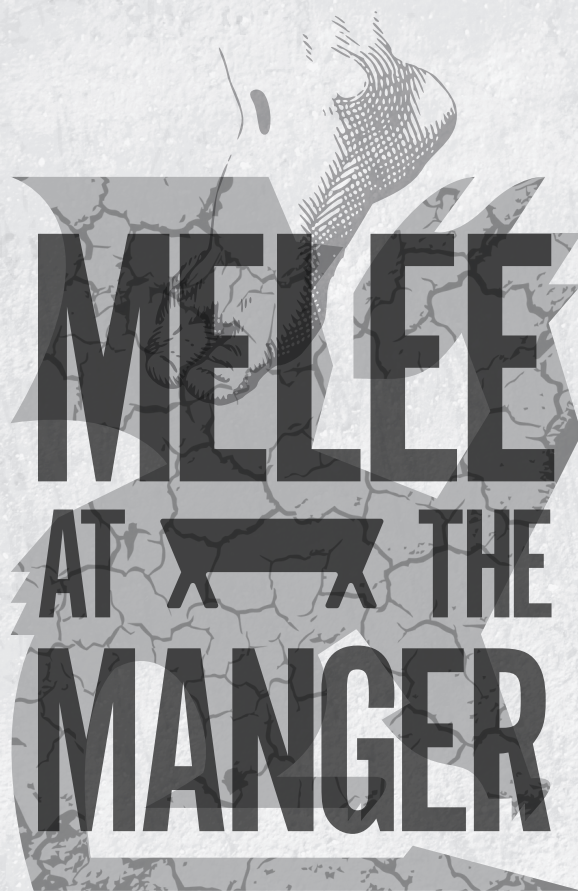




MELLEE AT THE MANGER

THE BATTLE AT THE BIRTH OF CHRIST



THE BATTLE AT THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

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Melee at the Manger: The Battle at the Birth of Christ

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THE RIVER CHURCH

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PREFACE

According to the dictionary, the word “melee” means a confusing fight. I am sure that many readers would wonder what a confusing fight has to do with Christmas. I thought Christmas was the most wonderful time of the year. Christmas is a celebration of Jesus Christ’s birth. How could there be a confusing fight or “melee” happening at the same time?

“Melee At The Manger: The Battle at the Birth of Christ” will take us to the Scriptures that describe for many of us the confusing fight that was happening or is happening as we stop to celebrate Christmas. Just because it is Christmas does not mean that there is not a battle that has been and is still taking place.

Week One will describe the spiritual melee where demonic forces have been resisting the plans of God. When many of us stop to celebrate and maybe only consider the beautiful aspects of the birth of Christ, we cannot forget that dark forces have been at work to destroy the good plans of God, even the birth of the Savior Jesus Christ.

Week Two will examine the worldly melee where earthly forces have been attempting to disrupt God’s plans. We must be alert and realize that the forces of this world have a system whose whole plan includes trying to kill the Baby Jesus. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus had to flee the country to avoid King Herod’s threat to Jesus. However, there was a confusing fight that ensued where Herod had all the baby boys who were two years old and younger killed, trying to destroy the plan of God.

Week Three will discuss the battle for our hearts. This is a confusing fight. We know the truth, and that is why we celebrate Christmas. However, we know our hearts can grow cold, and at Christmastime, there can be many distractions and family difficulties that distract us from God’s plan.

“Melee At The Manger: The Battle at the Birth of Christ” includes study guides for group discussion and daily devotions for personal growth. The goal this season is for all of us to intentionally appreciate the true meaning of Christmas from a fresh and real perspective.

1

THE RED DRAGON

PASTOR RYAN STORY

THE RED DRAGON

Around the world, there are 2.63 billion Christians who are preparing for the Christmas season. The stockings are being hung with care. Sugar plums are being dreamt of. Pine trees, artificial or real, are being decorated with lights, ornaments, and sometimes even popcorn. Some families may be setting out Advent wreaths and candles, while others are setting up Nativity scenes somewhere in their house.

1. What is your favorite family decorating tradition?

For my family, ever since my kids were young, we have allowed them to set our family Nativity scene on our fireplace mantel, but there is always a catch: it has to be biblically accurate. I have talked with each of my older sons about where the wisemen ought to be, and I always enjoy it when my kids put the wisemen figurines in the basement and bring them closer to the baby Jesus figurine after Christmas (It is always fun to find a forgotten wiseman figurine in the furnace room in June). There also is another figure we add to our Nativity scene yearly, and that is the Red Dragon. I have told people for years I do this and love the look on their faces, but equally, I love going to God's Word to find an amazing truth about Christmas from a cosmic level.

Revelation 12:1-2 says, ***“And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth.”***

Revelation chapter 12 opens with the first of several signs. Whenever we see ***“sign,”*** we have to understand that a sign is not always 100% literal. Signs are best viewed as associations or representations.

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2. How does the Bible describe the woman? Who do you think the woman is?

While today's lesson is less about the woman and more about the dragon, it is important to know who the woman is here.

Revelation 12:3-4 continues, ***“And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it.”***

3. How does the Bible describe the dragon? Who do you think the dragon is?

Revelation 12:5-6 adds, ***“She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.”***

4. How does the Bible describe the male child? Who do you think the child is?

To set up the rest of Revelation chapter 12, we have to understand that the three characters introduced are showing the cosmic melee between God and Satan.

THE RED DRAGON

Revelation 12:7-8 says, ***“Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven.”***

5. Who defeated the dragon? Why does this truth bring so much hope?

Revelation 12:9 says, ***“And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world - he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.”***

If we go back to Revelation 12:3-4, we see a more robust description of the dragon. Yet, upon defeat, we see the most epic, “Na-na-na-na, na-na-na-na, hey, hey, hey, goodbye.”

Revelation 12:10-11 adds, ***“And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, ‘Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.’”***

6. What did the loud voice proclaim?

Revelation 12:12 says, ***“Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”***

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7. Why is verse 12 a verse that brings rejoicing, warning, and then more rejoicing?

The dragon is consumed with pride and does not relent in fighting God. Even upon defeat, he is cast from Heaven and immediately resumes his fight.

Revelation 12:13 continues, ***“And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child.”***

Revelation 12:17 adds, ***“Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.”***

8. What does the devil do once he is thrown down? Who is his target?

While it might not be biblical, I have read that the fight you do not know you are in is the most dangerous fight you can be in. The truth is that all believers, all who ***“hold to the testimony of Jesus,”*** are at war, and sadly, some live as if they are not. We have to understand that there is a cosmic battle being fought, and there is a reality to spiritual warfare.

Ephesians 6:12 says, ***“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”***

THE RED DRAGON

9. Because we know we are in a war, how should we respond?

Despite the warring dragon, we who believe must rest in the victory that comes only through Jesus, the male child. Christmas should bring feelings of joy, peace, and love.

We must rest in the truth that the Christmas story was God's ultimate protection for His people.

All who know Christ as Lord are secure. Jesus has already secured victory over Satan through His death and resurrection. As believers, we share in this victory and can stand firm in the knowledge that Satan's ultimate defeat is assured.

10. Are you adding a dragon to your Nativity?

NOTES

Blank lined paper for writing.

MELEE AT THE MANGER

BE PREPARED

DEVOTION #1 | NOBLE BAIRD

Talking about the reality of spiritual battles and struggles can be difficult and even seem daunting at times. In our world, there have always been extreme views, ideas, concepts, and opinions on anything and everything! Yet, as followers of Christ who have confessed and believe in the true Gospel of Jesus, we must always go to God's Word as the starting and finishing point of all matters in life, including spirituality.

As we prepare for the Christmas season, there is a sense of excitement everywhere you go. Starbucks has colorful, fun drinks and cups. Christmas music is playing on every radio station and in the background of all the stores you enter. Houses are lit up with Christmas lights, inflatables, and festive decorations. Around the church, we do some of the same decorations and begin to incorporate worship songs proclaiming and celebrating the birth of Jesus here on Earth over 2,000 years ago.

