

Stars of Christmas Part Three

December 14-19

by Sharon Stults

How are you doing with all your Christmas preparations? Are you feeling overwhelmed, uncertain how you'll finish everything? That's a common sensation that many feel at this time of year.

Some of you are ahead of the game with presents all wrapped and under the tree, menus planned, and time left over to watch a Christmas movie. God might be asking you to reach out and help a young mother or a single parent or someone else around you, who could use another set of hands.

Maybe you are alone for the first time this season, and your feelings of grief and loss drain your motivation to even put up a tree. Did you lose your job or your business this year and money is so scarce you don't know how to do Christmas presents? Some of you might be reading this from a hospital bed or your couch at home, too sick and too tired to do your normal December routines.

This set of stars starts with two prophecies which warn Israel that Jesus and his family will need to flee Bethlehem to escape a murderous king who will slaughter thousands of innocents to protect his throne and legacy. The series then shifts to the

prophecies concerning the shepherds and wisemen and ends with two triumphant declarations about the authority and power of Christ's coming kingdom and blessings for the nation.

Life is often like this set of stars; we can shift between darkness and peril and light and joy all within the hours of one day. This earthly journey is unpredictable and only God knows what lies around the next corner for any of us.

This is why I believe, in part, God gives us the gifts of prophecies. He shows us glimpses of what is yet to be in his kingdom plan so that we may be encouraged that what we see around us right now is not the end of our story. Israel needed to know that each dark season of their history was not their last chapter.

If you are currently in a season of peace and light, be sensitive to those who are not. If you are facing difficulties and challenges right now, know that God is still speaking blessing and goodness over your life.

As his child, remember we find comfort in the knowledge that the shadows of this earth will give way to the light of our forever lives with him for all eternity. Meanwhile, in the valley of our shadows, we are never alone. Messiah has come and he is with us! Let heaven and earth sing even if it's through fever-cracked lips or from a broken heart. May you sense his power and peace with you today.

December 14

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son," Isaiah 11:1

Prophecy: Messiah would spend a season in Egypt

Fulfillment: Matthew 2:14-15

Have you ever met someone whose ego uses up all the air around them? King Herod, the ruler of Galilee at the time of Jesus' birth, was such a person. This madman who murdered his own family members sat on a throne of terror until Jesus was four years old. There's a fascinating article entitled, "[Who Was Herod](#)," by Jayson Bradley, about Herod's life and rule, that will help you understand why Joseph and Mary needed to flee all the way to Egypt to escape his death threats.

For our purposes, let's simply agree that Herod wasn't going to allow anyone perceived as a threat to his throne, to remain alive. God knew this and sent an angel to Joseph and Mary to insist that they leave Bethlehem and stay in Egypt for a time.

Hosea predicts the conclusion of the holy family's time in Egypt. God informs Joseph and Mary that King Herod is dead. He calls Jesus out of Egypt because that isn't where God planned for him to grow up. Jesus would come to manhood within the community Israel. Egypt was Jesus' temporary place of deliverance, but Nazareth would be his home.

God carefully moved Jesus and his family away from Herod's assassination attempts. Jesus would not die in infancy. He would be hidden and protected.

Later in Jesus' life, God did not move him out of Pilate's line of fire. Instead, God gave his son up to be a sacrifice for us all. Did Mary wonder why God saved her son once but not a second time? Did she understand the prophecies about him?

Did his close friends understand why God didn't send angels to rescue Jesus from his murderers? I don't think they did based on their initial reactions to his death. Surely, they heard the story of the flight to Egypt from his mother or siblings.

Some of our most painful times happen when we are waiting on God for a rescue, but he says, "No, that's not my plan for this situation." When God doesn't heal, deliver, or provide in the way you want him to, remember this small prophecy. What God did for us in one situation, he may do again in another, (remember Jesus escaped murderous crowds several times before his arrest and death) but that doesn't mean that we now have a magic formula for the next hard circumstance.

God's plan for the world is so complex we cannot possibly understand how a wrong movement in our life may put other things in peril. We must simply trust and obey him, as Joseph, Mary and Jesus did, with faith that God's ways may be mysterious, but they are always good.

