

Stars of Christmas

Part Four

December 20-25

This week, our meditations shift from prophecies about Messiah's birth to six that are fulfilled during his ministry years. Consider again, the culture and status of Israel during Jesus' earthly years. God chose the Hebrews, out of all other peoples, to be special, to be a dominant force of goodness in the world. Their kingdom should have continued as it was in the glory days of kings David and Solomon.

In those days, Israel's enemies feared and respected them. The nation overall, experienced wealth and peace. Most of you are familiar with what happens next, disobedience, turning to false gods and treating God lightly, not with reverential awe. The result was conquest and captivity for Israel. To this day, they have not returned to their position of influence, wealth, and power as in David and Solomon's day.

During Jesus' lifetime, Israel languished inside the Roman empire. The brutality of the ancient Romans is legendary in world history. Jewish kings and religious leaders were given just enough authority to keep the Israelites under control and subservient to the empire. They functioned as figureheads, puppets.

Israel waited for their Messiah to come and restore them to their former glory, breaking the yoke of their latest conqueror. Rome taxed the Jews heavily and ruled them according to Roman law with

harsh consequences like floggings, crucifixions, and such for those deemed as lawbreakers. After so many centuries with no Messiah appearing, I believe a national weariness settled on God's chosen nation.

For those who recognized and believed in Messiah, his ministry years were filled with wonder and joy. He did not deliver his followers from an oppressive government, but he taught them how to live with power and joy within it. Those who rejected him missed it all. Their Deliverer offered them something better than an earthly kingdom, but they chose unbelief instead and false religion instead.

God still lives among his people, in the form of Holy Spirit. He is always at work in our lives on behalf of the Father. Like the Israelites, God does not deliver us from every trial but gives us tools and weapons to live victorious and joy-filled in our fallen world.

This week's prophecies will encourage you to consider some of the key features of Christ's ministry that made him so unique from all the other Jewish religious leaders and caused so many to choose to follow him.

This last week before Christmas can be filled with wonder and joy for you too, or you can choose cynicism and sadness, generated from your difficult circumstances. You might be facing some truly awful challenges right now, and I don't minimize that. Neither does Jesus. He sees and he cares. His heart is filled with compassion for you just as it was for his people as he looked out over Jerusalem and considered their plight.

Messiah is with you in your circumstances, whatever they may be. He comes with life, light, hope and healing. Don't miss what he might be trying to do in your life this season because it isn't what you imagined. He wants to do *beyond* what you can imagine.

December 20

“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows^d and acquainted with grief and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not,” Isaiah 53:3.

Prophecy: Messiah would be rejected by his own people

Fulfillment: John 1:11, John 7:5

There are few people who know us better than the people we grew up around, usually family. My brothers could give you the dish about me, but they won't. They are men of honor. If not, they'd tell you that in Junior High, I rolled my skirts up on the school bus every day, as soon as I was out of my parents view or that I turned my hair orange using bleach, not a new shampoo like the story I told mom.

They might share their memories of family meals I ruined, arguing with my parents about curfews and pierced ears or when I pretended to take notes in church but instead, swapped news with friends. They could tell you this and much worse, like the times my youngest brother locked himself in the bathroom because he feared my temper. They won't because they are men of honor.

Jesus was a perfect older brother leading a sinless life from beginning to end. That means he didn't lie to or argue with his parents. He never punched his siblings out of rage, nor did he fob his household chores onto them. Scripture tells us he was tempted in all things, but he never fell into sin. So, what was it like for his brothers and sisters to grow up with a flawless older brother?

We can only imagine life in the Joseph household during the early years. What we do know, is that when Jesus began his ministry, he faced tremendous rejection from his own people, the Jews. Worse yet, his own siblings turned on him and said he was crazy. (Mark

3:21) The irony is that his family didn't even have any juicy gossip about Jesus' childhood and teen years to dish out. They simply refused to accept his identity. They dishonored their own brother, but worse than that, they dishonored their Messiah.

Do you think your Messiah understands rejection you endure in this life? I think so. Some of you know the pain of being rebuffed by family members. Sometimes unsaved or backslidden relatives can create friction during Christmas get togethers and events. Their mocking attitudes and dysfunctional lifestyles can be hard to bear.

Perhaps you are the only Christian in your workplace and the environment is rife with foul language and crude jokes, deliberately aimed at you. Is it your neighbors who think you're weird because you won't gossip or drink with them? Wherever you've faced rejection, particularly because of your faith, this melancholy star reminds us that Jesus understands intimately. His sorrows cut him deeply, and his grief load would crush any normal human.

