

abwe



Give Joy to the World

An Advent Devotional From
the Mission Field

Waiting for the 'Consolation of Israel'

Luke 2:22-38

Every December, the Christian world turns its eyes toward Israel. Colorful Christmas cards and triumphant carols transport imaginations to the land of Jesus' birth: "O little town of Bethlehem," "Jerusalem, sing for the night is o'er," "Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!"

Meanwhile, in Israel, Christmas passes as just a normal day.

Walking through the streets of modern Jerusalem, I've rarely seen any holiday decorations or recognition of Christmas at all. On December 25, Israelis bundle up for the cool weather carried in by the rainy season and travel to work and school as usual.

The city of Bethlehem sits just to the south of Jerusalem, over the rocky Judean hills beginning to turn green. As the site of Jesus' birth, Bethlehem remains popular with Christian tourists, and the minority Christian populations in both Bethlehem and Nazareth hold a carnival-like celebration of Christmas for tourists including processions and mass led by Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Armenian priests. But these celebrations are remote and cut off from modern life in Israel—with Bethlehem lying across the West Bank separation wall under the control of the Palestinian Authority and off-limits to Israeli citizens. Among Israel's two-percent Christian population, the majority of are Arab Catholics or Eastern Orthodox. Only 0.6 percent of Israel's population is evangelical, which means that the land of Jesus' birth is largely untouched by the biblical gospel.

The Jewish population of Israel has historically rejected Christian influence—including holidays like Christmas—due to centuries of atrocities committed against the Jewish people by those claiming beliefs under the broad umbrella of Christianity. They shun Christmas decorations, citing biblical prohibitions in Jeremiah 10 against decorating trees as idols. Messianic Jewish believers often seek to distinguish themselves from other Christians at Christmas, maintaining that Jesus was likely not born in December but rather around the time of Sukkot (the Feast of Booths) in the fall or Passover in the spring.

But regardless of the time of Jesus' birth or the opposition of the culture around us, we cannot lose sight of the fact that Jesus was born—and this is a cause for "tidings of great joy"! God the Father sent his dearly-beloved Son out of his glorious heaven to dwell among sinful people on earth. For three decades, he lived among those he had created, sharing our joys, pains, and sorrows, before taking upon himself the full weight of our sin to redeem us.

Anonymous



Prayer Requests:

- Pray for the leadership and members of a new church plant as it grows, seeks to be a light to its community, and completes construction for a permanent meeting space.
- Pray for national partners developing materials for Bible teaching.
- Pray for the people of Israel—Jewish and Arab—to find their hope in the true Messiah.

Christmas in *Israel*

The quiet of Christmas in Israel today reminds me of how it was that first Christmas. Like many in modern Israel, many in Jesus' day were waiting for a Messiah. Four hundred years had passed since the last prophet had risen to proclaim the word of the Lord. In that time, the Jewish people had cast off Seleucid Greek rule and finally established Jewish autonomy in their own nation, only to be subjugated again to Roman domination. They faced oppression and brutal political violence. And in the darkness, many turned to the scrolls of the prophets, waiting for their promised deliverance.

Simeon was one of the faithful who spent his life waiting for that hope. Luke writes that Simeon was "righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25). Simeon's words echoed the prophecies he knew from Isaiah, and the Holy Spirit was upon him, revealing that "he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ" (2:26).

Likewise, an elderly widow named Anna also awaited the Messiah. She had devoted herself to God since her husband's death many years before, "worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day" in the temple (2:37).

After many long years of worshiping and waiting for God to fulfill his promise, one day Simeon and Anna witnessed Joseph and Mary bringing Jesus into the temple to offer a purification sacrifice after his birth. They immediately began praising God. Although they recognized their Messiah, Simeon prophesied that many would not. Jesus would be opposed, and many would "fall and rise" because of him (2:34)—evoking Isaiah's prophecy that he would be a stone that causes men to stumble (Isaiah 8:14), but for others, "a precious cornerstone of a sure foundation" (Isaiah 28:16).

Men and women respond to Jesus the same way today. Some in Israel have accepted him, and some have rejected him—but many have never heard the truth about him. And so, like Simeon and Anna, we must speak of him to those who are "waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38).

And on Christmas, this quiet, often lonely day, we celebrate. We join with other internationals, local believers, and anyone interested to share a meal and praise God for providing for our salvation.

This year, may we declare with Simeon:

*For my eyes have seen your salvation
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel. (Luke 2:30-32)*



That *Night*

Luke 2:8-20, Romans 10:14-15

Could it be that the very first short-term missions trip took place the night of Christ's birth?