However, as we prepare for Christmas, we should talk about the reality of what Ephesians 6:12 says, ***“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”*** We must see where this melee started. In Revelation 12:1-7, we read about the Dragon who is Satan. We see him cast out of Heaven with a third of the angels. He has dominion over Earth, ultimately striving to deceive people from the truth of the Gospel of Christ. This passage is fascinating and can also be confusing. The woman is believed to be Israel, through which we ultimately have Jesus' descent.

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The descent of Christ through Jewish heritage and His ultimate birth here on Earth was not only a physical battle that would come between followers of Christ and those who oppose the truth of the Gospel. It was also, as we read in Ephesians 6:12, a spiritual one. So, what does this mean for us as we prepare to celebrate the incredible birth of our Savior? The word “prepare” is what continues to stick out for me. Paul writes in Ephesians 6:10-19 how we can prepare each and every day for the ability to protect, defend, and fight against the spiritual forces that Satan uses to attack followers of Christ.

My challenge to you today is to read over this passage in Ephesians 6:10-19. Pray boldly for your own spiritual well-being, but also protection for your brothers and sisters in Christ. Then, be encouraged knowing that the Lord is faithful, you are not alone, and the Dragon was already defeated at the foot of the cross and through the resurrection of our Savior!

CHRISTMAS DRAGON

DEVOTION #2 | JOSH THAYER

When we think of Christmas, we often picture peaceful nativity scenes, soft candlelight, and a silent night. However, what if I told you that Christmas was actually a battlefield and that behind the manger, there was a cosmic war unfolding?

Revelation 12:3-4 gives us a glimpse into this unseen battle, ***“And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it.”***

This is no ordinary Christmas story. It is the behind-the-scenes reality of what happened when Jesus came into the world. The ***“great red dragon”*** is Satan, and from the moment Christ was born, the enemy was on the attack. Herod’s massacre of infants in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16) was not just political paranoia; it was a demonic assault. However, Satan did not succeed. God protected Jesus, and the plan of redemption moved forward.

Fast forward to today. The battle is not over. Ephesians 6:12 reminds us, ***“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”***

Christmas is not just about a baby in a manger; it is about a King

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who came to wage war against the powers of darkness. As His followers, we are part of this spiritual melee.

So, what do we do? Paul tells us in Ephesians 6:13-17 to put on the full ***“armor of God.”*** We do not fight with swords or shields but with truth, righteousness, faith, and the Word of God. We stand firm, knowing that Christ has already won the ultimate victory. The Dragon could not stop Him then, and he will not stop Him now.

This Christmas, as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, let us remember that it is more than a peaceful scene. It is the declaration of God’s victory over the enemy. The battle rages on, but we fight from a place of victory.

Melee at the manger? Absolutely. However, the King has come, and the Dragon has already lost.

THE WORLD IS GOING TO LEARN TODAY

DEVOTION #3 | GRANT GRIMES

“Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt.” Matthew 2:13–14

The world has tried to stop Christmas since the very start. King Herod was willing to murder thousands of children to stop the coming of the Messiah, and the sad part is that the world continues to do the same thing today. More and more, we see Christmas shifting from a celebration of Jesus’ birth to a season centered on gifts and good food. We hear that “Happy Holidays” is preferred over “Merry Christmas.” The true meaning of Christmas is treated as something subjective, whatever you make it out to be.

In our passage from Matthew, the first Christmas was a real battlefield. Just as Jesus was born, an edict was issued in Bethlehem that all boys two years old and under were to be killed. A war was waged on the true meaning of Christmas. The world was trying to snuff out the Savior, but the world found out that day - you cannot stop Christmas.

Oftentimes, we get bogged down by the world and feel there is nothing we can do to combat the worldly melee at Christmas time. However, when the world pushes a different agenda than the true meaning of Christmas (that Jesus was born as the perfect sacrifice to pay the penalty for sin), Scripture shows us how to respond.

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Romans 12:2 tells us not to be conformed to the world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Christmas is not playtime when it comes to the mission of the Gospel. The world cannot have Christmas without the Good News of Jesus Christ, and as Christians, we cannot let the world conform us to its mold of materialism and Santa.

For families, this means having real conversations with children about the true meaning of Christmas and participating in events that are centered around the Gospel. For the church, this means focusing conversations at work, with family, and with friends on Christ at Christmas. We often hear the question, "What does Christmas mean to you?" This is the perfect opportunity to share the hope of Christ that we hold.

For the individual, this is a call to pray like never before. Pray for revival in the world, pray for sinners to come to Christ, and pray that you are transformed by the Gospel daily. Christmas is not just a season. It is a declaration that the Savior has come. Let us stand firm and proclaim that truth.

THE BATTLE OVER THE MANGER

DEVOTION #4 | PASTOR JOHN CARTER

Christmas is often portrayed as a peaceful scene. We picture baby Jesus lying in a manger, surrounded by adoring shepherds and singing angels. However, behind this serene image is a cosmic battle, one that has raged since the beginning of time and continues even to this day. The birth of Christ was not just a moment of joy; it was an act of divine warfare, a direct assault against the forces of darkness.

Matthew 2:16-18 says, ***“Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: ‘A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.’”***

Matthew 2:16-18 recounts one of the most tragic and violent events surrounding the birth of Jesus. It is the massacre of innocent children in the region surrounding Bethlehem. Herod, driven by fear and jealousy, sought to destroy the coming King while He was yet a toddler. His murderous decree was not merely the act of a paranoid ruler; it was a clear manifestation of the spiritual war against God's plan. Revelation 12:3-7 unveils the deeper reality behind this attack. The dragon, Satan himself, stood ready to devour the Christ-child, seeking to thwart God's redemption before it even began. However, God's sovereign hand protected His Son, ensuring the fulfillment of His mission.

Revelation 12:3-7 says, ***“And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days. Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon.”***

Revelation 12:9-11 continues, ***“And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world - he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, ‘Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.’”***

Revelation 12:17 adds, ***“Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.”***

The birth of Christ did not end the war, it escalated it. Satan knew that the arrival of the Messiah would ultimately be the first dagger to his defeat and destruction. Even though Christ has already won the victory through His death and resurrection, the enemy continues to wage war against God's people. We see this as it is recorded in Revelation 12:17. Paul also reminds us in Ephesians 6:10-20 that

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we are engaged in a spiritual battle that requires heavenly armor, God's armor. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against rulers, authorities, and spiritual forces of evil. Just as Christ's birth was met with resistance, so too will the birth of our faith be tested and fought against by a mastermind and deceiver of all people.

Spiritual warfare continues today, especially during Christmas. The holiday that should center on Christ is often overshadowed by materialism, busyness, and distractions. The enemy works tirelessly to shift our focus away from the true meaning and purpose of Christ's birth. Division in families, financial stress, and even depression increases during this season. These are all tactics to rob us of the peace and joy Christ offers.

However, just as God provided protection for Jesus and His purpose, message, and victory. He also equips us with everything we need to stand firm. Ephesians chapter 6 calls us to put on the full armor of God. We should display truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and the Word of God. God does not leave us without the tools to do battle. He does not leave us as helpless orphans. He enables us, through the power of His Spirit, to resist the enemy's schemes.

Christmas is not just a celebration of Christ's birth; it is a reminder of God's victory over darkness. We are called to walk in that victory, refusing to allow the enemy to steal our joy or distort our focus. This season, let us who chose Christ be intentional in our worship, steadfast in prayer, and diligent in guarding our hearts and minds. The battle over the manger was won, and through Christ, we are more than conquerors.

Take a second and ask yourself the following questions:

- Are there areas in your life where the enemy is trying to steal your focus from the message and hope of Christ?
- How can you actively engage in spiritual warfare through prayer and God's Word during this season of battle?

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SPIRITUAL WARFARE

DEVOTION #5 | PASTOR CHUCK LINDSEY

“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.” Ephesians 6:12 (NKJV)

You cannot stop Christmas! Here it is once again. For some, this season is an endless stream of happy nostalgia. For others, it is turmoil, panic, and stress.

Which is it for you? How are you doing in this holiday season?

