



Prepared at Christmas

2020 Advent Post Series by Debra Stephens

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Prepared at Christmas

*Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the Lord our Maker
(Psalm 95:6)*

Who knew this Christmas season would look like *this*?

The Lord knew. He's not the least bit surprised.

Due to the tumultuous year we've had, our battered hearts need preparing. Because to celebrate the Christ is to worship. And hearts often need preparing, to fully worship God in spirit and in truth—now, more than ever.

So, I won't ask if you're ready for Christmas. It may take some doing. Besides, we are just barely past Thanksgiving. It's much too early in the season to place any pressure upon yourself.

But it does help to feel prepared when it comes to celebrating Christmas.

And you can't possibly be prepared *for* Christmas if you miss the whole point *of* Christmas.

Do you know who *was* prepared? The shepherds.

We can take our cue from them.

Once that heavenly announcement came, they responded with "Let us go there" (Lk 2:15).

That simple.

In haste, they rushed to the manger. To be in the presence of Jesus.

Let us go there. Together. Let's simply rush to our Lord's side.

Let's not look back on Christmas and realize that we missed the Christ. That we didn't build worship into our preparations.

Let us, like the shepherds, simply go. But let us go in astonishment.

Yes, astonishment!

I know. Astonishment typically unsettles us.

But shouldn't we be astonished at what God has done? Be amazed by the lengths to which He is willing to go to redeem fallen mankind?

Our hearts should so thrill with astonishment at what He is willing—and able—to do.

Wonder at the very miracle of it all! Be exhilarated by the grand drama of God's redemptive story.

Christmas is not something that happens outside us . . . around us . . . *to us*. It's not something to endure or survive. Or tinsel over. It's opportunity. It's the grandest of all occasions to look to God and celebrate Him . . . worship Him. And be astonished.

He has come!

The pronouncement has been made by hosts of heaven.

Let's go there! Let's be like those shepherds.

In astonishment, in excitement, in eagerness, they rushed with haste to the Christ.

And in so doing, He prepared them to worship.

Inwardly Prepared

Some things need to be prepared from the inside, out.

Like us, for Christmas.

Before we prepare the first thing on the outside of ourselves, we would do well to first start on the inside. And the absolute, best way to do that is in prayer before God.

We can commit ourselves wholeheartedly to Him and ask that He prepare us wholly—heart, mind, body, soul, and strength.

Prayer will prepare our hearts, so we aren't preoccupied, prevented from enjoying Him.

Throughout the Christmas season, we spend time decorating, baking, shopping, wrapping, and planning perfection. Often, little time is spent preparing our hearts, to ensure Jesus gets the best part of us.

This change comes from the inside out—because our hearts affect external matters.

God knew our hearts would need preparing . . . cleansing. So, He promised and provided the remedy:

*And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you.
And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart
of flesh (Ez 36:26).*

A gift of His grace is that of a new heart. And there is no time like the present to accept His present.

The humbled and surrendered heart—committed wholly to Him—is cleansed, transformed, and prepared. Creating an inner sanctuary—where He is pleased to dwell.

But it's a partnership. Our part is that of coming to Him in prayer. And part of that time in prayer can include meditating upon His Word.

God does some of His best work through His Word.

Then, like Mary, we are treasuring up the things of Christ deeply in our hearts. And so fill our hearts daily with the gospel.

This preparation then allows for us to take it out into a world frantically searching for Christmas.

It was John who cried out in the desert place to *prepare the way for the Lord*. That can become our inward plea. Resounding within. Preparing a way for Jesus to fill your heart—that **He** may be at the heart of your Christmas.

Then gift that prepared heart right back to Him.

An Aromatic Offering

Ahhhh, the delicious smells of Christmas! I love them all.

Homes are infused with a symphony of holiday aromas—evergreen and scented candles, pastries baking, or an ambient fire. But I especially love the warm, wafting aromas of giving and love.

Paul instructed the Ephesians to *walk in the way of love* and pointed to Jesus as the example. His sacrifice was a fragrant offering to God.

You have a fragrance to dispense, too. One prepared by God to share with the world.

What is that fragrance?

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing (2 Cor 2:14-15).

We are the aroma of Christ. And we can share the fragrance of the knowledge of Him everywhere we go. In every place we go this bustling time of year.

You have a fragrance for the world—discipleship. But do you know that you also have a fragrance to offer God? It's the sweet aroma of your worship.

Give Him your aromatic worship.

What *is* the fragrance of *your* worship?

Is it sour, by bitterness and unforgiveness?

Salty, from the sweat of your brow or tears of sorrow?

Sweet, filled with loving gratitude?

It may not be like the gifts of frankincense and myrrh the Magi brought the Babe, born King of kings. But don't let that stop you.

Come!

But don't *just* come . . . come to worship. Your worship is a pleasing aroma to God, as are those prayers mentioned yesterday. Both are made all-the-more-sweeter by your loving adoration.

Pondering Prepared Minds

Ponder, it's a good word. It's one that lingers long in my thoughts, before it crosses the threshold of my lips.

It means *to consider something deeply and thoroughly; to weigh carefully in the mind*. A few of its synonyms are *contemplate, meditate, deliberate, ruminare, evaluate, reflect, muse, mull*.

The verb form in the Greek, *syballousa*, is used only once in the New Testament. Luke 2:19 reads: *But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart*.

It does our hearts and minds good to ponder godly matters.

And pondering is a key ingredient for being prepared for Christmas.

If we want a Christmas prepared in a devotional way—one that does not conform to the world's pattern—then we must intentionally renew our minds.

*Do not conform to the pattern of this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.
Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—
his good, pleasing and perfect will (Rm 12:2).*

To renew our minds by the Word of God, as the verse says, helps us to discern the will of God. It fills our minds with Jesus. And helps us to have the mind of Christ.

Pondering Jesus leaves little room to ponder problems propagated by this pandemic. Or other lesser, earthly cares.

Prepare your minds by the Word this season.

Read the Story afresh.

Read the Story again . . . *and again*.

Read of the angel's visitation, their grand announcement, their praise of God.

Read of Nazareth and Bethlehem.

Read of the grueling journey, the shepherds, the Magi. The glory!

Ponder it . . . *Him*.

Think on these things and, like Mary, mull it over . . . and over . . . and over again.

It's another way, along with worship and prayer, to prepare for Christmas.

Rest—It's Part of the Preparation

*From the Lord comes deliverance.
May your blessing be on your people.
Selah
(Ps 3:8)*

Typically, December calendars are demanding. Ruthless, even. December has a tendency to bark merciless marching orders, at a grueling pace.

But 2020 strikes again—seriously altering our calendars. Many traditional holiday activities and events have been cancelled this year. While that may have freed up some time, it has created other issues in its place. Issues that weigh us down and vie for our peace.

Our days are nothing like the Hallmark peace of a seasonal picture postcard.

It is important, in this bustling month of preparations, that we deliberately prepare some time and space to pause in stillness before God.

Steal away from the stress, which rudely bombards tranquility, and prepare for yourself a daily *selah*.

Selah, it's what biblical scholars have translated as a musical pause. It is used in the Book of Psalms a whopping 71 times.

It can mean *a rest*—to stop;
a pause—to listen.
It can bring peace.

If you are a child of God, you especially need to find a pausing place to listen to the voice of your loving Father.

If you are seeking answers, you need to find a pausing place, away from the noise, to draw near Truth Himself, Jesus.

Come away from all the clamoring media and press. Disallow its constant invasion. And determine that the holiday commotion won't keep you from communion with the Savior.