Consider the story of the shepherds, told from a firsthand perspective:

*I'm a humble Judean shepherd, like my father was before me.
He was a good shepherd who taught me well how to care for our sheep.
And that night, of all nights, I wish that he could have been with me again—
to hear what we heard.
There in the field, with the glory of the Lord shining around us, the angel
told us of the arrival of Christ, our Savior.
"Fear not, for I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people!"
We ran to town, searching, asking where he might be, telling what the angel
had said.
Would you have believed us? That Messiah was lying in a feed trough around
the corner?
It was a ridiculous, glorious story!
We looked like fools who had been sleeping on the rocks too long! But we
were on a mission.
Finally we found him, the babe lying in the manger, just as the angel had said.
"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom
he is pleased."
There by the manger, enveloped in the peace of the now-silent night, we wor-
shipped our Savior, the Christ.
That night, of all nights, I was glad to have had my sons along with me—to
see what we saw.
That tiny baby was our Great Shepherd come to lay down his life for his sheep.
How wonderful that I know him, that I can call on his name! I will praise
him with my children and future generations.*

How could the shepherds have called on him in whom they did not believe?

And how could they have believed in him of whom they had not heard?

And how could they have heard except for the angelic messengers who were sent to tell them?

And that night, "they returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them" (Luke 2:20).

As the shepherds returned praising God, they surely told those around them of the marvelous birth of the Messiah. How beautiful are the feet of those who bring that good news! Take a moment to remember and thank God for the people in your life who shared the glorious story of Jesus Christ with you. Pray for the missionaries who are sharing the good news with others around the world today.

Craig & Cassandra

Fisher

NICARAGUA



Prayer Requests:

- Pray for the physical and spiritual well-being of the 10 ABWE missionaries in Nicaragua as they serve to equip and encourage the church: Bruce and Laura Edgar, Craig and Cassandra Fisher, Jason and Beth Lang, Jessica Mulder, Chad and Rachel Strong, and Traci Warner.
- Pray for prefield missionaries Jon and Michelle Cramer, who are currently raising funds to serve in Nicaragua, and that more missionaries will come.
- Pray for short-term missions teams to come to Nicaragua and our ministry, Centro ABEM. Short-term missions teams make a long-term impact helping our church partners transform their communities with the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- Praise the Lord for the recent sale of the front acres of Centro ABEM! Following the sale, we have to relocate our entrance road closer to the fence line of the adjacent residential neighborhood. Please pray for a solution to issues regarding this fence line: surface water run-off, trash, and cows have been damaging our property, and thieves pass through our property to rob the houses in the development. Relocating our entrance road makes finding a solution critical for everyone. Pray that ABWE's organizational status in Nicaragua will remain stable so that we can continue serving as God wills.

Christmas Season in *Nicaragua*

There aren't shepherds in Nicaragua like there were in Judea. But our Live Global national partner, Alvaro Ramirez, does raise pelibüey, which is a Cuban breed of sheep. He also serves as a spiritual shepherd as he is planting a church in his farming community. He recently asked us to help with a Vacation Bible School "trunk-or-treat" as an alternative to the Nicaraguan holiday La Purisima.

La Purisima is a Nicaraguan festival celebrated from November 28 to December 8 that commemorates the immaculate conception of Mary, which is the Catholic doctrine that Mary herself was conceived in her mother's womb without the stain of original sin.

La Purisima is the largest holiday of the year for many Nicaraguans and dominates the Christmas season here. Families build altars in their homes and devote days to prayer. In downtown Managua, businesses and government agencies sponsor large altars that are judged, with winners decided in different categories. The festival culminates with La Gritaría, or "The Shouting," in which participants shout back and forth the question, "What causes such joy?" and the response, "The conception of Mary!". The day's activities are a mixture of the US traditions of Halloween trick-or-treating; Christmas carols, gifts, and food; and Fourth of July fireworks.

Later in December, most Nicaraguans celebrate Christmas by exchanging gifts on Christmas Eve, and there are fireworks at midnight all around the country. Christmas Day is a relatively quiet, family day like it often is in the US.



The Light That Overcomes Darkness and Danger

Luke 1:78-79

Darkness. It is the absence of light, the place of fears and lies. It represents the sin and evil that has infested our world and pervaded the heart of the natural man. There are those who sit in darkness—the unsaved—who, whether by ignorance or willful choice, are in rebellion against their Creator.

