and the Scriptures bear witness about Him (John 5:39). Those who looked ahead to His first coming and we who look back on His earthly ministry and long for His second coming are aided in our waiting and watching and living by knowing Him through His Word. Advent is a great time to recommit ourselves to reading, studying, and knowing God's Word. It might mean turning down the

noise of movie watching, music listening, and entertainment seeking that can easily overtake our plugged-in lives. But that might mean that we know better this Jesus, the Son of God, and all that He is to us and for us.

Second, Jesus, the Son of God, knows us. Initially, Nathanael was skeptical. He couldn't believe that the Messiah can come from Nazareth, an insignificant town. But Nathanael's negative response turned to admiration when Jesus revealed his past. It is Jesus's prior knowledge of Nathanael that convinced Nathanael of Jesus's identity as the Son of God and the King of Israel (John 1:48-49). God knows the number of hairs on our head and the days marked out for us; He knew us in our mothers' wombs, and He knows, as verse 51 suggests and the end of the book of Revelation makes clear, the future that He has for us and for the world. In Indonesia, there are people who work as psychics. Some seek their advice because they believe that psychics have the ability to know their fate. The confidence and comfort for the Christian is not that we would know our fate, but that Jesus, the Son of God, knows and holds our future. His earthly ministry assures us that we can trust Him and follow Him.

Third, knowing who Jesus is should make us eager to introduce Him to others. As soon as Andrew recognized Jesus as the Messiah, he found Simon and brought him to Jesus, too. As soon as Philip was invited to follow Jesus and recognized Him as the one promised by Moses and the prophets, he found Nathanael and invited him to come and meet Jesus, too. As Christians read the Bible less and become less focused on and confident of Jesus's identity, they become reluctant to evangelize. Advent can be an opportunity to grow. May our Advent reflections not stay private, but may they encourage and inspire us to share the hope we have in Jesus with family and friends, co-workers, and neighbors.

In the midst of poverty, pandemic, disunity, and uncertainty, we can celebrate this Advent and Christmas season because Christ Jesus is the Son of God. He still wants to reveal Himself and invite people to follow.



REV. NJOO MEE FANG (M.TH)

The Reverend Njoo Mee Fang is pastor of Christ Jesus Church in Jakarta, Indonesia. She is program development coordinator for Langham Preaching in East Asia.

DAY 3

JESUS IS THE SON OF DAVID

耶穌是大衛的子孫

(Traditional Chinese)

Those who led the way rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" - Luke 18:39

"Son of David" was not an unfamiliar phrase to the Jews in Jesus's time. It is the Messianic title for the anointed one for whom they have longed for generations.

Surprisingly in Luke, the first person who called Jesus "Son of David" was a blind man in Jericho, not a Jewish leader or one of the twelve disciples. While begging on the roadside, the blind man heard that Jesus of Nazareth was walking by. He cried out to catch His attention. Luke used different Greek words (ἐβόησεν; ἔκραζεν) in verses 38 and 39 to depict the intensity and urgency in the blind man's cries. He captured the heart of Jesus so much that Jesus stopped to encounter him face to face and healed his sight wondrously. It was a life-changing moment for him.

He Humbled Himself to Save and Heal Us

Jesus hears our cries, too, no matter where we are or how marginalized we are in our situations. As the Son of David, Jesus humbled Himself and entered human history to save us. We can be sure that He hears our howls of distress. Even if it is just a cry of the heart, He hears.

Although Hong Kong is an affluent global city, it is common to see a family crowded within a single, 100-square-foot apartment. The disparity between the rich and the poor is immense. Many poor, like the blind beggar, cry out desperately for help. Those above the poverty line cry out, too, as they are crushed by enormous pressures.

Jesus, the Son of David, was born in a manger. He clothed Himself in humanity. He understands our fragility and is willing to transform our lives. He hears our cries.

The blind man recognized our Lord not just as a man—"Jesus of Nazareth" as he was called by the passing crowd (Luke 18:36-37)—but as the "Son of David" (Luke 18:38-39)—the promised Messiah. Even when rebuked by others, he kept on shouting out, "Son of David...!" He insisted on seeking our Messianic King as he could "see" who Jesus was. Although he was physically blind, he was not spiritually blind. His simple faith led to the amazing encounter. Jesus affirmed the blind man's faith, saying that it was his faith that healed him (Luke 18:42).

Jesus is God and full of compassion. He cares about you, listens to you, and wants to fulfill your yearning heart, just as He desired to meet the blind man's need by asking him, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Luke 18:41). At a time and culture where blindness carried a stigma that brought rejection and bondage, Jesus's healing brought liberation. More than just a physical healing, an encounter with Jesus brings value, dignity, and acceptance into His kingdom.

God is Faithful throughout Generations

The blind regaining sight was a mark of the Messiah (Luke 7:21-22) and a sign of the beginning of the Messianic era. (Luke 4:18; Isaiah 29:18). The blind man's healing, then, repeats the annunciation of Jesus's birth through Gabriel, "The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; His Kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:32b-33).

Jesus is the Son of David, the Messiah, because He is the one to fulfill the Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7:8-17). And, Jesus showed His supremacy by declaring that the Messiah is the Lord of David (Luke 20:41-44). Not to be confined by the expectations of the Jewish people, He demonstrated that His Messianic rule is established through His death and resurrection to give us life and glorious hope. Jesus, our suffering Savior and Lord, works in chaotic human history and is faithful to keep His promises through generations. His utmost sovereignty is a comfort beyond words.

It has been said that in facing the rapid changes in the Hong Kong society and the massive effects of international tensions, people were filled with tons of diverse feelings and thoughts. Thousands and thousands of families left Hong Kong in the past year for various reasons. During Advent, remembering that Jesus fulfilled the promise to enter our history through the lineage of David brings so much comfort and encouragement. We know that our Lord is faithful, watches over us, and acts in His best timing. Peace flows in our hearts as we know that He reigns and transforms all things. This is the spirit of Christmas.



DR. CATHERINE KWONG

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DAY 4

JESUS IS THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Jesus es el Buen Pastor

(Spanish)

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me." -John 10:11-14

"I am the Good Shepherd." This provoking statement by Jesus is preceded by His healing of the blind man, and by the resistance of the Pharisees to see Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God (John 9:1-41).

In response to the questions of the Pharisees, Jesus shares a parable—using images of the pastoral life so familiar to the Jews—to present Himself as the true shepherd, in contrast to thieves and robbers. However, as the Pharisees continue to misunderstand His message, Jesus identifies Himself as "The Door" of the sheep, showing the Pharisees that He alone is the gateway to salvation, not keeping the law or wielding religious authority.

Leaving no room for doubts, Jesus expands the parable, now presenting Himself as the Good Shepherd. He, unlike salaried shepherds, does have a genuine interest in the welfare of the sheep. The word "good" (Greek: καλός) describes what is noble, healthy, good, and beautiful, in contrast to what is bad and unpleasant. Jesus is the Good Shepherd because He takes good care of His sheep, giving them not only life, but giving His life for them. He lives and dies for the sake of the sheep. As a good shepherd, He knows them very well and they recognize Him. More than just superficial knowledge, this is a mutual, intimate, personal relationship between Christ and His sheep. This knowledge, communion, and intimacy between Jesus and His sheep is part of His unique character.

Jesus's "I am" statement in these verses affirms His divinity and His co-equality with the Father by announcing Himself as the fulfillment of God's promise to shepherd His people (Ezekiel 34:11-16). At the same time, He denounces the Jewish religious leaders—as God did through the prophet Ezekiel in His time (Ezekiel 34:1-10)—whom He compares with salaried pastors who do not really care about the lives of the Jews. They think only of their safety and comfort. Jesus on the other hand, loves His people so much that He is willing to give His life for them and for all humanity.

In Latin America today there are many spiritual leaders who are far from the model of the good shepherd. Like false shepherds, they deceive the sheep with false doctrines and promises. Like wage earners, they do not serve the sheep; instead, they steal from them, abusing power and offering them "junk food" and not the green pastures of God's Word. The great crowds in Latin American cities today are "helpless and scattered like sheep without a shepherd." They struggle with social injustice, corruption, poverty, idolatry, immorality, and the terrible consequences of Covid-19. They need to know the Good Shepherd and be led by pastors who are trained and disciplined to follow in His ways.

The season of Advent is not only for remembering the birth of Jesus but also His life, miracles, teachings, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension—all of it as part of God's saving plan for all humanity. It is also to thank God that we are "sheep of His pasture," that we are not in the hands of "wolves, robbers, or salaried shepherds," because He is our Good Shepherd, who gave His life for us, knows us by name, and continues to shepherd us through His Word and the Holy Spirit.

Advent should also be the time to remember that all of us who have pastoral roles—such as parents in our homes, pastors in our churches, ministry leaders, business managers, teachers, doctors, and nurses—are the Good Pastor's helpers. The only Good Shepherd is Jesus.

As the Good Pastor's helpers, let us seek from our hearts the same qualities of the Good Shepherd. Let us cultivate a sacrificial love for the sheep, the people that God has entrusted in our hands. Let us try to know their needs, and let us know ourselves by them with our strengths and weaknesses. Let us seek for them the abundant life that Christ came to give us. Let us practice a selfless love for them that motivates us to dedicate ourselves to them, even at the cost of our own lives, to guard them from dangers like false doctrines and theories, false teachers and prophets.

The Good Shepherd loves us and knows us. May this Advent season be the opportunity to grow in our love and knowledge of Him.



DIONISIO ORJUELA

Dionisio Orjuela lives in Ibagué, Colombia, and is the coordinator for Langham Preaching across Central America.