Our Messiah was despised. Despised. A strong word that means “to feel contempt or deep repugnance.” Instead of supporting him and shielding him from the death threats of the Pharisees, the Jews offered Jesus up to Pilate for crucifixion. There is no rejection that can ever happen in your life that our Jesus does not understand.

Messiah came knowing he would face hatred and rejection so fierce, it placed him on a cross. Just as God used the cross as a transformational tool in human history, so too he can use your moments of rejection and defeat to start something entirely new, in your family, your workplace or your neighborhood. He is acquainted with *your* sorrows and grief. He can change ashes into beauty.

Prayer: Thank you Lord for taking on all the rejection of this life, for my sake. Thank you for drawing near when others turn away.

December 21

"...but there will be a time in the future when Galilee of the Gentiles, which lies along the road that runs between the Jordan and the sea, will be filled with glory. The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine," Isaiah 9:1-2.

Prophecy: Messiah will bring light to Galilee

Fulfillment: Matthew 4:13-16

When the Assyrians invaded Israel, the Northern tribes, Naphtali, and Zebulun who lived around the Galilean Sea, experienced the highest level of conquest and captivity. Darkness and despair came over this portion of the promised land. Their people and wealth disappeared into the Assyrian culture. God's promise that Israel would be a mighty nation, faded in many minds.

That's why it's interesting that God chose this area to be Jesus' home base. He selected the darkest place in all the promised land. In mercy, he blessed the area that suffered great losses with the greater glory, the Word made flesh and living among them.

Galilee was barely recognized as part of Israel during Jesus' life. Known as "Galilee of the Gentiles, it was part of the Roman empire, deserted for half a millennium, after the Assyrian invasion. Theologian Frederick Bruner says, "A century before Jesus, the area was re-populated by Judean immigrants, but Galilee was the most pagan of the Jewish provinces,"

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia adds, "Their mixed origin explains the differences in speech which distinguished them from their Jewish brethren in the South, who regarded Galilee and the Galileans with a certain proud contempt."

Yet, this is where most of Jesus' ministry occurred. His first miracle, turning water to wine, happened in Cana of Galilee. On Galilee's hillsides is where thousands gathered to hear him teach and were fed spiritually and physically.

Once again, God gives preference to a place humans disregarded to do a great work. Messiah grew up in the worst part of Israel with the roughest, most backslidden Jews. Into that shadowed region, filled with its tragic history, he brought light.

This prophecy is our reminder that the presence of Jesus brings light wherever he goes. Secondly his followers, filled with his Holy Spirit, are bearers of his light wherever we go. Our homes are brighter because we reside in them. Workplaces become more light-filled when Christians are employed. The darkness of our cities, towns and neighborhoods is forced to retreat when we stake them out with prayer and our presence and claim the souls within them for God.

Darkness is the very reason Jesus came to earth in human form. How sad when his followers avoid or ignore darkness near them and cluster continuously with other believers. Praise God, our Messiah chose to leave perfected light and beauty to enter earth's atmosphere and engage with the dark evil that held humans in chains. Should his followers do any less?

Prayer: Thank you Jesus for the bringing the light of heaven down to us and becoming the Light of the World. Show me where I can bring your light to places and people in desperate need of it. I trust you to teach me and resource me to engage with specific locations and individuals in authentic, grace-filled encounters.

December 22

"I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark (difficult) sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known," Psalm 78:2-3.

Prophecy: Messiah would speak in parables

Fulfillment: Matthew 13:10-15, 34-35

Why did Jesus use parables so much in his teaching? The sermon on the mount was clearly stated principles for living, easy to understand. When he suddenly switched to parables, his disciples noticed immediately and questioned him. (Matthew 13) Jesus explained that, going forward, only those who believed in Christ and followed him at the heart level would be able to understand the mysteries of the parables.

Jesus didn't choose this teaching style to exclude people but to allow people to divide themselves based on their inner choices. Many people started out following Jesus because of the excitement of the miracles and the power of his first teachings. The parables forced people to make an internal choice to either go deeper and discover their meaning or to stay in a surface relationship with him. The people in the latter group, like the Pharisees, began to dismiss Jesus' stories as gibberish. They eventually became the crowd that screamed for his crucifixion.

I once brought a new converted friend to a worship service at my church. He loved the worship but complained about the sermon. "I couldn't understand a lot of what your pastor talked about," he said. I kindly explained to him that since he'd only been a Christ-follower for about a minute, I would be surprised if he understood very much of the sermon. He possessed no Biblical knowledge and had never been in a gospel-preaching church before.

