



Daily Devotionals – December 25 to December 31, 2021

By Dr. Charles Qualls and Rev. Steve Gibson -- Franklin Baptist Church

December 25 - Titus 2:11-14

by Rev. Steven R. Gibson

God's Grace Revealed

11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, 12 training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, 13 while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. 14 He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Devotion:

The appointed Epistle lesson for Christmas Day is a pleasant reminder of the necessity of Jesus Christ. The ability to live as a Christian comes from the Holy Spirit. It is because of the death of Christ that we have the ability to be rescued from our sin. We are freed from the power of sin because of the sacrifice of Christ. "So God imparts to human hearts the wonders of his heaven." (O Little Town of Bethlehem, stanza 3, # 107 Celebrating Grace) God gives us the power to live according to his will and to do good. This ability comes from God because of the completed work of Christ, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. If this is our pattern, then we anticipate Christ's return with hope and expectation.

It is not enough to renounce evil and sinful desires, we must live actively for God and God's glory. As the old hymn states, "Yield not to temptation because yielding is sin." (Horatio Jefferson Palmer, 1868) This yielding is not confined to a single event, it is a lifelong process in which we renounce sin and say yes to active service for Christ.

The redeeming work of Christ sets in motion the opportunity for us to be purified. To be purified indicates that we are not only freed from sin's death sentence, but we are also purified from sin's influence as our faith in Christ grows.

I'm not certain about you, but I feel the need for purification. I need purification from the thoughts that creep into my mind. I need purification from the misconceptions and judgements that I often make of others. I need purification so that the birth of Christ will once again be magical and hopeful. I need purification from the effects of Covid-19. Friends, if you find yourself in need of purification, remember the words of Titus 2:11 "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all...".

Prayer:

Be near us, Lord Jesus, I ask Thee to stay close by me forever and love me, I pray. Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care, and fit us for heaven, to live with Thee there. Amen. (John Thomas McFarland, 1892)

December 26 - John 1:1-14

by Dr. Charles Qualls

And The Word Became Flesh

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Devotion:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us.

I want to pick up on and repeat a line I used in the Christmas Eve service. Henri Nouwen's skillfully expressed notion that in Christmas God didn't do what we humans normally do. We are geared, from our enculturation, to try to move upward. Especially economically, but also in other ways, we think we must always climb.

Nouwen says, "God, instead, thought of life as moving downward."

God noticed our plight, our need, and decided to live among us. *And the Word became flesh and lived among us.* God saw that we needed to be transformed. *And the Word became flesh and lived among us.* God saw that we needed a light to shine into the darkness. *And the Word became flesh and lived among us.*

I hope in some small way this Advent and Christmas time you have caught a glimpse of the Christ child. Maybe someone spoke Christ into your life. Maybe you had your own chance to visit benevolence, goodness, forgiveness or hope into someone's life. I hope you have seen the Word that became flesh and lived among us.

That is what can happen at Christmas, in 2020 or in any other year. My prayer is that you have experienced love, hope, peace and joy in these days. If so, you have much for which to be thankful.

Prayer:

God of our hardship and Lord of our ease, whatever the reality of our 2020 has been, may you preside over it all. Lead us forward with hope that believes! Amen.

December 27 - Galatians 4:4-7

by Dr. Charles Qualls

Beyond Our Enslavement

4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. 6 And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" 7 So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Devotion:

In part, that's what we celebrated this Christmas. Any other Christmas, too.

That the fullness of time did come, and God sent a Son to redeem humanity. The “fullness of time” is a mystery we’ll never solve, you know. God’s understanding of time and circumstance form a concoction we don’t know how to measure nor to make. But, it is a good thing for us to have awareness of in our spirits.

The fullness of time.

So, Christmas is more than just a baby being born. It is the hope found in why that baby showed up. For all of us were, and still are, under the law somehow. In his time, “the Law” was the collective Mosaic law that dominated the religious system. The Church had become enslaved to the keeping of that law, and the bean-counters held all the power. The more laws you could add, the more power you had over everyone who was doomed to failure.

Today, you and I will cry out still, “Abba! Father!” For we are enslaved to other laws. Laws that we can describe or discuss. Laws that operate in more spiritual or relational realms that may be beyond us. So, we still need the gift that the Christ Child gave in showing up. Because of him, we can move beyond our enslavement if we will choose to. We can even become “children” and heirs of God’s grace and eternity.

Will you remember to give thanks for that next Christmas?

Prayer:

God of our hopes, instill in us a gratitude that lasts. Stir our hearts in appreciation for what a small child brought to us. Amen.

December 28 - Matthew 2:13-18

by Dr. Charles Qualls

The Escape to Egypt and Massacre of Infants

13 Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, 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.”

