



“I sometimes worry that daily devotional books, while being strong on devotion, give up something in terms of theology. It does not need to be this way, and David Mathis, in this Advent devotional, proves that true devotion arises out of theologically rich truth. We are to ‘grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ’—I think this excellent little book helps us to do just that.”

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“No Advent calendars for sale this Christmas can offer what lies behind the windows David Mathis opens in *The Christmas We Didn't Expect*. True to its title, it is full of surprises. So, buy it, and carefully unwrap each Advent treat (no more than one a day, or you may spoil your appetite). Then let it melt slowly on your spiritual taste buds and enjoy what Isaiah (the Christmas prophet) called ‘rich food!’”

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“For many, the familiar surfaces of the Christmas story cover unexamined depths. Within this warmly devotional and richly theological book, David Mathis meditates upon some of the great truths of the season, exploring wonderful mysteries that will encourage readers to hear its two-thousand-year-old story once again, as if for the first time.”

ALASTAIR ROBERTS, Author, *Echoes of Exodus*

“While the people, places and plot line of that first Christmas will ring familiar, there are surprising realities surrounding the birth, life, and death of our Savior Jesus that will make your heart sing. With accessible and pastoral prose, Mathis weaves together biblical, doctrinal, and practical truths into a beautiful tapestry that not only introduces us to the many important truths surrounding Jesus’ person and work but also reveals why they are so vital to our daily walk with God.”

JULIUS J. KIM, President, The Gospel Coalition; Visiting Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Seminary California

“Theologically rich. Heartwarming and profound. David Mathis is a sure guide to both the simplicity and the complexity of Christ’s coming, and he leads us in a way which is deeply thoughtful, refreshingly insightful and thoroughly worshipful. This daily devotional manages to be soaring and searing at the same time. It will cause you to marvel at the Lord Jesus Christ and to think long and hard about what (and how) we’re celebrating, and it will breathe new life into the Christmas season. I look forward to using it and pray that others will do the same.”

GARY MILLAR, Principal, Queensland Theological College

“Christmas contains so many delightful surprises, whether presents tucked secretly under the tree or much-loved visitors arriving at your door with arms full of gifts. These delights pale in comparison, though, to the astounding surprises you’ll discover in *The Christmas We Didn’t Expect*. David Mathis reveals fascinating twists and turns on every page of the Christmas story. There is always something new to learn about Christ’s birth, and this fresh collection of insights truly delivers. My husband, Ken, and I are already planning to use this remarkable book for our devotional reading this Christmas—and we urge you to join us!”

JONI EARECKSON TADA, Joni and Friends International Disability Center

To Gloria

The Christmas We Didn't Expect
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Published by:
The Good Book Company



thegoodbook.com | thegoodbook.co.uk
thegoodbook.com.au | thegoodbook.co.nz | thegoodbook.co.in

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ISBN: 9781784984762 | Printed in the UK

Design by André Parker

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PREFACE

A SEASON OF WAITING

Advent is a season of waiting. Children know well how long the wait for Christmas can be, but modern adults are prone to find our lives moving all too fast. Yet Advent is an ancient invitation to slow down. To mark the days and make them count. To relearn a pace of life that is more unhurried and more human. To not let the 24 hours of Christmas Day catch us off guard and unprepared. And to wait for Christmas with patience and hope.

The English word “advent” is from the Latin *adventus*, meaning “arrival” or “coming.” The advent primarily in view each December is the first coming of Jesus, now two millennia ago, and as we look back we are reminded as well of his promise to return.

OPPORTUNITY, NOT OBLIGATION

To be clear, God has not mandated that we celebrate Advent. Or Christmas. Or Easter. Or any other particular

feasts and festivals, in contrast to believers in the Old Testament (Exodus 23:14-17; 34:18-23). For early Christians, especially those raised in the Jewish faith, the surprising newness of the new-covenant age was important to learn and reinforce. This is because, under pressure from fellow Jews, young Christians were observing old-covenant festivals as obligatory, and therefore in a way that undermined the exclusive sufficiency of Christ. They needed to be told, “Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (Colossians 2:16-17).

Few of us today may struggle consciously with the same religious pressure that these early Christians felt. But the apostolic warnings remain important. Observing Advent, or any other calendar season or date, does not secure or keep us in God’s favor. Christ has finished that work, and, through his Spirit, we are joined to him, receiving the Father’s full acceptance by faith alone.

THIS BOOK

My prayer, then, is that this collection of daily meditations might help you and your kin keep Jesus as the central and greatest treasure of the Advent season and the Christmas that follows. In particular, in the pages ahead, I want to rehearse the surprising twists and stunning turns of God himself being born as man. In this season of waiting—as we wait with *expectant* hope—I want to highlight how much of that first Christmas

teemed with the *unexpected*. From the way Jesus came, to who he really is, to the details of his arrival, the first visitors, and then the life that would follow, and how we are called to respond—it was all so unexpected. Over and over again at Christmas, God shows us the distance between the depths of his wisdom and the shallowness of our human expectations.