My friend needed to make the same choice as the people of Jesus' day did. Do I want to stay and learn to unravel the mysteries of this invisible God and his kingdom, or do I continue with my current status quo? Praise God, my friend stayed and is an elder in our congregation now.

This star points us to the truth that we are only responsible for exposing people in darkness to the light of Jesus. We do this in several ways. First, the way we think, speak, and behave should be a gospel story. Our choices should confound lost people and raise questions in their mind because our values are not the same as the world's.

Second, we take opportunities God grants to make a direct gospel presentation either through our own testimony or inviting them to a special event, small group, or worship service. Finally, we use whatever talents and abilities God has given us to share the gospel. Singers sing, writers write, teachers teach, etc. all from a kingdom perspective. Jesus used storytelling.

This Christmas season don't be disheartened when your lost family, friends, co-workers, or neighbors don't understand or approve of the way you celebrate Christmas and walk out your daily life. This is a sign that God is speaking kingdom mysteries to them through you and your choices. Your life is the parable. They must decide whether to understand it or dismiss it. The best things you can do are to continue to shine your light boldly, be available and kind to answer questions (without being defensive) and pray that they would not walk away but choose to seek and know the Messiah.

Prayer: Lord, help me to be a story of your light, grace, and truth to everyone I meet today.

December 23

"The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound..." Isaiah 61:1.

Prophecy: Messiah would be sent to heal the brokenhearted

Fulfillment: Luke 4:18-19

In my lifetime, I do not recall a time before now where the number of broken hearts and broken lives reached the level we are currently experiencing. The piles of losses grow higher and higher, reminiscent of America's great depression during the 1930's. Every number reflecting loss continues to climb including divorce, suicide, job loss, business failures, bankruptcies, stock market declines, mass shootings, incidence of life-threatening illness and death.

This pattern of loss is an ancient one for humanity. History roils like a churning wave of empires rising and falling and wars waging, all leaving behind expansive wakes of broken lives and hearts. From heaven's perspective, it seemed clear that earth needed a healer. Jesus said, "I'll go."

By human reasoning, Messiah came to earth at a lousy time for Israel. So many Jews expected him to come dramatically, noticeably. He didn't do that. After such a disappointing entrance, I believe many of them had their hopes pinned on him flexing his heavenly authority against Rome once he reached adulthood. He didn't do that. His first miracle, turning water to wine only affected the reputation of one of his neighbors. Not exactly a strike for justice against Rome.

Eventually, when people started to realize he could heal the sick, cast out demons and raise the dead, I think they assumed these acts were all warm-ups to the big show when he'd go head-to-head with Caesar. So many Jews missed the impact of the life-changing miracles, signs, and wonders that he chose to engage in based on his father's instructions.

Everywhere he went, Jesus healed broken hearts and lives, and set people free. When people become healed, whole, and free, they change the culture around them. Free, healthy believers can put their resources, their time and energy, into spreading the gospel. They aren't consumed with trying to solve their own problems and issues.

This star reminds us that Messiah came to earth precisely for the broken and bound places of your life. Where are you hurting today? Sick or diseased body? Broken family? Troubled mind? Bleak finances? Messiah has come. Sit quietly before him now.

You've probably already cried out to him repeatedly for the challenges confronting you. Right now, just sit quietly. Read Luke 4:18-19 as if Jesus is speaking it to you directly, because he is. What part of Jesus' declaration of what he wants to do for all humans do you personally need the most today? Let that piece of it wash over your soul. God anointed Jesus to address your needs here, now, today. Lean into to that, receive it and put your hopes in him.

Prayer: Lord, I thank you that there is no need so great, no sickness so horrible, no situation so dire that you cannot move with power in my circumstances. Lord, I believe, help my unbelief. Strengthen my faith to believe that you are at work to heal me, deliver me and provide for me.

December 24

“You have taught children and infants to tell of your strength, silencing your enemies and all who oppose you,” Psalm 8:2. NLT

Prophecy: Messiah will be praised by little children

Fulfillment: Matthew 21:16

Jesus often created a ruckus around religious leaders, flying in the face of all their extra Pharisaical laws and nonsense. He healed the wrong people on the wrong days. He socialized with wrong people in wrong places. He preached wrong stuff in the wrong synagogues.

On one such occasion, recorded in Matthew 21, he preached an illustrated sermon, of sorts, concerning God’s design for worship and his temple. Infuriated that God’s house of prayer had become a ruthless marketplace where the poor were fleeced, Jesus did some serious rearranging of merchant’s booths, tables, and goods while he tried to help people understand the true purpose of the temple.

