

JOYFUL ALL YE NATIONS RISE

An Advent Devotional
from the Global Church

With an Introduction from

Christopher J. H. Wright

*Global Ambassador
for Langham Partnership*



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Joyful All Ye Nations Rise: An Advent Devotional from the Global Church

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Introduction

“Angels don’t sing,” my friend said to me. I was rather surprised, given the assumption of so many Christian hymns (especially at Christmas) that picture the angels in full-throated song. “No,” he went on. “The Bible doesn’t say that the angels sing—not even over Bethlehem when Jesus was born. They give praise and they say things. It doesn’t say they sing. And even in Revelation, the angels make speeches with a loud voice, but it’s the twenty-four elders (Rev. 5:9–10) and the victorious redeemed (15:3–4) who sing songs. Singing is for humans, not angels.”

I’ve never checked his theory to see if there’s anywhere in the Bible where angels are specifically said to sing. Perhaps an angel might drop by and let me know. But I agree with my friend’s main point: singing is a distinctively human thing. Birds might disagree, but then we’re talking about songs with words. (Sorry, birds—we still love your singing.) And singing is especially a biblical thing, in the sense that it has always been deeply part of Jewish and Christian worship and culture.

Indeed, singing is commanded! How many times do the psalmists tell us to “Sing to the Lord!” And how many times do they respond with an enthusiastic, “I will sing . . . !” Clearly, God knew that His wonderful gifts of music, poetry and song would not only enhance all human life on earth in infinitely creative ways but would also serve to teach truth, enrich worship, accompany all our emotions and, above all, celebrate God’s own saving love and grace.

Singing accompanies the best and the worst of times. Isaiah sounds an Advent note when he envisages the joyful singing of the redeemed in the new creation.

And the ransomed of the LORD shall return
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain gladness and joy,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away (Isaiah 35:10, ESV).

Jesus and His disciples sang a hymn as they trudged out to Gethsemane in those last hours before His betrayal, trial and crucifixion (Matthew 26:30). Since they had just eaten the Passover meal, this would have been the traditional “Hallel”—some of Psalms 113–118. The arrival of the gospel in Europe began with two prisoners, chained up after a Roman flogging in Philippi, singing! “About midnight

Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:25).

And what better time to sing than when we travel through Advent to the joy of the incarnation. No wonder there are so many Christmas hymns and carols going back centuries, just a few of which inspire each of the meditations in this book.

I used to think that the best Christian singers on earth were Africans, having enjoyed the rhythmic vitality and spontaneous harmonies of their worship. And then I went to teach a Langham Preaching seminar in Vanuatu. I could hardly believe what happened after someone strummed a few chords on a guitar: a huge swell of voices in multiple harmonies from these towering Melanesian Pacific Islanders raised the tin roof, louder than the pounding rain. I want to hear them again in the new creation!

Whether the angels will join in, we’ll have to wait and see.

Chris Wright

Global Ambassador, Langham Partnership

*O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.*

— O Come, O Come Emmanuel (v. 1)

Around 735 BC, Ahaz, king of Judah, faced an enormous menace. Tiny Judah was attacked by powerful kings, Pekah of Israel and Rezin of Syria. Ahaz trembled. How could he withstand the onslaught and escape the threat? King and country were in dire straits. Ahaz could not see a way out (Isaiah 7:1–2).

Into this hopeless situation came the words of the prophet Isaiah. He reassured the king that God would deliver Judah, that there was no reason to be afraid. God even offered a sign to show His determination to help. “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). Despite some mystery about the boy’s mother, the message was clear: God would definitely intervene and demonstrate His rescuing presence (“Immanuel” means “God is with us”) by delivering Judah within about two years (Isaiah 7:15–16). Against all the odds, God seems to be involved in the affairs of the nation. And that is also our hope today.

Some two centuries on, a crisis of a different nature held God’s people ransom. This time, it was not external but internal evil that wreaked havoc—the people’s “iniquities” and “sins” in general (Isaiah 59:1–2) and their bloodthirstiness, guile, unreliability, corruption and violence in particular (Isaiah 59:3–8). Israel had failed to obey God. Consequently, “justice is far from us” (59:9), “At midday we stumble as if it were twilight” (59:10), “We look for justice, but find none; for deliverance, but it is far away” (59:11). This is not just ancient Israel’s experience but that of the church, too. We, too, see pastors involved in scandals, corrupt bishops stick to power and the church fail in her mission.

It is not only the prophet who was troubled by this state of affairs. The Lord Himself was so “displeased that there was no justice” and indeed “appalled that there was no one to intervene” (59:15–16) that, once again, He decides to act in person (59:16–17). Because no one cares, no one bothers, no one assumes responsibility, God once again promises personal intervention and deliverance to restore justice: “The Redeemer will come to Zion” (59:20). And this makes the situation hopeful.

We are not immune today to political crises of the nature Isaiah witnessed or to moral/religious crises among God's people of the magnitude he described. The wars in Ukraine, Gaza and elsewhere have shaken our complacency, constitutional changes and political leaders have destabilized social and political life in many places and the church has struggled to be the salt and light of justice, righteousness and love she is supposed to be. In this world, too, "We look for justice, but find none; for deliverance, but it is far away" (Isaiah 59:11). In this world, Europe and Russia, Israelis and Palestinians, corrupt governments and impotent oppositions, politicians and voters of the right and left likewise badly need God's redeeming presence and justice. Is there hope to be found?

Two thousand years ago, Israel again experienced oppression by foreign hands as well as self-inflicted corruption and injustice. Israel was captive to Rome and her own sins, once again in need of God's rescuing presence: Immanuel.

Two thousand years ago, as a helpless child, God came and ransomed captive Israel from sin's oppression and every other possible power (Colossians 2:13–15). So we experience Immanuel now, the presence of the Holy Spirit with us and in us, made possible by Jesus' death and resurrection. And we press on as members of that ransomed people of God, mourning in exile, striving in the Spirit's power to proclaim the gospel and to embody love and justice among the nations and rejoicing in anticipation of God's ultimate appearance and deliverance.

We know that, when the Lord takes matters into His own hands, the most desperate political and moral/religious crises can be resolved and one day will be. So we, too, take up the cry: *O come, O come, Emmanuel!*



Dr. Tamás Czövek

Hungary

Tamás is a Langham Scholar and Langham-published author. He teaches Old Testament at both the Pentecostal Theological Seminary and John Wesley College in Budapest, Hungary.

*O come, thou Rod of Jesse, free thine own from Satan's tyranny;
from depths of hell thy people save, and give them victory o'er the grave.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!*

— O Come, O Come, Emmanuel (v. 3)

This Christmas season, our hearts resonate with the cries of a war-torn land where sadness, anger and hatred prevail. As we mourn lives lost—both Palestinians and Israelis, especially children and women—we find ourselves immersed in a scene reminiscent of the biblical context into which Christ was born: a time of darkness, suffering, oppression and brutality.

Isaiah 11:1–10 paints a picture of hope and restoration. The “Rod of Jesse” symbolizes the coming of a Messiah from David’s lineage, a leader endowed with wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord. He will usher in a kingdom ruled by righteousness and justice and an era of peace where even natural enemies will coexist harmoniously. Thus Isaiah prophesies the peace that Christ brings, a peace that transcends our earthly struggles.

The lyrics of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” draw directly from this prophecy. The “Rod of Jesse” is a plea for the Messiah to come and liberate people from oppression and tyranny. This liberation is not just physical but spiritual, freeing humanity from the bondage of sin and death. The refrain is a call to celebrate the anticipated arrival of God with us, bringing this longed-for salvation.

Amid the Israel-Gaza war, we hold on to two divine gifts: the presence of God (“O Come, Emmanuel”) and the gift of hope (freedom from “Satan’s tyranny” and “depths of hell”). Jesus walks with the oppressed and marginalized. His healing and comforting presence brings hope to suffering people—hope that transcends earthly disappointments. Amid our pains and losses, we hold to the promise that the current devastation is not the end of the story. God continues to write the next chapter. He is with us in our suffering and will bring justice and right all wrongs.

So, even as we grieve and confront our fears, it is not without hope. We hold onto the divine promise that Jesus’ reign brings reconciliation (Isaiah 11:6). Hope looks beyond hardships, trusting in God’s complete sovereignty over injustice, believing that light can be reborn from the womb of darkness. Through us, Jesus

will tear down walls, resist evil with good and pave the way for a peaceful future for Israelis and Palestinians.

Isaiah 11 and “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” resonate with “Laylat Al-Milad” (“On Christmas Night”), a famous Arab Christmas song about love breaking through darkness: “On Christmas night, hatred vanishes; earth blooms; war is buried; love is born.” Its verses remind us that Christmas carries a call to action:

*When we offer a glass of water to a thirsty person, we are in Christmas
When we clothe a naked person with a gown of love, we are in Christmas
When we wipe tears from weeping eyes, we are in Christmas
When we cushion a hopeless heart with love, we are in Christmas
When the spirit of revenge dies in me, I am in Christmas
When my soul melts in the being of God, I am in Christmas*

Through the acts of compassion, liberation, healing and forgiveness illustrated in this song, God restores human dignity. The church, His transformed community, displays these signs of the kingdom in the face of oppression as evidence of God’s new world. In the hope that God will bring justice and right all wrongs in His time, we see “war buried” through the eyes of faith, motivating us to tear down dividing walls, resist evil with good and hatred with love. When our “souls melt in the being of God,” His love moves us away from exclusion to embracing others, turning enemies into friends. Then we become beacons of hope, embodying God’s restoring presence to the lives we touch.

The story of God-with-us is not just about Christ breaking down the wall between humanity and God. It’s also an invitation to work with Him to break down barriers that divide us as individuals, communities and nations.



Dr. Rula Khoury Mansour

Israel

Rula is a Palestinian Christian from Nazareth, Israel, and a Langham Scholar. She is the founding director of the Nazareth Center for Peace Studies and associate professor of Reconciliation Theology and Christian Ethics at Nazareth Evangelical College. She and her husband, Bader, live in Nazareth with their three sons: Adi, Rami and Sami.

*King of kings, yet born of Mary, as of old on earth He stood,
Lord of lords in human vesture, in the body and the blood,
he will give to all the faithful his own self for heav'nly food.*

— Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence (v. 2)

Picture yourself wearing the finest garment daily, symbolizing the greatest honor and achievement. Instead of keeping that on, you trade it for an old, worn-out shirt that you would wear for the hardest, dirtiest tasks. Would you do it? Jesus did exactly that. Though He was God, He left His throne above in heaven and chose to live among us, not with the power and glory of a king, but in the humble role of a servant.