The difference in response to Christmas is tied to many factors. For some, it is a financial response. If the finances are good, we are good. If the finances are stretched, we are stressed. For others, it is a family response. If our family dynamics are good, this time of year can be a blessing. If the family dynamics are weird or bad, this time of year is often trouble! Questions may abound. “What will Uncle Frank say this year? Do we really have to go to your mom’s?” For many others, we go into the season cranky and stressed. We have eaten a lot of pie by this point; our pants are not fitting anymore, and we do not feel well. We have not seen the sun since September, and our vitamin D levels are far too low for us to smile, let alone sing, or make merry! Bah humbug!

Well, regardless of your response to Christmas, one thing is true for all of us. In the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, it is easy to lose sight of what Christmas actually is. Christmas is a reminder. That is all. It is a necessary, yearly call to forgetful people to remind

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ourselves that God came to us to save us from our sins. We often miss the point. Christmas and its real meaning get lost in the busyness, stress, and the chase of temporary emotional happiness. Let me remind you today: it is really not about lights, trees, or even gifts. The Christmas season is a reminder, and it becomes a blessing when it reminds us of what He did. When this leads us to deep worship and thankfulness, Christmas fills our hearts with joy. When we pause to reflect on this great act of God's love toward us, we should remember that we would have been lost forever if He had not come. However, He came. He came to die so He could be with us forever. Christmas is a reminder of the lengths to which love will go.

So, why is it so hard for Christmas to be this way for us? As Christians, we must remember that anything good is under spiritual attack. Christmas is no exception. Ephesians 6:12 (NKJV) says, ***“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.”*** Much of the Christmas season is a clever attack from a strategic enemy to obscure the truth of God coming into our world. Between the traditions, gifts, lights, get-togethers, and Hallmark movies, the entire Christmas season can come and go without any real reflection on what God did. Our enemy would love nothing more than for us to think that this is all that Christmas is with the chase of the Christmas feeling, the giving of a few gifts, the keeping of traditions, and get-togethers. However, Christmas is so much more. Can I encourage you to take the time to reflect and remind yourself of what this season really is? Let the truth of His love for you, that pushed Him into this world for you and me, drive you into worship and thankfulness today.

AN EXPECTED OUTCOME

DEVOTION #6 | PASTOR JUSTIN DEAN

There have been so many movies about underdog stories. So many, in fact, we now tend to expect the underdog to come back and win in almost every media we consume. The underdog is one for a reason: they are outmatched, outclassed, and outgunned. Sometimes, we get in our heads that our God is the underdog. I can understand why. We see evil every day, and it can be hard to understand how anything will outmatch it.

Has there ever been a time when you have felt that evil is unconquerable? Do you still feel that way? Why or why not?

Revelation 12:3-8 says, ***“And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days. Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven.”***

I love old fantasy stories. Traditionally, dragons are the biggest and baddest things around in old tales. Nothing makes them the

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underdog except our God. There is no hope for the dragon against our God and Heaven's armies. The dragon is weak, small, and insignificant in comparison to the glory, majesty, and might of our God. The dragon is thoroughly defeated and cast down out of Heaven. He does not harm the child or the woman and is instead left in utter defeat.

Do these verses bring you comfort? Why or why not?

Does reading about spiritual warfare cause you to have fear, soberness, or both? Why?

Sometimes, we can find ourselves discouraged and feeling defeated by the evil of the world. Things can feel hopeless, and we can lose sight of the victory that we have in Jesus. He has, does, and will claim victory. In times of discouragement, it is critical that we look to Scripture to remind us that our God is undefeated and undefeatable. Evil will not overcome our God; it simply cannot, and we can trust that our God will see us through as we seek to live for Him.

We must come to expect that our God will show up in mighty ways. These verses remind us of the lengths that God will go to fight for us. He will fight for you if you follow and trust in Him.

Spend some time in prayer, recognizing God for His power, strength, and majesty.

THE RED DRAGON

2

CLASH OF THE KINGDOMS

PASTOR PHILIP PIASECKI

CLASH OF THE KINGDOMS

My favorite Christmas movie is *“Jingle All The Way”* with Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sinbad. They go toe to toe fighting for the last “Action Man” action figure for a gift for their kid. Over the course of their fighting, they completely lose sight of what Christmas is really all about. To me, the movie is the perfect encapsulation of the internal battle we all face around the holidays between how the world wants us to live our lives and how God wants us to live our lives. We see this battle from the biblical side of things as well. The Christmas story is often depicted as a peaceful, serene event with shepherds, angels, and a manger. Yet, as we will see, beneath the surface there was a clash of kingdoms between God’s heavenly kingdom and Herod’s earthly kingdom.

1. What is your favorite Christmas movie to watch each year?

2. Read Matthew 2:13-18. What stands out to you about Herod’s reaction to the news of Jesus’ birth?

Matthew 2:13-18 says, ***“Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I called my son.’ Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the***

wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.'

In Matthew 2:13-18, we encounter King Herod, a worldly ruler whose paranoia and desire for power unleashed an assault that threatened the newborn King, Jesus. King Herod had heard rumors of this ***"king of the Jews"*** being born (Matthew 2:2). King Herod's original plan was to have the wise men find out where Jesus had been born and report back to him so that he could have Jesus killed. However, when the wise men never return to him, he realizes that they have betrayed him. So, he orders all boys two years old and under to be killed. We see King Herod here being controlled by his fear and his pride. The birth of the Savior happened, and all King Herod could do was worry about himself and hold tight to the power that he had.

3. Why do you think Herod saw a baby as such a threat to his power?

4. What does this reveal about the nature of our own sinful hearts?

It seems as if King Herod knew what Scripture said about the Messiah being born, and His understanding was that the Messiah was going to be an earthly king. This would mean that He would be out of power when this baby finally grew up and took his throne. This is the way that our sin wants us to react to the thought of Jesus as King of our own lives. Instead of surrendering control of our lives to Jesus, we react by trying to keep control of our own lives even more. We start focusing on all the wrong things other than Jesus Himself.

CLASH OF THE KINGDOMS

I think the Christmas season can even magnify our selfish hearts even more. We take a time of year that is supposed to be focused on our Savior's birth and instead get distracted by everything that the world around us makes Christmas all about.

5. In what ways do you see yourself in the reaction of King Herod?

6. Herod's fear drove him to violence. What fears might tempt us to resist God's work in our lives, and how can we overcome them?

John 18:36 says, ***“Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.’”***

7. Why was it so significant that Jesus was born to establish a heavenly Kingdom instead of a kingdom of this world?

Everybody thought that Jesus had come to establish an earthly kingdom, but He reminds His disciples in this verse that His Kingdom is not of this world. He was sent to establish a heavenly Kingdom that operates in a completely different way than the world was accustomed to. Jesus came in humility to be a sacrifice for us, not to rule an earthly kingdom. We see these things through God's Kingdom, which was brought to Earth through humility and grace as Jesus was born in that stable.

MELEE AT THE MANGER

8. Re-read Matthew 2:13-15. Contrast Herod's response with Joseph's obedience in these verses.

9. How is Joseph's reaction a picture of how we should respond to Christ?

Joseph continued to put His full faith in God. When God told him to go to Egypt and stay there, that is what they did, and it protected them from death. When the world tells us God cannot be trusted, we must remind ourselves that He is in full control. As believers, we have to realize that we are not the rulers of our own lives. We have to be willing to lay down our pride and put our lives in the hands of Jesus. Joseph could have decided that he knew what was best for his life, but instead, he willingly humbled himself to God's commands. God's Kingdom and the earthly kingdoms are always going to fight for our allegiance.

Romans 12:1-2 says, ***"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."***

10. How can you better protect yourself from being ***"conformed to this world"*** and better put yourself in a position to be ***"transformed"*** in these ways from Romans 12:1-2?

CLASH OF THE KINGDOMS

11. Where do you see the values of God's Kingdom clashing with the values of the world in your own life?

Christ's mission advanced.

This clash continues today as the values of God's Kingdom (justice, mercy, and humility) confront the world's pursuit of power, wealth, and self-interest. The story of Jesus' birth and the Christmas season is such an important reminder for us as believers to keep our eyes fixed on Christ. We can too easily find ourselves acting no different than the rest of the world that does not know Jesus. We need to keep Him at the center not only at Christmas, but of our everyday lives. The kingdom of this world and the Kingdom of God will always be at odds. Let us make sure that we find ourselves fighting on the side of the one true King.