But God offers hope to those who walk in darkness. God, who is rich in tender mercy and abounding in steadfast love, stepped into the darkness to rescue us with the Light of the World.

Zechariah prophesies of this promised Savior in Luke 1:78-79. He declares: *“whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”*

In the midst of darkness, we have hope because Jesus Christ has come to give light and peace, both now and for eternity. God’s light will not be overcome, even in places like Afghanistan, where the seemingly impenetrable darkness strives to snuff out any faint glow.

We hear this assurance ringing in the triumphant testimonies of Afghan ministry leaders partnering with the ABWE Afghan Initiative, who despite all odds were given the treasure of the gospel. God graciously opened their eyes and shone his truth into their hearts. Having been rescued themselves, they risked all, even their very lives, to bring that light to others sitting in darkness around them.

Matt and Jennifer J.

LIVE GLOBAL –
AFGHAN INITIATIVE



Prayer Requests:

- Pray for healing. Our Afghan friends have endured much trauma as they have been persecuted for the sake of the gospel. Pray that God would grant them emotional and spiritual healing and hearts of forgiveness.
- Pray for resources. Pray that God would raise up financial partners to fund the unique and impactful ministry of the Afghan Initiative.
- Pray for abundant fruit. Pray that God would bless our efforts for his glory, and that many Afghans—here in the US and overseas—would come to know him.

Christmas in *Afghanistan*

Ahmad pulled his coat tighter around himself and cast one last cautious glance over his shoulder. Was it worth the risk? Yes, the birth of his Savior was meant to be celebrated with other believers. With the Taliban's ominous threats still echoing in his mind, he defiantly reached out and rapped on the front door. All fear was pushed aside as he was welcomed into the joyful warmth of fellowship.

Afghanistan is the most dangerous place on earth to be a Christian, and for our brothers and sisters living there, celebrating Christmas is met with many challenges and fears. Despite the risks, members of the underground church still gather secretly in small groups, worshipping together in prayer and song because of their shared hope in the God who took on flesh for their salvation.

This year, several Afghan ministry leaders and their families will celebrate Christmas for the first time in the US. These families were forced to flee Afghanistan when the Taliban took over in 2021 and became connected with ABWE through Live Global and EveryEthne missionaries. As part of the Afghan Initiative, these families have been relocated to the US to reach other refugees with the gospel.

Now, as these families minister in the US, they continue to shine as lights in the darkness. As they explain in their own words:

"We remember the gift he is to us. Jesus is the true Light. The genuine, perfect, steadfast Light." – Nabi

"His birth was a light in the darkness for guiding the people." – Ahmad

"My people are living in darkness, and I pray God would use me to reach my people to live in the light." – Ilyas

This Christmas, these Afghan Christians are all looking forward to the same thing: commemorating their Savior's birth without fear and limitations.

"Here we are free, feeling peace. And there is no fear of worshipping God in church. I can't wait to celebrate Christmas with our loved brothers and sisters here and pray for other people groups to know the real and merciful God," says Sara.

During this Christmas season, let us praise God together with our Afghan brothers and sisters and celebrate the Sunrise who pierced the night, visiting us from on high.



A Living Hope for the New Year

Ephesians 2:1-10

During the rainy season in the plateau region of Togo, West Africa, the mountains come alive with verdant, lush, fertile foliage. Crops bloom and produce abundant fruit that offers a promise of prosperity at harvest time. Toward the end of November, the harmattan season sweeps in with winds carrying arid dust from the Sahara and leaving the land dead, dry, and barren. As years pass, the coolness of the harmattan evenings arouses a nostalgic reminiscence, bringing Christmas to mind.

It is that time of year again. The land looks lifeless, yet it is time to celebrate the giver of life itself.

Historically, the Togolese have not made much of the Christmas holiday. No trees are decorated. No lights are hung. No presents are given. Instead, the Togolese celebrate New Year's Day. To the Togolese, the new year offers a new life of opportunity as they say goodbye to the old year and celebrate the new hope of the year to come.

As we teach new Togolese Christians the value of celebrating Jesus' birth, we remind them of the eternal living hope he brings. Rather than celebrating an ambiguous hope for a thriving new year of life, we hold a sure and living hope of eternal life through salvation from sin.

Earlier this year, our team in Togo studied, memorized, and meditated on Ephesians 2:1-10, which perfectly encapsulates the spiritual paradox of believers. Our spiritual state of sin leaves us as dry and desolate as the land during harmattan: "And you were dead in trespasses and sin" (Ephesians 2:1). Our spiritual state in Jesus leaves us as flourishing and fruitful as the rainy season: "But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ. By grace you have been saved" (Ephesians 2:4-5).