DAY 5

JESUS IS THE BREAD OF LIFE

Yesu Jeevadaayaka Rotti

(Kannada)

Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. -John 6:35

The Christmases of my childhood were tedious. More correctly, the run-up to Christmas was. For weeks, my mother conscripted us children into the making of festival food. There were marble-sized bits to be pinched off a great big mountain of sweetened and spiced dough. The dough bits were then delicately flattened on the back of a fork and rolled off it into little curly cylinders. The *kalkals*, as they were called, were then deep-fried into golden-brown nuggets and finally frosted with sugar syrup.

These were only one item in a list of must-makes for Christmas. Backs went sore and fingers groaned with fatigue. You could smell our house halfway down the street—the warm smells of shredded coconut toasting, of molasses melting, of sugar caramelizing.

On the evening of Christmas Day, my mother loaded plates with assorted short eats and covered them with white lace napkins. My duty was to ferry a plate to each of the neighbors, most of whom were not Christian. What we were offering them was a plate of mouth-wateringly fragrant, edible Christmas.

That’s what food is about in India. Food is to give away. Food is an invitation to relatives and friends. Food is what you take to the home of someone sick. When someone dies, the tradition is that the family’s kitchen stove should go unlit for a couple of days to let others lovingly bring the meals. When guests come by, whatever the time of day or night, we first invite them to eat. And so, when we built a house of our own, we had the front door opening directly into the dining room. This cultural priority on hospitality is why we have the Big Fat Indian Wedding. The guest list is rarely in the hundreds and nearly always in the thousands!

Curiously, the age to come that the prophet Isaiah describes sounds suspiciously like a Big Fat Indian Wedding: “On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines” (Isaiah 25:6). Like any Indian feast, it is the most extravagant spread the host can afford. But, unlike any other feast, the feast is the host Himself: Jesus.

Jesus said: “I am the Bread of Life.” Our Christian response to that can be generously “Indian.” Having “tasted” Him, we feed on Him every day. We snack on Him all by ourselves. We relish Him in the company of fellow Christians. Beyond that, we find joy in offering Him to others—to the Muslim neighbor, whose sleepless nights are riddled with anxiety; to the atheist cousin who drops by to say she’s been laid off from work; to the nominally Christian friend just diagnosed with a terminal illness; to the seeker in our Bible study group who has just lost his teenage son; to all who need to be sustained through this broken and shuddering thing called life. We assure them that a great, joyous feast awaits at world’s end. Meanwhile, along with the plate piled high with Christmas eats, we offer them Jesus. We offer them food for life—even abundant life—in the here and now.



DR. HAVILAH DHARAMRAJ

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DAY 6

JESUS IS THE LAMB OF GOD

Ісус як Агнець Божий

(Ukrainian)

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! – John 1:29

One day, John the Baptist saw Jesus at the Jordan River, where John was baptizing, and said to people: "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Obviously and importantly, Jesus is the Passover Lamb whose once-and-for-all sacrifice on the cross freed us from the penalty our sin deserves. We celebrate this gift of grace as we observe Advent.

I want us to consider another connection to Jesus as the Lamb of God, a connection that is particularly meaningful to me in this time and my context. When Jesus appointed seventy-two disciples and sent them out to labor in His kingdom, He said to them: "Go! I am sending you out like lambs surrounded by wolves" (Luke 10:3). Later, before His arrest, crucifixion, death, resurrection, and ascension, the Lamb of God prayed for His disciples and, prophetically, for us, His disciples in the ages to come. He said to the Father: "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one" (John 17:15). This prayer reminds me that He knows that He sends us into the world like lambs surrounded by wolves. I need this because this is how we very often feel as His children in the context of social-political and economic challenges in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

My context tells me that in order to survive in it, I need to become a wolf, a predator, because no one will take care of me if I do not take care of myself. But Christ reminds me that I am His sheep, called to entrust myself to His care, becoming like Him and being transformed into His character. The sheep cannot defend itself from the wolf. The Shepherd protects the sheep from the wolves, not by the power of the sheep but by His power. By the power of Him who has loved us, we are His salt and light in the world. We are in the midst of rot, but we do not rot and do not stink because God—the Father and the Son and the Spirit—is in us and with us. We are among the sinful darkness, but we are not darkness because the light of the Father through the Son shines in the Spirit in us and through us, through His sheep in the world of wolves.

Christ also reminds us that the church is not a wolf pack. Relationships in the church are not competitive relationships within a group controlled by an alpha male. The church is built on our experience of Christ's love through the Holy Spirit, not on the strong and mighty hand of a human political or

religious leader and not on our achievements or merits in the community. We are brothers and sisters in Christ, fellow lambs following the Good Shepherd. And the shared life of the church is not a hunt or defense of our hunting grounds! We pursue the mission of God as the people of God in the world of wolves: the mission to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength with our worship and our lives; and to love our neighbor—yes, even our wolf neighbor—as ourselves. The Lamb of God sends us like sheep into the midst of wolves, not to be torn apart and be fed to the wolves. Instead, He wants to reveal the transforming power of the gospel through our faithfulness to Him and His mission, even when we feel surrounded by a wolf pack.

John's call to people to look at the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, reminds us that the Lord, by His grace, can transform even the hardest wolf into His sheep. He is capable of turning wolves into His lambs, reviving them for a new life with Him for His sake and the sake of His love and mission.

So, Lamb of God, keep us, your sheep, safe from the evil one in this world when we feel like wolves surround us, and help us faithfully carry your mission. Hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.



TARAS DYATLIK

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DAY 7

JESUS IS THE ADVOCATE

Yesu ni Wakili – Msaidizi – Mtetezi

(Kiswahili)

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. – 1 John 2:1

Before we begin to reflect on Jesus, our advocate, who went far above and beyond by paying the penalty for our sins, let's offer up this prayer:

Oh Lord our God, we thank you for the Advent season. We pray that during this period of devout and joyful expectation, we will be reminded that Christ is our advocate (Wakili – Msaidizi – Mtetezi). Help us today to appreciate what it means to have Jesus serving as an advocate (Wakili – Msaidizi – Mtetezi). May we hold this truth, live in this truth, and know this truth. Help us, Lord, to experience joy as we demonstrate steadfast faith. Protect us from faith that wavers. May we always remember that there is no guilt or condemnation for those who are in Christ. In the name of our Christ, Amen.

And if a hymn is what your heart desires, I commend “Jesus, My Advocate” by Charles Wesley (1707–1788).

*Jesus, my advocate above,
My friend before the throne of love,
If now for me prevails Thy prayer,
If now I find Thee pleading there,
If Thou the secret wish convey,
And sweetly prompt my heart to pray;
Hear, and my weak petitions join,
Almighty advocate, to Thine...*

In 1 John 2:1, the Apostle John reminds us of who Jesus Christ is. John is telling us that the Lord Jesus Christ is our advocate. He is our friend in court, mediator, defense attorney. When we sin, Satan makes the accusation. And the accusation is true. So, we end up standing there guilty before God. When that happens, we need help. We need somebody to take our side. We need somebody to take up our defense. Jesus is supremely and perfectly qualified to serve as our advocate before the Father. His duty is to plead the cause of the sinning Christian before God the Father (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25; 9:24). In this Advent season, we are invited to renew our trust in our advocate and to be assured that, if we sin, we not only have an advocate but also a sacrifice for our sins. Our advocate is the perfect propitiation for our sins and He will keep us until the end.

For believers in our Tanzanian/African context, an advocate stands in for one major purpose: to address the gap well explained as an inability of people to defend themselves. Why? In most cases, and given the difficult situations one might be facing

in the context of poverty and diseases, someone becomes helpless and cannot act effectively anymore.

Whatever our context, how can our hearts respond? Perhaps before anything, we can seek a quiet moment to allow our hearts to connect with the heart of our intercessor and advocate before the Father, Jesus Christ (the righteous). May we look at Christ and remember:

- We have His help after we have sinned.
- As Christians, there are going to be times when we stumble and fall, when we step back into sin.
- But when we do, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.
- He is the perfect advocate (Acts 3:14; 7:52).
- He has effectively removed the wrath of God and cleansed all who believe in His name (1 John 2:2, 12; 3:5; 4:10).

I encourage you to linger over another great hymn, “Before the Throne of God Above” by Charitie Lees Smith (1841–1923).

*Before the throne of God above
I have a strong and perfect plea,
A great High Priest whose name is Love,
Whoever lives and pleads for me.
My name is graven on his hands,
My name is written on his heart;
I know that while in heav'n he stands
No tongue can bid me thence depart,
No tongue can bid me thence depart.*

As you prepare your heart for this Advent season, may you find joy and unity with your sisters and brothers across Africa by reciting the words of grace in Kiswahili: Say the words of grace in Kiswahili.

*Neema ya Bwana wetu Yesu Kristo,
na upendo wa Mungu Baba
na Ushirika wa Roho Mtakatifu
vikae nasi sote
Amina*



REV. CANON DR. ALFRED SEBAHENE

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DAY 8

JESUS IS THE GREAT HIGH PRIEST

耶穌，我們神聖的同理者

(Taiwanese)

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. - Hebrews 4:14

Traditional Chinese culture alludes to three fundamentals in establishing interpersonal relations and maintaining social order: emotions, reason, and law (情理法). While western culture prioritizes reason and law when navigating social life, Chinese culture puts human emotional ties first. However, we now live in a day and age characterized by increasing individualism, technological advancement, and modern-day busyness, so empathy towards others is increasingly rare. Aren't we already hard-pressed attending to our own lives? How do we squeeze in time and emotions for others? Our prolonged connectivity with our electronic devices rather than the person next to us makes us cold, mechanical, and unsociable. Even family members are estranged from each other despite common bloodlines. Meanwhile, the poor, the bullied, the refugee, the sick, the depressed, the aging, and the bereaved among us are increasing in escalating numbers.