NOTES

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MELEE AT THE MANGER

MERCY IN THE MELEE

DEVOTION #1 | PASTOR GARY WRIGHT

“Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.” Matthew 1:18-19

Years ago, one of my family members was cheating on his wife. The affair led to a child being born. The husband hid the whole situation from his wife. Without his wife knowing, he was having child support taken out of his check. After several years, while doing their taxes, his wife discovered the secret. It caused a melee in the family, to say the least.

When Mary was found to be pregnant with Jesus, it caused a melee in her family as well. Mary was betrothed to a man named Joseph. Being betrothed was more than an engagement. In those days, families arranged the marriages of their children. Joseph and Mary were no exception to that custom. There was most likely a contract between the two families. Once Mary and Joseph entered into the betrothal, the contract was binding, and to separate required a legal divorce. At this point, the couple was considered husband and wife, but they did not live together or sleep together. A betrothal would last a full year before the actual wedding.

Do you see the melee? Mary was pregnant, and Joseph knew the baby was not his. Imagine the emotions that Joseph was feeling. Mary's pregnancy was causing some serious melee.

MELEE AT THE MANGER

If Joseph had exposed her, Mary could have been put to death (Deuteronomy 22:23-27). Joseph had a decision to make. He could either expose her or give mercy. Scripture says that Joseph was **“a just man.”** Joseph chose to give mercy. Joseph showed his love for her and decided to divorce her quietly and not cause her any shame. Thankfully for Joseph, an angel spoke to him in a dream. **“‘Joseph, son of David,’ the angel said, ‘do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins’”** (Matthew 1:20-21, NLT). With this information, Joseph married her.

People in our lives, even those who are closest to us, can hurt us terribly. Forgiveness and mercy can seem impossible. However, through prayer and the strength of Christ, forgiveness and mercy are possible.

Let us go back to the example from my family. The wife of the cheating husband was a follower of Christ. She separated from her husband for several months. During this time of separation, through prayer, counseling, and the strength of Christ, she was able to give mercy. She forgave her husband, and they moved forward with their marriage. The two stayed married for the rest of their lives. Even in the most difficult situations, mercy in the melee is possible through the strength of Christ.

Jesus, the child that Mary was carrying, is our greatest example of mercy. Even though we have all rebelled and sinned against God, Jesus, God’s Son, chose to give us mercy in the melee by going to the cross and dying to pay the price for our rebellion.

EXPECT PERSECUTION

DEVOTION #2 | CHRIS MONTVILLE

“Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’”

Matthew 2:13

“Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.” Matthew 2:16

The word Gospel translates to good news. Jesus coming to Earth, living a perfect life, and taking the punishment that we deserve upon Himself on the cross so that we can be in right standing with God is good news. However, you first must understand that there is bad news before you can accept the good news. The bad news is that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

If you do not understand the bad news, you will not accept the good news. If you do not think you are a sinner in need of a Savior, why would you care about the payment Jesus made? You must accept the bad news first.

This, at its core, is offensive to the world. This news can bring a lot of different reactions, and frankly, it is what we would often call the scariest part of sharing the Gospel, “Will the other person still

accept, love, or like me?"

While I want to acknowledge those concerns, it does not change the call to go into the world and make disciples (Matthew 28:19), and that call will sometimes bring back a negative reaction. The New Testament is very clear that we, as Christians, will be persecuted. In 1 Peter 4:12-13, we read, ***"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed."***

Just as King Herod was intimidated by Jesus' birth as a possible threat to his power, the Roman and Jewish cultures after Jesus' resurrection were intimidated by Christianity's influence and power. While our current American society may not be seen as being worried about Christianity's influence and power to the same extent, I do not know if I fully agree. I think the world does not have a problem with "lukewarm Christians" who go to church on Sunday and do not practice the faith outside of that. The world does have a problem with true Christians who are actively sharing their faith and actively looking to bring more people out of the domain of darkness, and into the Kingdom of God's beloved Son (Colossians 1:13).

Our call is clear. We will experience resistance to our call from the world, but it does not change what Jesus Himself calls us to do. Matthew 28:18-20 says, ***"And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'"***

WE DO NOT FIGHT FOR NOTHING

DEVOTION #3 | GRANT GRIMES

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Ephesians 6:10–12

Spiritual warfare during Christmas may seem like a strange concept. After all, this is a season of joy, celebration, and time spent with loved ones. Yet, the reality is that spiritual warfare during Christmas is very real. From Genesis chapter 3 to the birth of Christ, we see that Satan is a cunning adversary determined to destroy mankind. There seems to be no better time to attack God’s people than during a season dedicated to celebrating the birth of his greatest enemy, Jesus, the Messiah.

In Ephesians 6:12, Paul reminds the church in Ephesus, and ultimately all believers today, that our struggle is not against flesh and blood. Our enemy is far greater than what we can see with our eyes. This is not a mere physical battle. We are up against the forces of darkness and the schemes of the devil himself.

However, this reality should not fill us with fear or confusion about Christmas. Instead, it should call us to be watchful, prayerful, and spiritually armed. During this festive and joyful season, we must put on the full armor of God and be ready to stand firm in our faith, always prepared to give a defense for the Gospel.

MELEE AT THE MANGER

As I write this, I am reminded of the song I sang as a child: *"I'm in the Lord's Army"* ("Yes, Sir!"). The words still echo in my mind, and they capture an essential truth about the Christian life. We are engaged in a great spiritual battle. Yet, we do not fight alone. The Lord has equipped and strengthened us for this war against sin, giving us everything we need to stand victorious in Him.

As we go through this Christmas season, ***"be strong in the Lord and in strength of his might."*** Remember that the Lord is with us, and the battle has already been won.

CHRISTMAS MASSACRE

DEVOTION #4 | JOANNA MONTGOMERY

There are parts of the Christmas story that almost every Christian knows, but there are important details some have never noticed. Many do not know just how intricately Satan worked through King Herod to try to destroy the hope of our Savior and eliminate Christmas.

Rome was in charge during the time of Christ's birth. Mary and Joseph had to be counted for tax purposes. Because of their heritage, they had to go to Bethlehem to be counted, and that is where Jesus would be born. Prophecy in the Old Testament, Micah 5:2, said the Savior would be born in Bethlehem. If Rome had not required it, Mary and Joseph would not have been in Bethlehem, certainly not while she was ready to deliver a baby. This fulfilled prophecy is one of the many ways we know that Jesus is the promised Messiah.

A less-known prophecy concerning the Savior was revealed in Jeremiah 31:15, ***"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."***

When the wise men from the East came to see the baby Jesus, they first stopped in Judea at King Herod's palace because they were looking for the next great king. They assumed, as I would have, that the king would be born in a palace. Jesus was not there, though. He was not the kind of king they were used to.

Herod, the local ruler appointed by Rome, was very interested to know who this king was. He was not about to let someone overthrow

MELEE AT THE MANGER

his rule. He wanted details! He discovered the most likely place the wise men would find the baby king was in Bethlehem. That is where prophecy said He would be born. Herod wanted to destroy this would-be-king but did not want the wise men to know that was his plan. Herod told them to look in Bethlehem, and when they found the baby, they should come back to let him know where the baby was so he could worship this king, too. Of course, that was a big lie. He had no intention of worshiping anyone.

God ruined Herod's plans and sent the wise men home a different way, then told Joseph to take Mary and the Baby and flee to Egypt. Herod was furious when the wise men did not return. Not to be undone, he decided how he would solve the problem. He ordered all little boys ages two and under to be murdered.

This is what that prophecy in Jeremiah 31:15 refers to. Rachel (the wife of Jacob, who became Israel) was weeping for her children because they were no more. The nation of Israel was mourning the death of their baby boys, ages two and younger. This sad prophecy is fulfilled because Herod is trying to destroy something he cannot understand.

So, why Ramah and not Bethlehem? Ramah was six miles north of Jerusalem, and Bethlehem was six miles south of Jerusalem. King Herod had the male children, aged two and under, in a six-mile radius around Jerusalem slaughtered. It was a vicious attack to kill the King of the world. It was a war to kill Christmas. However, God was not surprised by Herod's attack. He told about it 600 years before when a prophet named Jeremiah wrote it down.