Prayer: Lord, grant me peaceful confidence in your great love for me and your plan for my life.

December 15

“A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more,” Jeremiah 31:15.

Prophecy: A massacre of children would occur at Messiah’s birthplace

Fulfillment: Matthew 2:16-18

Most Bible scholars do not define this verse as a messianic prophecy, like the others on which we’ve been reflecting. Some scholars define it as a demonstration of repeating patterns in the nation of Israel, played out in Jesus’ life and that’s why I chose to include it. A staff writer on the website, “Jews for Jesus,” explains it like this:

What Matthew is doing in his first few chapters is this: he is not saying that the Old Testament passages he cites are direct predictions of Jesus’ life – though they certainly were in other cases. What he is doing is showing that key points about the life of Israel are being repeated in Jesus’ life. In this way, Jesus fulfills Scripture because as the greatest Israelite of all, his life follows the contours of the nation’s history. It is as if Matthew is saying, “Jesus is with you, Israel – what you went through, he went through.”

The beauty of this idea struck me so profoundly. God wove details into the tapestry of Jesus’ life to include event patterns that the Jews would recognize. He suffered and they suffered, a Messiah who understood their unique national identity of persecution.

Herod’s ruthless slaughter of all male infants in Bethlehem is the same demonic spirit that murdered the Israelite’s male infants during their slave days in Egypt. Most likely, hundreds of babies

were put to death in Egypt. Scholars estimate that since the population of Bethlehem numbered about a thousand people during Jesus’ time, that the number of babies murdered didn’t exceed twenty. Regardless, though it may not have been the mass genocide of Egypt, twenty families suffered horrible loss.

Satan’s routine remains the same. Just as he squirreled up the Garden of Eden, he wanted Bethlehem to become nothing but a tragic memory for Israel, eclipsing the birth of Messiah.

At Christmas, we love to focus on the beauty and majesty of Messiah’s birth, as it should be. Let’s also remember though, that his birth triggered Herod’s demonized mind to order the slaughter of infants. There will always be bitter mixed with the sweet in this life just as the shadow of the cross lurked behind the manger.

The message that God sent to Israel with this star is the same to us. Jesus is with you, dear one. What you are struggling with right now, he experienced in some form during his life. He connects deeply to our sufferings and disappointments, because of his own. Messiah came to solve the problem of sin and pain definitively. He is our hope of our life to come where there will be neither.

Prayer: Thank you God, that Jesus understands our sorrows like no one else. Grant me fresh hope that the suffering I’m experiencing today will pass and will also accomplish good things in my life and for your kingdom.

December 16

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,” Isaiah 9:6.

Prophecy: Messiah will be filled with power, peace, and the Spirit from birth

Fulfillment: Luke 4:18- spoken by Jesus himself

My brother is currently finishing a degree that will enable him to be a professional counselor, a new career after years of teaching high school successfully. We live far apart from one another, but he calls me with updates about his studies, internship, and new counseling position. My mind is bogged by how much work is required of him to do this.

Left up to me, he'd be certified already. School teachers with years notched on their belts, like my brother, are already professional counselors in my opinion. His wealth of knowledge, experience, wisdom, and insight was impressive before his most recent schooling. I think his brain must resemble Oz's scarecrow.

I'm now trying to imagine my brother possessing at birth, all the wisdom and understanding it's taken him sixty some years to accumulate. Would I have recognized the anointing on him and the brimming knowledge within during childhood or would I have mocked and dismissed him as Jesus' family did? I suspect the latter of myself.

Our Messiah came fully loaded for bear. He arrived with all the internal knowledge needed to rule our world and galaxies beyond. No classes in human psychology and development needed for our

Messiah. His authority and equality with God the Father became established in the womb. The ability to create a pathway for peace between God and humans, is second nature for Jesus.

The shepherds experienced all this on the night of his birth. We don't know precisely what they saw and heard besides a newborn in a feeding trough. They sensed and experienced something unique in that manger which caused them to realize the angels told them the truth about this Bethlehem child.

The wisemen, learned scholars, respected, and highly valued in their time, recognized the "It factor," in Jesus when they visited him. During his ministry, the gospel writers tell us stories about people who weren't completely sure about Jesus and yet recognized his power, authority, and ability to heal.