Stop and listen
to the news of His deliverance;
Rest in that.

Purposefully prepare *selah*;
deliberately prepare rest.

Pause to come—into His presence.
Pause to praise.

Pause to enter—into His peace.

Prepare a place in your hurried and harried day for a rest.

Selah.

A Family Prepared

In our advent journey so far, we've toured the inward components that need tending, to be prepared for Christmas this year. We looked at the importance of preparing our hearts and minds through prayer and the Word, so that we may worship and rest in Jesus. Now we'll turn the conversation to outward matters.

And there is no better place to begin than with our families.

Now, I'm not talking about polishing up the outside. Or adorning the gang in new outfits for the perfect holiday portrait. It also goes beyond gift-giving. And fitting them with masks and sanitizer. It's got to be more involved than that. It's got to go deeper.

First and foremost, let's bathe them in the Word and cover them in constant prayer.

Set their focus upon Jesus. Crown Him King of your family . . . your Christmas—daily.

Admittedly, we've got some fierce competition battling to divide families. It's a harrowing feat, for sure. The relentless input for our kid's attention - and heart - is constant. But one way to capture and involve them is through family traditions.

Christmas is filled with traditions.

There are traditions that were passed on to you from your family. And there are those that you create and pass down to your children and grandchildren. They vary greatly. There are as many traditions as there are families. Those most treasured are the ones rich with meaning and significance.

A child's wonder is a fantastic thing to cultivate. That awe plants the most amazing seeds for faith to grow. And the miraculous signs and wonders of God recorded in the birth narrative are definitely awe-inspiring!

In our family, we observed a daily devotional time—which included their participation. Choose a time that best fits (midday, mealtime, or bedtime), just try to be consistent. I often used various products on the market and custom-fit them to our family. When they were younger, it often included an activity of some kind. It's not always *what* you do exactly, or *how* you do it, just that you simply do. The practice enriched our faith . . . *our family*. And it made our holiday traditions ripe with the fullness of God.

This tradition prepared our family for Christmas—in meaningful ways.

So, as you feed your family during the holidays, feed their hearts and minds with the Word. (It's ok if it's in bite-sized pieces.)

And, just as the family of Jesus went on pilgrimage to His birth together, you can take your family on pilgrimage to the Christ this Christmas—with prepared hearts.

How Not to Prepare a Home—101

It was a year marked by significant changes . . . and an uncertain future.

Normal was a foreign concept.

But I was overly determined to keep things *normal*—to a fault. Especially when it came to Christmas.

I tackled the monstrous job of decorating the home on my own (in a less-than admirable attitude).

I bullishly wrestled bulging boxes. And launched the ladder to deck the roofline with lights (in absolute fear and stubborn pride). I wore myself out, concerned with outward appearances.

But, as I assembled the tree, the stand failed to stand at all. I huffed . . . and I puffed . . . till I practically blew the house down trying to fix it.

I couldn't afford to buy a new tree, and we certainly weren't going to do without, so I tried to engineer a solution. And, because I felt everything else in life was miserably broken, a broken tree was entirely unacceptable!

I first tried to duct-tape the tree to a piece of plywood; then camouflage the rigging. Well, you guessed it: it toppled a few days later.

"I'll fix that!" I spewed.

Then I tied some rope around it and **nailed** it to the windowsill! That kept it up all season. So, I did it again the year after that, and the year after that (reutilizing that unremovable nail, buried deep in the foundation of the house).

The kids roared with laughter. I nervously, and painfully, chuckled along. (Now, of course, I find it quite hilarious!) It was a silly thing that turned the tide for us.

When we moved out of that house years later, the nail remained. As I gave the home a final, reminiscent tour, I smiled at the memory of it. (I smile even now.) I have often wondered what the new homeowners thought of that curious nail (because I doubt it ever came out!).

Decorating our home that year was ultra-important—but for the wrong reasons. I erred in believing that the very success of our Christmas depended on how it all looked. But, by God's healing grace, He is teaching me a different set of values and priorities.

Decorating for Christmas is the non-essential. Preparing our homes, however, is not.

Here are a few personal thoughts on how to prepare a home for Christmas:

- Pray over, in, and through each room—about the activities, conversations, and people that will occupy that space.
- Leave out an open Bible (and share with others what you find there).

- Make Jesus evident among you by giving Him thanks and praise whenever you see His hand at work.
- Set the tone of your home by speaking words of kindness and respect.
- Fill your home with the spirit of Jesus: Be patient, merciful, and humbly serve others in love. Be the example in attitude. And be forgiving of others (and yourself) when you blow it.
- Try to minimize unnecessary clutter (if for the sole reason of mental health).
- Finally, adorn the atmosphere with love and laughter.

Preparing our home has become far less dramatic . . . and traumatic. I don't attempt to string up lights across the rooftop anymore. I have realized that's not how you prepare your home for Christmas. And I'm quite ok with keeping the store-bought garnishments to a minimum. God has graciously taught me to address what lies within first.

In a year when we have endured many significant changes, and an uncertain future, it would be easy to fall into a trap to go Griswold-overboard at Christmas. And with the additional circumstances of not being able to invite a large number of guests into our homes, it has become even more important that we simply invite and welcome Jesus into our homes—leaving Him room to dwell among us.

A God-Prepared Covering

In these opening advent days, we observed our cultural holiday preparations. Now we'll turn to the biblical narrative to consider what God has prepared. Because to see the provisions of God—His goodness, glory, and grace—will add a robust *Hallelujah!* to our celebration of His Son.

We'll begin at the beginning, in Genesis. We'll tour the magnificent doings of God down through history, of those things He prepared for the first advent-coming of His Messiah.

And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there He put the man whom He had formed. And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:8-9 ESV).

The Garden God created and prepared as a dwelling place for His image-bearers was nothing short of perfection. More than the tree of life, His presence was there.

No sin was there. No ugliness, no hatred, no corruption, no brokenness . . . no illness. No shame to cover-over (Gen 2:25).

But then Genesis 3:1 happened!

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God actually say....' (Gen 3:1a ESV).

And then...

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate (Gen 3:6a ESV).

The one command of God? Broken. Right along with the Father's heart. Not to mention the breach in their relationship.

And the need for their covering was born. The covering of their nakedness, their sin, their shame.

They tried to fashion a self-made garment of fig leaves (Gen 3:7), but to no avail. And the human drive for autonomous works was born.

But no covering made by human hands would suffice. Covering up was not possible. Nor could they hide from God, try as they might.

God pronounced judgment upon the three for their disobedience (Gen 3:14-19). Then He did the unexpected.

And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them (Gen 3:21 ESV).

God's provision was divinely (and personally) prepared. He clothed them in garments of His own making.

But death had entered God's created order. The sacrificial death of that animal was required. By the blood of a sacrifice, the act of their rebellion was covered.

It was Jehovah-God Who covered them with garments of His grace.

Mercifully, He covered their nakedness and shame.

By grace, He provided the covering for their sin. Because He alone can provide atonement for sin.

This one act—in the beginning—foreshadowed the lasting remedy God would ultimately provide in the Christ. Through the shedding of His sacrificial blood is atonement made for the sins of the fallen human race.

God prepared and provided garments for Adam and Eve—coverings for both the physical and spiritual need born of their sin. But a far greater covering-of-perfection was coming.

And Christ Jesus, Whom we celebrate and serve, has covered *you* in garments of salvation (Is 61:10) . . . and love everlasting.

Our Covenantal God

*I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant
between me and you and your descendants after you
for the generations to come,
to be your God and the God
of your descendants after you (Gen 17:7).*

From that first sin in Eden's Garden, it spread like a raging wildfire.

