

Reading Schedule for December 17-23, 2018

There are many more Old Testament passages that apply to the birth of Christ and the coming of the Messiah. But I'd like to transition to the New Testament and look at some of the most familiar and inspiring scriptures about Jesus coming to earth. You may know these passages very well, but I think they're just what we are supposed to read as we embrace the inspiration of Christmas, Immanuel God with us.

December 17 – John 1:1-14: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (v.1) This is such a profound way to introduce the incarnate Word. The way that the reader should understand the “Word” in this case is, the revelation of God. We use our words to reveal, so this means the divine expression of God. The association of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us connects Jesus to the Father in a profound way. This affirms the deity of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, the amazing reality of the incarnation (God in flesh), and His mission to bring the true light to a dark world. How does this first reading from John?

December 18 – John 1:15-34: “The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (v.29) I mentioned yesterday that Jesus entered our world with a mission. He came to take away the sins of the world. He is the spotless Lamb of God. We understand these truths, and yet it is exciting to read them again as John the Baptist announces the identity of Jesus. For so long the Jews had been sacrificing the blood of a lamb as a necessary component of forgiveness for sins. But now, salvation would come to God's people through the Lamb of God. This also points to the Passover lamb, which was so significant in the Jewish culture. In this one statement, John the Baptist declares the mission of Jesus to be our substitute and die in our place. His death would appease the divine wrath of God because of sin. He would atone for our sins. I also am inspired by verse 18 because it clearly says that Jesus made the Father God known to us. How do you respond to this second reading as we are one week away from Christmas?

December 19 – Matthew 1:18-25: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means “God with us”).” (v.23) Earlier we read from Isaiah 7, as Matthew quotes this unique verse about the virgin birth, the meaning of the name Jesus, pointing to Immanuel, God with us. We know that the name Jesus means “he saves.” Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of the prophecy from Isaiah, as the whole account points to Mary being a virgin. We also get a glimpse of the character of Joseph as he obeyed the command of God, even though he would surely be misunderstood. What does it mean to you that Jesus came to save us, and how significant is the idea of Immanuel, God with us? These are the two main themes about Jesus in this account.

December 20 – 2:1-12: “On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.” (v.11) You probably realize the fact that the Magi traveled a long distance to meet the Savior of the world. It is interesting that the word says that they entered “the house.” Most scholars believe that Jesus was 6 months to a year old when the Magi met him; in fact, some believe it could have been two years later, since

Herod had all the children two years and younger killed. These foreigners recognized deity when they met him, and they worshiped the child. They expressed their devotion by offering him gifts. These gifts would be very important for Joseph and Mary, as they had to escape to Egypt (which we will read about tomorrow). How do you respond to this familiar account of the wise men? What would it mean to you to follow their example?

December 21 – Matthew 2:13-23: “. . . and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.” (v.23) After all that took place, Joseph, Mary and the child would not return to Bethlehem, but would choose to live in Nazareth. From the account of Luke, we learn that Joseph and Mary were from Nazareth originally. Maybe you remember reading in Isaiah 9 about the honor that would be displayed for Galilee because that is where Jesus grew up. In fact, Jesus spent 90% of his life near the Sea of Galilee, and in cities like Nazareth, Capernaum and Bethsaida. On my Holy Land tour I was surprised how insignificant these villages still are, and how small the population is around the Sea of Galilee. It is a beautiful, large lake, but very few people live near it. It seems like an unlikely place for the Savior of the world to spend most of his earthly life. It reminds me that Jesus is not impressed with the big and the many, but more so with the sincere and the humble. Jesus would associate with people who were thought of as less than as he walked this earth. What aspect of this story caught your eye?

December 22 – Luke 1:1-25: “The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.” (v.19) We believe Zechariah to be a godly man. But in this case, he had little faith. He casually responded to the angel, who then told Zechariah of his true identity. In Daniel 9:21 we learn that Gabriel was a predominant angel of surpassing faithfulness, holiness and responsibility. Zechariah underestimated what God could do and showed a lack of reverence for this divine angel. Sometimes I think we take our connection with God too casually. To step into God's presence, as we are invited to do, is an incredible privilege. We have been reading Hebrews, where we are invited into the throne room of God's grace. But we don't do it casually, right!? What does it mean to approach God with reverence? How do you respond to this story about Zechariah?

December 23 – Luke 1:26-56: “The angel went to her and said, ‘Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.’” (v.28) This whole section is about Mary. It describes her as a virgin, which would be absolutely correct since she was only betrothed to Joseph. It would be unthinkable to have intimate relations with your partner before the commitment of marriage. There are so many aspects of this encounter that reveal the faith of Mary and why she was chosen. She expresses herself as one of humble state in verse 48. It is easy to see the difference between Zechariah's response and Mary's response. She is open to what God is saying to her, even though it doesn't make sense. It is no wonder that the Catholics make such a big deal about Mary, because she is an incredible person. What characteristics do you notice the most? What aspect of this story inspires you?

PRAYER: Pray that God will use our gifts for Angel Tree and Advent Conspiracy to touch lives for Christ.