This star reminds us of one of the mysteries of the Messiah. Although he came as a fragile baby and died in complete vulnerability, everything of God existed always in him. What application is there for us? It means that every experience, good or sorrowful, that Jesus acquired from birth to death passed through the filter of his perfect authority and wisdom. Where you and I struggle to constantly figure out Christ-like responses and stances to everything life throws at us, he never did. He already knew.

Can you understand the incredible resources available to us in our Messiah? Every experience of humans shaped perfectly by all the character, power, and authority of God. Messiah contains everything we need to know, the wisdom on how to put that knowledge to use, and the anointing to do it with grace.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I thank you that no problem is too complex and no challenge too large for you. You are the answer to all my questions and the solution for all my concerns.

December 17

“May desert tribes bow down before him, and his enemies lick the dust!” Psalm 72:9.

Prophecy: Shepherds, (men of nomadic tribes), will humble themselves and bow down before the Messiah

Fulfillment: Luke 2:12

In Psalm 72, the writer points to Solomon’s reign but shifts, inverse 8, to writing about a greater king to come. The splendor of Solomon’s court and the respect world leaders showed him, would be eclipsed by Messiah. Even independent, fierce nomads would kneel before him, which they most likely did not do for Solomon.

As I thought about these Bethlehem shepherds, I realized that nativity scenes and Christmas pageants unintentionally sanitize them. I’ve perceived them to be gentle guys, quietly minding sheep, intimidated by the hustle and bustle of cities and their people. That is not an accurate description of a good shepherd.

Let’s go back to the Old Testament and remember what we know about the life of a shepherd through King David’s biography. Who lived in the wilds on his own from a young age? David the shepherd boy. Who regularly put his life at risk and killed lions and bears with his own hands? David. Who traveled rugged terrain with herds of sheep, keeping himself and the flock watered, fed and safe? David.

I don’t think shepherding is for weaklings or cowards. These Bethlehem shepherd, like most nomadic peoples, would be rugged, strong, and fearless. They had to be to be able to keep flocks of sheep alive. They would be like today’s “Survivor,” winners.

Not only did shepherds need to contend with natural predators, severe weather conditions and the unpredictability of animal husbandry, they also had to guard against robbers and thieves.

Now that we’ve formed a better mental picture of shepherds, imagine how men like that might respond to the first enormous angel that appeared in the night sky? Did they grab their weapons only to drop them in terror? Luke tells us they were overcome with fear. Did they rush to gather their sheep more closely to protect them from this new predator?

What happened when the heavenly host joined the first angel? Now, that would be the award-winning video to see these mighty men of the wilderness, dumbstruck and motionless before the heavenly messengers. Despite their fear, the shepherds believed what the angels said, and this one decision, changed their lives.

If we made our nativity sets more realistic, the shepherds might resemble WWF wrestlers rather than the delicately designed men so often featured. Imagine guys the size of Dwayne Johnson, “The Rock,” crowding into the manger and kneeling in worship. What a sight! How heaven rejoiced to see it.

This star is a warning and an encouragement to all humans. No matter how large your life might be, how big your platform, how great your power, influence, and wealth, at some point, everyone must bow their knee before Christ. We can humble ourselves now and live with him for eternity or we can wait until the end of days, when it’s too late. But make not mistake; every knee will bow.

Prayer: God, I bring before you those I care about who have not yet bowed before Messiah. Open their hearts to the Christ child today.

December 18

"...a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;" Numbers 24:17.

Prophecy: A star will point the way to the infant Messiah

Fulfillment: Matthew 2:1-2

Can we consider again that God selects the most unlikely folk to accomplish his purposes? This poetic prophecy inspired the likes of Mozart and Mendelssohn, and other composers through the centuries, to compose stunning pieces of music. The irony is that the original messenger, Balaam, was a prophetic goofball, at the center of one of the funniest stories in scripture.