"Empathy is the primary ability needed when helping people," say our modern psychiatrists. But how do we nurture empathy? They suggest two ways. The first way is through personal experience, which can naturally develop in us a sense of empathy for others. We can understand and share in the trauma of others because we've experienced it before ourselves. The second way is through vicarious experience whereby we develop empathy by relating to another's struggle through careful listening and imagination.

But even our most well-intentioned human empathy fails us at times. For example, my niece and nephew suffer deeply with anxiety. The nature of mental illness is so personal that when the cloud of darkness encircles them, even words of encouragement and prayers from dearest friends and family are not enough to drive it away. Perhaps you, too, have experienced a heavy, painful burden that even the kindest, most empathetic friend could not alleviate. Jesus, our great high priest, provides a balm to these wounds.

Hebrews 4:15 reveals to us that Jesus empathizes with our weaknesses. His ability to understand and share in our human pain, loss, shame, and hopelessness came through personal experience. He was despised and rejected. He was misunderstood and abandoned by those close to Him. On the cross, Jesus experienced the unfathomable sense of abandonment, darkness,

and alienation from God: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). He even experienced the evil of death itself. Jesus need not imagine our pain, nor trade places with us; He genuinely shares the feelings of fear, alienation, and evil that surround us. Yet, Jesus has overcome them. Jesus is the first fruit of resurrection (I Corinthians 15:20-28). Hebrews 4:14 says Jesus has ascended into heaven where He now sits in the presence of God the Father. Here is the good news: Jesus’s personal experience of death and resurrection promises tremendous comfort to us in our mental anguish.

Moreover, Jesus does not merely identify with us—He actively intercedes on our behalf. When our language fails to narrate our anxiety and hopelessness, Jesus takes over and offers up our needs in “prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears” before the gracious throne of our God the Father (Hebrews 5:7). Jesus cries with and for us. His tender compassion embraces us. His ability to empathize pours out in His ministry of intercession. This does not mean that things quickly resolve. It does mean that we are not alone, forgotten, or misunderstood as we persevere through the darkness until all things are made new.

Our passage exhorts us to cultivate strong confidence in Jesus’s priestly role. His path of obedience to the will of God the Father assures us that He has the empathy we all need. Especially in the darkness, we need faith to believe in this truth. So, we pray for spiritual eyes in order to see ourselves “brought up to heaven”—in prayer now and in reality one day—with and by Jesus.

As we walk through this Advent season, may we recognize the humble birth of Jesus as a signpost pointing us to His life vocation as our divine empathizer.



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DAY 9

JESUS IS THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH

Yesus vahanse sabhave hisa vey

(Sinhala)

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. – Ephesians 4:15

Advent means “arrival” or “coming.” The season of Advent invites us to recall the first coming of Jesus, a baby born in that tucked-away little town of Bethlehem. And through the chain of events launched by this first coming—birth, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, Pentecost—the church was birthed. But Advent also points forward, urging us to ready ourselves for the second coming, the return of the divine bridegroom to wed His church-bride.

Between the bookends of these two Advents—one characterized by meekness and vulnerability; the other by majesty and victory—the Lord’s presence is manifested in a form very different from both His first and second comings. Jesus is with us today neither as baby nor as bridegroom but as the head of His body, the church (Ephesians 4:15). We reflect today on two questions: What kind of head do we have? What kind of body must we be?

“Head” may conjure up a mental picture of a powerful head of state or business magnate, an authority figure who commands (and often demands!) unquestioning obedience and respect, someone remote and far removed from those at the bottom of the hierarchy. In most South Asian cultures—whether in the political, business, social, or domestic sphere—people lower down in the pecking order are accustomed to scurrying around to serve the needs and wants of those at the “top.”

But Paul’s use of “head” can only be understood in relation to “body.” When he writes that Jesus is “head of his body,” Paul is not thinking of a national or corporate entity but a human body, not an organization but an organism, where the head has a living and life-giving connection with every cell. Connection, rather than command or control, is key. As head, Jesus is inseparably and intimately connected to and involved in the life, well-being, and growth of His body, a body that both manifests His presence on earth and will one day be His beautiful bride.

As he picks up the head-body metaphor in Ephesians 5, Paul’s focus is not Christ’s lordship but His Savior-hood and His servanthood: “Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior” (Ephesians 5:23). Having sacrificially saved this body, Jesus now lovingly serves it. The head’s powers are

not exercised over the body so much as for its benefit as he “feeds and cares for” the body (Ephesians 5:29). In a nutshell, this head does not seek to “boss” but to bless His body!

C. S. Lewis writes, “The Son of God became a man to enable men to become sons of God.” As head, Jesus equips and empowers His body with gifts and graces so that the infant church may be built up and become a mature body (Ephesians 4:11–13). He is the enabler of its growth, within a structure that is not top-down but relational, not ruling over so much as raising it up so that the whole body may reach the maturity of “the whole measure of the fullness” of Christ Himself, the glorious radiance that befits His bride (Ephesians 5:27).

Given that we have a head who saves, serves, suffers with, and sanctifies us, what kind of body must we be? In contrast to the insistence of the legendary Peter Pan, “I won’t grow up, I will never even try,” will we cooperate with our head’s growth plans for us, resolving to “no longer be infants” but “grow to become in every respect the mature body of him” (Ephesians 4:14–15)?

An African proverb offers these words of wisdom: “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” The human body cannot grow independently of either its head or other body parts; neither can the church. While remaining deeply and intimately connected to its head, “the whole body” must also be “joined and held together” to promote the body’s growth (Ephesians 4:16). This kind of growth takes time, effort, and sacrifice. It entails uncomfortable truth-telling and inconvenient loving (Ephesians 4:15).

The season of Advent is often viewed as a time of preparation for our Christmas celebrations. But during Advent and beyond, the body of Christ is preparing for a wedding celebration! When the marriage of the Lamb dawns, will we, His bride, have made ourselves ready (Revelation 19:7)? Marriage is for the mature. And, given that the benchmark for measuring maturity is Christlikeness (Ephesians 4:13), we still have a lot of growing—and growing up!—to do.



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DAY 10

JESUS IS IMMANUEL

Si Jesus ang Immanuel

(Filipino)

“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). - Matthew 1:23

Laboring for every breath, totally exhausted, pale-complexioned, coughing severely, tears of excruciating pain in her eyes. That is the last image I saw of my niece Jenjen as she was taken away by the ambulance. “Laban, Jenjen! Kasama mo si Lord!” (“Hang tough, Jenjen; fight on! The Lord is with you!”), I exclaimed. At the time of writing this reflection, Jenjen is still in the ICU battling Covid-19. It is a painful picture of human suffering, made more painful by the reality that there are many “Jenjens” still languishing helplessly in hospitals around the world.

Speaking metaphorically about the “involvedness” of the Good Shepherd in the affairs of His sheep, Jesus said: “...the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out” (John 10:3). He then declared, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:10-11).

But why was Jesus willing to lay down His life for His sheep? The answer lies in His own revelation: “I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father...” (John 10:14-15). It is this intimacy between Jesus and His Father that cemented the way Jesus ministered sympathetically and mercifully to His people who were distressed, marginalized, and alone.

It is noteworthy that the assurance of provision (“life...to the full”) and protection (“lays down his life for the sheep”) is predicated on the fact that the Good Shepherd calls His sheep by their names. We hear echoes of Isaiah 43:1 where God Himself declared: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.” God does not only know the number of our hair strands, He also calls us by our “name”—the very legal and public representation of our identity!

When God gave the name to the child who is “to save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21), Matthew explained that the name would be the paramount expression of the “Immanuelity” of God—the God who is with us! While John was interested in the “incarnation” of God (John 1:14), Matthew

was more interested in God’s “Immanu-*el*”—the God who is not only among us but, more importantly, with us and for us. God is in solidarity with us.

In the same fashion that Matthew began his Gospel with the disclosure of God’s “Immanu-*el*,” he also concluded with the ever-abiding presence of God—“I am with you always, to the very end of the age!” (Matthew 28:20).

The language of Immanuel communicates the wonder that the human and the divine are interacting in shared time and space. But in Jesus, who is Immanuel, the wonder expands exponentially for He is God participating not only as the divine, supreme being, but as a true human being, equally liable to painful sufferings, morbidity, and mortality in daily human affairs. Therefore, God understands fully well the reality of human fragility and frailness.

When the author of Hebrews admonished his readers to “Look unto Jesus” (Hebrews 12:1), he was in effect reminding us of a God who is distant yet very much “with us.” Jesus is the God of “with-us-ness”! What a comfort this is to those of us in places like the Philippines, a place seemingly plagued by natural disasters, challenging poverty, and corruption. Our God is with us in our victories, in our joys, in our laughter, and in our successes! But our God is all the more with us in our defeats, in our pains, in our losses, in our cries, in our struggles, in our mourning, in our quest for seemingly elusive justice, and even in a global pandemic! In the highs and the lows of life, we are not unaided and alone. I do not know what the end of Jenjen’s present ordeal will be, but He is the one who said, “Do not be afraid ... for I have called you by name!” Jesus is in solidarity with us because He is Immanuel!

During this Advent season, may you draw closer to Immanuel, the One who has drawn close and is forever with us.



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DAY 11

JESUS IS THE KING OF KINGS

يسوع ملك الملوك

(Arabic)

...which God will bring about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords... - 1 Timothy 6:15

It is very common to speak about Jesus in the Advent season as the coming Messiah or king. Many famous hymns celebrate Him as such. But have you thought of what this actually means? What were the gospel writers communicating by portraying this baby born in a cave in Bethlehem as king?