This passage in Philippians, called the hymn of Christ, is extraordinarily rich and deep. Here, we see three portraits of Jesus: His deity, humanity and servanthood. The first is Jesus' pre-existence in substance and being, which is equal to God in every way. He is the God of every god and has never lost sight of His divinity. Didn't He pray, "And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began" (John 17:5)? He also claimed to be God when He said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30).

Second, He descended and took upon Himself human clothing—born of the Virgin Mary, stripped of all His privileges, glory and power. Still God, but now in the flesh. "For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way . . ." (Hebrews 2:17a). He is truly God and truly human. He is fully one of us but without sin.

Third, He descended further down and took the lowly clothing of a servant. John the Baptist, another miraculous birth whose parents were past the child-bearing age, was born to a father who was a respected priest. John was special, but not Jesus. Jesus was born to ordinary parents and lived without drawing attention in any way. Jesus got His identity through His service. Remember the scene in the upper room where He washed His disciples' feet with a basin and a towel (John 13)? That was always His posture. He served in total dependence on and obedience to God, doing God's will (John 4:34) rather than His own (Luke 22:42). God's will for Him finally led Him to the cross, the ultimate place of the surrender of the flesh to the will of God, which is also the ultimate sacrifice and the most extraordinary love story!

Jesus' incarnation reveals that both the physical and spiritual realms are equally sacred and will dwell together in integrity for eternity, contrary to the common belief that matter and flesh are evil. It also exposes the graveness of sin in terms of its cost. But above all, it reveals God's great love for us, that He became Emmanuel, God with us, died our death, redeemed us and reconciled us to God.

In Nagaland (India), a Christian state, we rally around the slogan "Nagaland for Christ." After 150 years of Christianity, Sunday involves tremendous traffic and packed churches. The churches are frequently the most noticeable structures in prominent areas around the state. Prayer houses are found on nearly every street. People tithe religiously. But there's a disturbing truth lurking beneath this seeming devotion. Unfortunately, Nagaland is known less for faith and more for its corruption, falling-apart infrastructure, wasteful spending and rising unemployment. We need more than simply Christianity. We need to return to Jesus Christ, the incarnate God, who offers genuine transformation.

Just as Christ put on the garment of humanity and served others, we are now called to put on Christ. This means clothing ourselves in humility, kindness, patience and love (Colossians 3:12). The incarnation is not just a story we remember but a call to live differently. Think of your life as a wardrobe. Each day, we choose what to wear. Will we wear pride, selfishness and anger, or will we wear the garments of humility, service and love? Christ wore the clothes of servanthood, love and humility. These new clothes don't just change how we look on the outside. They change who we are on the inside.

This Advent, as we ponder the greatness of the incarnation, may we remember that the incarnation continues in and through us. Have a merry Christmas, everyone!



Neiphrulou Lasuh

India

Neiphrulou serves as a facilitator of the Langham Preaching movement in Nagaland, India, and as an associate pastor to women at City Church Kohima. She is married to Bendangtemjen, and they have two children, Lentina and Jerome.

*Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art,
dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.*

— Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus (v. 1)

In this song, written by Charles Wesley in 1744, we hear the continuous groaning of humanity awaiting a savior to carry its burdens. In Matthew 1:21, the angelic words about the newborn baby state that He shall be named Jesus “because he will save his people from their sins.” This declaration echoes the prophetic song about the Lord’s servant who “bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:12). Jesus is the very son of God who was sent by the Father to save His lost, hurting and errant creation.

For the Christian church, this prayer for the long-expected Jesus to come was never meant to be limited to one time in life or one area of life. Such a prayer is daily lifted by the church at all times and places, calling Jesus to intervene in the midst of our fears, struggles, pains and doubts. It is a cry which aims not only for the historical second coming of Christ but also for His continual coming with power and salvation in our lives here and now. This long-expected Jesus is at the same time Emmanuel, who is “God with us.” He is not living in a high, ivory tower totally indifferent to what we are going through. Rather, He is with us to the end of the age as He promised (Matthew 28:20), in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes and somehow, we misperceive Him, as did the Emmaus disciples who said ignorantly, “we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). In the midst of our troubles, our eyes get blinded by the unpleasant circumstances and the unceasing pressures to the extent that we can no longer feel the extreme closeness of the Lord. Thus, the troubled soul may accuse the Lord of being sleepy, indifferent and inattentive (as in Mark 4:38; Psalm 10:1). However, reality is otherwise. God is totally and positively present in our darkest times. As Clinton McCann puts it, “God is involved. God is present in the depths; God is to be found where we live every day; God is with us. God is personally intimately, concretely involved.”¹

In the last book of the Bible, we find out that the last-mentioned prayer in the Scriptures is a prayer that is lifted on behalf of the striving church, which finds

itself helpless in a violent and hostile world. But the door that is still and always open is that of heaven. That is why the ongoing prayer from the holy community has been and will always be “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” (Revelation 22:20). And as the Apostle John’s benediction says, His grace is with us every day (Revelation 22:21).

As the Arab world is witnessing horrible, scary and painful conditions due to the wars in Gaza, Syria, Sudan, Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq and Libya, the prayer for the continuous coming of Christ is indispensable. The Christian church is called to be a sign of this coming. As the star in the east pointed to the Savior’s place for the Magi to come and honor Him, in the same way, the church has the responsibility to point to Christ in order to revive hope in the hearts of those who have lost it. The church in the Middle East can do many things to fulfill this role. In its preaching, the church must point to God’s love, which strengthens the weak and encourages the oppressed. In its social ministry, the church has to present Christ the healer, the feeder of the hungry and the One who cares for widows and orphans. In its speech, the church should proclaim the truth without fear and declare God’s judgment with both audacity and humility. Such a witness confirms the prayer’s ongoing relevance.

Indeed, come, thou long-expected Jesus.

¹J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 93.



Rev. Dr. Youssef Helmy

Egypt

Youssef is the Langham Preaching regional coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa. He lives in Cairo, Egypt, where he serves as the senior pastor of Heliopolis Evangelical Church.

*Come to earth to taste our sadness, he whose glories knew no end;
by his life he brings us gladness, our Redeemer, Shepherd, Friend.
Leaving riches without number, born within a cattle stall;
this the everlasting wonder, Christ was born the Lord of all.*

— Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus (v. 3)

The season of Advent speaks powerfully and poignantly to our innermost longings. Political leaders continue to promise more than they can deliver. Political turmoil, violence and corruption remain sad realities in many countries in the world, including on the continent of Africa. In Kenya, my part of the world, religious leaders take advantage of the various longings in people's lives by promising "get-to-heaven-quick schemes" as part of their "get-rich-quick schemes." Confused by over-realized theologies of the end times, innocent and perhaps ignorant people will sell everything they have to cash in on the promises of health, wealth and success. The world's ideologies are a third contender for the satisfaction of people's longings. What seems intellectually compelling still leaves us spiritually vacuous, for the longing of humanity is deeper than the latest intellectual fads. C. S. Lewis put it best when he said, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."¹ Where, then, can our longings be fulfilled?

Our wait for fulfillment coincides with the wait of Matthew's community. Both "waitings" find their fulfillment in Jesus, the suffering servant-king. In Matthew 8:14–17, we find Jesus doing what He does best—satisfying both the temporal and spiritual needs of people, by healing His friend's (Peter's) mother. We learn, too, that His mission was prophesied by the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 53:4–5). This passage anticipates one who suffers but does so bearing the griefs, sorrows and penalties of others. It speaks so powerfully and relevantly to our deep longings as it points to Jesus as one who is like us in knowing suffering but also one who brings us relief—peace and healing—from our suffering. Indeed, the wonderful reality of the incarnation is that the great God came down to our ordinary sin-stricken world to do something about it!

The hymn "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" puts these realities in both beautiful contrast and beautiful words:

*Come to earth to taste our sadness, he whose glories knew no end.
By his life he brings us gladness, our Redeemer, Shepherd, Friend.*

In that last phrase, the hymnist beautifully describes one who does not just listen to our “rants” like our ordinary friends or take advantage of our needs like a politician or religious swindler but truly satisfies our longings through His threefold mission:

1. To **redeem** us from sin by taking its penalty upon Himself (Isaiah 53:5)
2. To **shepherd** us through the ups and downs of life’s journey (John 10:10–14)
3. To **befriend** us in the restored relationship we now have with Him (John 15:13–15)

This mission of Christ provides a longed-for reprieve in our human experiences. So, to us who struggle with the guilt and consequences of our sins, Jesus is able to redeem us and free us. To those who go through the rough storms of life, Jesus may calm the storm but will surely shepherd us through the storms we face—and all of life—by His Word and Spirit. To those whose relationships have been destroyed through abuse, violence or abandonment, Jesus sits right beside us, empathizing with us and providing the care and comfort we deeply long for. As we focus on and sing about these great realities during Advent, Jesus changes our perspective and strengthens our resolve to bear His same redemption, shepherding and friendship to a longing world today.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 121.



Dr. Kevin Muriithi Ndereba

Kenya

Kevin is a Langham-published author who serves as a lecturer and head of the department of practical theology at St. Paul’s University in Kenya as well as within the Presbyterian Church of East Africa.

Thou who wast rich beyond all splendor, all for love's sake becamest poor; thrones for a manger didst surrender, sapphire-paved courts for stable floor. Thou who wast rich beyond all splendor, all for love's sake becamest poor.

— Thou Who Wast Rich beyond All Splendor (v. 1)

Growing up in the communist country of Yugoslavia, going to church was not forbidden. One could not be a member of the Communist Party and go to church, but others could. However, Christmas was not publicly celebrated. People would buy Christmas trees and decorate them privately in their homes on Christmas Eve, but, being a communist country in which the majority of people lived very modest lives, buying gifts for Christmas was not something that was prominent. For example, my mom's generation would get an orange or something like that as a Christmas gift! Buying gifts became more prominent in the '70s and '80s, and, after the Homeland War in the '90s when Croatia became an independent country, things changed. Specifically, Croatia gradually became more and more influenced by the West. Now Christmas sales start very early in December, and Advent celebrations start late in November with the decoration of Christmas trees.

Today, Christmas is mostly about shopping-mania and outward appearance expressed in material things. Children understand Christmas mainly through gifts, often nagging their parents to buy them something for Christmas. Several years ago when my son asked me, "Dad, what will you buy *me* for Christmas?" I had to give him a straight theological answer: "Son, Dad will not buy you anything. It is not your birthday anyway; it's Jesus!" Joking aside, I did buy him something for Christmas, but I just wanted to teach him something about the true nature of Christmas.