But God extended promise to man and further bound Himself by a series of subsequent covenants.

Each covenant God made (beginning with Adam, then Noah, Abraham, Moses at Sinai, and King David) built upon each other—to their culmination in the New Covenant in Christ Jesus.

The promise of a new covenant included forgiveness and regeneration and was guaranteed by His unbreakable oath (Heb 6:13-14). The covenant of circumcision was in the flesh (Gen 17:9-14). However, the covenant of Christ, of the heart (Rm 2:29).

Most covenants were accompanied with signs. The sign of the Noahic covenant was the rainbow. Circumcision was a sign of the Abrahamic covenant. The Mosaic covenant came with the Law and the sacrificial system—to serve as a guardian until the Messiah came (Gal 3:24). The Davidic covenant established an everlasting kingdom. And the sign of the new covenant is baptism (Col 2:11-12), along with the memorial observance of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:23-25).

Both Zechariah (Lk 1:72-73) and Peter (Ac 3:25-26) pointed to Jesus as confirmation that God had indeed kept His covenants. As did Paul (2 Cor 3:5-7). And we further learn from the writer of the Book of Hebrews that Jesus is the Mediator of the New Covenant, a covenant far superior to its predecessors (Heb 9:15; 8:6).

God promised to redeem lost mankind, ultimately so *He would be our God and we, His people (Jer 31:33)*.

As God With Us, Immanuel, Jesus is our God and we, His people—because our Covenantal God is a relational God.

Flowing from a desire to maintain a relationship with all of His creation, God prepared an eternal covenant. One to outlast time. And now available to all mankind through His Son.

God's covenants—prepared from the foundations before time—reveal the character and the heart of God. They are beautiful . . . complex . . . and everlasting. And they prepare our faith with unwavering hope.

Being Prepared by Promise's Divine

There is a confidence that comes from knowing God is for you. Really and truly **FOR you**.

That confidence helps you feel prepared for anything!

One way to gain that confidence is taking in God's divine promises.

Hope was birthed in the promises of God and can be mined from the pages of His Word. The grace-filled promises held out for you there shed light on His love-brimming heart.

God made a promise to the world's first couple, and several others who followed. The blessed birth of Jesus fulfilled a long string of promises He made across the span of history.

A particular recipient of promise was Abraham.

All families of the earth will be blessed through you (Gen 12:3b).

God gifted Abraham with several promises. One of them was for descendants to be born to him and his wife (even though they were rather advanced in years). What seemed impossible to man, was God-possible.

Multitudes have failed to believe God's promises. Because they fail to believe God.

The only impossibility to God's promises is, in fact, for Him to *not* keep them.

The grandest promise of them all is His promise for a Savior—proving that He is indeed for us!

For centuries God sent a barrage of messages through His servants, the prophets, promising that a Savior would come.

And He has! The Promised Redeemer has come!

Jesus is the Answer to every promise of God!

All glory to God . . . *glory in the highest!* Yes, let all of heaven and nature sing!

Knowing that the promises of God are for us is to know that the God of the Promise is for us.

And trusting that He is faithful to each one, gilds faith with God-confidence.

Preparing a Familial Line

To the people of Israel “is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised. Amen.” (Rm 9:4-5)

God called His servant Abraham out of Ur and promised him a son. Through His covenant, God would bring forth a nation from the familial line of Abraham.

Through the seed of this one man, God would birth the Redeemer of the world. The Deliverer of the Nations would come from the lineage of Israel’s patriarchs-of-promise, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. A Deliverer whose very redemption would ransom a people for God . . . to become the family of God.

From one family would come one family—of the line God prepared.

God prepared a place, a people, and a nation. His plans and purposes, ready to unfold.

*But when the set time had fully come,
God sent his Son,
born of a woman, born under the law,
to redeem those under the law,
that we might receive adoption to sonship (Gal 4:4-5).*

The promises and covenants were made.

A bloodline was prepared.

All things, readied by the hands of God for the world’s Savior, waited for the fullness of time.

Salvation was coming . . . through a line divinely prepared.

Prepared by promise;
Prepared by covenant;
Prepared by blessing—
For the grace to be called His dearly beloved child.

Where the Lord Provides

We are walking our way through God's Grand Story, recalling those things He has prepared. And we're still in Genesis. But such blessings are found there!

*Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns.
He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering
instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide.
And to this day it is said,
"On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided" (Gen 22:13-14).*

This has long been one of the most fascinating events in the Old Testament. (Not to mention pivotal in the overarching redemptive narrative.) Gleaning from it richly prepares faith—because it reveals much about the antitype in future workings of God. But we will only look at a small portion of it today. Of particular importance is something found in the first verse of the same chapter:

*Some time later God tested Abraham.
He said to him, "Abraham!"
"Here I am," he replied (Gen 22:1).*

God *tested* Abraham. And Abraham passed the test. (So did Isaac, for that matter. He trusted his father, as he was bound and laid upon that altar.)

God asked Abraham for his son, but he believed God could, and would, raise him from the dead (Heb 11:17-19). So he went to the Mount of the Lord. And, on the third day, he was given back his son (Gen 22:4).

But far more magnificent to behold is God's provision of the ram, the substitute that spared Abraham's son.

By grace, through a faith that obeyed, God provided a substitute.

God provided the ram in place of Isaac that day. He provided the solution to his dilemma, lurking in the shadow of death.

God provides for every act of obedience.

And that is why Abraham proclaimed the name of the Lord, Yahweh Yir'eh, The Lord Will Provide.

God gave a word to Abraham. And he trusted and obeyed.

God can be trusted. And He can be trusted with your children, too.

Centuries later, another Firstborn Son would be asked to climb a mount—to be sacrificed upon a tree. But this time, He **was** the provision. He **was** the substitute. And, as Abraham believed, God was able to raise Him back from the dead—given back to the world three days later.

In Bethlehem's stable, we see Yahweh Yir'eh provided yet again.

However, we can't just look at the gift of God in Jesus' birth. But also, the gift of God in His death. And resurrection.

In all things, God has provided.

He provided on that mount;
He provided in that shepherd's field;
He provided on Calvary;
And through the Lord's empty grave.

And He provides for *you*—right where you are today.

Bread Prepared in the Heavens

The desert was an absolute mob scene.

God had delivered a people from slavery just one month earlier, accompanied by many powerful and miraculous signs and wonder.

But there was much grumbling going on nonetheless.

This is what you get from a mob of hungry people:

The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.'

"Then the Lord said to Moses, 'I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions' (Gen 16:1-4).

They were, as they say, *hangry*.

So God prepared bread, which came down from the heavens, to feed His people and meet their daily needs.

On the dawn of that first morning, when the foreign substance rained down from heaven, they exclaimed of the flakes; *What is it?* And the name stuck. For the meaning of *manna* in Hebrew is just that, *what is it*.

God provided for the Israelites. Faithfully. Six days a week, every week, for 40 years (Ex 16:35). Until they reached the promised land.

They could depend upon His goodness.

Our souls, too, hunger.

So, the very Bread of Life came down from heaven to satisfy that deep hunger that lies within us all.

Jesus said to them, 'Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.'

'Sir,' they said, 'always give us this bread.'

Then Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty' (Jn 6:32-35).

It was God, the Father, who sent manna from heaven. And the Father, also, who gives the True Bread from heaven. One perishable. One imperishable.

People asked *what* of the holy bread from heaven, just as people asked *who* of the Holy Son of God. And, as manna satisfied the people's physical hunger, Jesus satisfies completely and continually every spiritual hunger.