A Universal King

Matthew stresses in the beginning of his gospel that Jesus Christ is the King of all people, not only of the Jews, by recounting the coming of the magi, or the kings of the East, to worship Him, to acknowledge Him as “king,” and to give Him the honor that befits Him as a king! The coming of the nations’ representatives is actually the fulfillment of prophecies. Isaiah, for example, described how the nations will walk in the light coming out of Jerusalem—that is, the light of the Messiah (Isaiah. 49:6; see also Psalm 72).

Jesus Christ is the King of the universe, the King of all peoples. This is good news for us today. It means that racism has no place in Christianity—not in Jesus’s day, not in modern-day Bethlehem where I live and work, not at any time or in any place! There is no place for ethnic, sectarian, religious, or tribal racism in our Christian faith. Our diversity as Christians is part of our identity, and it is important and necessary. In addition, this is a challenge to any racist ideology and to any notions of supremacy or privilege.

A Challenge to the Empire

The gospel’s message that “Jesus is King” is a challenge to all the kings who were contemporary with Christ. Jesus challenges the logic of might and pride. He challenges the empire of His time. When Matthew writes that the magi presented this child with royal gifts, and that Herod was troubled and even mad, there is a subtle yet profound message: because Jesus was born, this mighty and ruthless king fears for his throne.

There is a new kingdom, and born in Bethlehem is the new king. However, His kingdom is quite different from the kingdoms of the world. It is a kingdom of a different kind. The King is born in a cave, not a castle. He is born in Bethlehem,

not Rome, Athens, or even Jerusalem. The heralds of the kingdom were simple shepherds. His parents from little-known Nazareth. His father a carpenter.

It is a kingdom with love and service at its core. Its King was a servant of all, who died and suffered on behalf of all.

When Matthew wrote his gospel, Christians were persecuted, weak, and small in number, yet he had the audacity to declare Jesus as the King of the world. He even mocked Herod as being fearful and obsessed. Herod the king was troubled, while the royal gifts went to the true king. Today, two thousand years later, Herod is just a memory, a footnote in the story of Jesus. The remains of his castle near Bethlehem bear witness to his brutality, his madness, and to the oppression and injustice of his tyranny. Meanwhile, the grotto of the nativity bears witness to the meekness of Christ, and worshipers visit it day by day. Worshipers of Jesus the King from all over give witness to His universal kingdom!

A Challenge for Us Today

Jesus Christ today is a King who challenges us all with His weakness, poverty, and meekness. Shall we accept Him as king? Do we accept His approach of sacrificial love? The challenge for us today is to choose what the magi chose—to come before Christ and offer Him our gifts, ourselves, our hearts. The challenge also is to follow Him in His servant leadership, in His humility and meekness, and in His sacrificial love and service to all people.



REV. DR. MUNTHER ISAAC

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DAY 12

JESUS IS THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

இயசூவலே உலகத்தின் ஒளி

(Tamil)

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."
-John 8:12

Who would you say is a better person, Saul or David? Saul saved an enemy king's life, whereas David had his own soldier killed. David committed adultery, but there is no indication that Saul ever committed adultery. Yet David was the man after God's own heart! How can this be? The difference between the two men can be seen in what they did after they were confronted with their mistakes. When Samuel confronted Saul, Saul asked Samuel to honor him before the people (1 Samuel 15:30). When Nathan confronted David, David confessed his sin publicly (Psalm 51). David was willing to walk in the light, whereas Saul continued to walk in darkness. This illustrates the significance of Jesus's claim that He is the light.

Jesus's second "I am" saying, in John 8:12, continues the theme started in John 1:1-9 where light is the dominant theme that John uses to introduce Jesus. It also builds on the Old Testament portrayal of God as light (Psalm 27:1).

As the light of the world, Jesus reveals the Father to us. If we want to understand what the invisible God looks like, we must look at Jesus (John 17:26).

As the light of the world, Jesus also reveals our own selves to us. This seems to be the main point in John 8:12, where Jesus not only defined who He is but also who His follower is. The follower of Jesus does not walk in darkness but has the light of life.

What does it mean to walk in the darkness? Those who walk in the darkness do not know where they are going (John 12:35), presumably because they cannot see. So, walking in the light means knowing where we are going because we can see. We see Jesus, who leads the way by His life and teaching. Note that Jesus did not say, "I give light to the world." He is the light. If we are to make use of His light, we have to follow Him—obeying His commands, imitating His example, and going in the same direction as He went. This does not entail a sinless life. Rather, it is a life in which we recognize our sins and are quick to confess them and turn back to the light when we go astray (1 John 1:5-9).

Sometimes, we think that others are the light. When we compare ourselves with others, we may think that we are nice people, doing well, and heading in the right direction. But when we look at our life in the light of Jesus, then we see what true righteousness looks like. This is what happened in the story that immediately precedes Jesus's saying in John 8. The men who wanted to stone the woman caught in adultery left one by one when challenged by Jesus to start with the sinless among them. When Jesus confronted them, when His light shone into their lives, they rightly saw both themselves and their neighbor, the woman.

When you lift large stones in the garden, you will see all kinds of crawling insects. In the same way, there will be things in our hearts under which we hide our secrets. Only when we are ready to lift those stones and expose those areas to the light of Jesus are we following Him completely.

Today, we are often more ready to justify our sins than to confess them. In my own context, I have heard many Christians justify their lies in the name of speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). For example, when the leaders of a Christian organization make a mistake, they try to cover up their mistakes in the name of protecting the organization. When you try to save someone by lying for them, there is always another person hurting because of your lies. When we let the light of Christ shine into our lives and expose our sins, we need to accept and confess them and trust God to use the results for our good and His glory.

The forgiveness Jesus won for us on the cross gives us the freedom to do just that! Praise God that Jesus, as the light, reveals to us a God of grace and mercy who empowers us to walk in the light, who is eager to forgive when we repent, and who receives us into His presence forever.



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Dr. M. Alroy Mascenghe lives in Colombo, Sri Lanka. With support from Langham, he writes commentaries on the books of the Bible in his mother language, Tamil, and Langham supports him in this endeavor. His books are used in more than 15 countries as the Tamil diaspora is spread all around the world.

DAY 13

JESUS IS THE ALPHA AND THE OMEGA

Wekutanga neWekupedzisira

(Shona)

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty." -Revelation 1:8

The statement "I am the Alpha and the Omega" appears three times in the book of Revelation. First, it appears in our passage in Revelation 1:8 where its subject is "the Lord God." It appears in Revelation 21:1, where its subject is God, and in Revelation 22:13, where its subject is Christ. This usage clearly demonstrates the identity of Christ as similar to that of God's. The same way God is the alpha and omega is the way in which Christ is the alpha and omega. The Christ we worship is none other than God Himself.

The Greek letters Α (alpha) and Ω (omega) are the first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet. The implication is that God is the first and the last, which "emphasizes the sovereignty of God."¹ All of history is guided by the one who is "sovereign over its beginning and its end."² God was there in the beginning before the world was created. He also will be there after all things. He has no beginning or end.³ A few verses earlier, John identifies God as one "who is, and who was, and who is to come" (verse 4). He is the God of the past, of the present, and of the future. His concern is not just with the beginning and the end, but with all that happens in between.

In the African context, particularly South of the Sahara, we wrestle with the issue of Christians visiting witch doctors when they are sick. In such cases, Jesus is something that is added to other, pre-existing cultural solutions. Jesus as alpha and omega means that He is sufficient and we do not have to look for other supernatural solutions. He is the one we run to from the beginning and along the way, and the one we run to at the end.

The people of God in all contexts should find assurance in knowing that God is involved in the affairs of the world and in our lives as well. Not only should we trust Him with the present, but we can trust Him with the future. In this verse, just as it is several times in the book of Revelation, God is known as the *pantokratōr*, "the all-powerful One" or "the Almighty," which means He has all the power and is sovereign over all things, including our lives. As we go through the Covid-19 pandemic, it should be clear to us that we have one who is able to carry us through the pandemic. He was in the beginning and He will be in the end (Revelation 3:14; 21:6; 22:13).

When the pandemic is at its peak, He is sovereign. When the pandemic is long gone, He is still sovereign. This is grounded in the message of the book of Revelation itself, given what the people were going through. Scholars have noted that the churches addressed in Revelation were facing political, social, and economic pressure. Persecution was rife. In the midst of that situation, God/Christ declares that He is the Alpha and Omega and the Almighty. That is to say that persecution does not have the last word, and, in our case, Covid-19 does not have the last word. Even when it continues to claim lives and destroy livelihoods, it shall have its end just like all the pandemics of the past. In every situation, our God reserves the right to the last word.

1 David E. Aune, Revelation 1–5 (vol. 52A; Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1997), 57.

2 G. K. Beale, The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 199.

3 Leon Morris, Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary (vol. 20; Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 56.



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DAY 14

JESUS IS THE LION OF THE TRIBE OF JUDAH

Isus Je Lav Is Judinog Plemena

(Bosnian)

Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals." - Revelation 5:5

A lion is a mighty animal, which we can only see in the zoo because Bosnia and Herzegovina is not their natural habitat. Even though we don't have them here, we learn a lot about lions by what we were taught in school or by watching television. The lion is known as the king of animals, which fits the picture of what a lion represents in Revelation 5. The lion is a symbol of authority, strength, power, and rule. Many ancient royal crests and seals depict the image of a lion.

In Genesis 49: 8-10, Jacob blesses his son Judah with the following words:

8 *Judah, your brothers will praise you;*

your hand will be on the neck of your enemies;

your father's sons will bow down to you.

9 *You are a lion's cub, Judah;*

you return from the prey, my son.

Like a lion he crouches and lies down,

like a lioness—who dares to rouse him?

10 *The scepter will not depart from Judah,*

nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,

until he to whom it belongs shall come

and the obedience of the nations shall be his.