Balaam, a soothsayer, received an urgent summons from King Baalak of Moab. The Israelites marched towards his nation, and he knew the stories of their conquests. Terrified, he commanded Balaam to curse the Israelites to stop them. I encourage you to read the full story in Numbers 22-24 as there are so many powerful lessons there but let's summarize. The bottom line is, Balaam tried repeatedly to curse Israel, but God intervened each time and forced him to bless them instead.

Finally, God allows Balaam to saddle up his donkey and ride with the princes of Moab, on the condition that Balaam will only speak what God puts in his mouth. On the way, an angel of the Lord stops Balaam's donkey on the road, refusing to let her pass. The angry prophet beats her until God allows the

donkey to speak and put Balaam in his place. The great prophet is rebuked by a humble donkey who is better able to see what God is up to and articulate it, then Balaam could.

This star is a statement about a literal star that will announce the King who comes from Jacob's line and will rule Israel. Those facts are significant and worth noting as we did on December 6. Today, think about God's choice of messengers for this important star.

Stories like Balaam remind me that God is not looking for skilled, savvy people (although those qualities are useful to him). He seeks willing and obedient folks, or animals, I guess if he can't find a human. The donkey showed more reverential awe for God and his messenger than the prophet did, until God opened Balaam's arrogant, foolish eyes.

We might think we come to the manger with more to offer than the shepherds. We've got talents and resources, after all. Of course, God wants us to recognize his ownership of all we are and possess and our role as stewards. The attitude we present to God though, is more important than the gifts.

This star reminds me that if I get too big for my britches, God may employ creative ways to return me to a humble stance. Imagine how ridiculous Balaam felt while his donkey rebuked him in front of all the princes of Moab. Humility is always the passport into God's presence.

Prayer: God, if there's any area of my life where I am not seeing what you want me to see and hearing what you want me to hear, open my eyes, my ears, and my heart.

December 19

The eastern kings of Sheba and Seba will bring him gifts. Psalm 72:10b

Prophecy: Kings from the east will bring gifts to Messiah

Fulfillment: Matthew 2:1-2

I love the colorful wisemen in my nativity sets, but why is it significant that these men came to see Jesus, guided by a special star, bringing these gifts? Allow me to share a few thoughts from various commentators.

Clarke points out that these men were part of the Jews exiled to the East, far from their cherished Jerusalem. Yet, they did not forget their promised Messiah and embrace the false gods of their surrounding culture.

Spurgeon says, "...the shepherds did not miss their way; they came to Christ at once, while the wise men, even with a star to guide them, yet missed their way, and went to Jerusalem instead of to Bethlehem, and enquired at the palace of Herod, instead of at the stable." My takeaway here is that although their hearts were right, their God-listening skills needed improvement. However, because their inner attitudes were pure, God did lead them to the child.

Concerning the star itself, Adam Clarke says that the Greek in Matthew is more literally, *stood over the head of the child*. In his thinking, it was a meteor that guided them to the very house where Jesus was. Spurgeon thinks it was like the pillar of fire that led the Israelites in the wilderness.

Of the gifts, Meyer says, "How useful this gold was to Joseph in the following months! It helped him to defray the cost of the journey

into Egypt and back, and to maintain his precious charges there. The Heavenly Father knew what those needs would be and met them by anticipation."

Finally, I'm picturing these men, there may have been more than three, clothed in rich fabrics and jewels bowing down before a small child in probably a tiny house. That must have been another great moment for heaven as they saw their beloved prince recognized and worshipped properly on earth.

There are several good lessons from this star. First, if our hearts are right with God, he will see that even our mistakes are sorted out correctly. Secondly, there is always room for improvement in our ability to listen to God. The wisemen got it right on the journey back home and never returned to Herod.

Lastly, however we choose to worship God publicly, it's probably not near lavish enough. He is worthy of our best. None of the people in Jesus' neighborhood would have missed this grand procession. Imagine their wonder and reactions when these wealthy, wise men fell before him. The townsfolk certainly couldn't ignore Jesus' identity after that. They were presented with a clear choice, believe, and worship or rationalize and ignore.

Prayer: God, help me improve my listening skills and keep my heart pure before you. Show me to whom I should be generous this Christmas season, in honor of you. Finally, cause me to be more concerned about finding ways to lavishly worship you with all my time and resources and less concerned about what people might think.