God has prepared with great care another Bread from Heaven, His Word—to sustain us in this desert wasteland. And Jesus, the Bread of Life, nourishes our very souls—to the Promised Land . . . and beyond.

The Preparing of a People

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now if you obey Me fully and keep My covenant, then out of all nations you will be My treasured possession. Although the whole earth is Mine, you will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex 19:4-6).

The descendants of Abraham had grown into a numerous people. By the hand of God, they would become the nation Israel . . . after He rescued them from bondage.

God would have to deliver the chosen ones of the covenant promise. Then they would need some preparing to walk with Him in the land promised.

The sacred text tells us that God heard their groanings and responded in faithfulness to His covenant. He would bring them out of their Egyptian slavery with a mighty hand and free them from the grip of a tyrannical Pharaoh.

His chosen servant, Moses, led them out across the land. Then God provided a most miraculous escape route, across the dry bed of the Red Sea, and quashed the enemy that pursued them.

Camped at the base of Mt. Sinai, God prepared a people. Over the course of the following year, He readied them to be His people. God would, yet again, create. He would create a new people, a nation. By His presiding power, they would conquer and possess the land He gave them.

It was there that God legislated their communal and religious systems. It was there that He first spoke the words that would govern them relationally, spiritually, morally, and socially. The Law, inscribed by *the finger of God*, was to be their civil code and method for worship. Their obedience to that Law provided a means of fellowship with God. And set them apart from other peoples. It provided their standard for living a blessed life.

God would bless the nation that chose to obey. He would be their God and they would be His people and possess the land—a land flowing with milk and honey. They would multiply upon the land until the fullness of time came for God's Messiah.

God would provide all they needed to live in the land as *a kingdom of priests, a holy nation*. He provided all they needed to live the prepared life. In the shadow of that great mountain, and before the splendor of God's voice from the cloud, He prepared the Law . . . the People . . . a Nation . . . and set before them a choice.

Contained within His words to them blazed a holy *but if*. They wrongly chose *but if*. They failed to trust and obey—their hearts unprepared by the faith needed to follow. So, God went about preparing the next generation—to be led by the Lord and Joshua into the land of covenant. What should have taken 11 days, now spanned 40 years of desert wandering.

That choice extended by God was the one from the beginning—between blessing or curse, life or death. Obedience or disobedience.

The same choice is ours. Because now it is the Lord Jesus who is preparing for Himself a people—as His holy priesthood. Citizens of His kingdom.

Will we follow the way of the world? Or the prepared way of the Lord?

A Prepared Place to Dwell

Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst.

*I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God.
And they shall know that I am the Lord their God,
who brought them out of the land of Egypt
that I might dwell among them.
I am the Lord their God (Ex 25:8; 29:45-46).*

I long to be with my children on Christmas. A longing that will go unmet this year because of the pandemic.

It is, however, but a fraction of the deep longing God has to be with His children.

Humanity was created to dwell with God.

Michael Morales explains that *the primary theme and theology of the Pentateuch as a whole is YHWH's opening a way for humanity to dwell in the divine Presence.*¹ He writes elsewhere, *The divine desire to dwell with humanity [is] the goal of both creation and redemption.*²

God's desire to tabernacle with His people has been exhibited through His various movements in history. What began at Creation, in the Garden, was adapted by God, due to humanities increasing alienation and estrangement from their Creator.

Humanity, separated from God, had abandoned their purpose. For the abundant life is found only by dwelling in His presence.

At Mt. Sinai, (which we explored in yesterday's post) God handed down plans for the tabernacle to Moses. God provided the most intricate details regarding every aspect of this holy place—from the frames, clasps, furnishings, posts, pegs, and curtains. But, because it was portable, by its very nature it was temporary. However, it was altogether glorious—because God was there.

The beauty and brilliance of God's plan was in its community involvement. God prepared a people . . . to prepare others . . . to prepare a place. He first prepared people—with skills, resources, materials and, most especially, His Spirit. Then, He used them to prepare others. **Together** they would use what He gifted to prepare a dwelling place among them.

After God established the land through His servant King David, another dwelling place was prepared among them. Building plans for the temple were given to King Solomon.

¹ Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? Pg 23

² Ibid, Pg 103

The word of the Lord came to Solomon: 'As for this temple you are building, if you follow My decrees, observe My laws and keep all My commands and obey them, I will fulfill through you the promise I gave to David your father. And I will live among the Israelites and will not abandon My people Israel.'

He prepared the inner sanctuary within the temple to set the ark of the covenant of the Lord there (1 Kg 6:11-13; 6:19).

It took seven years to complete the first temple, by the labor of over 30,000 people. It stood from 960-586 BC. Zerubbabel rebuilt the temple in 515 BC. It was again reconstructed by Herod. That dwelling stood from 20 BC to 70 AD. But God's manifest presence seemed to have vacated the premises.

What was God's next move?

The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (Jn 1:14).

God came to dwell among humanity in the flesh! Jesus, God's Dwelling Place.

God, in Christ, returned to His temple.

But He went even further still. Preposterously so.

He died the most tortuous of deaths, to be raised and return on High, in order to dwell **within**.

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? (1 Cor 3:16 ESV).

God had Solomon prepare an inner sanctuary within the temple, to set the Ark of the Covenant, representing the Presence of God among His people. The inner sanctuary relocated to inner self. From a building carved from stone to living flesh.

The tent of your body is a holy place . . . His most holy space—where He desires to tabernacle with you.

Furthermore, Scriptures teaches us, in Christ we are *being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit* (Eph 2:22). We are not stand-alone temples. Rather, we are being built up **together**, united as one by the Holy Spirit. We in Him—He in us.

God has been preparing a place where He could dwell among His people . . . from the beginning of time. The movements of God—in all Three Persons—propelled from garden to mountain, from tabernacle to temple, from flesh to the Body of Christ, to the forthcoming New Zion.

*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
“Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.
He will dwell with them, and they will be his people,
and God himself will be with them as their God” (Rev 21:3).*

Jesus prepares still. He ascended, to send the Spirit and to go prepare for us a place, an eternal dwelling with God—that we may tabernacle with Him in holy fellowship evermore.

A Land Promised

*They were longing for a better country—a heavenly one.
Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God,
for he has prepared a city for them (Heb 11:16).*

God prepared the people He delivered;
He had them prepare a place for Him to dwell among them;
and He prepared a priesthood.

God was ready to part the waters of the Jordan River
and bring them into the land
He promised their ancestors.

It was a good and fruitful land;
A land where grape clusters had to be carried on poles;
Where figs and pomegranates burgeoned.

It was a land flowing with the abundance of God's goodness.

However, attitudes over-shadowed faith.
Fear deemed the land unattainable
and God's promises unbelievable.

Their rebellion cost them God's reward.

If it was the land they didn't want, it was the land they wouldn't get.
They would wander in the wasteland of their unbelief
until the last one of the lot perished there.

God's offer to settle the land prepared fell to the next generation.

God promised to conquer the challenges before them
in exchange for their obedience.
He would drive out the enemies they would face.

They were, however, to live lives set apart from the influences of the nations.

Christians, too, are called to live in the world . . . but not of it.

When we assign to Him, in humble surrender,
the territory of our hearts,
He empowers from within a consecrated life.

By His name, He drives out enemies of pride, immorality, and fear.
It is a battle hard fought . . .
but a battle hard won.

And, by His Spirit, He produces abundant fruit in barren places—
until we reach that distant shore,

where the Son is now preparing
a land flowing with the riches of our Father's grace.