Here, Jacob is speaking about a ruler king who will come as a descendant of the tribe of Judah. He is speaking about the son of David, the Son of God—Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

After the terrible war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s, the political situation became perpetually tense. Since we have three major nationalities in the country, we don't have just one president. Instead, we have three presidents! Each president often fights for the interests of his own national group, which are sometimes contrary to the interests of the other two national groups. That results in many divisions, misunderstandings, disagreements, and tensions. Those tensions are reflected in the society, which is also divided by nationalities. The rare place where national divisions don't exist is in the evangelical church, among the fellowships of believers and followers of Jesus. One of the things that makes believers in the church different is an awareness that we Christians are the children of the same Father and subjects to the same King. Our King, Jesus, is one who is good, just, and perfect, and He cares for His subjects. It is common for today's politicians and rulers to care only for members of a certain political group or even for their own personal interests. Jesus is a different ruler. He loves us so much that He gave His life as a ransom for our sins so that we could have not only eternal life, but also this present life lived to its fullness (John 10:10). After His death on the cross, He rose again and ascended into heaven where He now reigns as King. In John 14:2-3, Jesus said that He is going to prepare a place for us and then He will return for us.

Knowing that Jesus, the great and powerful Lion of Judah, cares about us gives us strength and hope as we encounter the challenges of everyday life. He is reigning and working to bring about His good purposes. History is in His hands—that is what it means when Revelation 5:5 says that Jesus can open the scroll and its seals—and will culminate with His eternal reign, just as the angel said to Mary in Luke 1:31-33:

You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.



SLAVKO HADŽIĆ

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DAY 15

JESUS IS MESSIAH

Jisu Kenhekelie Kedi

(Tenydie)

The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.” – John 4:25-26

“Messiah” is a foundational and summative title for Jesus that brings together many portraits of God into one figure of hope. This is what the Samaritan woman discovered that day at Jacob’s well. In that awkward moment filled with cultural taboo, religious conflict, and tribalistic tension, this highly intelligent Samaritan woman paid attention to Jesus as Jesus unpacked for her who He is—the Messiah who will bring healing to all the world’s brokenness.

We watch this scene at Jacob’s well in awe. This conversation would have baffled angels who long to have such conversations with the Almighty and delve into the mysteries of the gospel. But at Jacob’s well that day, angels could only listen in, like us today, reading with awe how Jesus the Christ revealed His identity to a woman who was in every way on the other side of the social, cultural, religious, and political divide.

It is not that Jesus was unwilling to reveal Himself to people outside His tribe. In fact, Jesus was given for the world (John 3:16), a revelation that many chose to ignore. But not the Samaritan woman. She was ready for Jesus. Yes, she was sinful. She had her prejudices. She took sides politically. Her lifestyle and bad choices had condemned her to the dark and shameful spaces of society. She only went out in that odd time of the day to avoid the judgmental stares of people. But she was ready for the revelation of the Messiah. And Jesus finds her where He would expect her—at Jacob’s well looking for something refreshing to satisfy her thirst and fill her empty soul.

The Samaritan woman had no name. Perhaps that is because she could be any one of us in any context around the world. Her conversation with Jesus exposed multiple layers of problems that had plagued her family and society: conflict of tribalism between Jews and Samaritans, conflict over worship places, questions about the validity of the temple, and the controversial political history and identity of the Samaritans. But in the midst of the complexities of her situation, she believed that one day the Messiah would come to help fix all these problems. For her, the prophesied Messiah

carried this meaning—“all of God for all spheres of society.” And Jesus affirmed her hope when He replied, “Yes, I am he, that Messiah you talk about.”

This story brings me face to face with the issues in my context in Nagaland (Northeast India) where we are riddled with political insurgency, tribalism that is deep rooted, nominalism in the churches, and a corrupt system in the government that seems beyond repair. We have been stuck in these dark spaces for too long. The problem becomes more complex when the people indulging in these corrupt and oppressive practices are Christians who claim to be followers of the Christ. We are in a crisis deeper than we imagine. But like the Samaritan woman, we can emerge from the darkness of society to catch a glimpse of the Messiah who delights to reveal Himself to anyone who is ready to pay attention and willing to welcome Him.

The understanding of Jesus as the Messiah brings great hope to situations of conflict, confusion, and corruption. In my local language, Messiah can be translated: “Jesus the Good Anointed King.” This gives us great hope because Jesus is more than just a Savior for our personal sins. We can look to Jesus, the anointed king, to bring the motivation and resources of His reign to bear on the “dark spaces” of tribal conflict, crippling church nominalism, and corruption in all spheres of public life.

The Messiah has come, the one who brings together the many promises of God into one figure of hope. In the Messiah, God offers all of Himself for the healing of all of the spheres of our individual life and society. Things will not change immediately. But once we have encountered the Messiah, we can run back to our dark spaces with the light of the Messiah.

This beloved hymn we sing at Christmas captures the longing for the Messiah well: *“The hope and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”*



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DAY 16

JESUS IS MEDIATOR

Jesu (Jeso) Kriste ke Motsereganyi

(Setswana)

For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance--now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant. – Hebrews 9:15

A mediator is someone who brings about peace or a settlement between two warring parties. In Hebrews 9:15, Jesus is portrayed as a mediator between God and His people, Israel. One interesting point among others to be highlighted is that Jesus is the Mediator of a new covenant. In the old covenant, Israel sacrificed animals for the covering of their sins. In the new, Christ himself became the sacrifice so that people may be set free once and for all from their sins, thus qualifying them to receive the promised eternal inheritance (eternal life). This He did not only for the Israelites but for people from all nations. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Most nations in Sub-Saharan Africa have been erroneously labeled as practicing ancestral worship. The original practice was to slaughter or sacrifice an animal and, with the shedding of blood, request a respected person of the clan who died to mediate between them and the Creator. It was believed that the deceased ancestor is now a spirit and is nearer to God. The living, regarding themselves as sinful, knew they were not fit enough to ask a Holy God directly for anything, but needed a mediator to speak on their behalf.

With the passing of time, the enemy stepped in and confused the practice, making the people concentrate on the ancestor instead of on God through the ancestor. This distortion is seen as worshiping ancestors. Historically, though, this African practice is about recognizing our need for mediation before God.

The idea of a mediator is very important among the Africans. In the past, when things were not going well in the relationship between husband and wife, they would seek a mediator. In modern-day terminology, this would have been a marriage counselor. This mediator was highly skilled. Within a reasonable period, the couple would be reconciled and happy once more. This is one reason why among the Africans of yesteryear, there was hardly a divorce! The work of a mediator among these people was highly respected. Teaching that Christ is now the mediator for all is important.

However, it causes confusion when the old African practice is disparaged, when African people are told how bad “ancestral worship” is (which they understand to be needed mediation), and then Christ is preached as mediator. The best approach would be to show Africans this great truth from Hebrews 9:15: that old covenant mediation through animal sacrifice is replaced by Christ, the once-and-for-all sacrifice; and that they, too, in their need for mediation, can come to God through Jesus, the mediator. We need to preach Christ as the mediator not only of the Jews, but of the world. Jesus through the new covenant embraces all human beings who seek forgiveness of sins from God. To do so would help African people understand and accept Christ, rather than squashing their historical instincts and approach, and then introducing Christ in a similar vein. As the Indian proverb goes: “Don’t cut off a man’s nose and then give him a rose to smell.”

Christ is a better mediator between God and people for the forgiveness of their sins, not only of the Israelites but of all nations. He is not just a mediator; Christ is the only mediator between a Holy God and sinful people. In Him, we have forgiveness, reconciliation with God, and the gift of eternal life.



REV. DR. FRANK SHAYI

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DAY 17

JESUS IS REDEEMER

Ыйса - кун төлөп Куткаруучу

(Kyrgyz)

But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir. - Galatians 4:4-7

Reading Galatians 4:4-7, we learn from Paul that God the Father of our Lord Jesus did two things when He sent His Son to be born in flesh and under the law like all other human beings. First, He **redeemed** us from the bondage of the law and, secondly, He **adopted** us as His children. This reminded me of one Kyrgyz folk story that I think has very similar themes.

There was once a prominent rich man named Aldayar. He was well respected by many. Because of a series of prideful decisions and the dishonesty of some of the tribesmen, Aldayar soon lost his wealth and reputation among his people. Eventually, with his extended family, he was expelled from the tribe. In those distant years when the land belonged to the tribes rather than individuals, expulsion from a tribe meant eventual death.

As he and his family wandered the Kyrgyz mountains, they encountered another tribe who allowed them to settle next to them to survive the winter. Aldayar's past fame and status helped them. One day, Aldayar witnessed a high-profile dispute between the head of the neighboring tribe and another tribe leader whose son was killed by the son of the first one. To pay for this crime and for justice to prevail, the tribe leader's son, or someone with equal social status from the same tribe, had to be killed. Aldayar offered his own life instead of the young prince's, with the condition that his family be admitted as rightful members of the tribe. The offer was accepted by all parties, and the prince's life was spared. The opposing tribe leader felt his son's death was avenged. Aldayar's family, despite suffering the loss of their father, was saved from eventual destruction and received a new chance for life as part of the new tribe.

The Kyrgyz people have lived in tribes for centuries, if not for millennia. This tribal system is so engrained in the mentality and identity of the Kyrgyz that even seven decades of Soviet nation-building efforts did not change it drastically. Most of the present-day cultural concepts, symbols, and traditions that impact our life come from our nomadic tribal past.

So, the idea of Jesus as our Redeemer is also best understood through this prism. As we can see from this heart-breaking story of Aldayar, the idea of one paying the penalty for someone else's crime (even by one's own life!) is not new in our people's communal memory. This tradition seems to be deeply rooted in the laws and regulations governing the relationships within a tribe and between tribes. No wonder, then, that the phrase to redeem in verse 5 is translated literally as "кун төлөө" (paying the penalty for someone's death or property damages).