So I invite you to join me for this Advent. If you're picking this up before December 1, there's an introduction to read perhaps on November 30 or before, or anytime during the month. Then one reading each day, December 1-24, will aim to turn our gaze to Christ and ready our hearts for the feast to come.

David Mathis

Minneapolis, Minnesota

INTRODUCTION

GOD CAME DOWN

*You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his
people from their sins.*

Matthew 1:21

The allure of Christmas has a strange power, even for the unbelieving and seemingly secularized. The season has a kind of draw—a type of “spirit” or “magic”—that makes the winter-solstice festival every bit as big today, in an increasingly post-Christian society, as it was generations ago.

Why does Christmas still have this magnetism in a society that has tried to empty it of its true meaning? The real magic of Christmas is not in gifts and goodies, new toys and familiar traditions, indoor coziness and outdoor snow. What lies at the heart of Christmas, and whispers even to souls seeking to “suppress the truth” (Romans 1:18), is the most stunning and significant fact in the history of the world: *that God himself became one of us.*

The God who created our world, and humanity as

the apex of his creation, came into our world as human not just for show but for our salvation.

Christmas is supernatural. And our secular society is starving deep down for something beyond the natural, rarely admitting it, and not really knowing why. Christmas taps into something hidden in the human soul and woos us, even when it's inconsistent with a mind that professes unbelief.

HE CAME FROM HEAVEN

For those of us who do gladly confess the Christ of Christmas—as our Lord, Savior, and greatest treasure—we know why Christmas is indeed enchanted; because at the very heart is the essence of the supernatural: God himself entering into our realm. At Christmas God “came down,” not just to observe human sin and inflict righteous judgment from the outside (Genesis 11:5) but to be human and work his mercy from within.

The glory of Christmas is not that it marks the birth of some great religious leader but that it celebrates the long-anticipated coming of God himself—the arrival which God wired our souls from the beginning to ache for. “Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes” (Psalm 96:12-13). “Bethlehem ... from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days” (Micah 5:2).

What God so stunningly reveals at that first Noël is that when he himself finally does come, it is not in cloud or wind or fire or earthquake, or even simply in a still,

small voice (1 Kings 19:11-12). But he comes in the fullness of his creation: as human. He comes as one of us and dignifies our own species in doing so. He comes not as a bird of the air, beast of the field, or great sea creature. Christmas marks his “being born in the likeness of men”—the very God who made man, and has long endured our sin with great patience, is now scandalously “found in human form” (Philippians 2:7-8).

HE CAME AS A SERVANT

It is wonder enough that he came down at all. But when he did, he came not in human glory and comfort and prestige but “emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant” (Philippians 2:7). He came not only as a creature but in poverty, in weakness, in humility.

For a brief moment, on the hill of his transfiguration, three of his disciples caught a glimpse of the divine-human glory for which he was destined. “He was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light” (Matthew 17:2). But the Jesus they knew, day in and day out, on the roads of backwater Galilee, was no dignitary. “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). His disciples learned firsthand that “even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:45).

ALL THE WAY TO DEATH

Such service extended, and deepened, far beyond the mere inconveniences of life into costly self-sacrifice—

even the final sacrifice. He came not just to serve but “to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

It was one thing to wash his men’s feet in the upper room. It was another thing to rise from supper, lead them out to the garden, wait in agony for his captors, and walk alone the literally excruciating path that foot-washing anticipated: “He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8).

TO RESCUE HIS PEOPLE

But this was no mere descent from heaven, even to death. This was descent for a purpose. This was humility on mission. The death that God himself came to die was no accident of history. He came to die and live again. The extent of his people’s rebellion was matched, and surpassed, only by the extent of his final sacrifice. And in offering that sacrifice he showed us the very heart of love—his own and his Father’s. “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

The “magic” of Christmas is not just that God himself came from heaven as man. And it is not just that he humbled himself as a servant to meet the needs of others. And it’s not even just that he came to die: to unfold his service all the way to death. The magic is that he came down, and did all that, to rescue us. Such was the promise of God’s messenger at the time of announcing Jesus’ birth: “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

The Christmas We Didn't Expect

He came down to rescue us from sin and restore us to the ultimate joy for which we were made: to know and enjoy him. He came to reconcile us “to himself” (Colossians 1:20). He came not to supply us with the bells and whistles of a commercial Christmas, but he “suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, *that he might bring us to God*” (1 Peter 3:18).

Father in heaven, this Advent seal deep within our souls the meaning of this coming. Jesus came not to entertain. He came not merely to make the greatest story. He came to restore us rebels to our God. Advent is personal. Draw us closer in these days ahead to the heart of Christ, which is your own heart, and make his first advent in all its realness and substance more real in the lives we live. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

An
Unexpected
Birth

1. A CHRISTMAS CAROL FOR THE WEAK

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*

Luke 1:46-47

For too long, I misunderstood Mary's Christmas song in Luke 1:46-55 as if it were a journal entry from a peasant girl. After all, I thought, Mary must have understood so little at this point, right?