One of the texts that speaks about the true nature of Christmas is 2 Corinthians 8:9. Paul pastorally deals with one practical problem: the collection of help for the Jerusalem church that was in need. The church in Corinth started to participate in that collection, yet it seems that they were not quite willing to complete this act of grace. So Paul is using the example of the Macedonian churches, who had already finished collecting their gift despite some intense challenges, to encourage the Corinthians to finish with their collection for believers in Jerusalem. In the context of 2 Corinthians 8–9, it is clear that Paul is talking about a collection of

material gifts (money). But in the midst of this practical, pastoral problem, Paul is challenging the Corinthians not only by comparing them with the earnestness of the Macedonian churches but also by introducing the following statement about Christ in verse 9: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”

There is an interpretive challenge in this text. When Paul speaks about the collection for the Jerusalem church, it is clear that he is talking about material, financial gifts. When he says that Christ who was “rich” became “poor” so that, through “his poverty,” those who were in Christ might become “rich,” it is not obvious what exactly he is referring to. In what way can we understand Jesus’ “poverty” and “richness”? The first thing that we can establish is that Jesus’ poverty is something that made believers rich. If Jesus’ poverty made us rich, then it is obvious that this does not refer to material things. Consequently, Jesus’ richness also does not refer to material things. Rather, Paul here refers to the distinction between the “richness” of Jesus’ heavenly existence and the “poverty” of His earthly existence, which includes His incarnation, life, death and resurrection. Paul masterfully combines speech about two types of richness and poverty into one single idea: if the God that we worship was willing to sacrifice Himself for us and for our benefit, then we are obligated to follow His example. And in this concrete example from 2 Corinthians 8, this includes financial sacrifice for the sake of others.

As we approach the Christmas season, this text and the hymn that is derived from it are powerful reminders that the true nature of Christmas is not in buying (expensive) material gifts but in the willingness to live sacrificially for the benefit of others.



Dr. Ervin Budiselić

Croatia

Ervin is a Langham-published author who currently serves as a principal of the Biblical Institute in Zagreb, Croatia, and editor-in-chief of Evangelical Theological Journal Kairos.

*It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old,
from angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold:
“Peace on the earth, good will to men, from heaven’s all gracious King”;
the world in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels sing.*

— It Came upon the Midnight Clear (v. 1)

“Peace on earth”—the world’s most desired sound!

In an African context like the one I grew up in, theology is communicated through songs. Oral cultures transmit values and traditions through stories and songs. Of course, in any given culture, the role of music cannot be underestimated. We may find it difficult to memorize verses from the scriptures, but songs can easily be remembered, even by little children. Therefore, it is a great blessing for us to have Scripture-based songs and hymns to help us hold onto key theological truths. “It Came upon the Midnight Clear” is such a hymn, helping us reflect on the amazing reality of the Advent of Jesus.

Many years ago, Isaiah prophesied about the coming kingdom of the Messiah as a sign of God’s zeal for His people and their wellbeing (Isaiah 9:7). In fulfillment of that prophecy, Jesus, God’s greatest gift to the world, came and brought about the promised shalom. Luke, in his gospel, clearly described the scene: shepherds were out in the field watching their flocks when they heard a sweet voice from angels. The key message was “Peace on the earth, good will to men . . . !”, and it exploded amid the darkness. And not just the darkness of night. During the long time of silence between the testaments, it seemed the heavens were unreachable. Humanity tried different tunes to silence its deepest cry. Nothing worked. Nothing spoke to the hearts of the people. Politicians and rulers of the time led many revolts and fought costly wars. Until the news from heaven about the coming of the Prince of Peace broke, no one had a solution for the crises of the world. But finally, on that night, heaven opened and released its eternal message, and the earth glowed in joy as it received its creator. The angels filled the silent night with glorious voices declaring the coming of the new era, as our hymn so poetically expresses.

I am not against people’s attempts to keep peace and stability. It is natural and expected. The question of the centuries, though, is what is the source of true and unshakable peace? Where is the hope for a world experiencing crisis in its every

corner? Despite advancements in technology and civilization, people have not answered the question. But God has answered with Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. He came and preached peace and died on the cross to reconcile humanity to God and one another.

As we reflect on the Advent of Jesus through this beautiful hymn, we are reminded in the midst of despair that the sweet sound of hope resounds from those who know Jesus, the source of peace who will return to establish peace forevermore. The peace experienced by those who trust in Him is not just for ourselves but also to share with the world.

The source of true and unshakable peace is not human endeavor through politics, military might or economic security but the Prince of Peace who came to bring the peace that will increase without end. We are all invited to experience eternal peace at the feet of our glorious Lord forever. Therefore, let us sing with joy!



Dr. Ermias Mamo

Ethiopia

Ermias is a Langham Scholar who serves as chaplain and lecturer in mission at Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and as deputy general secretary of the Ethiopian Kale Heywet Church.

*O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie;
above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by;
yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

— O Little Town of Bethlehem (v. 1)

Bethlehem, a simple little town, surrounded by fertile fields for wheat and barley. The environment of hills with bushes and caves makes it a great place for sheep to graze, even if just a few kilometers away from the big city, Jerusalem. This quiet town encountered the *everlasting light*, as Christ was born there. Though quiet, it is a town with a long history. Naomi came from there, and Ruth lived there and became part of the ancestry of Jesus (Ruth 1:22). Samuel anointed David for his kingship there (1 Samuel 16:1, 11). Rightfully, this is the place where our king would be born, in the city of David. This ruler would be everlasting, though, unlike David, as the teachers of the law found in Micah 5:2-4 when King Herod asked them where this Messiah would be born (Matthew 2:5-6). This little town became the birthplace of the everlasting king and shepherd, everlasting light shining in temporal darkness.

Is this not also true in so many lives of those we serve with Langham Preaching? In Welfareville, the biggest slum area in Manila, Philippines, in the darkness of nightly shootings, drugs and poverty, Christ shone His everlasting Light as people got to know Him through preaching. As He brought light to the little town of Bethlehem, He brings it still today to areas of darkness. He brings it through the faithful, relevant and clear messages of His trained servants. He brings it through the hands, words and godly character of those who serve Him. He shines through us as we live out our convictions about Him.

As God once looked on the little young shepherd David, seeing the king he could be, today we still find God seeing beyond the outward appearance of status and money into the hearts of His faithful preachers in many remote, dark places in the world. One of our facilitators, a young high school graduate from a very remote place of spiritual darkness, came to me during a training we facilitated together with radiant light on his face. He shared excitedly, “You know that smart, English-speaking guy with the gray hair over there? He asked me to give him feedback on his outline, and I could help him see where to improve!” I will not forget the light in his face. It can only come from that everlasting light that

not only shone in the dark streets of the little town of Bethlehem but still shines in dark places today, including into the hearts of the many unexpected, unassuming facilitators Langham has.

That night that Christ was born in Bethlehem, both our hopes and our fears were met. A new reality, the incarnation of the light of the world, calmed our fears and gave birth to our hope. This gives us confidence to face all the darkness that is still before us, whether it be in sickness, relationships, war, lack of religious freedom, natural disasters or manmade ones. It helps us face the overwhelming demand of training preachers. Christ already came to shed His everlasting light on, in the midst of and through the darkness. Proclaiming that good news continues His light-bringing work. That is what gives us Christ-followers a different perseverance in times of hardship. May that light continue to shine in and through us.



Iljo de Keijzer

Philippines

Iljo serves as the movement coordinator for Langham Preaching in the Philippines. Of Dutch descent, she has ministered in Southeast Asia for two decades. She is passionate about equipping grassroot-level church leaders.

*Christ, by highest heaven adored, Christ, the everlasting Lord!
Late in time behold him come, offspring of the Virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail th' incarnate Deity,
pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel.*

— Hark! the Herald Angels Sing (v. 2)

Enigma! For me, that is most probably the closest description of incarnation. The concept defies human intellect, wisdom and thought. “How can you say that a man be God?” That is the most common question asked by the people in our Islam-dominated country. And then we have to explain that it is not man becoming God but a God who in His own sovereign will chose to become man and live among His people. *Emmanuel*.

We have to tell them the whole of the Bible story, that it was always God's holy intention to live among His people. It started right in the Garden of Eden where God would come down to meet His prized creation. Through ways that are not certain, He communicated with patriarchs, seers and prophets, sometimes in human vesture.

At Mount Sinai, it was taken to yet another level. It was a warm and sunny day, and Moses was grazing Jethro's sheep around that place. He saw a bush on fire, which might easily have been mistaken for brushfire. Surprisingly, the bush was not burning up, which was enough to arouse Moses' curiosity. That led him near the bush and, eventually, to an amazing encounter with God. Not only did God reveal His personal name, YHWH, to him, but He also said something that must have surprised Moses. “The LORD said, ‘I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. **So I have come down** to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey . . . ’” (Exodus 3:7-8). I, YHWH, have come down!

Many years later, when the Israelites were traversing the wilderness and would encamp in a place shown by God, the first tent that would be pitched would be the tent of meeting housing the holy of holies and the mercy seat of God. Once the Levites had done their job, the Israelite leadership would camp around the Tent of Meeting. On the circumference, the Israelites would pitch their tents,

three tribes in each direction, so that God's dwelling would be right in the dead center of His people. Emmanuel! God pitched His tent among His people.

Let us fast forward to the New Testament! John, in his gospel account, introduces us to *logos*, the Word of God, who was eternal as God, co-existent with God and self-existent as God. The same Word became flesh and dwelt (pitched His tent) among His people, exhibiting the divine attributes and glory. John goes on to tell us that the main reason for the incarnation was to reveal God to people. "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known" (John 1:18).

So, in actual fact, incarnation boils down to **revelation**. The God of the Bible always wanted to be known by His creation. God's revelation to mankind has been progressive. God made Himself known to mankind through various ways and means, culminating in His revelation through His son. Scolding Philip, who asked Jesus to show them the Father, He said, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (John 14:8-11).

Thus, Jesus is *the full, the final and the absolute revelation* of God to mankind. Beyond Him, we need nothing. So, if you have Jesus, you have the Father. What a privilege and what a blessing!



Dr. Asif John

Pakistan

Asif, a medical doctor, works in the pharmaceutical industry and was called by God to be a lay teacher and preacher of the Word. He was a pioneer member of the Langham Preaching movement in Pakistan in 2005 and continues serving as a local and international facilitator.

*Good Christian men, rejoice, with heart and soul and voice;
now ye hear of endless bliss: Jesus Christ was born for this!
He hath opened heaven's door, and man is blessed evermore.
Christ was born for this! Christ was born for this!*

— Good Christian Men, Rejoice (v. 2)

Mashramani is a very colorful national celebration in Guyana. The word *mashramani* means “celebration after hard work,” and it comes from the Amerindians (indigenous people) of the country. It is about laying aside, however briefly, the memory of the “blood, sweat and tears” expended to complete a project and taking time to rejoice, however temporarily. The connotation of Mashramani has evolved from a family or village celebrating after the completion of some family or community endeavor to an almost carnival-type event marking a national observance of the country’s republican anniversary. Not only may a village or country have something to rejoice about, but Christians everywhere have very good reasons to rejoice because of what Christ has done for us through His death on the cross of Calvary.