The story of Aldayar makes it a lot easier for a Kyrgyz mind to understand the connection between the redemption and adoption that Paul puts together in this passage to help both the Jews and the Gentiles understand their new standing in Jesus. Despite the absence of any tribal or family ties to the young prince, Aldayar's sacrificial payment for the young prince's crime was accepted as having an equal value because they both were from the nobility. Moreover, thanks to the high price paid by their father, the entire family of Aldayar was adopted into the new tribe. As it was many centuries ago, one's acceptance in a community means everything in the social fabric of the Kyrgyz.

This echoes strongly what Paul writes in verses 6 and 7. God sent His Holy Spirit into the hearts of those whom He has redeemed and made His children. It is so incredible that God changed my status from slave to that of His child! He paid a very high price for this—the humble birth of His firstborn Son Jesus, His subjection to the bondage of the law, and His death on the cross. By sending His Spirit into my heart, God restored my connection with Him, inviting me to a most intimate relationship of love, forgiveness, and sacrifice.

"Oh, our dear father, why have you done this?! Such great love and sacrifice..." might have been the thoughts of Aldayar's children and grandchildren, forever thankful and indebted for their father's unconditional love and care for them. How much more and how immeasurably greater is our Heavenly Father's love, sacrifice, and grace that we experience through Jesus Christ! I do hope that this great truth leads you, too, to reverence and humility before the feet of our Lord, as our hearts can only gasp, "Abba, Father!"



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DAY 18

JESUS IS RISEN

Jesús ha Resucitado

(Spanish)

For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. – 1 Corinthians 15:16-20

A friend often reminds me, "Things look the way they do because you see them from where you are." Very true! We simply need to climb a mountain or a hill to experience the reality that our vantage point impacts how we perceive our landscape.

Similarly, context shapes how we see and experience Advent. A fuller context allows us to approach the coming of Jesus from a holistic perspective. Let us reflect on this a bit. Of course, we know Advent includes the birth of Jesus, but it also connects to the other foundational events of His existence. Understanding this helps us rethink and then live Advent in light of the resurrected Jesus. May the God of life and resurrection guide and enlighten us as we reflect! Amen.

Advent and Jesus's Existence in Perspective

Advent is a time of active waiting that prepares us for the birth of Jesus. Yet the nativity itself does not represent the full purpose of His existence. It connects us with Jesus's earthly life, and His earthly life connects us with His death. And that death goes further to connect us with His resurrection. Yet, even His resurrection does not define the purpose of His existence, but it connects us to His ascension and reception in heaven. Likewise, His ascension and reception in heaven do not exhaust His divine purpose, but they connect us with His second coming. And even the wonder of His second coming does not exhaust the purpose of His existence, but rather connects us with the reordering of everything created for the purpose of giving it over to the Father.

In this Advent season, we await the coming of this multifaceted Jesus with freshly renewed interest—a Jesus whose greatness increases in dimension and expands as we perceive the unfolding of the whole panoramic tapestry of why He comes to visit.

Advent and the Resurrection of Jesus in Perspective

Advent is a time of hope-filled expectation focused on the person of Jesus being born. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is like His second birth—His emergence into a

transformational new reality for Him, His disciples, and everyone. This was crystal clear to the apostle Paul for whom Jesus's resurrection is the solid foundation of our faith.

Look again at Paul's words from 1 Corinthians 15:16-20. Using images of "first fruits" and "a great harvest," the apostle feeds our understanding that the resurrection of Jesus is the demonstration (first fruit) of the victory of the God of life and of resurrection over death itself, followed by a long procession of successive resurrections (the great harvest). It is our victorious cry of liberation from sin, the certainty of salvation, and the hope of eternal life.

Advent in Light of Our Current Perspective

How can we articulate and observe an Advent that takes into account the vast purposes of Jesus's incarnate existence and the wonder of His resurrection?

In this Advent we are passing through, in days filled with uncertainty, we remember the humble birth of Jesus even as we wait in hope for the coming of the All-Worthy One who will shine in global dimensions, dressed in the robes of His full magnitude. We long for the complete Jesus, the multicolored, grace-tapestry we so desperately need to see, who will bring about the fullness of His good purposes for His creation.

Ours is also a time to focus on and renew our hope in the risen Jesus, who speaks to the very core of this current Covid-19 pandemic, bringing light into the isolation, death, loneliness, and uncertainty. How grateful we are for a compassionate Savior who enters in, who draws near, and whose strength enables us to press on with hope.

Rethinking Advent and experiencing it on a new "mountain" with a fresh perspective transports us into the certainty that neither death, nor fear, nor illness, nor loneliness, nor infection, nor suffering will have the last word. The last word belongs to the risen and reigning Jesus. It is this Jesus who visits us by His Spirit in this time of Advent waiting. My whole being and yours, along with our brothers and sisters who have already experienced death, all eagerly await to hear the sound of His voice.



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DAY 19

JESUS IS THE SON OF MAN

Ο Ιησούς είναι ο Υιός του Ανθρώπου

(Greek)

Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." - Matthew 8:20

After His many healings (Matthew 8:1-17), and astonishing teachings (Matthew 7:28-29), Jesus's authority was acknowledged by the crowds. People felt that their messianic expectations were finally beginning to be fulfilled, and they wanted in. Who would not want to be closely associated with the new emerging power, share some of that glory, and, possibly, enjoy some of the benefits that are bound to accompany it? The Son of Man has come!

"Son of Man" was the messianic title known to the Jews from Daniel 7, where the prophet saw this messianic figure being "given authority, glory and sovereign power..." (Daniel 7:14). However, Jesus manifested His authority as the Son of Man in unexpected ways. When approached by a scribe who wanted to be on His team, Jesus revealed what His messianic authority looks like: "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). In this astounding statement there are many elements to reflect on.

First, Jesus reveals His homelessness in this world. One cannot help but notice the solidarity of Jesus with one of the most degrading human experiences—that of homelessness. This experience is particularly relevant to war refugees or victims of the global climate change. This summer, hundreds of Greeks became homeless in their own country after uncontrollable fires ravaged their lands for days. The unprecedented high temperatures made it impossible to tame this catastrophe. How is one to comfort these people and make up for the loss of the houses they grew up in and the fields that had been their only source of income? The Son of Man is the one who "emptied" Himself in solidarity with those who have nowhere to lay their head. But, as Christ's body, how far is our solidarity with the state of this world able to go? Perhaps we are also holding on to a certain Son of Man image of power, rather than discerning Him among the afflicted.

Second, Jesus describes his experience as unlike that of foxes and birds, for even *they* have a home. His is a completely solitary experience. Jesus's lack of a home in this world is essentially an experience of deprivation or rejection in a place that was expected to have been His home. It is clearly said that He came to His own home, "but his own did not receive him" (John 1:11). What

other experience could come closer to what Jesus describes than the solitary suffering of victims of domestic violence? They find themselves in what is otherwise known as “home,” yet they are denied the peace, belonging, and lack of fear that a home supposedly offers. Indeed, in the Scriptures the home is where one can sit “under their own fig tree and no one will make them afraid” (Micah 4:4).

Animals enjoy their nests, according to our verse, but the one who provided these to the animals is “nestless,” just like the mother who is denied the home where she birthed and raised her children. The rise in domestic violence, partly because of the pandemic lockdowns, has brought to the surface this primarily female experience more than at any other time. In Greece, seven women have been murdered by their partners in the course of the last seven months alone. The Son of Man knows the dangerous home firsthand. He is in solidarity with the suffering women of our world, and He is calling us to stand by them as well.

Nevertheless, we do see the Son of Man laying down His head to sleep, a few verses later (Matthew 8:24), and He does it in a storm! The statement that He has nowhere to lay His head means, at the same time, that the whole world is a place He may sleep and rest. Every place is His home, despite the fact that He does not lay His head in a peaceful world. He lays His head in a hostile, stormy world, yet He is able to sleep. He is home, and so are we. We are always home in His world, despite the uncontrollable storms and our unstable little boats. If the Son of Man tasted the world’s “homelessness” while, at the same time, having been given all dominion, then there’s no need to hold on to a home to find peace. Following Jesus, the Son of Man, means that it is possible for us to lay our heads and sleep, even in the storm.



DR. MYRTO THEOCHAROUS

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DAY 20

JESUS IS THE WORD

พระเยซูทรงเป็นพระวาจาของพระเจ้า

(Thai)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. - John 1:1-2, 14

Back in the 19th century, Chiang Mai, a city located in the upper north of Thailand (or Siam at that time), had its own local rulers. The most powerful among the rulers was Chao Kawilorot Suriyawong from the Thip Chak dynasty. He was feared among courtiers and people. In a courtroom, when he said "Owa," it meant an immediate death sentence. The public designated him "Chao Fa - Chao Chiwit," a king with the power of life and death over his people.

With that power, he issued a death penalty to the first two Thai Christians in the north, Nan-Inta and Noi-Suriya, condemning them for professing faith in Jesus Christ. Both were brutally executed in September 1869. The intent was to warn people that a cruel fate awaited all who should leave the state religion (Buddhism) for Christianity. However, in 1878, the king of all Thailand, Rama the Fifth, issued a royal command granting freedom of religion to all Thai people and rendering Suriyawong's words powerless. The story is an example that the more powerful a person is, the more power his or her words have.

The text in John 1:1-2, 14 introduces us to a powerful Word—powerful because it was with God in the beginning and was God. John gets his understanding of this Word from the Old Testament. In Genesis 1, the text repeatedly reads, "And God said.... And it was so." The book of Psalms declares, "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made... For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast" (Psalm 33:6,9). Psalm 107:20 states, "He sent out his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave." God's Word brought the universe into existence, provided healing to the sick, and gave life to those near death. Additionally, Isaiah 55:11 reads, "...so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." For Jews like John, a spoken word embodies the person who spoke it. So, God's Word represents God Himself.