14 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, 15 and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. 17 Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

18 “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

Devotion:

Wait. Whaa...?! Jesus in Egypt?

I know that some of you are well acquainted with this part of Jesus’ story. But for others, we just broke news. Let’s take a second and catch up on this just now. V16 really gives us the best context for the whole thing. Herod realized he’d been tricked by the Wise Men. They had figured out that he only wanted to find the Baby Jesus so that he could eliminate this child. You will remember that they “went home by another way” so as not to have to report to him what they had found.

In his fury, in his blatant and rabid insecurity, Herod ordered the death of all the children around Bethlehem who were two years old and younger. This is unthinkable, and the Bible narrates itself here to point out a

prophecy this fulfilled. Jeremiah had predicted a time when Ramah and Rachel would be weeping inconsolably for the loss of children there.

Ramah was a city within the territorial land of the tribe of Benjamin. It was just north of Bethlehem. Rachel, beloved wife of Jacob, was the ancestral mother of Benjamin. In fact, she died in childbirth while having him on the road near Bethlehem. She was buried at Ramah after they had journeyed on just a little farther. So, her son Benjamin was both the cause of her death and the cause for her to die in hope for the future.

Rachel, well-known and ever a symbol of motherhood in Bethlehem, is seen as watching over the Israelites. Now, at the slaughter of these innocents, her memory cries out again. Matthew digs back to Jeremiah's prophecy for this note. Meanwhile, Jesus was already safely spirited away. It is thought that the holy family lived for a time, perhaps three years, in the large Egyptian city of Alexandria. Upon Herod's death, they were given the all-clear to leave Egypt.

This brief text today illustrates the unfairness or evil that can be found in life. But also the hope that God is constantly moving proactively. God is ahead of us. Bringing life and connection, hope and provision to our world. Jesus would grow up to become our Savior, having found ironic shelter in a country that had once enslaved his ancestors.

Prayer:

Lord, what you do among us can boggle the mind. Help us to have trust that you are moving ahead of us and faster than we may sometimes see. You are accomplishing your purposes while we adjust to the realities of life itself. Amen.

December 29 - Matthew 12:46-50

by Dr. Charles Qualls

The True Kindred of Jesus

46 While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. 47 Someone told him, "Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." 48 But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" 49 And pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! 50 For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Devotion:

Isn't that the whole point? Especially during a season like Advent, aren't we working to be the true kindred of Jesus?

This is Matthew's telling of an incident that is also told in Mark's and Luke's gospels. Each presents this story from a slightly different angle, emphasizing varying details while leaving others out. The story can be uncomfortable -- at least to me -- in all of them.

To state that his followers are his family, especially those we readily identify as Jesus' "disciples," is to imply that his traditional (read: biological) relatives are not. Jesus was entering a crucial stretch of his pre-crucifixion ministry here. He was laying down his teachings and his identity in matter-of-fact fashion. He had little time nor inclination to let distractions sideline him.

Two things to take away here, at least. First, "chosen" family can be so vital to our healthy lives. Jesus' closest and most loyal followers were surrounding him. Sometimes, for a season or for a lifetime, our blood kindred may not be. The gospels suggest that Jesus' own family had a stretch where they may have felt caught in-between Jesus' ministry and their own standing within the Temple culture. They may have struggled to get on board with Jesus' own movement compared with his disciples.

Second, his chosen family sustained him with trust, company and service. Perhaps Jesus spent more time at Bethany, for instance, and less time in Galilee after his home folks rejected him in the Synagogue. Here now, in our text, Jesus lays out his truth. Those who opposed him, even those he loved, were not his priority. Those who might even lovingly hold him back were now going to have to take a seat on the sideline. Nothing would thwart the movement of God long-term. Jesus sends a signal here that dedication to God makes us true kindred. Anything less leaves us behind.

Prayer:

Lord, we seek to be your true kindred. Nudge us with your Spirit to understand that our faith is about more than just believing. Your true kindred surround you and are with you. Amen.

December 30 - Psalm 148
by Rev. Steven R. Gibson
Praise for God's Universal Glory

¹ Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights!

² Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!

³ Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!

⁴ Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!

⁵ Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created.

⁶ He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

⁷ Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, ⁸ fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!

⁹ Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!

¹⁰ Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!

¹¹ Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!

¹² Young men and women alike, old and young together!

¹³ Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven.

¹⁴ He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the Lord!

Devotion:

As we approach the end of the year, many thoughts race through our minds. Thanksgiving, Advent and Christmas provided a little glimmer of hope during this pandemic. Celebrations were scaled back, at best and many were just cancelled out of an abundance of caution. The friendship rituals were eerily missing -- the embraces between friends and family were nonexistent.