After Jesus tossed the merchant area, he began healing the blind and lame, Matthew tells us. Angry, Jewish religious leaders showed up just in time to hear children in the temple spontaneously begin to worship Jesus singing and shouting, “Praise God, for the Son of David.” For some reason, that did not bless their hard hearts.

Instead, they yelled at Jesus, saying, “Do you hear what these children are saying about you?” The Pharisees knew what the children referred to. “Son of David,” was a phrase reserved for the coming Messiah, of the line of king David. How dare this Nazareth upstart allow the children to worship him as if he were the Messiah.

See, the children got it, but the adults, bound by their own man-made form of religion, missed it all.

Children often see the truth about life and God better than adults. They are naturally drawn to baby Jesus in a manger. Give a toddler an age-appropriate manger scene to play with and watch. When my daughter pulled out their Little Tikes manger set this year, my four-year-old grandson played with it quietly for about half an hour, out of her sightline. When she returned to check on him, she saw he had done a remarkable thing.

Our sweet boy tucked baby Jesus and his manger deeply inside the Creche. Then he arranged all the animals and people, so they crowded together, shoulder to paw, facing the same direction, towards the baby. It didn’t resemble at all the artful arrangements we adults make with our manger scenes. It was a manger mash up that was truthful and beautiful.

Jesus told his followers that they needed to become like children to understand God’s kingdom and purposes. (Matthew 18:3) Children bring so much joy to the Christmas season and I believe a childlike heart in us can do the same. If we will step back and ask God to show us where we’ve slipped into religion instead of relationship, I think we will start to see things he’s been doing all around us that we were missing.

The children in the temple understood who he was and what he was up to. The more we return to that type of childlike faith, the more peaceful and grace-filled we will be about whatever is waiting for us in the new year. Let’s not be outdone by children in our praise and understanding this Christmas and in the New Year.

Prayer: God, restore me to a place of simple, childlike faith today, especially for the hard things in my life. Show me where I’ve slid into religious practices instead of intimacy with you.

December 25

“Rejoice, O people of Zion! Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey—riding on a donkey’s colt,”
Zechariah 9:9 NLT.

Prophecy: Messiah would be called King

Fulfillment: Matthew 27:37, Mark 11:7-11

Yesterday, I experienced an unexpectedly powerful worship time in my Tahoe on the way to church. Since my drive is a half hour, I usually listen to podcasts, videos, or music that I’ve queued up before I get in the car. I felt impressed to listen to the Christmas portion of Handel’s “Messiah,” and worship along with it. I’ve done this before and I’ve also sung these pieces several times with various choirs over the years.

Each time I engage with this music I am always moved by the prophetic, messianic scriptures put to majestic song but yesterday was unique. Before the music started, I heard God say, “Pay close attention to all the words and what they mean this time.”

Immediately with the first song, “Comfort Ye My People- Every Valley,” God began to move in my heart and mind in fresh ways. He showed me new insights as to who he is, and who Jesus is and what he came to do for humanity. By the time I reached “The Hallelujah Chorus,” my eye makeup sustained some damage. I finished the chorus as I pulled into the church parking lot.

Gasping and breathless, (that song is crazy high and demanding for we sopranos), I used what I had left when the song finished, to shout to the King of King and Lord of Lords. I kept worshipping him for his beauty, splendor, and authority. All by myself in the Tahoe.

In the parking lot. With folks pulling in around me. Some lavish praise for wonderful Jesus.

If you never take the time to praise God with everything you’ve got in you, as loud as you can, I encourage you to reread some Psalms like 98 and 100. “Shout” is not a metaphor or a suggestion, it’s a command. As my pastor says frequently, “If you can scream your lungs out for some sports event, isn’t God worthy of your best praise?”

Today we celebrate Jesus’ birthday. The best birthday song you can sing to him is one that worships who he is in grand fashion. After all he has done for us, can we not leave behind self-consciousness and our preferred methods of worship for some loud, lavish praise today? I like the Hallelujah chorus and great Christmas songs like “Joy to the World,” and “O Come All Ye Faithful,” Just pick something that authentically stirs your soul. Here’s a link to a very cool version of the [Hallelujah Chorus](#), if you connect with that as I do.

This star is to remind us of the truth that the King of Kings came to earth as a helpless infant, all for love. He endured and embraced thirty-three years of life, fully engaged with people, on a dark fallen planet, all for love. On the cross, he proved the length, depth, and breadth of his love for us, this King of Kings. No ruler has ever existed like him nor ever shall. He is worthy today of your best and highest praise.

Prayer: King of Kings and Lord of Lords, I bring you all my love and devotion today, in gratitude for who you are and all you’ve done. Let my life be a gift back to you, Lord.