We look forward to a city with eternal foundations, a city designed and built by God
(Heb 11:10 NLT).

In expectant hope, we live as those named in *Hebrews* hall of faith—
unashamed and longing to live in the city promised and prepared—
by our everlasting Master, Lord, and King.

Crowned in Glory

*But about the Son he says,
“Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever;
a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom”
(Heb 1:8).*

Americans—we love the grandeur of royalty. But monarchical rule is foreign to us. In fact, it was in revolt of despotism the United States was born.

But, if you are a people, and you have bad leadership (and I do mean *bad*), and everyone else around you has a king, what do you suppose you want, too?

When Israel’s judge and prophet Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons, Joel and Abijah, as Israel’s leaders. *But his sons did not follow his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain, accepted bribes, and perverted justice* (1 Sm 8:1-22).

So, all the elders of Israel gathered together and confronted Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, “You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.”

But when they said, *give us a king to lead us*, this displeased Samuel. So he prayed to the Lord. And the Lord told him; “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights.”

Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. He honestly warned them of the dangers of their desire. They could expect the king to rule over them harshly. *He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.*

But the people refused to listen to Samuel. “No!” they insisted. “We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.”

Samuel listened to all the people had to say. Then he repeated it before the Lord. The Lord answered, “Listen to them and give them a king.”

God had a King already prepared to perfection. But the people rejected God as their King. They wanted a king of their own choosing, like all their neighbors. And they certainly didn't want to wait on God's timing for His Messiah to be born into the world.

God gave them over to their desires—to suffer the consequences.

A total of 42 kings reigned over Israel and Judah. Only three reigned over the mostly “united” kingdom of Israel. Subsequently, 19 reigned over the northern kingdom of Israel and 20 over the southern kingdom of Judah. Each of these kings ruled only for a time. And each of these kings failed them. But to David, God promised an eternal King who would reign justly (2 Sm 7:16).

God, the Father, would pass on His Kingdom to His Son, the Promised Seed, through a covenant with the royal line of David. A kingdom the *Gates of Hades* would come against—and yet endure.

You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; His kingdom will never end (Lk 1:31-33).

The King came, born of a virgin as promised, in the days of Caesar Augustus.

He was born crowned.

The kingdom of God has come near. It is *within your midst* (Lk 17:21). And Jesus has been heralded its King, the Anointed One of God.

Jesus is the eternal King of Righteousness, whose kingdom will have no end.

But the crown of man was fashioned of thorns. And the Messiah of God was crucified as King of the Jews.

But heaven's crown is the crown of God's Glory. And He was vindicated—raised as King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev 19:16) in all majesty, power, and authority.

May His kingdom come! May every knee bow before Him—the King prepared of God. And may it begin this Christmas.

Preparing a Way in This Wilderness

Are you ready to turn the bend in our *Prepared* path?

As our advent-days approach Christmas, and we gradually wind our way through the story of all God prepared for the coming of the Lord that first advent, we are also drawing nearer to our destination: the Savior.

Today, we'll fast-forward from Israel's Old Testament history to the trailblazer who prepared the way for the coming Christ. The flame that was John, the Baptist, flickered preparation for the Coming Light.

It was Jesus who called him *a lamp that burned and gave light* (Jn 5:35). John's blazing truth illuminated the density of mankind's darkness. And spun a spotlight on the greater Light coming.

It was foretold by God's prophets that John would *make ready a people prepared for the Lord*.

It was customary in the Ancient Near East to first prepare the roads a king would travel ahead of his journey to distant lands. A great King was indeed coming! And the assignment was given to John to ready the way.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world (Jn 1:6-9).

John was sent from God . . . as a witness. His family was faithful to prepare him for his calling.

How would you like to have his job?

Ah, but you do!

We are to testify to what the Light has done in our lives. We, like John, are to point to the Christ and boldly proclaim, *Behold, the Light of the World has come!*

And to shine in the glory of it all.

John was a prepared witness *to testify about the Light so that all might believe*.

Hear his testimony and believe!

Turn your chin heavenward and capture rays of the Lord's light . . . and believe.

Then testify.

Out in the wilderness John declared; “Prepare the way of the Lord.” Prepare the way for the Lord to come into your wilderness. . . *this wilderness*. This wilderness of confusion. This secular wilderness of noise and excess. Clear the way for Jesus to enter in. Prepare room where clutter heeds His entry—whether clutter from worry or busy distraction. Prayerfully allow the obstacles to fall away . . . and only a focus upon Him remains.

To prepare for Christmas is to prepare a way for Him. Clear space for the Lord and allow His light to shine into it.

And shine it will!

What's to Fear

*The virgin's name was Mary. And [Gabriel] came to her and said,
"Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"
But she was greatly troubled at the saying,
and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.
And the angel said to her,
"Do not be afraid, Mary,
for you have found favor with God" (Lk 1:27b-30 ESV).*

Now I have seen some troubling sights in my day. And I have heard some troubling news. But there's troubling . . . and then there's *troubling!*

Right there we read that Mary was *greatly troubled*.

Gabriel was sent by God with the most glorious news. His opening greeting (*chaire* in the Greek) can also be expressed with a hearty *Hail!*

He goes on to call her *favored one*, or *charitoō*, meaning: *to grace, highly honor or greatly favor*.

Gabriel's greeting seems meant to prepare Mary. Because whenever someone is told *the Lord is with you*, it's typically because they need the encouragement for some great task ahead. Some task your heart may fear. But with Gabriel's explicit *the Lord* (*kyrios*), Mary would have understood that reference as a person *exercising absolute ownership rights*.

This troubled Mary . . . *and rightly so!* It's quite understandable, considering the extraordinary occasion. But I wonder, by what precisely? Was she *deeply troubled* by the visitation? By the angel's appearance? His message? Or all of the above?

Luke went on to explain that Mary *tried to discern* his greeting, or *dialogizomai*: *to reckon thoroughly, deliberate or intensely reason*.

But good ole' Gabriel tells her not to *phobeō*, be afraid. He doesn't want her *to be alarmed, terrified, or frightened*.

And the Greek for *deeply troubled*? Well, it's *diatarassō* (*dia* means *through to the limit* and *tarassō* is *trouble*). It can be translated as: *to agitate greatly, acutely distressed, or greatly disturbed*. This is the only time it is used in the New Testament. A unique word reserved for this one unique occasion.

So Mary rushed to Elizabeth to see the sign spoken of by the angel, affirming the authority of his word. Thankfully, God had prepared a companion for her in Elizabeth—so they could face the possible impossibilities of God together.

What to fear has always come into question.

Sometimes we get it wrong.

There especially seems to be some confusion these days.

There are some things we fear that we shouldn't. And other things we don't fear that we should.

Like God.

But it's all a matter of the type of fear that's appropriate.

Some fear he is an angry God . . . but shouldn't

Some have no reverence for Him at all . . . but should.

There is a proper, healthy sort of fear when it comes to God—it's the reverent kind.

Jehovah-God is a god to be feared. And yet we have relegated Him a jolly Santa, with skewed opinions about what we deserve.

Secular arrogance has forgotten to fear God. Forgotten the need for His mercy. The mercy that knows we don't have a hope without Him. So, He birthed salvation in that Babe, born of troubled Mary.

Yes, we rejoice that, in Christ, our salvation has come! We would rightly tremble if He had not.

It is because of Him that we can be fearless in matters of faith—for He has secured our peace with God. He has given us a hope we can trust. And He empowers us to do those fearful things for Him. As He did for Mary.