The war against Christmas is a spiritual battle. We will become overwhelmed in this spiritual battle if we do not keep our focus on Christ and who He truly is. So, how do we participate in fighting this battle? We need to pray for people in positions of power and leadership that they will not be like Herod, who was overcome with evil, but instead, they will encourage the honor of Christmas within the areas they influence.

THE ORIGINAL GRINCH

DEVOTION #5 | PASTOR JOSH YATES

“Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.” Matthew 2:16

“How the Grinch Stole Christmas” is one of my favorite Christmas movies. I am not one who only likes the original one; I like the one that Jim Carey starred in 2000. For those who do not really know the story, the Grinch is a sour creature that was born with a heart two sizes too small and lived in a mountain above Whoville. The Whos always looked forward to and celebrated Christmastime time with their families. The Grinch did not have that, so he took it all away.

Christmas has many stories like the Grinch in the past. *“Scrooge”* and *“Krampus”* are a couple more. There was an original Grinch; however, his name was King Herod.

Herod would become King of the Jews in 37 BC, making him king of Judea during the time of Jesus’ birth. He ruled the people harshly for 33 years and had a great impact as the king, though he could never be the rightful heir to the throne he sat on. Only one from the line of David who was fully Jewish could ever qualify for such an honor. The true King of the Jews had to be born King of the Jews.

Herod was ruthless as he attempted to gain complete control of Judea. He killed anyone that he saw as a threat to his power. He killed his wife, sons, and many others in order to secure his throne.

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This really sounds like Shakespeare! Richard III wants to be king, but there are 187 men, women, and children between him and the throne. So, he decides to kill them all! If Netflix decided to do a mini-series on Herod, who are they going to cast as Herod? Would you choose Jack Nickelson, Anthony Hopkins, or Sauron? This guy was nasty.

He learned of the newly born King of the Jews via the wise men. He knew he had to take out this baby, so he tried to trick them to get more information. When that did not work, he killed all the male babies two years old and younger. It was simply horrendous.

There are always principalities and powers that attempt to stop Christmas. There are events in our world that attempt to get our focus only on worldly things. There are happenings in our lives and relationships with people that we have that attempt to stop Christ from being born in our hearts on a regular basis.

What is attempting to stop Christ from being born in you this Christmas? I hope no one is trying to kill you, but what things are drawing your attention away from the baby in the manger? Is it a broken relationship that has you angry or deeply hurt? Are you unsettled at your job, and unsure how you are going to make it through this season? Is this Christmas just too dry and normal, so you want something more?

Just like Jesus' birth, which we celebrate, nothing can stop Him from coming. We can look to other places, people, and things that distract us, but He came. He is waiting for you to look at the manger and see Him for Who He is, the King of the Jews and the King of your heart.

Will you live for Him this Christmas and beyond? Will you find your peace in Him? Will you carry His name everywhere you go? Will you trust Him? Will you allow Him to be born in you this Christmas?

Do not let a Grinch steal your joy which can only be found in Jesus.

BEYOND DEATH AND TAXES

DEVOTION #6 | DAVID HUDGENS

It is often said that in life there are only two guarantees: death and taxes. Have you ever heard this phrase? The cynical and satirical nature of this saying highlights two universal, unpleasant human experiences to express a worldly truth claim: nothing in life is ever a sure thing except for these two nagging realities. As an adult, this expression makes me chuckle and sigh. After all, physical death is the natural end for all biological life existing east of Eden. Taxes, for better or worse, have been an inevitable and costly companion to human governance throughout history. Yet, I ask, are those two ideas really the only guarantees in life? Are there no other certainties? Is there no more hopeful outcome upon which we can bank our lives?

In Matthew 2:13-18, we encounter a poignant and dark moment in the early life of Jesus. After the visit from the wise men, Joseph receives a warning in a dream to flee to Egypt with Mary and the Christ child because King Herod, filled with rage, seeks to kill the newborn King. In a desperate attempt to eliminate any threat to his throne, Herod issues the unconscionable decree to kill all male children born in Bethlehem and the surrounding regions. Yet, this gruesome act could not stop God's plans.

From the very beginning, in Genesis chapter three, a cosmic conflict begins between God's sovereignty and all other opposing forces, illustrating the lengths to which evil will go to resist God's will. In the Garden, Satan sowed the seeds of relational destruction between God and humanity. Then, after God delivers the promise of one to come who will crush the head of the serpent, Satan sets his aim to prevent the arrival of the Messiah. However, throughout the biblical

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narrative, every effort to obstruct God's redemptive work ultimately fails. God's purposes prevail, regardless of human schemes or the enemy's tactics.

Psalm 33:10-11 offers profound hope regarding God's sovereignty, ***"The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations."***

In our own lives, we often face overwhelming circumstances like personal crises, loss, or societal issues that discourage us. It is easy to feel trapped in a cycle of despair, echoing the sentiment of "death and taxes." However, Scripture reminds us that hope exists beyond our situations. God's promises provide us with the certainty we seek; they offer a guarantee that transcends our temporary struggles. Romans 8:28 assures us, ***"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."***

The events surrounding Jesus' birth remind us that even in the darkest moments, God's sovereign plan endures. While Herod thought he could thwart God's plan, he became an instrument in a larger narrative. It is one that assures us that God is always at work through the timeline of human history. Every challenge we face is an opportunity for God to display His power and faithfulness. Therefore, we can choose to trust Him, rely on His promises, and proclaim the truth that, in Christ, we have a future filled with hope.

Today, take a moment to reflect on the areas of your life where you feel uncertainty. Bring those concerns before God in prayer. Ask Him to remind you of His faithfulness and embrace the certainties that come from knowing Him. For in Him, we find our ultimate guarantee. He holds our true, sure thing in life.

CLASH OF THE KINGDOMS

3

REMEMBER

PASTOR ROY TOWNSEND

REMEMBER

1. When we stop to think and remember all of our Christmas traditions, what comes to mind for your family?

2. Do you remember a special childhood Christmas tradition that you currently do not observe, but you do remember that tradition?

According to a USA Today article, there are ten beloved traditions that are exclusive to the way that Americans celebrate the Christmas holiday. Seeing Santa Clause, decorating a Christmas tree, attending a church, gathering for a Christmas dinner, hanging a stocking, watching a Christmas movie, seeing Christmas lights and decorations, hiding the Christmas pickle (I have no idea), welcoming the Elf on the Shelf, and celebrating local and regional holiday traditions were highlighted in the article. I really wonder if my Christmas celebrations are so consumed with these traditions and observances that I have forgotten what the meaning of Christmas is by having so much fun and family time.

3. Do you remember why your family observes Christmas?

4. What is in your heart during these observances? What are we feeling, and do these feelings or thoughts push us toward observing the birth of Jesus Christ?

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5. The first question was remembering a Christmas tradition, but the real question is, do we remember what the birth of Christ means for our spiritual lives, salvation, and eternity? What does it represent?

In Romans 15:15, the Apostle Paul reminds the Roman church, ***“But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God.”*** Paul is reminding the church of their privileges and responsibilities. As I think of this verse in relation to our observances of Christmas, I wonder if our hearts grow cold to the true message and meaning of Christmas. I wonder if my observances are so consumed with fun and harmless traditions that my heart may have grown cold to the true meaning of Christmas.

6. If nine out of ten Americans relay that they celebrate Christmas, how are our celebrations different from their celebrations?

In the book of Jude, the writer describes with urgency that we as believers should be warned against false teachers who creep in and pervert the truths of situations or the truth of Scripture and deny the truth of who Jesus Christ is. Jude 1:3-4 reads, ***“Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.”*** Then, in verse five, he says he wants to remind us of Jesus. This verse made me think and wonder.

REMEMBER

7. Do you believe that you need to be reminded of Who Jesus is and what He did for us this Christmas?

Please look at Matthew 1:18-25, ***“Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.”***

8. Is there any mention of your Christmas traditions that reference this account of the birth of Christ?

9. What is the importance of Immanuel in relation to our spiritual condition and salvation through Christ?

MELEE AT THE MANGER

10. What does the birth of ***“God with us”*** or ***“he will save His people from their sins”*** mean? Do you believe that this gets discussed at Christmastime?