An angel had told her that she would bear God's long-awaited king (Luke 1:32-33), and that her relative Elizabeth also had miraculously conceived (Luke 1:36). Mary is stunned, no doubt, at these unexpected graces and goes with haste to visit her relative (Luke 1:39), and yet she still seems to know so little when she offers her song of praise.

However, the Gospel writer, Luke, does not treat Mary's poetic words as a mere aside. They are the high point of his first chapter. As the rest of his Gospel makes plain, Luke stewarded what tight space he had with great care, not as an unbiased reporter but as an

inspired spokesman for the risen Christ. And while Mary's "Magnificat," as the church has come to call her song (based on its first word in Latin), may sound strange to us today compared with other carols, her lyrics represent some of the most important Christmas lines ever penned.

They give us one of the most profound glimpses into the heart of God in all the Scriptures. (Perhaps you might want to pause and read Luke 1:46-55 before going any further.)

MARY'S MAGNIFICENT SONG

The song has three distinct parts. The opening lines (v 46-47) declare what Mary is doing in the hymn: praising God. Then (v 48-49) she explains why: because of what God has done for her. Finally, the bulk of her song (v 49-55) marvels at the *surprising* glory of her God, significant not only to her at that first Christmas but to all his people, all the time.

That final section (v 49-55), which is remarkably God-centered (he is the subject of every verb), is the heart of Mary's hymn and is a celebration of God and his ways, which are so counter to our natural human expectations. Mary celebrates the kind of God he is: different than our instincts and shattering our paradigms as he shows his strength not by recruiting the strong but by rescuing the weak.

When Mary gives the reason for her praise (v 48-49), it is curiously general. As such it follows the pattern of the Psalms. This is emphatically not a personal journal

entry, but a song designed for the people of God, in all places, for generations to come.

GOD'S SURPRISING GLORY

Here, as a skilled theologian—or simply as one well-steeped in the Scriptures (compare Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2)—Mary holds up the heart of God's holiness ("holy is his name," Luke 1:49): that he is, in himself, of an order altogether different and greater than his creatures. He consistently acts contrary to our human intuitions. His thoughts are not our thoughts, nor his ways our ways, but they are higher—as high as the heavens are above the earth (Isaiah 55:8-9). This God rallies to the weak, not the strong.

He chooses what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. He chooses what is weak in the world to shame the strong. He chooses "what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not"—like a forgotten town called Nazareth and an unwed young woman carrying a child conceived without a human father—"to bring to nothing things that are" (1 Corinthians 1:27-28). He humbles the strong and magnifies his strength by exalting the weak. Christmas turns the world upside down.

Hasn't this been our experience of this God and his world? Over and over again, just when we think we have figured him out with our infinitesimally small minds, he shatters our assumptions and plans. He turns our world on its head. Mary's own son will literally embody this peculiar glory of God. And for those of us with eyes to see, like Mary, it is marvelous: the

very wisdom of God, worth celebrating in song and in a life of praise.

GOD MAGNIFIED IN OUR REJOICING

But even before her celebration of God's rescue of the weak, Mary begins with an insight that we should not overlook. Her opening lines not only celebrate *that* God magnifies his strength in the weaknesses of his people but also *how*. How is God magnified in us? Not through human pride and confidence, nor through human wealth and strength, but through the humble heart that rejoices in him.

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit
rejoices in God my Savior. (Luke 1:46-47)*

This is a life-changing lyric—not just at Christmas but for all of life. God is magnified in his weak people when we, like Mary, rejoice in him. The two are connected. God is shown to be magnificent in Mary as she rejoices in him—because we magnify, or honor, or glorify what or whom we enjoy.

We see a glimpse in Mary's song of what John Piper has called "Christian Hedonism," and its central insight that "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him." This is not a peripheral truth for Mary, or at Christmas, or at any time of year, but it is endlessly relevant and will be so eternally for God's people as we grow in and expand and deepen our enjoyment of God.

WHAT CHRISTMAS SINGS ABOUT GOD

We would do well this Advent to listen carefully to Mary's strange song—strange to humans attuned to the music of the world but thrilling to those who have an ear for the God who is, rather than the one of our imaginations.

Neither Mary's song nor Christmas itself is a marginal revelation of the true God. Christmas is a window into his very heart. He does indeed look, with mercy, on those who own their humble estate, to exalt them—while he looks, with terrifying justice, on the prideful, to humble them. And for those of us who are weak and heavy laden, God's ways are marvelous in our eyes and music to our ears.

Father, you humble the proud and exalt the humble, and we stand in awe. We recognize that the way we feel fragile, exhausted, and burdened this Advent may mean we are right where you want us. You sent your Son to help the weak and weary. Open our eyes to the weaknesses we try to ignore and cover over. In your Son, we are safe to own them, and come humbly to you, to rejoice in you and your strong arms, not ours. Magnify yourself in us this season through our rejoicing in you and your Son. In his name we pray. Amen.