The central character of Advent is Christ, our Messiah, who was born to die so that mankind may live forever. When Pilate asked Him whether He was the king of the Jews, Jesus replied, “You have said so” (Mark 15:2). I could think of no other king who’d be willing to die for the sins of the world, not just for the Jews. Jesus was intently focused on His mission. Because He was very purposeful, He glorified His Father who had sent Him on the search and rescue mission, as He came to **seek** and to **save** that which was lost (Luke 19:10). That’s something to celebrate. *Good Christian men, rejoice, with heart and soul and voice!*

“With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last” (Mark 15:37). Those who provide end-of-life care for terminally-ill people know what it is like for someone to breathe his last breath. That’s it. It signals one’s time on earth is done and one has passed from life to death. Jesus’ mission was accomplished by dying in our place. The curse which hung over sinful humanity came to rest upon Jesus instead. Hallelujah! *Now ye hear of endless bliss: Jesus Christ was born for this!*

“The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (Mark 15:38). What a great opening! That which kept mankind from direct fellowship with God was destroyed. God Himself removed the separation by ripping that curtain

from top to bottom so that there should be no barrier but free access between God and man. No one but God, by His mighty hand, could open the veil. So we now can declare *He hath opened heaven's door, and man is blessed evermore! Christ was born for this!*

“And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, ‘Surely this man was the Son of God!’” (Mark 15:39). A centurion was a soldier who had one hundred men under his command. The one on duty on the day of Jesus’ crucifixion had probably seen more of this kind of death sentence than he cared to remember. However, this man, Jesus, whom he saw killed, was no ordinary man. He left an impression. In other words, to the centurion, no man could have died the way Jesus died unless he was the son of God. And indeed, Jesus is.

So what are we going to do about this? Rejoice! This is the true Mashramani time—celebration after hard work. The only thing is that Jesus did the hard work of dying for our sins, and we get to do the rejoicing.

Thank God.



Desmond Rogers

Guyana

Desmond is the senior pastor of the South Road Full Gospel Assembly in Georgetown, Guyana. He served for many years as the regional secretary of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES) with responsibility for English, French and Dutch Caribbean. He is now the Langham Preaching coordinator for the Caribbean region.

*O Come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;
come and behold him born the king of angels.
O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord.*

— O Come, All Ye Faithful (v. 1)

“O come let us adore him, o come let us adore him, o come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.” The lyric has been sung throughout generations as an invitation to *all people* to come and see Christ, the Lord. However, in the story of Luke 2:15–20, God’s invitation did not initially come to all people but rather to a specific group—some shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. Who are these shepherds? Why did they have the privilege of the first invitation? These questions guide us to important lessons in this season.

First, the shepherds are marginalized. They were poor and low in status, often ignored by society. They were nobodies to most people, overlooked when the privileges were distributed. But this story shows that God did not ignore them. On the contrary, God sent an angel, accompanied by a great multitude of the heavenly host, to call them to come to Bethlehem to see the newborn king. During Christmas, most churches invite friends and family to celebrate with joy and to hear the Christmas message. This story encourages us not to ignore the marginalized around us—here in Thailand, that includes undocumented workers from neighboring countries, the poor and elderly among us who need assistance and even former and current prisoners—for they matter to the Lord. If anyone feels insignificant, the story invites them to listen to the good news and know it’s for them.

Second, the shepherds respond with haste. After the angels had left, the shepherds hurried to Bethlehem to see what had happened according to the good news they received. We do not know how they managed their flocks while traveling to Bethlehem or why they needed to hurry. Nevertheless, their eagerness shows that they took the invitation seriously and valued the news as real hope for life. People in my context respond quickly when they believe they will gain something tangible or meet their own interests, such as receiving money, securing scholarships for students or obtaining good job positions. However, they often fail to realize that the gospel offers far greater benefits than what they think they truly need. When we have too many things to do or desires to fulfill, we might easily ignore God’s

invitation to come see and adore Jesus. Like the shepherds, we need to hear and respond to God's gracious invitation with urgency.

Third, the marginalized became the agents of hope. Interestingly, after visiting the child, the shepherds spread the word about the child to everyone, causing amazement. The story does not mention the angels instructing them to spread this message. The shepherds spread it with excitement on their own, becoming natural agents of the good news. Evangelism is not only a big event, requiring a wonderful preacher or a good reputation to share a witness. God can use anyone who has experienced His grace to bear witness. In Thailand, powerful testimonies often come from those who have faced significant failures in business or family life, or even from former drug dealers who have spent many years in prison. These individuals' experience of God's grace makes for powerful testimony to the hope of the gospel.

We, too, should ask these questions: Have we experienced God's grace? How has God's grace impacted our lives? The answer becomes our witness to the good news of Jesus, and we, too, become agents of hope.

The more we experience Christ and His goodness to us and to all people, the more we enjoy the invitation: *O come, let us adore him.* The more we enjoy this invitation, the more excited we are to invite others to come and adore Him, for the newborn baby is Christ, our Savior and our Lord. Amen.



Dr. Wiriya Tipvarakankoon Wiriya *Thailand*

Wiriya is a Langham Scholar and a member of the Langham Preaching committee in Thailand. He serves as the head of the M.Div. program at Bangkok Institute of Theology and as a part-time minister at Sueb Sampanthawong Church in Bangkok.

*“Fear not, then,” said the angel, “let nothing you affright;
this day is born a Savior of a pure virgin bright,
to free all those who trust in him from Satan’s power and might.”
O tidings of comfort and joy.*

— God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen (v. 3)

The Christmas angel’s announcement of good news resonates deeply with Nigerian Christians today as 2024 has been a terrifying year. The country has faced numerous challenges that have weakened believers’ peace, joy and hope. Food scarcity and poverty have driven many to desperation. Banditry is on the rise, and kidnapping has become a daily horror in village settlements. Economic hardships have claimed lives, with reports suggesting that up to 3,000 Nigerians die each day due to hunger. The poor and marginalized are the most affected by these crises.

Christmas brings a powerful message of hope and joy for all. Shepherds were outcasts in first-century Israel, due to poverty and their questionable integrity. The Jewish sacrificial tradition and the patriarchs’ association with sheep gave the profession some recognition, but society despised shepherds at the time when Christ was born. However, the good news of Christ’s birth coming first to them showed that Jesus cares deeply for the lowly, marginalized and restless. The angelic announcement to the shepherds is a powerful reminder that Jesus’ message is for all—even the weary, burdened and oppressed. As Jesus promised when He said “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28), there is rest for all in Christmas.

Christmas also brings a powerful message of hope and joy amid fear. In Luke 2:10, the angels urged the shepherds not to fear, a message that resonates with us today. They proclaimed the good news of the arrival of a Savior who will deliver from those things that cause fear and bring hopelessness and oppression. To the hard realities of the lived experiences of many people comes news of a solution in the form of the one who would take on sorrow and eventually deliver people from it. That good news is transformative not because it offers an immediate solution but because it introduces hope to conditions of fear and despair. And with hope, we can persevere.

Jesus’ ministry of hope to a crippled woman on the Sabbath demonstrates His saving power and the reason for hope (Luke 13:10–17). This story reveals three powerful truths about Christ’s inclusive mercy.

First, her encounter with Jesus exemplifies His ministry to those on the margins of society. The spirit that crippled her for eighteen years left her on the outside looking in. Despite her condition, Christ did not turn her away. He saw her pain, understood her situation and brought joy in hopelessness. His act of mercy embraced her fully, showing that no one is beyond His love and care. Second, her story demonstrates that hope and peace at Christmas are not limited to just one aspect of life. Jesus recognized that this woman's suffering was not just physical but also social and spiritual. He came to heal and transform all areas of brokenness, including restoring this "daughter of Abraham" to her dignified place in the community. Third, when religious leaders criticized Him for healing on the Sabbath, Jesus demonstrated that His mission transcends human legalism and goes beyond religious law. Healing and mercy are the point of all He does, including the intent of His instruction. He cannot be confined by the strict application of laws and the idolatrous power of religious leaders. His salvation breaks through all barriers. His healing of this woman exemplifies the good news that Jesus came "to free all those who trust in him from Satan's power and might."

The transformative hope of rescue given at Christmas and exemplified in the gospels is a powerful and needed message for Nigeria and Africa amidst fear and hopelessness. I trust it resonates in your circumstances as well. We do not know for sure when deliverance will come from the many places and effects of Satan's might. But it will come. This Christmas, may you hear again the angel's "Fear not . . ." and find hope and rest in your situation because of the freedom Jesus came to bring.



Dr. Godwin Adeboye

Nigeria

Godwin is a Langham Scholar and the Langham-published author of Can a Christian Be Cursed: An African Evangelical Response to the Problem of Curses. He serves as the African regional coordinator at the Oxford Centre for Religion and Public Life and is a pastor-theologian with the Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) in Nigeria.

*Why lies he in such mean estate, where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christian, fear; for sinners here the silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spear shall pierce him through; the cross be borne for me, for you:
hail, hail the Word made flesh, the babe, the son of Mary.*

— What Child Is This (v. 2)

The traditional African society is rooted in the extended family system in which everyone's spiritual, economic and social well-being is closely knitted. Therefore, the birth of a child comes with great joy and celebrations in recognition of the child as a divine blessing to the family. The lowly birth of this child, whether it happens as the mother toils in the farmland, on the way to the stream or in the compound without health facilities, does not diminish the attendant joy. The child enters into the family and becomes a member of the community, sharing in every respect as one of the family.

Similarly, the child Jesus enters the world as a great blessing to His family as He was placed in a manger. Though “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Hebrews 1:3, ESV), He partook in the flesh and blood of our common humanity, lying in a “mean estate.” This type of lowly birth does not typically attend the arrival of nobles! Little wonder that, for ages, humanity keeps asking, “Why lies he in such mean estate, where ox and ass are feeding?”

The answer lies in the truth of Hebrews 2:14–18, which can be summarized this way: in identifying with sinful humanity, Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, became one of us and took the punishment of humanity on the cross so that, through His death, He might destroy the power of death and set sinners free from lifelong slavery. Let's break that down a bit.

The passage celebrates the perfect humanity of Jesus. He shared in our human nature (flesh and blood) as “the babe, the son of Mary,” and was made like His brothers (and sisters!) in every respect. As flesh and blood, He tasted all of life in a broken world under the bondage of sin. He was able, then, to deliver His people from the fear of death and lifelong slavery because He destroyed the one who has the power of death (the devil) through His death on the cross and subsequent resurrection.