It is important to remember. We, as believers, need to remember what we are celebrating at Christmas. We need to help others remember what we are truly celebrating and what we are thankful for in our spiritual lives at Christmas. We have to realize that there are false teachers and false systems that want to turn our hearts away from the true meaning of Christmas and the sacrifice that Jesus made by humbling Himself to become human, which we celebrate at Christmas. Philippians 2:5-10 reads, ***“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.”*** This Christmas time, we should remember!

REMEMBER

NOTES

MELEE AT THE MANGER

WHOLEHEARTED LIVING THIS SEASON

DEVOTION #1 | PASTOR CALEB COMBS

I have loved playing and coaching sports my entire life. From basketball to soccer and everything in between, I firmly believe that whatever you do, you should give it your all. The same principle applies to following Christ. It should be our greatest commitment. Romans chapter 12 calls us to be a living sacrifice, meaning we are to live wholeheartedly for Christ.

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, He responded this way in Matthew 22:37-38, ***“And he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.’”*** It is a powerful call to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and mind. However, our culture often erodes our wholehearted devotion to Christ. The distractions and demands of daily life can slowly take priority, pulling us away from what truly matters.

Jesus also addressed this issue in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:24, ***“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.”***

During the Christmas season, it is easy to become distracted and lose focus on this commitment. The busyness of holiday parties, year-end obligations, gift shopping, and festive traditions can be overwhelming. While these activities are not inherently bad, they can shift our focus away from Christ if we are not intentional.

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It is all too easy to let the things of this world erode our focus on Christ. Let us be intentional about keeping Christ at the center of all we do. We do not have to cancel our holiday plans or withdraw from celebrations. Instead, we should go through each event with a heart wholly devoted to Him. Whether we are spending time with family, attending Christmas gatherings, or exchanging gifts, may we do it all with an awareness of God's presence and a heart set on glorifying Him.

Let this be a season where we truly love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls, and minds. By keeping our focus on Christ, we will experience the joy and peace that only He can bring. May this Christmas be different, not because of fewer commitments or traditions, but because of a renewed dedication to living wholeheartedly for Him.

JESUS IS THE REASON FOR THE SEASON

DEVOTION #2 | SIERRA COMBS

“And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.’” Luke 2:10-11

Every December, we are bombarded with messages telling us that Christmas is about getting the best deals, decorating perfectly, and giving extravagant gifts. I take that back; it really starts in October. I know people who start listening to Christmas music on October 1st and have their tree up before Halloween. That might be a little extreme for my personal taste, but I have to admit that even now, as I write this, I have a “real feel” Christmas garland in my Amazon cart, and it is only February (though to be fair, it is in the saved for later section). No matter what your personal convictions are regarding these things, you have to admit that the pressure can be overwhelming. However, Christmas is not about what is under the tree. It is about Who was laid in the manger. In a culture that often tries to remove Christ from Christmas, the real battle is not fought in the courts or the stores. It is fought in our hearts. Will we be consumed by the world’s version of Christmas, or will we fight to keep our focus on Jesus? I say it every year at Christmastime, “Jesus is the reason for the season!” However, we need to ask, “Do I sincerely let that truth penetrate my heart?”

Matthew 6:21 reminds us that ***“where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*** The world says our treasure is in stuff. The focus is on more presents, more decorations, more activities, and more indulgence. However, Jesus came to offer us a greater

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treasure: Himself. When we focus more on buying the best gifts rather than celebrating the Giver, we lose sight of the greatest gift of all, which is salvation through Him! I often think of the two sisters in the Bible from whom we can glean so much. We can find their story in Luke 10:38-42 (NIV). One of the sisters, Martha, was ***“worried and upset about many things,”*** while her sister, Mary, simply sat at Jesus’ feet. Now, the things Martha was striving to get done were not bad things! Yet, Jesus told her, ***“Mary has chosen what is better.”*** This Christmas, are we more like Martha in being busy, stressed, and distracted? Or are we like Mary, being focused on Christ? The enemy wants to replace worship with worry, devotion with distraction, and Christ with consumerism. It does not have to be like that! We get to choose.

So, how do we, as Christians, win the battle in our hearts and reclaim Christmas? First, we need to reset our focus on Christ. Include your family in this refocusing! Pray together, read the Christmas story (Luke 2) throughout the season, and make worship a priority. We also need to resist the push of consumerism. Simplify! Give generously, but do not let the pressure of materialism rob you of your peace. Most importantly, we need to remember the joy of salvation. The angels declared the ***“good news of great joy!”*** Jesus is the reason we celebrate. He is the reason for the season!

THE PRAYER JOURNAL

DEVOTION #3 | LORENA NORRIS

“I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth.” 1 John 2:21

Christmas is a time of joy, hope, and celebration. Yet, somehow, it is simultaneously draining with endless lists of things to do, gifts to buy, church events to attend, charities to donate to, organizations to volunteer for, and people to visit. All on top of the things we want for ourselves. Even with all the good and generosity surrounding the season of Christmas, our hearts can become cold and unfeeling.

If you have ever found yourself in this place, you are not alone. This is a common struggle, and it has been happening since the beginning of time; just go back to page three of your Bible. Adam and Eve were surrounded by God's presence in the Garden of Eden, yet they fell for the lie that they needed something more. Later, God's people, the Israelites, repeatedly forgot His goodness despite seeing countless miracles.

The wonderful thing about 1 John 2:21 is that it reminds us that when we are saved by Jesus, we know the truth. Take a deep breath and remember this truth: we are loved by a Savior who understands our hearts and minds. Even better, He continues to love and pursue us when our hearts and minds are preoccupied. He is right there, waiting to restore us. Rather than feeling guilty for growing cold, use this as an opportunity to come back to Him. Ignore the lies of the enemy that say we are too distant or too distracted to have joy and hope. The very hope of Christmas is that Jesus came for people

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who struggle, who lose their way, and who need Him more than ever.

If you are like me and struggle to remember all the incredible things God has done, I want to share an exercise that has helped me in remembering and seeing God's goodness. I will take my prayer journal and open it to previous prayers, and I begin to read what was on my heart at that time. Then, as I read, I take a highlighter and highlight answered prayers. The first time I did this, I was amazed at all the ways God had moved in my life. If you do not keep a prayer journal, consider starting one.

This season, let us return to the truth we know. Jesus is our Savior and came to bring light into our darkness. He is still Immanuel, God with us. Today and every day, He offers peace, joy, and hope. Let us allow that truth to warm our hearts once again. Then, rise to stand in awe of Who He is and what He has done. We are never alone, no matter how far away we may feel. God is faithful in reminding us of His goodness. God is faithful in restoring us, just as He has done from the very beginning.

CONTENTION FOR HEARTS

DEVOTION #4 | CHRIS FREZZA

Our enemy, Satan, is contending for our souls. He seeks a believer to **“devour,”** as 1 Peter 5:8 puts it. He does this with great tenacity in our culture and world because, as Revelation 12:12 says, **“He knows that his time is short!”** As believers seeking to please God with our lives, we can never let our guard down. Whether at work, school, or even at our church gatherings, the enemy has influences everywhere that are seeking to cause us to stumble into sin. Jude speaks to this contention for believers.

Jude 1:3-4 says, ***“Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.”***

Jude appears to have altered what he initially wanted to write about to instead send a strong message in response to the **“certain people”** who crept in. They were people who the enemy used to cause believers to go astray. The enemy is contending for your heart. Fortunately, there is another Who also makes contention for you.