All of that background is in view as John makes the connection that Jesus is the Word who came in power to do the Father's bidding. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the

one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The phrase, "made his dwelling among us" literally means "tabernacled among us." The term tabernacle in the Old Testament was an earthly picture of God's dwelling place among men. Thus, Jesus, taking on human flesh was God "pitching his tent" among us!

John writes his gospel to present the glory of this unique person of Jesus Christ, "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). And he starts with the reality that Jesus is the Word, the unmatched power of God at work in the world in human flesh. He has finished God's plan in creation and in redemption by fulfilling God's Word through His life, His death, and His resurrection.

Reflect on that reality for a moment. For ancient human kings, their word determined life or death and was a force of great power. For God, the King of kings, Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. And with all the power of the eternal God, He died that we might live, and lives that death will die. The hope of Advent is that you will know God and find life in this Jesus who is the Word of God in the flesh.

Let's praise Him and call upon Him: O great and glorious Word of God, Jesus Christ, we praise and glorify You. We humbly ask You, by the holy mystery of Your incarnation and nativity, to deliver us. Let the glad tidings we commemorate this season be made known to all people. Amen.



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DAY 21

JESUS IS THE VINE

Jisu Darkha Bejii Achechena sii-e¹

(Poula)

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener." - John 15:1

Airports provide great scenes for observing contrasting human emotions. In India, we see some people with garlands, smiling and waiting for the arrival of their loved ones. And when they arrive, some break into *bhangra* (a Punjabi dance). We also witness some families huddling together for their last-minute goodbyes, with tears glistening in their eyes. If reunion ignites joy, farewell surely stirs up sorrow.

John 15 is placed in a somber setting, the mood darkened by the cloud of Jesus's impending departure. If we zoom out and look at chapter 15 in context, we find it amidst the farewell words of Jesus. After the triumphal entry of Jesus in John 12, He began to talk openly about His impending death as the hour of His glorification (John 12:23; 13:31). Previously, Jesus avoided the risk of being seized or stoned because His time had not yet come (John 7:30; 8:59; 10:39). But from John 12 onwards, Jesus began to prepare His disciples for His imminent departure and their life after that.

Coming back to the airport scene, as we zoom in at the family bidding farewell, sometimes we notice a son or a daughter listening attentively to the parents' final advice, as if the fate of his or her life hangs on it. As the disciples travel this road of life, their lives, too, would hang on the teachings and the work of Jesus on the cross. In John 15, maybe as they walked in a vineyard and He pointed His finger at the vine trees, Jesus revealed the secret of a fruit-bearing life. In verse 1, Jesus says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener." Jesus identifies Himself as the "true vine" to assert His divinity and introduce Himself as the source of a fruitful life. The metaphor Jesus used was an everyday picture, familiar to the disciples, but it conveyed profound spiritual insight that bears historical significance. Jesus called Himself the "true vine," unlike the "degenerate...wild vine," identified with the unfaithful and idolatrous Israel, that bore no fruit (Jeremiah 2:21; Psalm 80:8-16). Jesus fulfills where Israel had failed. He has become the true Israel (Matthew 2:15; cf. Hosea 11:1) by becoming a channel of blessing to the nations. Now, whoever abides in Him will bear fruit, "fruit that will last" (John 15:16).

Even after two millennia of the gospel's global impact, some people are still unconvinced of Jesus's cosmic and heavenly authority to give life. Some people think that Jesus is not enough; they need something else. We see

fragments of syncretism in various societies, and the Naga society is no exception. Although the majority of Naga Christians have abandoned pagan religious practices, some are still controlled by its murky, residual ideas. For instance, when someone gets sick in the family, the father slays a domestic fowl and looks for signs in its innards, hoping that it will point to the affected organ of the sick person. Such practices undervalue Christ as the source of life and wholeness. To practice them—or anything else that puts hope in something in addition to or instead of Jesus—is not to abide in the vine.

Stretching this metaphorical idea, those who syncretize are like rogue branches drawing death-giving sap from a neighboring poisonous tree even as they claim to abide and draw life-giving sap from the vine. Can such a thing happen? Can such a branch bear good fruit? This does not happen in the botanical world, but people think they can make it happen in the spiritual world, dividing allegiances and covering their bases.

New birth in Christ should lead a believer to a maturing and spiritually evolving life, towards becoming the best version of themselves, producing the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Jesus impresses upon His disciples, then and now, that the only way towards fruitfulness is through connectedness. As a mobile phone cannot fulfill its purpose without being connected to a network, you and I cannot experience an abundant life without being connected to Jesus, the only source of life. Are you connected to the vine? Is Jesus bearing fruit through you?

1 In Poula, which is a dialect of Poumai Naga people, residing in the states of Manipur and Nagaland, in the North Eastern region of India. Nagas are a distinct ethnic group settled in the Indian states of Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and in the country of Myanmar.



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DAY 22

JESUS IS THE WAY

Jesus dzə` dzəə`

(Lamnso')

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. – John 14:6

The conflict in which Cameroonians living in the northwest and southwest regions find themselves for the past five years has exposed the challenges Christians face in asserting their loyalty and commitment to God. Many people's faith has been challenged as they helplessly watch their loved ones being murdered in cold blood, their houses torched with fire, or their family members abducted to unknown destinations. As more people become homeless and are exposed to hunger and want of basic needs, survival becomes difficult. It becomes more challenging to affirm that Jesus is the "way," especially as the church's efforts at resolving the problems seem not to bear much fruit. How can Christians in such a context understand and appreciate Jesus as the way, in the midst of competing ways?

The Way is Personalized

Our text presents Jesus' statement to a bewildered group of disciples who have been with Him, following Him and learning from Him, yet have struggled to connect His thoughts to their future expectations. In response to Thomas's statement that they are ignorant of Jesus's destination and thus the way there, Jesus points His disciples to His mission. By saying "I am the way (dzəə kù dzə mo vèn)," He personalizes the way. He is not claiming to merely know the way, in the sense of giving direction; His person and work serve as believers' pathway to God the Father. "Way" speaks of a connection between two persons or things, and Jesus Himself serves as the link between God and humans. His statement insists that salvation does not come through the law, sacrifices, religious practices, or the overthrow of foreign oppressors, as the Jews of the first century believed. Instead, Jesus Himself is the channel through which people can have a relationship with God the Father and spend eternity with Him.

The Way Fulfills the Religious Yearnings of All Peoples

The affirmation "Jesus is the way" is very important in the context of war and humanitarian crises in Cameroon and across Africa. Jesus dzə dzəə calls into question the use of "odeshi" powers and the occult in an attempt to protect one's self or fight against the oppressor. It calls the Christians' attention to the need to rethink the role ancestors play in solving such human problems.

Considering the absolute statement Jesus makes, it indicates that no other way is valid in establishing human relationship with God, the possession of eternal life, or supernatural solutions to problems caused by other human beings. In a crisis of faith, we are called to affirm that Jesus is the God-appointed way instead of claiming that our primal religious practices connect us to God or can provide a solution to the crisis affecting us. Jesus's statement points to His person as the ultimate revelation of God who fulfills the religious yearnings of all peoples of the world. Any other religion or philosophy that proposes a different avenue to God is not authentic, since Jesus asserts that He is the one exclusive path to God. Our relationship with the Father, which brings us needed help through a crisis, depends on Jesus alone. Therefore, since He is God's anointed, we are all called to respond to Him in obedience, no matter our difficulties and challenges. Those who claim to know God but reject Jesus do not know God.

The Way Shows God's Action in the World

In the midst of a world teeming with religious diversity, Jesus the way means we should look to Jesus to discover who God is, how God acts in the world, and the character of the divine mission. When in crisis, we must remember that all roads do not lead to God. Rather, we can remember that, in Jesus, God came to us. The way of Jesus is not a way void of challenges, but when challenges come, our Lord assures us that He will be with us till the end.



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DAY 23

JESUS IS LORD

Yesu en Rwoth

(Alur)

Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. - Philippians 2:9-11

Lordship of Jesus Christ

The earlier verses of Philippians 2 speak of Jesus's humility, becoming a human being, and of his obedience, following God's will unto death. For this humble obedience, Paul tells us, God honored Jesus twice. First, God exalted Him, and second, God gave Jesus the name that is above all names (Philippians 2:6-9). One day, all will know and acknowledge that this humble, obedient Jesus is Lord.

This context is essential as we consider what it means that Jesus is Lord. The concept of "Lord" is used in both the secular and religious realms. In secular politics, it has the meaning of a personality who holds all the power over his people.¹ In various African cultures, this title has different dimensions. It is attributed to a chief who has marked his history with victory, that is, a "warlord." Among the Alur people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, it is used to express a wife's respect for her husband: *rwoth para* (my lord)—a form she must use to address him.

The Bible, too, uses "Lord" in diverse ways: as a polite way to address a superior, who may be equivalent to a gentleman (Matthew 13:27); or to identify the "master" of a servant or slave (Matthew 6:24; 21:40). But it is also used to speak of God (Matthew 4:7). And, at key points in the unfolding revelation of who God is, biblical writers and speakers apply it to Jesus. Elizabeth recognized the lordship of Jesus before He was even born. When Mary visited her, she said, "But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:43). And in Philippians 2, the title "Lord" for Jesus crowns the passage. It celebrates that Jesus has equality and glory with God beyond the humility of the cross.² This text is important—and a wonderful Advent reflection—because it gives us key information about the nature of the incarnation and the nature of Jesus's lordship. Jesus humbled himself, taking the condition of a servant, and He suffered in obedience. His reward was an elevation as high as His humiliation had been deep.