Though troubled at the meaning of this heavenly message, Mary submitted willingly—ever the humble servant. But she endured many grievous troubles—because *the Lord was with her*. His grace favored her with strength—strength to trust.

Where lies your fear? God . . . or man? In present circumstances . . . or in your eternal future?

It's a question worth asking. And an answer worth weighing.

You might be troubled by the news you hear. But you can give over your troubles and fears to God—and rest in His peace. With the mere whisper of His name, *Immanuel*, remember, *He is with you*.

Resource: Hebrew-Greek ESV Key Word Study Bible

Preparing Room

The widow of Zarephath had one at the ready for Elijah's visits (1 Kg 17:9).

A couple in Shunem made one for Elisha whenever he came passing through (2 Kg 4:9-11).

And Martha offered hers to the traveling Jesus (Lk 10:38).

What is it? Room.

Earth had none for its Creator, however.

*And she gave birth to her firstborn son;
and she wrapped Him in cloths,
and laid Him in a manger,
because there was no room for them in the inn
(Lk 2:7 NASB).*

No room was prepared for His arrival.

But God prepared room.

He prepared room in Mary for the Messiah to be birthed into a lost and dying world. He had room prepared in a stable the eve of the Savior's birth. And a manger stood at the ready to receive the delivered Deliverer.

Jesus, born in a stable, laid in a manger—all the room there was to offer. But it was room prepared by the providence and provision of God. The providence of God, that went so far as to have a census decreed, also fulfilled the prophesy for the Bethlehem birthplace.

Would we even know what a manger is, if not for its mention in the familiar Story? I doubt this city girl would otherwise know. But that manger was room enough to cradle the Son of God.

That ordinary feeding trough was transformed by the arrival of Jesus. (Likely unaware that He was satisfying His divine mission even then.) **For He came to fill and transform every space He inhabits**—even as a newborn infant lying in a common feeding trough. That manger became a royal crib merely by the Father's provision and the Son's presence.

Mary swaddled that child, her precious son, and ever so gently laid Him in that rough-hewn crib. It was all she had—but she gave it all.

Mary welcomed earth's Visitor with hospitable love—preparing Him room, the Babe of God.

When Heaven Prepares a Song

Don't you love that this time of year is filled with music?!

Music has become a big part of our celebration. A joyous part! It is undeniably some of the most beautiful music ever composed.

But when heaven prepares a song, it is downright gladdening!

Luke recorded a trio of songs in his gospel:

Mary's psalm glorified the Lord (Lk 1:46-55);

Zechariah offered highest praise for the redemption at hand (Lk 1:68-79);

Simeon sang of the salvation God had prepared for all mankind (Lk 2:29-32).

From the depths of her soul, Mary recounted what God *has done*. What He *has done* still stands—and is worthy of song. For what He has done, He has done for all.

All can be called *blessed*.

All have cause for praise.

Is there a song you can prepare this Christmas?

Can you look back across the rugged landscape of this past year and see what God has done?

You don't have to be a composer. Or musically gifted, even. Just awed. Grateful.

What praise can you offer to *the Mighty One who has done great things for you* (Lk 1:49)?

Prepare in advance of Christmas with this pre-prayer:

Fill us, Lord, with *Your* song;

A song of eternal praise.

We can pre-prayer today, so our Christmas will be prepared with a song. A song from the heart. Or if the year has left you weary, empty, and at a loss for words, borrow a song prepared long ago. Recant the songs writ in the heavens, taught by the Spirit, and voiced by Mary, Zechariah, or Simeon.

Whether borrowed or new, let the heavens ring with song this Christmas! Don't let the pandemic rob your gift of praise.

Our King has come . . . and is coming again. Sing *Glory to the King of kings*.

The Babe Prepared and Born to Man

*You will conceive and give birth to a son,
and you are to call Him Jesus.
He will be great and will be called
the Son of the Most High
(Lk 1:31-32a).*

The life she felt forming inside her was Life itself.
What began as a flutter became the graceful movement of Hope;
A slow turning, then a kick—the confined dance of Love.

A Babe, conceived of the Spirit;
Promised and prepared of God;
Swelled to the fullness of Eternity's plan.

Impressions of the Child's limbs gradually appeared from within:
A head . . . a knee . . . an elbow;
God—in human flesh—soon to enter His Creation as Babe . . .
As Man.

God became flesh to be with His people;
All glory, wrapped in human tent;
Born into humanity's mess by grace.
His cry, a prayer, for His Father to comfort the world.

The Babe prepared was:
Born a King;
Born a Savior;
Born crucified.

To us a Child was born;
To us a Son was given;
Who longs to be born in you.

A Name that Saves

*She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus,
because He will save His people from their sins.*

*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:
'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call Him
Immanuel' (which means "God with us") (Mk 1:21-23).*

Before He was born His name was already prepared by God;
a name of honor and authority;
a name that saves.

The angel was God's messenger, passing the name given from heaven to earth—
from the throne room of God to Joseph's ear.

Yehoshuah—
Yahweh saves.

Immanuel—
God with us.

Not just one name . . . but two;
Because of all He came to do, not just one would do.

Selected by a Father who knew Him;
Befitting of both Who He is and what He would do.

It's a name that reveals identity;
For wrapped in His name is power . . . and grace.

A name, at its very mention
Brings peace, comfort . . . strength.

He is the God with us who saves;
His is the name above all names.

By what name do *you* know Him—
According to what He has done for *you*?

There are many fitting names to choose from;
I pray you know Him as *Friend*.

Heaven's Prepared Message

Over Bethlehem, the hushed skies rumbled above the veil—waiting in anticipation.

With the Babe's first wail, the veil split wide. And, in the profundity of that miraculous moment, curtained skies parted for all to see the hosts of heaven proclaim *Glory!*

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

*'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom
His favor rests' (Lk 2:8-14).*

The pronouncement of the hosts of heaven, first delivered to lowly shepherds tending their flocks nearby, was as a melodious garland across the vaulted heavens—ringing throughout all of nature.

They sang the most blessed of news.

It was the message God longed to deliver to His people. It was the message prepared to announce the long-awaited birth of His Beloved Son.

Those awe-struck shepherds may not have fully understood the whole of the message. But they could grasp that it was meant for them.

It was indeed a message meant for them . . . for others . . . *for all.*

The declaration, "A Savior has been born to you," was for them. But it is also a message for you. And a message for those around you—because Jesus was born to all mankind. Many are hungry to hear . . . left wanting and in great need. The weary, the worried, the despairing and hopeless—all need to know their salvation has come.

If you ever struggle for words, not knowing what to say to others about Jesus, you can share that same message. The message prepared by God and declared by His heavenly messengers.

Simply quote the angels.

It's a message already prepared. That's what those shepherds did. *They spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed* (Lk 2:17b-18a).

Gift those around you this Christmas with the prepared message of God. It's the good news needed to overcome all the bad news around us.

Carefully Prepared Gifts of Worship

*When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.
And going into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother,
and they fell down and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures,
they offered Him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh (Mt 2:10-11 ESV).*

Magi from the East searched the skies for the star that would herald the coming of a great king.

It was far greater than the Great Conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn we just witnessed—for it was a miraculous instrument of God.

It was the highly awaited sign that would signal the pilgrimage of these wise men.

At first glimpse of heaven's prepared light, these stargazers were *overjoyed beyond measure*.

With the arrival of God's greatest Gift, they loaded their cargo and journeyed westward, guided by the star—with a determination to honor the newborn King.