A sign of a strong church is that there are people in it who are also contending for souls with a tenacity that exceeds our enemy's. Staff, leadership, and mature volunteers alike share this responsibility. In

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2 Peter chapter 1, Peter reminds the believers he is writing to about the qualities a believer has because of knowing the Lord Jesus Christ so that they can confirm their calling and election in Him. Particularly in verse 13, he says, ***“I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder.”*** He finds it necessary not to just let the course of life go on but to intentionally and purposefully stir up the church toward reflecting the glory of Christ in their hearts. The mature in Christ must be doing this with those earlier in their journey in the faith. The author of Hebrews puts it this way:

Hebrews 10:24-25 says, ***“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”***

The enemy knows we are most vulnerable when we are separated from each other both in physical proximity and in our alignment with Christ. If you are a believer established in the faith, do you seek to bring others together in the body of Christ? Do you speak boldly and contend for the hearts of younger believers the way Jude and Peter did? Think about how the Lord wants to use you to minister to others in your church. The enemy is making contention for the souls of our people, but God may want to use you to facilitate an even stronger contention for them. Be willing to be used by Him!

CONTENDING FOR YOUR FAITH

DEVOTION #5 | JILL OSMON

Christmas is often considered a season of peace and joy, but it can also bring with it unexpected challenges. The pressure to keep up with societal expectations of gifts, decorations, and holiday events can easily overwhelm us. The noise of a world focused on consumerism can drown out the true meaning of Christmas: the celebration of Christ's birth, love, and incredible gift of salvation.

I remember when I was a kid, Cabbage Patch Dolls were the hottest toy around. Parents would get into actual fistfights on Black Friday, all in the name of Christmas. Being with family can stir up emotions, whether it is challenging dynamics or when we are remembering loved ones who are not with us anymore. The different feelings that surface during the holidays can deeply affect our hearts. At times, this tension between the world's version of Christmas and the true meaning of the holiday can challenge our faith. Christmas, in its essence, is a reminder that God came into the world, humbling Himself to a manger, to offer us redemption. It is in the quiet of this truth that we find the power to contend for our faith. This is not just during the Christmas season but in all seasons of life.

We find in Jude this idea of contending for our faith. Verse 3 says, ***“Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”*** Verses 20 and 21 add, ***“But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.”***

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Contending for your faith means holding on to the hope we have in Jesus, no matter the circumstances. It means refusing to be swayed by distractions, whether that is family dynamics or misplaced priorities, that seek to overshadow His light. Jude encourages us to build ourselves ***“up in your most holy faith.”*** This requires intentional effort, especially when life becomes chaotic or when external pressures attempt to steal our peace. Christmas calls us to turn our focus toward Christ, the reason for this season, and allow His love to fuel us through the hustle and bustle.

Here are three ways to contend for your faith this Christmas.

1. **Center your heart on Jesus:** Amid the busyness, find quiet moments to reflect on the meaning of Christmas. Take time to read the Christmas story from Luke 2:1-20 or meditate on how Christ's birth changed the world and your life forever.
2. **Pray:** Prayer is a powerful way to stay connected with God. Ask Him for strength to resist distractions and peace that surpasses understanding. Allow His love to guard your heart as you navigate the season.
3. **Remember the eternal perspective:** Christmas points to an eternal truth that Jesus came to save us. When challenges arise or when you feel your faith being tested, remember that the story of Christ's birth is just the beginning. Our hope is not in what we have or do not have this season but in the unshakable truth of Christ's love for us.

As you contend for your faith this Christmas, remember that it is not about perfection. It is about keeping Christ at the center and allowing His presence to transform your heart, no matter the circumstances.

FINDING CHRIST IN THE CHAOS

DEVOTION #6 | DEBBIE GABBARA

Retail sales at Christmas time is certainly a battle that stores of all kinds are determined to win. My husband, Larry, experienced this firsthand during his retail career. Over the years, he became very calloused during the Christmas season. Early displays and chaotic shoppers gradually hardened his heart toward the real meaning of Christmas. He became crabby throughout November and December and often said how much he had grown to dislike the entire Christmas season. During his long work days, there were little, if any, reminders that Christmas was the celebration of the birth of Christ Jesus. In his work environment, Christmas was just aggravation and trucks full of extra merchandise that he did not want to deal with.

Ephesians 6:12 (NIV) says, ***“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”***

The Christian life is often depicted as a battle in Scripture. Satan wins when our focus shifts from the real meaning of Christmas and is moved to keeping us busy, feeling behind, or inadequate. Satan's goal is to distract us from the wonder found in the birth of the Savior of the world onto anything else that will keep us from telling people the Good News of Jesus. He is the reason for the season.

In 1 John 2:21 (NLT), we read, ***“So I am writing to you not because you don’t know the truth but because you know the difference between truth and lies.”***

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The truth is Jesus' birth would change the world forever, and Satan knew it. The evil one does not want us out telling anyone about the wonders of Christmas. The message is that Jesus, the Son of God, came to Earth, died for our sins, rose again, and brought salvation to all of humanity.

God, Who is the source of all truth, says that we know the difference between the truth and lies. God is truth. Scripture calls Satan ***“the father of lies.”*** Do not let Satan, the one who always lies, make your heart cold with stress and busyness. It is up to us to be intentional and vigilant to keep our focus on the true meaning of Christmas. Take time to remember Who and why we celebrate. Let the love and light of Jesus shine in your words and attitude as you navigate this Christmas season.

My husband retired from the retail world several years ago. I am so glad he has rediscovered the joy of Christmas. It is a reminder that even when we struggle, God's grace and love are always there to guide us back.

In 2 Thessalonians 3:16, Paul says, ***“Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every situation. The Lord be with you all.”***

REMEMBER

4

LUKE 2:1-21

The Birth of Jesus Christ

¹In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The Shepherds and the Angels

⁸And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹²And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

¹⁵When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary

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treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

²¹And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

NOTES

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GAMOPHOBIA

DEVOTION #1 | DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

Gamophobia comes from the Greek word “gamos,” which means marriage, and “phobos,” meaning fear. It can be the fear of marriage, but it is defined as larger than that; it is the fear of commitment.

Psalm 37:5 says, ***“Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act.”*** Following the Lord is the key to success. The verse even says, ***“He will act.”*** When we choose to follow the Lord, He will get involved. He will show up. David uses several other directives in writing this chapter: ***“Trust in the LORD”*** (verse 3), ***“Delight yourself in the LORD”*** (verse 4), and ***“Be still before the LORD”*** (verse 7). Commitment is essential and involves focus and a willingness to act.

Pilate was not willing to commit to the Lord. He knew Jesus was innocent but folded. Matthew 27:24 says, ***“So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.’”*** It is sad. Pilate was self-reflecting and ***“saw that he was gaining nothing.”*** Pilate was committed to himself. It did not end well for him. He had an excellent opportunity to step up and take a stand for the Lord. He cowered. He probably did not want to lose his position, financial status, and “upright” reputation.

Charles Stanley has said, “Too many Christians have a commitment of convenience. They’ll stay faithful as long as it’s safe and doesn’t involve risk, rejection, or criticism. Instead of standing alone in the face of challenge or temptation, they check to see which way their

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friends are going.” We need to be willing to step outside of our comfort zone and make a difference in the lives of people we know and those we do not know yet. The legendary football coach, Vince Lombardi, made a statement about his football team that relates to the church, “Individual commitment to a group effort - that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work.” Together, we are better. We need to commit to the Lord, His work, and His people.

Zig Ziglar adds, “It was character that got us out of bed, commitment that moved us into action, and discipline that enabled us to follow through.”

NOMOPHOBIA

DEVOTION #2 | PASTOR NOBLE BAIRD

In 1983, the world was introduced to the first commercially available cell phone. The DynaTAC 8000 hit retail shelves in 1984 at the low price of \$3,995! Amazingly, this phone had a battery life of 30 minutes of talk time and only took 10 hours to charge. Fast forward over four decades, and over 95% of Americans own a cellphone, with 75% being smartphones. As our culture here in America continues to grow, become more fast-paced, and our schedules continue to fill, we have become dependent on these little devices in our pockets.

For many of us, it is through these busy schedules that we are able to provide for our families and able to give back to God a portion of the blessing He has given us. However, in this fast-paced culture, we can often forget to take a step back and breathe. In Psalm 46:10, David writes (as God is speaking through him), ***“Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!”*** Jesus understood what it meant to be still. Yes, He had a busy schedule during His ministry here on Earth. He was constantly traveling, speaking, healing, and He had twelve men He was discipling the whole way! However, countless times throughout the New Testament, we read of how Jesus took time to rest, pray, and remember His Father who was in control of it all.