He tasted death by the nails and spear which did “pierce him through” on the cross. He thus became the merciful and faithful high priest who paid for the

people's sins, assuring us that forgiveness is certain and fellowship with God is restored. And He broke the chain of slavery to sin and death and brought deliverance for humanity when He rose from the dead. Now, those who put their trust in Him—"the offspring of Abraham," that is, those who believe by faith without being circumcised (Romans 4:11)—become members of His family and share in His eternal victory over death and the devil.

Finally, the writer to the Hebrews says, having suffered temptation Himself (Matthew 4:1-11), Jesus is a helper of those who are being tempted (see also 1 Corinthians 10:13) and a high priest who can truly provide grace and mercy in times of need (Hebrews 4:15-16). What a blessing to the family of God to know that Jesus sympathizes with our weaknesses because He understands them from His own experience and so provides compassionate and real help as we walk the road of faith.

In this Christmas season, we as Christians should celebrate in reverent fear and worship Him who took on flesh as the son of Mary. Hallelujah to Him who shares in our common humanity. Indeed, "Hail, hail the Word made flesh!" Let us help sinners hear "the silent Word" pleading with them to come to join us in the worship of Jesus Christ who came at Christmas.



Emeka Egbo

Nigeria

Emeka serves as the associate director for Langham Preaching Africa after stints as the country coordinator for Nigeria and the regional coordinator for English-speaking Africa. He is also the lay president of the Diocese of Jos, Methodist Church of Nigeria, and provides pastoral care for the Grace Methodist Church, Kwanga, Jos.

*And our eyes at last shall see him, through his own redeeming love;
for that child so dear and gentle is our Lord in heaven above,
and he leads his children on to the place where he is gone.*

— Once in David's Royal City (v. 4)

John 17:24 clearly points to the intention of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to bring His faithful into fellowship with Him where they could see His glory. To see His glory has nothing to do with detached observation. To truly see God is to be in communion with Him, participate in His life, share in His blessedness. Jesus wanted His followers to enjoy this beatific vision. How did Jesus accomplish this? Through the incarnation of the Son of God. Advent is a time when we can reflect on God's identifying with humans to bring us into communion with Him.

During the Advent season, pop culture and intrusive commercials bombard us to sell their understanding of the "spirit of Christmas." To screen all of that out, we need to remind ourselves about the core meaning of the incarnation of the Son of God. It was once profoundly formulated by Athanasius of Alexandria: "He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God" (*On Incarnation*). This statement points to several important thoughts.

Sometimes we think of Christ as though He was a Marvel superhero—an ordinary looking person with hidden superpowers He could use when needed. But the incarnation is more than a human appearance shrouding superpowers. The incarnation means that the Son of God has *become* human. Totally human. With all possible consequences. As we all know too well, to be human means to be limited, dependent and vulnerable. Human life is accompanied with illnesses, sufferings and despair. Jesus, the Son of God, partook of all these aspects of humanity. In the gospels, we see Him dependent on God the Father, saddened by the brokenness of the world, subject to the decisions of sinful leaders and agonizing to His Father about the difficulties of the way forward. He was one of us. And He still is. This not only gives Jesus a unique capacity to understand us, intercede for us and support us on our way but also builds an eternal bridge between the human and the divine.

By becoming human, the Son of God also revealed to us the invisible and unreachable God. As Emmanuel, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23), He made God

known to us, says the Apostle John (John 1:18). It is through Jesus Christ we learn most fully what God is really like and what God's attitude towards humans is. Jesus has demonstrated God's tender mercy to those who need a doctor. We have learned about God's deep compassion towards the deprived and suffering from injustice. In Jesus, we learn about God's unbreakable faithfulness. In Christ, we can see the Father revealed amid the kinds of realities we face.

Athanasius of Alexandria points out that by assuming humanity, Christ intended to make us capable of seeing His glory. Athanasius' words do not mean that we turn into gods ourselves. Not at all! He means that, in Christ, the human and divine are eternally connected so, through Christ, we will know and participate in the life of the Triune God.

The Apostle John puts this hope of beatific vision in the category of space: "I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory . . ." (John 17:24). We do not know exactly where this place is. In fact, it does not even matter, for heaven is wherever God is. What matters is that we will know the fullness of His greatness—i.e., His glory—when Christ "leads his children on to the place where he is gone."



Dr. Oleksandr Geychenko

Ukraine

Oleksandr is a Langham Scholar and Langham-published author. He currently serves as the rector of Odesa Theological Seminary in Odesa, Ukraine, and the issue editor of Theological Reflections: Eastern European Journal of Theology.

*Sages, leave your contemplations, brighter visions beam afar;
seek the great desire of nations; ye have seen his natal star:
come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ, the newborn King.*

— Angels, from the Realms of Glory (v. 3)

Who are the wise men mentioned in Matthew 2:1? Are they simply intelligent people? Chinese translations of this passage often use 博學之士 (savant) or 博士 (doctorate holder). According to World Population Review, there are about 277,000 new doctoral degree holders every year across the globe. The world has no shortage of supposedly intelligent people. Or are the wise men astrologers? The Greek word used is μάγοι (magi). According to one lexicon, a magus is an “expert in astrology, interpretation of dreams and various other occult arts.” This matches the use of “sages” in “Angels from the Realms of Glory.” For either interpretation, it is clear that these “magi” are learned people who study hard in their fields of expertise.

Cultural stereotypes sometimes portray Han Chinese parents as strict people who push their kids to study hard hoping they will become learned people—i.e., doctors or lawyers—as if anything less would bring great shame to the family. This is a stereotype that does not reflect reality. However, there is the sense in which Han Chinese parents do put a lot of weight on their children’s future. These parents **contemplate** how best to ensure the longevity and honor of the family name. For immigrant parents, this is even more pronounced because their **vision** is not for themselves but for a thriving second generation. For this reason, they **seek** opportunities and resources that can secure this future.

Sometimes, Han Chinese parents seek resources from the realm of spirits and deities in folk religion. Chinese folk religion adherents can come from far away to “worship” at a temple. People are willing to travel this distance because of a temple’s reputation for being extra efficacious in granting what they seek. The “worship” involves bowing, beseeching and offering, summed up by the term 拜 (bài). For the bright vision of a successful future, people would *bài* the best deities. The distance traveled becomes inconsequential.

The Magi also traveled far to “worship” a particular deity. We are not privy to their motivations for wanting to worship Jesus. They could have read the importance

of Jesus in the stars and thus wanted to be on the good side of this coming king. They could have been convinced of the Christ's power and thus wanted to seek His favor for certain desires they had. Whatever the reason, these wise men recognized the Messiah when they came, and they worshiped Him.

James Montgomery, the author of this hymn, suggests that the reason to do so is because there are “brighter visions” offered to those that do. These visions involve a God who desires that all the nations come to Him for salvation. The visions show the promised Messiah, born in a manger to eventually fulfill all the laws and prophecies and bring about God's redemptive purposes. The visions portray a king who will reign justly and rule the world as it was meant to be ruled.

Do we also see the same “brighter visions”? Or are our eyes set on the petty things of this world? Our careers, children and families are all important. The wise, learned people of today should indeed plan their futures properly with clear goals. But when we spend all our time **contemplating** those kinds of things, we lose our focus on Him, who can “do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20).

This exhortation applies to all learned people everywhere. After all, ethnicities other than Han Chinese seek brighter futures, too. Therefore, all supposed wise people ought to heed the call to **leave** this worldly wisdom and **contemplation** behind in order to **seek** the brightest vision of all, Jesus Christ. It is a call to come to Him with simple **worship**. When we do, our futures and our children's futures become brighter yet, anticipating the eternal joy of belonging to this newborn king.

¹ Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).



Dr. Tony Chuang [莊智超]

Malaysia

Tony (PhD, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) is a Langham-published author originally from Taiwan. He currently serves in Malaysia as a bi-vocational pastor at Georgetown Baptist Church while teaching at Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary in Penang and the Anglican Training Institute in Sabah.

*Saints before the altar bending, watching long in hope and fear,
suddenly the Lord, descending, in his temple shall appear:
come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ, the newborn King.*

— Angels, from the Realms of Glory (v. 4)

I grew up in Macedonia, in the far south of Europe. This sunny land is in full contrast to the shadowiness of the Eastern Orthodox churches that fill it. Each time I would enter one as a child, my heartbeat would slow down as I was immersed in the gloomy space away from the world. The church had its own saturated glow, smell and rhythm. In its midst was the icon of Christ looking at me with love and comfort.

Although I moved to Croatia twenty-five years ago, one of the reasons that I became an evangelical Christian was coming to understand more deeply the love and comfort of Christ. I did not find it on the walls of my evangelical church but in the love of my brothers and sisters, in the prayer we shared when I felt Him close to me as never before and in the faithful Bible teaching about His redeeming life and love. In the worshiping community, my eyes are repeatedly fixed on Jesus and the love and comfort His gospel brings.

In the fourth verse of “Angels, from the Realms of Glory,” seeing Jesus is everywhere! The saints, fervently looking for “the Lord descending” and “appearing in his temple,” are in the center, as is their worship at the altar, where they express their deep desire to give all the praise and glory to God Almighty. Interestingly, *worship* itself contains *seeing* because Christian worship involves the ability to see what is hidden to the others, to see and believe the prophecy by the eyes of faith. It includes waiting patiently “in hope and fear” for the fulfillment of the prophecy: the first coming of the Messiah for saints past and the moment of *seeing* the Lord face to face for us today (1 Corinthians 13:12).

The hymn alludes to Luke 2:25–32, which introduces us to Simeon, a righteous and devout servant of the Lord. Simeon spent years bending before the altar waiting for the coming of the promised Messiah. He had a spiritual experience of being so close to God that he received a vision from the Holy Spirit and saw its fulfillment. Simeon *sees* and *recognizes* the newborn baby as the promised “salvation” prepared by our Lord “in the *sight* of all people.” Simeon expresses his

joy by singing a song of worship to the Lord who fulfilled His promise! This Jesus is the awaited “newborn King” of the saints in the song, and so an invitation goes out for all to come, see and worship Him:

*Come and worship, come and worship!
Worship Christ, the newborn king!*

The worship in both the biblical text and the song is a practice we all join in that makes us part of the community of believers and sets our minds free to *see* what is hidden and often lost to our human perception because of the realities that surround us. In worship, we bend before the altar and *see* with eyes of faith the first coming of the newborn king, remembering the love and comfort displayed during His earthly ministry. And at the same time, worship helps us watch longingly and eagerly in hope and fear amid life’s trials for the prophesied and promised second arrival of the Lord, remembering that this same Jesus will come again to make all things new.