Elevation of Christ

After His resurrection, Jesus is honored above all names throughout the universe because He is the only Savior and the only hope of the world (Acts 4:12).³ The authority of our Lord Jesus Christ extending over the whole universe is seen in the fact that at the name of Jesus every knee must bow. This reflects what is true in many cultures in Africa, where bowing shows submission to a person in authority.

The fact that the three realms—heaven, earth, and under the earth—bow to Jesus shows that He is both the Lord of the spiritual world and the Lord of the physical world. In power, glory, and honor, His name is the greatest in heaven and on earth. Those who refuse to admit this do so at their peril.⁴ At the last judgment, even those who are condemned will recognize Jesus's authority and His right to rule.

However, we must let the full context of Philippians—and of Jesus's life—inform our understanding of His lordship. He is the Lord who humbled Himself, by becoming one of us, and who was obedient to death that we might have a way to be with Him. He is the Lord who loves and the Lord who serves. Paul made clear that all humanity will submit to Him one way or another, either willingly or under compulsion at His return. What grace that we can know His loving Lordship now and be ready and eager to meet Him when He comes!

Conclusion

The humility of Jesus has immense repercussions at the personal, ecclesial, and national levels. The Lord clearly shows us that humility not only precedes honor and glory but also leads to them. He demonstrates that true authority serves those under its care. Thus the apostle Paul urges the Philippians and us to stand firm in the faith (Philippians 1:27-30), to live in humility towards one another (Philippians 2:3), and trust God to glorify us and bring about His justice.

1 W. GRUDEM, *Systematic Theology, Charols, Excelsis*, 2007, p. 258.

2 Study Bible, Sower, Excelsis, 2015, p. 1972.

3 T. ADEYEMO, *Contemporary Biblical Commentary*, Farel, 2008, p. 1556.

4 The Bible with study notes new life, Second 21, Geneve, 2012, p.1876



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DAY 24

JESUS IS THE LAST ADAM

Yesu Christo Ne Adam a Otwa tuo

(Akan)

So it is written: “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. – 1 Corinthians 15:45

The references to “first Adam” and “second Adam” in the Scriptures are meant to make clear that the history of Christian salvation is connected. Salvation is God’s rescue mission in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus came as a second Adam to save by reversing the curses brought by the first Adam. He did this by representing us: in His obedience to God’s will, in His mediation between us and God as a perfect high priest, and in His substitution of Himself as a sacrificial lamb once-and-for-all on the cross.

Reversing the Curse

We owe our understanding of why Jesus Christ is the second Adam to Paul. He wrote to the Romans, explaining how Christ reverses the curses inflicted upon humanity by the failures of the first Adam:

Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who is a pattern of the one to come. But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! (Romans 5:14-15)

A process of decay was instigated by the choices of the first Adam, and the journey of return to God started with the Abrahamic covenant and was fulfilled in Christ (Galatians 3:6-9). Paul writes that “the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed,” and by “seed” he meant Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:16). The story of Christian redemption is therefore best understood against the backdrop of the alienation that occurred between God and the first Adam, which was reversed through the “seed of Abraham,” Jesus the Christ, the second and last Adam.

In his book *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament*, Christopher J. H. Wright observes how the Old Testament looks beyond itself to an expected end in Jesus Christ. Paul states within the context of the resurrection story:

For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive (1 Corinthians 15:21-22).

Jesus Christ is therefore presented as “a pattern” or type of Adam in Paul’s letter to the Romans. In Genesis 3:15, God puts enmity between the serpent and the woman and her offspring. To the serpent, God says about the woman’s offspring “... he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” Jesus is the offspring of the woman—the second Adam—who renders the mortal blow to the devil’s head. The ultimate consequence of the alienation between God as Creator and Adam and Eve as the created was the loss of intimate fellowship. In the second Adam, that fellowship is restored.

Second Adam as the Perfect High Priest

How? The anticipated victory of the second Adam is evident in the encounter with the devil at the beginning of Jesus's ministry (Matthew 3:16-17). There were three temptations that were thrown at Jesus. Each of them, in some way, reflected what the serpent had requested Eve to do, that is, to usurp God's sovereignty. Where the first couple failed, Jesus succeeded, resisting the devil's temptations by trusting and obeying God's Word.

Consider these important differences between how the first Adam and the second Adam represented humanity:

- The first Adam wanted to be like God, but the Second Adam was God who became human by choice (Philippians 2:7-8).
- The first Adam brought condemnation and death through disobedience; the second Adam brings righteousness and life through obedience (Romans 8:18-19).
- The first Adam died as a result of his sin (Genesis 3:19); the second Adam died in our place for our sin (Hebrews 9:25-28).
- The first Adam was banished from Eden (Genesis 3:23-24), but the second Adam was raised from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:20), intercedes for us in God's presence (Romans 8:34), and will bring those that belong to Him there, too (John 14:3).

Among the Akan of Ghana, one word accounts for the dynamic role of Jesus: *Ntamgyinafopanyin*, Supreme Mediator. This captures what the Second Adam should mean for the African Christian and "brings us closer to the picture of the self-sacrificing High Priest as powerfully painted by the author of Hebrews...." His taking on of human nature as the Second Adam enabled Jesus to share the human predicament and so qualified Him to act and intercede for humanity.

Jesus, the last Adam, overturns the curses brought upon us by the first Adam. By taking on our humanity in His first Advent, He was able to represent us with His obedient life, sacrificial death, and priestly intercession before the Father. At His second Advent, He will fully conquer death, the curse will be no more (Revelation 22:3), and the restoration of intimate fellowship with God will be complete. May you experience joy and hope this Advent season as you celebrate what the last Adam has done and long for what He will yet do.

1 Christopher J.H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1992).

2 Monica Migliorino Miller, *The Theology of the Passion of the Christ* (New York: St. Paul's, 2005), 2-3.

3 John D.K. Ekem, *New Testament Concepts of Atonement in an African Pluralistic Setting* (Accra: Sonlife Press, 2005), 120.



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DAY 25

JESUS IS ETERNAL LIFE

یسوع ابدی زندگی ہے۔

(Urdu)

We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. – 1 John 5:20

To understand that Jesus is eternal life, it helps to see how eternity relates to His birth, His life, and His death and resurrection. Since Jesus is God who became man, these aspects of His earthly life have bearing for ours.

Jesus's birth unites eternal life with human life: Jesus did not begin to exist at His birth. He always was. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God" (John 1:1-2). This reality is supported in John 17:5 when Jesus refers to the glory which He had with the Father "before the world began" and in John 17:24, which refers to the Father having loved Jesus "before the creation of the world". With respect to His earthly life, Jesus had come and gone before any of the people to whom the apostle John's letter was addressed or before any of us who believe in Him today. But with respect to the eternal Son of God becoming a man, when Jesus came, He came to stay. Eternity now dwells in human flesh forever. And that thought, of the permanent abiding of the eternal Christ in human flesh, remains an assurance that eternal life is possible for humanity.

Faith in Christ means to embrace the wonder that in the incarnation, Jesus unites eternal life with humanity.

Jesus lives an eternal life: John 10:27-28 is a self-proclamation by Jesus: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish." So, the personal relationship a Christian has with Jesus leads to eternal life for the Christian. What does it mean to follow Jesus? It means to obey His voice and instruction, to walk in His ways, and to go where He goes. So, the Christian who follows Jesus learns the way of living—loving God with heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving neighbor as self. That is the way of the eternal kingdom. She learns to live the kind of life, the quality of life, that produces flourishing and so will endure forever in God's kingdom. Jesus gives us that "eternal life" by His teaching and example. How, though, can we go where He goes? Ultimately, where He goes is into the very presence of God—which is where we are made to be, but to where we lost access to because of sin and rebellion against God and His ways.

Jesus's earthly life, though, was lived in perfect obedience to God and His ways. He did nothing to deserve separation from God. On the contrary, His life qualifies Him—and all who are united to Him by the Holy Spirit—to live forever in the very presence of God. He can give eternal life to His sheep because as God, He has it, and because as human, He earned it in the flesh. Hence, to be in Christ Jesus means to be certainly and securely qualified for eternal life in His righteousness.

Jesus's death and resurrection assure us of eternal life: The apostle Paul hits this important connection between death and eternal life head on: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). Simply put, sin's penalty—death—stands in the way of our having eternal life. Because Jesus is human and sinless, He can pay the penalty for human sin as a substitute. And He did (Hebrews 2:14-17)! And once that penalty is paid, it cannot be demanded again. Alleluia! Jesus's resurrection in human flesh assures us that we, too, can and will be raised. Again, the apostle Paul makes this important connection clear: “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:20). His resurrection is the “firstfruits,” the beginning of a harvest that assures more to come. Because Jesus rose, we who are in Him by faith will also rise to eternal life with God.

What a tremendous comfort and joy for people who live in regions of the world like mine, where political volatility and religious tensions highlight life's fragility, to know Jesus, who is eternal life. Indeed, it's a comfort for the world at large—ravaged by disunity, immorality, and pandemic—to know that He leads us now in the life that is abundant and will endure, and He has won for us the assurance that death will not have the last word. His blessing of eternal life will flow “far as the curse is found.”



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Chris Wright's conversations
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in the Majority World.



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CHRIS WRIGHT
AUTHOR, THE MISSION OF GOD

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"The great thing about this Advent devotional is not just that it gives us multiple portraits of Jesus, but that it does so through multiple eyes and voices from around the whole global body of Christ, and especially from the Majority World. Langham Partnership is privileged to be giving voice to sisters and brothers from all over the world, and we pray that you will be blessed as you walk with Jesus in their company this Advent."

-Chris Wright

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