Nomophobia is the fear of being out of cell signal range or without our cell phones. If I am completely honest, there have been times in my life when this fear was very real. However, when I remember the words of David and the actions of Christ, that fear is taken away. Now, I am not saying that cell phones are evil and we should not have them. Being in ministry, my phone has given me the ability to

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pray with people who are hundreds of miles away, video chat with my missionary friends overseas, and has helped me get to Canada and back without a big, outdated map! Yet, this reminder to be still is crucial in the business of the world we live in. So, as you continue your week, I challenge you to take some time to set your phone down and truly just disconnect. Take some time to pray, rest, and remember the One who is in control. Be still.

PANOPHOBIA

DEVOTION #3 | DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

Panophobia or Pantophobia comes from the Greek words “pan” or “panto,” meaning “all,” and “phobos,” meaning fear. It is the fear of all or everything. The word “panic” is derived from the name of the Greek god Pan. This is the fear that is associated with panic or anxiety. It is the fear that something bad is going to happen.

You have probably heard this quote before, even though we do not know who said it, “I do not know what the future holds, but I know who holds the future.” Take a moment and think through that phrase. Tomorrow might catch us off guard, but it will not catch God by surprise. Romans 8:28 says, ***“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”*** We do not know what tomorrow may bring, but God is there. He is in control. He has a plan. He is watching out for us. Going further into Romans chapter 8, we read, ***“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”*** God held His Word to provide salvation for us. He will provide for us in the future. Abraham had to experience anxiety in offering up his son Isaac, but God showed up. Abraham felt so blessed that he named the place, ***“The LORD will provide”*** (Genesis 22:14).

The key is to “let go, and let God.” It is the mindset that we give control of our lives to the Lord. We stop pushing our personal agendas and seek His plans. Proverbs 3:5-6 says, ***“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all***

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your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.” Trust God with today and tomorrow. Give Him full access to your resources and your calendar. He will make them better.

Finally, Jeremiah 29:11 adds, ***“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.”***

THANATOPHOBIA

DEVOTION #4 | PASTOR NOBLE BAIRD

Thanatophobia. If I were a betting man, I would bet that this is a fear with which a majority of the world struggles. This fear is the fear of death. At the time of writing this devotional, noon, it is estimated that there have already been a total of almost 80,000 deaths in the world today. We have all experienced the effects of death in some capacity. Whether it be the loss of a family member, friend, co-worker, teacher, or maybe a favorite public figure, we have all suffered because of death. However, thanatophobia is a fear that can be overcome.

In Genesis chapter 3, we have what is often referred to as “The Fall.” This was the time in our history when Adam and Eve were overcome by temptation and sinned against God. From that moment, sin entered the perfect world that God had created. As a penalty for this sin, death also entered into our world. As God’s Word and our history have unfolded over the course of thousands of years, life and death have been a constant. As new life enters our world, life also leaves it. Fast forward to the night when angels rejoiced and shepherds traveled to worship a King; God gave us a Savior who would pay the penalty for a fear which has plagued this world since it became corrupt. As we read through the Gospels, we see our Savior Jesus conquering over death. He came with a purpose and a plan, which was fulfilled at the cross and in the tomb that was emptied three days later.

Death is very real, and if I am honest with all of you, it has been a fear that I struggled with at a time in my life. Yet, when I take a step back and remember the Savior who conquered death for me before

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I was even born, I am reminded of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15:55, "***O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?***" As I finish writing today, the death count has now risen to an estimated 82,000. Yes, death is very real, and yes, it is scary. However, as followers of Christ, death should not give us fear but a sense of urgency. It is an urgency to proclaim the Gospel and to make sure that we do everything within our power to share the message and love of our amazing Savior who conquered the fear that plagues so many in our world today. So, when you have those times of fear, take a step back and proclaim those words boldly as Paul did, for we have already won the war, and we will spend eternity with our Savior! "***O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?***"

GOT GOD?

DEVOTION #5 | DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

George Washington made one of the most powerful statements I have ever heard, “It is impossible to govern the world without God and the Bible.” That does not sound like the separation of church and state. The government may not need the church, but President Washington understood it needed God and His Word. Romans 13:1 tells us that government was established by God, **“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.”** The government is there to protect us; however, our salvation comes from God. Psalm 118:14 says, **“The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.”** We should not expect the government to be our strength or salvation.

The First Amendment reads, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.” It was and is important to protect the church from the state. Our founding fathers knew they needed God and focused a lot of our laws and structure based on the Bible. There should be no strife between church and state.

In 1 Timothy 2:1-2 (NIV), Paul says, **“I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people - for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”** We need to pray for those in authority. It is not about political party; it is about God and His Word. These verses use some very key words:

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peaceful, quiet, godliness, and holiness. Peace and quiet are tied to morality and character, which is directed and orchestrated by the work of those in authority. The best way to support our authority is prayer. Prayer is so important that the passage is almost redundant: ***“petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving.”*** We need to pray.

As a pastor, there is a very common phrase I hear people at a funeral or going through a tragedy say, “I do not know how people who do not know God would get through this.” God brings peace and direction. We need God; a key way to know God is His Word. As President Washington said, we need God and His Word.

John Witherspoon, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, said, “I entreat you in the most earnest manner to believe in Jesus Christ, for there is no salvation in any other... (Acts 4:12). If you are not reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, if you are not clothed with the spotless robe of His righteousness, you must forever perish.”

MORAL LAW

DEVOTION #6 | DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

“If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” 2 Chronicles 7:14

The United States of America needs Jesus. It was founded on Christian principles. God has blessed America. We need to make sure people do not rewrite the past, ignoring our God. We also need to get our focus back on God. Pray for a revival.

The sixth President of the United States, John Quincy Adams, said, “The highest glory of the American Revolution was this... it connected in one indissoluble bond the principles of civil government with the principles of Christianity.”

Paragraph two of the Declaration of Independence famously starts, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Please catch the phrase, “truths to be self-evident.” We are born with an innate sense of right and wrong. It lends itself to the idea of fixed standards and absolute truth.

C.S. Lewis argued for the existence of God based on this moral law in his book, *“Mere Christianity.”* It can be summarized as this:

1. There is a universal Moral Law.
2. If there is a universal Moral Law, there is a Moral Law-giver.

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3. If there is a Moral Law-giver, it must be something beyond the universe.
4. Therefore, there is something beyond the universe.

Exodus chapter 20 and Deuteronomy chapter 5 both contain the Ten Commandments. Some have said Moses is the biggest sinner of all time because he broke all Ten Commandments in three seconds (remember, he threw the first set down because of the sin of the people, so God rewrote them). It is interesting to see that countries that do not have a copy of the Bible in their language already have a sense of what is right and what is wrong. Even the 1% biker gangs have a “set of rules.” Moral Law exists.

Only a fool would say, “There are no absolutes” (as that is an absolute in itself). A friend of mine was in college when the professor said, “There are no absolutes.” All he said in response was, “Absolutely.” The professor scowled at him, saying, “We are not going there.” There are absolutes. There is truth. God’s Word is the truth (John 17:17), and the truth will set us free (John 8:32).

As our country becomes more and more liberal, we need to hold to the truth. This age of tolerance weakens the mind as one is expected to believe that opposing theories are both right. Some things and thoughts are wrong. We need to share the truth in love. Mercy and truth are walking hand in hand.

OUR VISION

Matthew 28:19-20: ***“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”***

REACH

At The River Church, you will often hear the phrase, “We don’t go to church, we are the Church.” We believe that as God’s people, our primary purpose and goal is to go out and make disciples of Jesus Christ. We encourage you to reach the world in your local communities.

GATHER

The goal of weekend gatherings at The River Church is to glorify Christ in all we do! Whether it be through singing, giving, serving, or any of the variety of ways He has gifted us and called us together, Jesus is at the center of it all. We celebrate that when followers of Christ gather together in unity, it’s not only a refresher, it brings life-change!

GROW

Our Growth Communities are designed to mirror the early church in Acts as having ***“all things in common.”*** They are smaller collections of believers who spend time together studying the Word, knowing and caring for one another relationally, and learning to increase their commitment to Christ by holding one another accountable.

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