There is no better way for us to remain close to our Lord but to be steadfast in worship and so to be consistently confronted by His love and comfort.



Julijana Mladenovska-Tešija

Croatia

Julijana is a Langham-published author. She has a ThM and is pursuing a PhD in Philosophy and Religion while she serves as Vice-Dean for International Affairs and Projects and as a lecturer in Philosophy at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, Croatia.

*Silent night! Holy night! Son of God, love's pure light
radiant beams from thy holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.*

— Silent Night! Holy Night! (v. 3)

“Silent Night! Holy Night!” was written by a young priest in Austria, Joseph Mohr. Mohr is said to have gone on a walk one night after the Napoleonic wars had taken their toll on his town. As he looked out over a very quiet, winter-laden town, he admired the bright silent night and the calm of the town at peace. The now-beloved lyrics flowed from that experience. Two years later as he prepared for a midnight service, he asked his friend, Franz Gruber, to write an accompaniment for the poem, and the two men performed it that night.

In this broken world, filled with so much disappointment, destruction, disease, decay, despondency, discouragement, despair, darkness and death, the words “Son of God, love’s pure light” remind us of the birth of Jesus, the light of the world. He was sent by the Father to shine in our darkest night, heal our brokenness, pardon our sins and give us eternal life in Himself.

The Apostle John summarized the many signs done by Jesus during the Passover Feast in Jerusalem (John 2:23) whereby He brought hope and joy to many people suffering with infirmities. Because of these signs, Nicodemus came to Jesus one night to engage Him in a conversation. Jesus, knowing the real need of Nicodemus, drew the conversation towards man’s need for salvation. He told Nicodemus that God had expressed His love to the hopeless world through Jesus, His one and only Son (John 3:16-17).

Indeed, God so loved His world that in our utterly helpless state, He gave Christ, His one and only Son, to die for us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8). Jesus came at just the right time to redeem humankind and to give us life eternal. Jesus made clear that the acceptance of God’s love by faith—“whoever believes in him”—is a prerequisite for the experience of this new hope and determines our final destination in eternity with Him.

In weddings in Ghana and some other African cultures, there is the giving of a ring as a token of a man’s love for his bride. The bride must accept this token

and symbol of love from the would-be husband before the ceremony continues. Better than a man's love for a woman, God has loved us unconditionally and has given us the embodiment of His love—His Son—as a demonstration. “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10). God continues to love the world and seeks to bring her back to Himself. Have you accepted His love? Are you inviting others to know and accept it, too?

Our world is engulfed with so much hatred, conflict, confusion, abuse and injustice that the demonstration of genuine love has been thrown to the wind. People are naturally selfish and often express “love” only because of what they hope to get from another party. But when the selfish purpose is achieved, the so-called love wanes. A typical example of this was the “love” expressed by Amnon towards Tamar, his half-sister. When Amnon achieved his purpose, his love turned to hatred (2 Samuel 13:1, 10–15). Not so God's love. It blesses the one loved. It can be trusted. It is steadfast.

As we prepare to celebrate Christmas and sing of the dawning of redeeming grace, God's love for us continues to beckon. May His ultimate purpose for sending His Son into the world to save become a reality in many lives and never fail to move us to respond in love and worship.



Francisca Ahwireng

Ghana

Cisca is the ushirika (preaching club) coordinator for Langham Preaching in Ghana and the author of the E-Life Reflections online devotional. She also serves as pastor and administrator at Calvary Worship Centre in Accra, Ghana.

*As they offered gifts most rare at that cradle rude and bare;
so may we with holy joy, pure, and free from sin's alloy,
all our costliest treasures bring, Christ, to thee our heavenly King.*

— As with Gladness Men of Old (v. 3)

The precious baby the Magi visited was born to save us from the penalty of our sins, blessing us with an eternal life of freedom and joy by His death. We were all slaves to our sins and wrongdoings, but with His blood, Jesus freed us from them—both their power and their penalty. The price was invaluable and the penalty unbearable, yet He endured His gruesome fate because of His great love.

When He has done so much for us, what can't we give Him? What could we possibly keep from Him? Shall we save our time and pleasure from Him whose sole purpose was to come to be rejected, to suffer and to die for our salvation? What then shall we keep to ourselves?

The three wise men were thrilled with joy when they saw that the star which was leading them had stopped above baby Jesus and His mother. They came in, bowed down and worshiped Him. They knew who the baby was and offered Him the most precious and expensive gifts they had. Perhaps they knew that even the greatest of their material treasures would pale in comparison to the ultimate treasure the little baby would one day gift to them.

What, then, shall we offer Him who suffered in our place?

The delusions of this world compel us to blind our spiritual eyes and clog our spiritual ears so that we chase after false gods like wind which we cannot grasp. When we seek status, pleasure and wealth, we withhold our precious, limited time and effort from Christ's mission and His true reward, which was paid for at a great cost. To hold out against Jesus is to neglect the great commandment to go and make disciples of the nations. To hold out against Jesus is to neglect our lost brothers and sisters who march toward eternal death and suffering.

Ulaanbaatar, the capital city of Mongolia where most of the nation's Christians live, is a city of hectic chaos. Excessive road congestion causes many to spend several hours commuting between home and work each day when the distance is

short enough that it should only take thirty minutes. Disorganized bureaucracies and confusing city structures impose a high cost on accomplishing many daily tasks. This situation hinders the ability of many Christians to attend church meetings or share the gospel. In such a city as Ulaanbaatar, it sometimes feels like giving Jesus the precious time and energy He deserves is impossible.

But even in the endless bustle of city life, not all hope is lost. I am reminded of an elderly lady with severe kidney issues in our church who spends almost four hours coming to and from church every Sunday, at least half an hour of which is spent walking to the nearest bus stop. Through the harshest cold of winter (-30° C/-22° F) and the beating heat of summer (+30° C/+86° F), she finds joy and strength in this exhausting journey to worship the God she loves alongside her fellow churchgoers. She knows the price that Christ paid for her, and she knows her eternal destiny. In this solid assurance, she finds the strength to spend those long hours going to worship the Lord. This effort is her most precious gift which she offers the Lord Jesus.

What are *our* most precious gifts and treasures?



Yanjinlkham Enkhtaivan

Mongolia

Yanjaa serves as a local facilitator for Langham Preaching in Mongolia. She is also the CEO of Erdem Buteel Co. Ltd., which partners with Langham Literature and other publishers to translate key theological books into Mongolian.

*Thou didst leave thy throne and a kingly crown
when thou camest to earth for me,
but in Bethlehem's home there was found no room
for thy holy nativity.*

— Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne (v. 1)

Some would say, “Every day is Christmas,” and I agree! Everything Christmas represents is at the core of Christianity, and we should celebrate that fact every day. However, having a dedicated day or season to celebrate it is great, too. It is an intentional pulling together of ourselves to apportion a little more time than we generally would, both in our routine and in our consciousness, to focus on the meaning and the depth of what happened at Christmas and how it touches you and me today.

If we peel back the festivities, Christmas really is a commemoration of God leaving His heavenly abode and throne and coming to dwell with human beings as a human Himself. God born as a helpless baby, swaddled in cloths by His earthly parents tired after a long journey, laid in a trough and likely surrounded by animals—the best conditions they could find at that time (Luke 2:7). God coming to the earth in human form is not a new or unique concept. Other cultures and religions around the world and across time have something comparable in their depository of myths and stories. Many gods in Hinduism reincarnate and come to earth multiple times, in human and non-human forms, to restore cosmic order, preserve dharma or pursue other ends. With Hinduism being a major religion in Asia, especially India, and many non-Hindu Asians being at least superficially familiar with Hindu mythology, one may ask, “So what sets Jesus apart?”

What is unique is the reason Jesus came to earth—“thou camest to earth for me,” as the song puts it. Jesus’ incarnation was focused on us, lost human beings. All religions are in one way or the other human beings seeking God. Only in Jesus do we have God seeking human beings. It is an act purely motivated by love (John 3:16). This seeking God is the same God who walked the garden of Eden looking for Adam and Eve, calling out, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). Entering our world as one of us, Jesus demonstrates for us through His life what it means to be a restored human being living in obedience to and full communion with God, and He takes our place in His death, paying the price for our sin. His birth is meaningful because He lived the life we want and need to live and willingly died in our steads.

Although the Christmas event took place 2,000 years ago, Jesus is still being born in the hearts and lives of women and men around the world, redeeming from sin and showing the way to those who would follow. Is there room in our hearts and lives for Jesus this Christmas? Maybe we are not in the best of places in our lives this Christmas. That is all right. Jesus wants to be present where we are, in whatever situation we find ourselves. There is no pomp and show required. The heavenly king is happy to be in a lowly manger with us. Yes, He “came to earth for me.”

As we approach Christmas, let us intentionally recall the lengths to which God went to be with us, expressed aptly in the words of Saint Augustine of Hippo:

Man’s maker was made man that He, Ruler of the stars, might nurse at His mother’s breast; that the Bread might hunger, the Fountain thirst, the Light sleep, the Way be tired on its journey; that Truth might be accused of false witnesses, the Teacher be beaten with whips, the Foundation be suspended on wood; that Strength might grow weak; that the Healer might be wounded; that Life might die.

This Christmas, no matter where we are, Christ is here for us. If what you need is love and empathy, Jesus, the God who became a human, seeks you. If what you need is a powerful God, remember that Jesus who came now sits enthroned and no power on earth or in heaven can challenge Him. He is neither alarmed nor threatened by what you are going through. He is perfectly in control of your situation, and He is with you this Christmas.



Dr. Angukali Rotokha

India

Angukali is a Langham Scholar and Langham-published author. In addition to her research and writing, she serves on the pastoral team of her church in Bangalore, India.

*One day when heaven was filled with His praises,
one day when sin was as dark as could be,
Jesus came forth to be born of a virgin—
dwelt among us, my example is he!*

— One Day He's Coming (O Glorious Day!) (v. 1)

As I contemplate the complex image of Jesus in the New Testament, what amazes me is the simplicity of His message in the first chapters of the gospels. Turn the other cheek. Go the second mile. Have two cloaks? Give one away. Do not look at the speck in your brother's eye; look at yourself. Always forgive. Where your treasure is, there your heart is also. Learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart.

What also amazes me is Jesus's humanitarianism. He is always for others, never for Himself. Despite tiredness, loneliness, misunderstandings and suffering—even with “no place to lay His head”—He is always defending the oppressed, helpless and outcast, regardless of who they are: children, women, seniors, tax collectors, prostitutes, traitors, the homeless, sick people, pagans or heretics. Regardless of what terrible things they have committed. Irrespective of how much they are condemned in their communities and society.