Challenges were many in our community with increased pressures on families and businesses. Even our church was closed to in-person worship, but thankfully has now reopened. While in-person worship is better than staying at home, the ban on singing carols adds to the lack of normalcy. In addition to all of that, it was not safe to share in one of the most loved Christmas traditions -- sharing in passing the light via candles on

Christmas Eve. But all of these beloved traditions were temporarily suspended in order to save lives. So we end the year with many thoughts on our minds, and also have anticipation for the year 2021.

What do people do when their hopes are dashed? How do we respond to radical adversity? How are we able to share the light of Christ in such a time? I believe that we need to remember how God has provided for us in times past. I believe that today's Psalm has clues to help us begin the New Year with a new attitude.

Psalm 148, a Psalm of praise, calls all of creation to praise God. This Psalm sums up the theological heart of the psalter -- God reigns! In spite of all of the hardships of the people of Israel, they are called to praise God. The praise of God includes the following: The beings and inhabitants of the heavens, the heavens themselves, animate and inanimate objects, sun and moon and stars. All of the heavenly beings are called to praise God's name -- that is God's essential character and purposes, representing God's very self. God's character and purpose are revealed in God's acts in creation and are the basis for praise. We recall that God's mode of creation was by his speech.

Then the praise resounds from the earth and all of its inhabitants. Reminiscent of the creation account in Genesis, the crowning focus is on humanity. This is achieved when humans recognize the ultimate sovereignty of God.

Why do we praise God? People have been given the opportunity to exercise "dominion" over the earth in the same way that God exercises power: as a servant. We fulfill our vocation by praising God, that is in imitating God.

By having this Psalm in the Christmas season, the church affirms that Jesus Christ both announced and embodied God's reign in the form of a servant and a suffering servant at that. This Psalm anticipates that the Christian who greets Jesus as Lord is to recognize God's sovereign claim on our lives. To praise God is to join Jesus in the power of the suffering servanthood. For this reason, Psalm 148 is a Psalm for all seasons.

Prayer:

As we approach the end of the year 2020, we ask you O God that next year might be different. Give your people hope and perseverance as we seek to serve you. Amen.

December 31 - John 8:12-19
by Rev. Steven R. Gibson
Jesus the Light of the World

¹² Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." ¹³ Then the Pharisees said to him, "You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid." ¹⁴ Jesus answered, "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. ¹⁵ You judge by human standards; I judge no one. ¹⁶ Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is valid; for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me.

¹⁷ In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. ¹⁸ I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf." ¹⁹ Then they said to him, "Where is your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also."

Devotion:

It is early on December 12 and I am writing at my kitchen table with fresh coffee in my cup. The darkness of the night is slowly giving way the promise of another day with the sun peeking ever so slightly. Then I open my text for this day, and it hits me -- just as the light of the world approaches the horizon, the true light of the world approaches us.

John's Gospel is famous for its "I am" statements: I am the light of the world is such an example. More than forty times we encounter the "I am" statements in this Gospel. Exactly what was Jesus trying to achieve with these statements? Jesus is telling us that he is connected to God, and so are his works connected to God's works.

The Jewish Festival, the Feast of the Tabernacles, is the historical basis for this passage. And in this passage the Gospel writer equates Jesus with light. This feast was celebrated in the fall giving thanks to God for the harvest. This festival also recalled Israel's wandering in the desert following the exodus from Egypt. Lampstands were in the Temple, symbolizing the light of God on this and other Jewish holy days.

At the time of this writing, the temple no longer existed but the writer recalls a time when the temple held a central place in Jewish life. When Jesus states "I am the light of the world," he links himself to both the temple and a symbol of the presence of God. In effect, Jesus is the light of God on full display for all to see.

Jesus as the light of the world first appeared in this Gospel in Chapter 1, the prologue. John has anticipated in the prologue that he (John) came to testify to the light, but the true light would come soon. In Chapter 8, there is no mistaking that Jesus is the true light whose purpose is to enlighten everyone.

All was on track until the Pharisees had a problem with Jesus' unique relationship to God without anyone to witness his testimony. The law stated that two persons were needed to verify a particular claim, so Jesus is questioned about testifying on his own behalf. They stated that no one was present to verify Jesus's claims. Jesus responded that he and God constitute the two witnesses required by the law. Surely the testimony of not one, but two divine testimonies would be more than adequate to fulfill the laws demands.

In today's world chocked full of darkness, we are reminded that God has noticed our plight. God's best message to us is his son Jesus who is the light of the world. We are called to believe in the true light of God, that light which enlightens all. Darkness may endure for a time, but God's true light will prevail. That is the basis for our faith and our existence.

Prayer:

Illuminating God, help our unbelief during this time. Change us from a people walking in darkness to a people who embrace the great light of Christ. Amen.