We don't know their number, but their gifts were three. They were gifts carefully prepared and rich with meaning. Their offerings were costly. Their gifts, extravagant. No stingy Scrooge could be counted among them.

They didn't give to get.

Nor should we.

Our interactions, however, really amount to more of an exchange than actual giving. Because often we give with an expectation for something of equal value in return.

But God, our Father, is generous. He gives good gifts.

And when the Gift of His Salvation was born, these men responded. They traveled far to give honor. To give worship. To give of the gifts they'd been given.

The extravagant gifts they offered were:

Gold, to crown Him King;

Frankincense, a worship offering;

And myrrh, symbolic of the sacrifice He would give.

If you were to prepare a gift, what would your treasure box hold?

No gold?

No myrrh?

No frankincense?

That's ok.

That is not what He requires.

Simply give Him your devotion.

Prepare a gift of worship.

Prepare it carefully.

Then, *with exceedingly great joy*, offer it to your King.

Simeon, the servant who saw what God prepared

Have you ever longed . . . and hoped . . . and waited to see something?

Do you also remember that sweet, sweeping sensation when you finally did?

I felt that way with the birth of both of my children. I longed to see them, those 40 long weeks of waiting. I had no idea what they would look like . . . or exactly what to expect.

That helps me relate, ever-so-slightly, with how dear old Simeon must have felt when, at long last, he set his eyes upon Israel's promised consolation.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him.

*When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for Him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took Him in his arms and praised God, saying:
'Sovereign Lord, as You have promised,
You may now dismiss Your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen Your salvation,
which You have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel' (Lk 2:25, 27b-32).*

I imagine Simeon's prayer echoed Psalm 69:13:

*But I pray to You, Lord,
in the time of Your favor;
in Your great love, O God,
answer me with your sure salvation.*

The words of Psalm 91:16 seem like a fitting reply to his faith-filled prayers:

*With long life I will satisfy him
and show him my salvation.*

Simeon had received a promise of God. And he watched and he waited his whole life for that which he hoped and believed would come.

God, ever true to His word, blessed his servant Simeon. He saw the Lord's Messiah and the coming of man's salvation—a salvation that revealed the Father to both Gentile and Jew.

Jesus was promised first to His own, then to the Gentiles. We see just that order of revelation occur at His birth. First the shepherds, His fellow-countrymen, were heralded by the heavenly hosts. Then, the magi, by starry hosts.

Salvation has been prepared by God and secured by Jesus for all. He has paid sins' debt with His blood. And we now can exclaim with the psalmists that *the Lord is my salvation*. We, too, can *depart in peace*, knowing our Peace with God has come.

Do you know the salvation of the Lord?

Are you longing to see Him come? Watching . . . waiting . . . hoping?

We may not see it, like Simeon. But faith is not always seeing. That was the case for many others who came before us. They lived faithfully, waiting to see the promises of God. But salvation, though not seen, will not to be denied.

On that you can rest assured.

Gaze Upon the Manger Scene (A Poem for Christmas Day)

Gaze upon the manger scene,
Take in its peace sent from above.

Gaze upon the manger scene,
It is the birthplace of God's Love.

Gaze upon the manger scene,
For there God laid the world's King.

Gaze upon the manger scene,
See the glory of which the angels sing.

Gaze upon the manger scene,
Rejoice in the best news ever heard.

Gaze upon the manger scene,
Emulate the worship of a lowly shepherd.

Gaze upon the manger scene,
Revealing God and His plan masterfully prepared.

Gaze upon the manger scene,
Noel's light and joy given for you to share.

The Prepared Way

He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it (Gn 28:12).

He lay for the night, in a certain place, spent and on the run. With a rock for his pillow, *at the gate of heaven*, he named the place Bethel, *the house of God*.

In a dream, he saw a way open up between heaven and earth.

The way could only be seen in a dream. He could only go so far as a closed gate. But God allowed Jacob to see, in a divinely given vision, that there was a way into the heavenly realm.

The Lord then restated His covenant previously made with Abraham and Isaac. He promised to be with Jacob *until all had come to pass* (Gn 28:13).

The With-Us-God blessed Jacob to see the way to God—a way that would not be realized for millennia to come.

But when Love came down—birthed in a Bethlehem stable—He brought our way to God.

The Way is not a place, but a Person. And the angels of God would ascend and descend upon Him, as foretold.

*Very truly I tell you,
you will see “heaven open, and the angels of God
ascending and descending on” the Son of Man (Jn 1:51).*

Upon meeting Nathanael, at the start of His ministry and the calling of the Twelve, Jesus referred to Jacob’s dream. He was connecting the dots. He was stating His purpose. And later declared, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6).

Jesus not only made a way for us . . . He is the Way.

It is a way He opened by His blood and obedience. A way planned and prepared in eternity, paved by His death, resurrection, and ascension.

He is The Way—by the grace of God, through faith, we come to the Father.

The Lord showed Jacob that ancient night that there was a way to the Father. Then provided that Way.

He has come, and He is with us, *until all shall come to pass*.

A Wardrobe, Ready-Made, for You

*I delight greatly in the Lord;
my soul rejoices in my God.
For He has clothed me with garments of salvation
and arrayed me in a robe of His righteousness,
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels (Is 61:10).*

Oh, the many wonderful and blessed things our Lord has prepared for us—including a wardrobe!

It's a wardrobe made of His righteousness, with costly garments spun of His salvation.

And it's a wardrobe that includes armor . . . *battle armor*.

God has fitted us with armor for this battle that wages against us. So we can stand victorious (Eph 6:13-17).

In His great love, the Lord has prepared other beautiful garments for you to wear. The garments of kindness and compassion. Choose to clothe yourself with them daily. When you do, others see His reflection in you. And, when the people of the Lord are clothed in His love, there is harmony among us (Col 3:14).

We can also adorn ourselves with garments of praise—for *the display of His splendor* (Is 61:3).

Wearing these royal garments crown us with the glory of the Bridegroom—and makes the world a more beautiful place.

Be Prepared with a Reply

*How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion,
'Your God reigns!' (Is 52:7)*

These are what I'm going to refer to as *mounting days*. Because *mounted* up on significant trials of life is a global pandemic.

People are suffering from stress mounted upon stress. Like the stress that comes from a serious diagnosis, being added to the stress of living in the face of a deadly virus. Or raging fires . . . hurricane-upon-hurricane . . . riots in the streets . . . fatal injustices. They do not cease, nor slow, when another calamity strikes.

Life's grievous struggles have not halted because a pandemic struck. They are piled onto it.

This fallen world is merciless. And precious souls are straining under mounting stress—stress-upon-stress, stress-upon-stress.

When someone you know receives one more bit of bad news, it helps to be prepared with an encouraging reply. Not something trite or rehearsed. Not cliché or unmerciful. But a comfort from the Lord. A reason for your hope. Truth they can hold on to.

Especially now—in these mounting days when people are gasping for courage.

In times of quiet before the Lord, He equips us with a reply. A word of our hope . . . our peace . . . our joy in the Lord. (Yes, even in mounting days.)

Ask Him to provide just such a ready reply.

The gospel is God's gift to the world, for our courage and peace in this world. It is that good news every heart needs—for wrapped in its gift is the real beauty of hope and perseverance in the midst of cruel suffering.

As God has blessed us with a comforting, strengthening word, we can bless others.

We have a gift to share with the world. We can bless them with news of hope and purest love.

Christmas contains the message of the miraculous grace of heaven that came to earth to free us from all that threatens our peace with God. It's a message that God has come to restore our dignity lost and offers us hope for our future. And strength for our hard days.