Jesus, Son of God, God with us, doesn't lord over but serves, showing love for people in His mission to save the world. This is the attitude that He teaches His disciples many times during His earthly ministry—even shortly before His death, even betrayed, even in the hour of sorrow. During the Last Supper, in John's account (John 13:1–17), Jesus takes off His clothes, wraps a towel around His waist, and washes the feet of His apostles—all of them, including Judas. This is not the work of a teacher and master, which He is. It is usually what enslaved people do for the free people. It is humbling and diminishing in the world of the ancient Middle East, so the apostle Peter rejects it. He won't accept this menial service from Jesus, whom he loves and honors. But he has to be cleaned spiritually, which he does not understand until after the cross and resurrection, and physically, as a demonstration of serving each other.

“Do you understand what I have done for you? . . . you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you (John 13:12, 14–15).” As those sent by Jesus, they must be servants to others,

not patrons and owners. They should serve the faithful ones, like Peter, and the lost ones, like Judas.

Is this Christianity? Yes, this is Christianity that is based on the premise of loving one another (John 13:34–35). Simple, yet fundamental.

The beginning of the 21st century—at least in Central Europe, my part of the world—is not the easiest time for Christianity. It is increasingly challenging to find God in my disenchanted world. It seems that people are getting on pretty well without God in their daily lives, in their secular reality. Intellectual arguments are less entertained and less effective. But that was never the primary way for followers of Jesus anyway. The life of love is the effective testimony—to see Christ in the other and act as Christ toward the other, no matter who they are.

Is this how Christianity is perceived in my part of the world? Does it serve and not rule? Does it wash the feet of people and not stay confined in beautiful, ideological towers? This is a time, like 2,000 years ago, to give a simple but powerful witness of love—beyond sublime words, beyond beautiful and complicated arguments, just the witness that Christ has conquered evil and leads us in the way of love.

It is essential to return to the simple example: just care for the other person—every person, regardless of their ethnicity, gender, orientation, social status, political views, financial situation, religious persuasion or sinful ways. Is it possible? Is it possible to wash another person's feet in the 21st century?



Dr. Wojciech Szczerba

Poland

Wojciech is a Langham-published author who serves as the rector/ president of the Evangelical School of Theology in Wrocław, Poland, and as a senior research associate at the Von Hügel Institute at St Edmund's College, University of Cambridge.

*Truly He taught us to love one another.
His law is love and his gospel is peace.
Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother,
and in his name all oppression shall cease.*

— O Holy Night (v. 2)

December 21, in the northern hemisphere where I and almost ninety percent of humanity lives, has the feel of oppression. It's our darkest day. And similar numbers of people around the world today either feel enslaved or are literally oppressed.

When God created humans in His image to reflect His laws and truths, He subjected us to consequence. By giving us freedom to subjugate ourselves to sin's power, He exposed us to potentially experiencing suffering, death, darkness and separation from Him. Since Adam, the human track record has been perfect: nobody resists evil's wooing knock at our heart's door. We've all fallen short of God's glory and all given ourselves over to the devil's oppression, his desire for control.

For the first generation of disciples, then, Jesus' words contained inspiring vitality:

- My truth will set you free . . .
- I give life abundantly . . .
- Whoever believes in me has eternal life . . .
- If you love one another, everyone will know you are my disciples!

It must have seemed to them that humanity would be set free in a generation! But, as we recall Jesus' birth today, we may feel His words don't ring with the same hope or validity. At our vantage point in history, while the gospel reaches for the Earth's ends, oppression has also spread like wildfire—religious, social, economic and ethnic oppression—and it threatens to engulf us. Sure, we still embrace the truths of Jesus' life, suffering and resurrection, but they can feel distant and less empowering. There's so much infighting, negative news, intense pain, global unrest, famine and growing war. Oppression.

With Adam, oppression began, and with us, it still expands. Even now as believers, we struggle against weak, dying bodies headed for idiosyncratic destinations of shame. We are oppressed by spiritual darkness. The devil's delight. And we oppress. We are quick to exploit any power or advantage we have over others.

Can we admit this? Do we see how quickly we would take the place of oppressors, given the chance? Few can resist long. None resists forever. And, sadly, we pass on the malady to the next generation. What darkness!

But therein lies the good news of “O Holy Night,” the night of our dear Savior’s birth! Jesus’ birth predicts eternity, when night will turn to day, when death is overcome, when the enslaved are freed and all will be transformed (1 Corinthians 15:51)! Oppression will cease. The oppressed, in the blink of an eye, will know their worth. We will all be changed.

It’s beyond imagining, but this is the healing Jesus came to bring humanity. “You yourselves know . . . how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him” (Acts 10:37–38, ESV). Anointed with God’s Holy Spirit power, Jesus taught and embodied God’s love, overcame our subjugation and renewed our responsibility and opportunity to love. He extends His reach through us as His Spirit empowers us to do good, fight oppression and love well.

Jesus’ death reflects humanity’s oppression more clearly than any other, yet His resurrection proves that God’s love overcomes. Our hope in that reality fuels us to live and love like Jesus!

Therefore, on this winter solstice, when darkness swaddles the earth, be reminded of this: the Christ child sets you free to love! In the Comforter’s power, we join the loving ranks of peacemakers. And by this, everyone will know that we are His disciples and that Jesus is the Way!



Rev. Naji Umran

Egypt

Naji serves as the regional ministries leader for the Middle East for Resonate Global Mission and on the Study Committee for Religious Freedom and Persecution of the Christian Reformed Church. He and his wife, Anne Zaki, are close associates with Langham’s work in the Middle East, and she is in the process of getting her dissertation published by Langham. They live in Cairo, Egypt, with their four boys.

*We three kings of Orient are; bearing gifts, we traverse afar,
field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star.*

— We Three Kings of Orient Are (v. 1)

Today's reading is from the Gospel of Matthew. "On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh" (Matthew 2:11).

As you read this scene, what did you notice? The house, the child, His mother, the kings, the gifts? Where was your attention drawn? This extraordinary history only appears in Matthew's gospel. How does it speak to you? Is there a single word you read in this passage that, for you, describes what God is up to?

Today's gospel recounts an extraordinary visit! Kings, wise men, Magi from the east—traditionally, three of them—each bowed down, bringing precious and expensive treasures for the newborn child delivered to His mother Mary.

Take a moment or two to imagine being with Mary and the baby. Take a moment to stay with a part of the scene, recalling the words or images. Let your attention settle on Jesus as a little child. As you consider baby Jesus in this passage, what do you feel? How do you react to Him?

Putting aside, for a moment, your pride and any sense of self-importance you may have, place yourself humbly into the hands of your God, the God who knows all your faults and failings and loves you still.

This is the historic coming of God in the person of His Son. This little child is the incarnation of God, the fulfillment of the promises in the Old Testament. *Alleluia*. He is bringing the presence of the kingdom of God. Not a kingdom of dominion but a kingdom of love, grace and justice.

Now read the passage once more. Does anything new stand out to you this time? Take a few moments now to join the scene of adoration, to bow down and worship Him now, as the three kings from the east did. Jesus came as a little

baby but now is the risen Lord of lords. God the Father gave Him the maximum honor, the name that is above all names. What does it look like for you to honor Him in your life?

But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone (Hebrews 2:9).

You might feel prompted to speak about this story in the coming days to your family, friends or a neighbor—or perhaps there's something else on your mind and heart about the core celebration of Christmas, Jesus. Finally, look back over the feelings and moods that you have experienced during these moments and try to turn them into a prayer to God. Into a praise to God. Here is one from my context that I find particularly meaningful:

*From all tribes, peoples, and races, many will come to praise You.
From so many cultures, languages, and nations
In time and space they will come to worship You*

*Blessed be always the Lamb, Son of God, root of David.
Blessed be Your Holy Name, Christ Jesus, present here.*

*Redeemed, bought, great multitude, many will come to praise You.
Chosen people, Your kingdom and nation,
In time and space they will come to worship You*

*And to us, it is only fitting to dedicate everything, a sweet offering to the Lord
We want to consecrate gifts and talents and life on Your altar, for Your praise*
— Guilherme Kerr Neto / Jorge Camargo



Dr. Marcelo Vargas

Bolivia

Marcelo is a Langham Scholar who serves as the executive director of Centro de Capacitación Misionera (CCM) in La Paz, Bolivia. He is married to Silvana, and they have a daughter, Priscila, a son, Elias, and two grandsons, Dominic and Nilo.

*Joy to the world! The Lord is come:
let earth receive her king;
let every heart prepare him room,
and heav'n and nature sing.*

— Joy to the World (v. 1)

Advent is a time for singing and also for observing silence. We celebrate a new reality and make room in our hearts and lives for its implications.

The wonderful lyrics from the iconic hymn of Isaac Watts, written more than 300 years ago, come to us with resounding voices proclaiming the coming of a babe who is, in fact, the King of kings. The cosmos, having been darkened with sin and evil, now at last opens its doors for the awaited king. The Light of the world has dawned.

The coming of Jesus is both a kingly breakthrough and a humble stepping into the lives of people and cosmos. He is the king but does not force His way like we see our worldly rulers do. The lyrics implore us to receive Him as the king He is. Jesus was mockingly acknowledged by the Romans as king of the Jews, but He was not merely the king of Jews. He is king over all, Jews and non-Jews. There are people who do not acknowledge Him as king, but those who do accept Him as their Lord and Savior enjoy fellowship with Father, Son and Holy Spirit and, at the same time, are endowed with the great responsibility of sharing the good news and demonstrating kingdom values in terms of truth, grace, righteousness, love and admiration for His creation.

When the heavenly choir sang a song (whose grandeur a believer will only know when he joins the angelic choir in heaven!) to some unknown shepherds and their sheep, it changed their lives for sure. Their trust was so real that it did not take long for this group of people to allow what was told to them into their hearts. They did exactly what they were told, proceeding to Bethlehem to look for the baby Jesus.

The manger provided a cozy holder for the newborn king. There could be no greater paradox than this, that the baby king was placed in a manger amid a crowded, smelly scene. Nature's cohabitants—animals—were among the first to witness the arrival of the king of the cosmos, who would have authority over

heaven and earth. Here was the greatest mystery of incarnation being unfolded in a most humble place with the presence of cattle and a visit by the simple and despised shepherds. In that quiet place—except for the cries of the baby, whispers of Mary and Joseph, the shepherds’ interruption and occasional animal sounds—Mary pondered what in the world this baby was going to do when He grew older and what it all meant. She, too, had to make room for this new reality.

The challenge for us today is how to do God’s work, how to let the reality of His kingship shape our lives. We see much use of money, power and skills in Christian ministry. All these things are not bad in themselves, but how they change our motives and attitude does matter. They can’t be lords of our hearts and kings of our lives. The joy of the good news that the king has come leads to the type of worship offered by the shepherds: simple acts of obedience and awe, an inspiration for millions of poor and despised ones of today who are welcome to see and worship Jesus. We can testify to what we have experienced as we receive the king in our hearts and glorify God with our lips and our lives in all stations of life.

Worship songs come and go, but there is something in “Joy to the World” that makes it endure as a heartbeat for every Advent season. It is its simple juxtaposition of celebrating good news and thoughtful reflection on its implications. May we celebrate the cosmic Advent with fervor and shouts but also with moments for humble contemplation.

For further reading:

Edward R. Brown, *When Heaven & Nature Sing: Exploring God’s Goals for His People and His World* (South Hadley, Massachusetts: Doorlight Publication, 2012).



Ashkenaz Asif Khan

Pakistan

Ashkenaz is the principal of Zarephath Bible Seminary in Pakistan and serves as a peer reviewer for Langham Literature.

*No more let sin and sorrows grow,
nor thorns infest the ground;
he comes to make his blessings flow
far as the curse is found.*

— Joy to the World (v. 3)

In Mongolia, we also sing one of the most well-known Christmas songs. “Joy to the World! The Lord is come: let earth receive her King; let every heart prepare him room . . .” This song is filled with joy and declares that joy to the world—earth, nature, trees, hills, plains, fields, peoples and nations—because the Lord has come to rule with love, truth and grace. The song speaks of a great joy or a reason to be joyful for both people and all of creation that have been waiting for their salvation and redemption.

When we see our surroundings, whether that is individual lives, families or societies as a whole, we see suffering, pain, illness, corruption and wickedness. In our country, we see the breakdown of families because of alcoholism, poverty and physical abuse. Many children are growing without either a father or mother in their lives. Politicians, judges and government officials abuse their power and position for their own benefit, and the interest of the country seems to be the last thing to be considered. Greed for money is destroying nature and the environment in our country. Mining is a big contributor to our economy, but concerns for the use of water in an area where there is already a scarcity of water and for the preserving of nature continue to be serious issues. Unfortunately, these future-looking issues are largely ignored or silenced for monetary gains today. When will we see restoration in our societies and the whole of creation?

The book of Revelation speaks of a day when “No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city . . .” (Revelation 22:3). The root of all the problems and sufferings goes back to the first sin by Adam and Eve, when they listened to the voice of Satan instead of God. Genesis 3:17 records God’s words of judgment: “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life.” Ever since people chose to ignore God and follow their own way, the whole creation has been subjected to a curse. All the evil and problems we see around us are the various forms and consequences of this curse. Yet Romans 8:19–21 speaks hopefully of creation’s eager longing for its release from this bondage.

When the Son of God was born as a human being among us, He declared the arrival of the kingdom of God. That marked the beginning of the end of suffering and the first occasion to declare joy to the world. Yet to come, when the throne of God and of the Lamb is among His people, the kingdom of God will be fully realized, and there will no longer be anything accursed because of human sin. That will be the day when joy will be declared again to God's people and to God's creation. Then the river of the water of life, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, will bring fruit and healing to the nations. God's people will be able to worship Him face to face, and they will be with Him forever and ever. What a time and eternity it will be! What a reason to declare the greatest joy to God's people and His creation.

On the one hand, the celebration of Christmas reminds us of the first arrival of the Son of God in this world. On the other hand, it makes us look forward with great expectation and joy to the second arrival of the Son of God and the complete fulfillment of the kingdom of God. "He comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found." One day, they will. That is our reason to be joyful and declare this joyous hope to all of God's creation!



Dr. Bayarjargal Garamtseren

Mongolia

Bayar is a Langham Scholar, a Langham-published author, a Langham-supported publisher and the movement coordinator for Langham Preaching in Mongolia. He also serves as the Mongolian Standard Version project manager for the Mongolian Union Bible Society. He and his wife, Yanjaa, have four children.

*He rules the world with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness
and wonders of his love.*

— Joy to the World (v. 4)

I really love Christmas songs although, I must admit, I am not a big fan of the Christmas hype. Maybe it's because I was not raised in a Christian family and didn't have any traditions, or maybe it's because I live in a place where a lot of traditions lead to division and tensions and really do not have anything to do with God.

But this song, “Joy to the World,” fills my heart with joy and awe at the greatness of our God. As you may know, Isaac Watts wrote this song as a paraphrase of Psalm 98, a glorious psalm which invites us to join the whole creation in celebration of the Lord. The psalm gives us three reasons to praise the Lord.

He is our Savior who performed miraculous deeds in saving us (Psalm 98:1–3).

He has done marvelous things in Israel's history and displayed His glory to all nations. He supernaturally invaded the laws of nature and made a virgin pregnant. He, the Word, became one of us and dwelt among us. He won the victory for us on the cross and saved us, delivering us from darkness to light and giving us new life. And that salvation is for everyone who is ready to receive Him.

He is the king who rules the universe (Psalm 98:4–6).

There are many leaders in this world who rule out of their own interests, manipulate and create tension, but Jesus is a different kind of king. We know that God is sovereign and that He is the one who gives and takes away authority. He can use (and does use) everything—every war, disaster, mistake, poor decision, failure—all for His glory and our good. And He rules with truth and grace. He reveals the truth to set us free because He is the Truth. And He extends His grace to us, forgiving our sin and sending His Spirit to help us live in the truth. He invites us to approach boldly to His throne of grace to find help in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16). Actually, He goes so far as to make us His ambassadors so that through us everyone is invited to taste and see the riches of His glory. We are the proof to people around us to see how great—and gracious—our God is.

He is the judge who will make things right (Psalm 98:7-9).

Jesus is coming again! This time not as a small vulnerable baby but as a mighty warrior and a righteous judge who will judge the world with equity. In this world of injustice and corruption, it is a tremendous hope that we have a righteous judge who sees all and who will defend our case and make things right. He will make an end to all evil, and all nations will see and marvel at His glory. We are coming to the end of a year marked by suffering—wars, refugees, racial issues, political tensions, economic distress, natural disasters, corruption and other challenges many of us even now experience. In my country, we live in a constant tension between ethnic groups, and corruption has crept in at every level of society. People are tired of injustice and lies from their leaders. Are you discouraged by the tension and injustice in the world?

Let me encourage you today to rejoice and praise Him while looking to the past at the marvelous things God has already done in history and also in our personal lives. Also, let us rejoice while looking at the present. He reigns today. In the midst of whatever is going on, He is still in control, and His grace is available to us. And let us not forget to rejoice while looking towards the future, for He is coming again. Then, every knee will bow and every tongue acknowledge Jesus is the king (Philippians 2:10-11). Some will do it in fear and reluctantly, but we will leap with joy, shouting and singing the “wonders of his love, wonders of his love!”

Merry Christmas to all.



Jelena Milicevic

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Jelena serves as the Langham Preaching movement coordinator for Bosnia and Herzegovina and is on staff at Evangelical Church Mostar in the city of Mostar.

Wisdom from the Global Church:



Where these devotionals were written



About Langham

Our Vision:

Langham Partnership exists to see Christians in the Majority World maturing in Christ through the ministry of church leaders who faithfully teach God's Word

Our Mission:

To strengthen the ministry of the Word of God through

1. Langham Scholars

Multiplying biblically faithful theological leaders

2. Langham Literature

Accelerating the creation and distribution of evangelical literature

3. Langham Preaching

Nurturing national grassroots for training in biblical preaching

The Langham Logic



“If God wants His people to grow up, which He does. And if they grow by the Word of God, which they do. And if the Word of God comes to them mainly through preaching, which it does, then the logical question to ask is: what can we do to raise the standard of biblical preaching?”

— JOHN STOTT, LANGHAM FOUNDER

How We Work:

PARTNERSHIP IN GOD'S WORD

Our approach to walking with the global church reflects the heart of our founder, John Stott.

WE LISTEN

We are invited into countries and listen as local leaders identify the most pressing issues in their cultures.

WE EQUIP LOCAL LEADERS

Through help from partners like you, we equip indigenous pastors, publishers and writers, enabling them to multiply disciples in their nations.

WE FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

Together we help churches become deeply rooted in God's Word so they can provide biblical solutions that address local issues.

Where We Work:

PLACES OF POVERTY, PRESSURE AND POTENTIAL

Langham Partnership focuses the resources God provides in contexts where the work of God's Kingdom is characterized by

POVERTY

Where God's people are under-resourced—due to economic shortages or where there are few evangelical believers.

PRESSURE

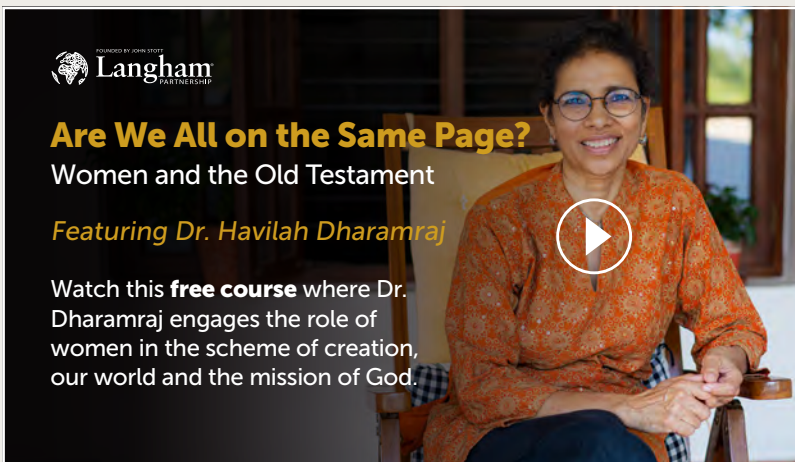
Where God's people are under threat—due to religious hostility and violence or from regional conflicts and civil wars.

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Where God's people are at the tipping point—about to influence surrounding peoples or where strengthening the ministry of God's Word could firmly establish the health, maturity and unity of the emerging church in that region.

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9:41



53:35

-11:26



1x



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“We must be global Christians with a global vision because our God is a global God.”

— JOHN STOTT, LANGHAM FOUNDER

“Singing accompanies the best and the worst of times. Isaiah sounds an Advent note when he envisages the joyful singing of the redeemed in the new creation (Isaiah 35:10). Jesus and His disciples sang a hymn as they trudged out to Gethsemane in those last hours before His betrayal, trial and crucifixion (Matthew 26:30). And what better time to sing than when we travel through Advent to the joy of the incarnation. No wonder there are so many Christmas hymns and carols going back centuries, just a few of which inspire each of the meditations in this book.”

— CHRIS WRIGHT, GLOBAL AMBASSADOR
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