That Christ our Lord has come to save, He is with us as we walk through suffering, and helps us endure mounting stress; that He has made a way for us to have hope beyond today, is some really terrific news to soothe the stress within.

In the midst of harsh, empirical oppression, there was still a silent night—with angels proclaiming the good news of God. They shared it with those in need.

So can we.

Or maybe you *are* that one in need. I say to you: remember—and keep remembering. Remember, present grace has come. He came proclaiming peace, good tidings, and salvation. He reigns, sovereign. And He has promised to redeem all things. Your Savior—ever faithful, good, and true—can be trusted in every mounting day.

Another Place—Planned, Promised, and Prepared

*And if I go and prepare a place for you,
I will come back and take you to be with Me
that you also may be where I am (Jn 14:3).*

We have walked through the story of God together this season, recalling all the things God prepared for the coming of His Son. We began at Creation, where God prepared a place to dwell with His “firstborn” children in Eden’s garden.

We considered the instructions God gave His chosen people to prepare the tabernacle, in order to tabernacle with them, as they made their way to the land promised. A land, with the finest of fruits, prepared by His grace. A place where they could thrive and prosper and bring glory to His name.

There came a time in history when God allowed King Solomon to build a temple. A place where He would dwell among them and they could worship and serve as His holy people.

In the fullness of time, He came in the flesh. Jesus revealed the Father to His fellow Jews; sacrificed His life to provide redemption for mankind; and ascended to the Father to prepare yet another place for the family of God. All while preparing a place within, by His Holy Spirit, where He can tabernacle among us as we make our way to an eternal home promised.

That’s a lot of preparing.
And that’s a whole lot of trouble
for a rather rebellious lot.

But there is another dwelling yet to come.
And what a spectacular place it will be!
A place where we will, at last, enter into the Lord’s rest.

Ever creating,
expanding,
making things new—
the Master Carpenter is preparing another place.

It will be a no-other-place-like-it place,
a forever place . . .
with Him.

A place where bodies don’t wear out,
and lives aren’t broken.
Where light and love and goodness reigns—
because He reigns.

The waiting is hard—
waiting for His promised return,
for His kingdom come.

But we have hope for the wait.
We have the Church,
the place prepared for the here and now.

And we have much to do,
filling all the grand rooms
He is preparing.

We can be like Him,
here in this place,
as we long for another.

Fix your heart homeward,
upon the King of glory,
and His eternal place prepared.

When the Groom Prepares His Bride

*I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem,
coming down out of heaven from God,
prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband
(Rev 21:2).*

A wedding calls for a great deal of preparation.

There is much to consider: venues, caterers, flowers, photographers, invitations, music, cakes, decorations, garments, rings . . .

But, for the bride, it all starts with the groom.

There is a Groom who readies His bride with utmost thought and care. (Because there is no such thing as a “ready-made” bride. No! She must be prepared). And there is a Father of the Groom preparing a celebratory wedding feast.

Said Groom is Jesus. And the Bride I’m referring to is His Church.

The Church belongs to Christ, its Bridegroom. And the wedding imagery used in the New Testament portrays Jesus’ perfect love for those He came to save.

You are a vital member of that Church, invited to the wedding of God’s Son. But you must be willing to be prepared. *You must show up ready.*

*Let us rejoice and be glad
and give Him glory!
For the wedding of the Lamb has come,
and His bride has made herself ready.
Fine linen, bright and clean,
was given her to wear.
(Fine linen stands for the
righteous acts of God’s holy people.)
(Rev 19:7-8)*

The righteous deeds performed by the bride prepare her for the Bridegroom. What are they? That, my dear one, I will allow you the honor of discovering for yourself (as part of that personal preparation).

I encourage you to dive into what the New Testament has to say about weddings and brides. You might start with one of the following parables.

- Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids - Matthew 25:1-13

There, you’ll read of five wise and ready and five foolish and unready bridesmaids. Those ready were watching for their returning Groom.

- Parable of the Wedding Feast - Matthew 22:1-14

In this parable, you'll read of a King who prepared a banquet for His Son. The invitation extended is not one to be ignored! Nor are the King's garments offered to wear.

Many weddings were planned and prepared this year—the year of the pandemic. And many were cancelled. Or significantly altered. But the wedding feast God has prepared for our Groom will continue as planned.

And the Bride must be ready.

Let's pray His Church is fit for His arrival—so the Groom will be pleased with her readiness—when He comes.

Prepared for all this broken world throws at us

*I have told you these things,
so that in Me you may have peace.
In this world you will have trouble.
But take heart!
I have overcome the world
(Jn 16:33).*

I don't ever remember a more difficult year. *You?*

It's been a real nail-biter.

It's probably going to be a cliff-hanger, too—because I doubt all this mess will be cleaned up by day's end. Questions and anxiety will likely linger long after midnight.

How did you fare this year, friend?

Did you feel prepared for any of it? Prepared to navigate what the world threw at you?

I don't believe I could have been prepared to endure **any** of it without faith in the sovereign Lord. Even then, my heart went reeling and racing every now and then.

But Jesus tells us to *take heart*—that we can have peace in Him.

Bring it **all** to him, friend.

We can lament the brokenness of this world. The psalmists did. And quite remarkably, I might add. And we can grieve at the amount of real suffering found around every bend. We can add petitions for mercy and healing. For peace and strength. And we can hold onto hope and trust in God.

We could be bitter. But it would be far better if we were prepared. **Prepared for the world—in order to win the world.**

We don't have to love this world. Attain it, aggrandize it, or idolize it. But we do have to love those in it.

Equal to the brokenness of the world are the people living in it. And much of what the world throws at you comes from others. Which requires the mind of Christ. His virtues that help us endure much of what gets thrown our way are those of patience, forgiveness, and grace.

Jesus, enduring even greater trials, overcame this troublesome world. And He has done much to provide for our overcoming, as well.

Having His perspective also helps. Jesus knew where He came from. He knew to whom He belonged. And where He was going. He also knows what's in the heart of humans. But He remained focused on the Father . . . and loved folks all along the arduous way.

To live in this world, and to overcome this world, we must be prepared by the Word, the Spirit, and prayer.

We are prepared when we have the attitude of Christ. Then mirror His heart (rather than mirror the world). For it is His love that will make all the difference in this world.

That is the good that can come out of this hard year—and affect all the days that follow.

Watching is to be Prepared

What a season of reflection it has been! Thank you for joining me.

It's been a season infused with the Word—made richer for looking back upon the miraculous workings of God.

Filled with the story of the coming of His Christ, we are indeed left astonished anew.

And now the season has come to pass, as has the year that housed it. And we begin again. A new year, fresh with perspective. (Hopefully, His perspective.)

Now that we've looked to the past, let's look forward—by looking forward to His 2nd Coming.

As time moves us along, let's go clinging to a critical teaching of Jesus and carry it forward.

But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!' (Mk 13:32-37)

What Jesus said to them, He says to all: **Watch!**

Watch is the word of advent. It is how we can ready for His arrival.

Make all of life an advent, a waiting for our Lord's coming.

Jesus mentioned the four Roman watches of the night in this parable. While we don't know where we are in those watches of the night in history's timeline, we can know that we are most certainly further along than we once were.

We can live the life of the prepared by keeping watch. That doesn't mean drop everything and wait, looking intently to the skies. Rather, it means we readily live with a vibrant hope . . . an active faith . . . an urgency to do His will.

My prayer for us for 2021? To live the year as His prepared—ready, watching, and ever-hopeful.

Trust God's daily grace is sufficient, dear one, by believing all He has already prepared.

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