Our loving Lord did not leave us dead in our sin. He offers life through Jesus—not merely a new year of life to celebrate on New Year's Day, but a new life that we will celebrate with him for eternity. He offers this abundant gift of life to all who trust Jesus as their eternal, living hope. The life he offers is indeed worth celebrating.

So during Christmas this year in our homes, let us not be caught in the abstract celebration of an ambiguous hope that lasts only for a few weeks. Instead, like the new Togolese Christians, let's celebrate our new life and the eternal hope we have in Christ through his birth, death, and resurrection. Through Christ we find our greatest reason to celebrate—the forgiveness of sin and the redemption of our souls.

Andy and Jackie

Kirby

TOGO



Prayer Requests:

- Pray for Togolese churches to grow, flourish, and have a fervent desire to reach across tribal barriers to share the gospel with their lost Muslim neighbors. Pray for the missionaries to have wisdom in building and strengthening the churches.
- Pray for the varied ministries in Togo: the Bible institute, hospitals, resource center, Studio Verite, aviation ministries, the school for the blind, and the Christian schools.

Finding *Peace* in Days of War

Luke 2:14

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (Luke 2:14)

Angelic voices trumpeted this refrain over sleepy shepherds outside of Bethlehem. This message propelled them to go and witness the scene the angels had described: the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in the manger. Having seen the promised child, the shepherds hastily began proclaiming what they had seen to all who would listen.

The angels’ refrain told of peace on earth. Lasting peace is only found in the gospel message. The Great Commission compels us to tell the gospel—even during days of war—to the ends of the earth. The conflict that has devastated the country and people of Ukraine in 2022 has also produced a revival, as many Ukrainians have heard the gospel and turned to Christ, recognizing that he is the only true source of peace and hope. The Prince of Peace has brought an eternal calm in the midst of chaos and death. Heaven rejoices with those who find forgiveness and rest in Jesus.

One of our national partners, Pastor Zhenya, recently described how God is bringing peace to the hearts of Ukrainians through a church outreach ministry to internally displaced people.

“We do this outreach once a week, on Thursdays. We started this type of ministry at the end of April and we continue to do it now. . . . At each meeting before we distribute the aid, we have a service, we sing, preach the gospel, and call people to repentance. People are very open, praying, crying and giving thanks for the help. There are people who have started to come to Bible study, women’s group, and Sunday services. Now in the Sunday service, 70 percent are new people. My church team and I are very tired physically because not all of the church members are in Ukraine or Kiev. But we want to continue to serve as long as we have strength, health and financial resources. Please pray for our ministry that God would give us the strength to continue the ministry.”

Christmas in *Ukraine*

Ukraine celebrates two Christmases: December 25, which has been an official holiday for Protestants and Catholics in Ukraine since 2017, and January 7, for those who are Eastern Orthodox. However, atheistic roots from the former Soviet Union tied certain Christmas traditions to New Year’s Day celebrations instead: the tree, lights, presents, and Grandfather Frost (Santa Claus). Therefore, Christmas is a relatively uncluttered day for celebrating Jesus’ birth at church—sometimes on both Christmases. Our kids love to visit the Christmas market and decorate the house for the season.

Mike

Gustafson

UKRAINE



Prayer Requests:

- Pray for spiritual and physical peace in Ukraine—and in Russia.
- Pray for physical safety for those who are serving in dangerous places.
- Pray for perseverance for the churches and pastors that labor in the harvest.

"The Little Jesus" or Savior of the World?

Luke 2:10-12; Isaiah 9:6-7

We had only been in Quebec for six weeks when we visited one of the largest Catholic basilicas in the province on December 23. It was an impressive setting made even more beautiful by the Christmas decorations added at the front of the church in preparation for the midnight mass the following evening. We were carrying our youngest child, four-month-old Matt; the other kids were walking along with us. As we reached the front of the church where workers were putting the final touches on the manger scene, one of them saw the baby in our arms and asked, "Could we use your baby tomorrow night for the midnight mass?" We laughed, politely declined the request, and continued our tour. Part of the humor for us was the idea of a Baptist missionary's baby playing the central role at the basilica's most important liturgical event of the year.

What we didn't understand in those early days of learning a new language and culture is that le petit Jésus (the little Jesus) who is depicted in the manger isn't the Jesus we encounter in the Scriptures.

Luke 2, probably the best known of the incarnation narratives, introduces us to that baby in the manger and he is not "little Jesus."

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. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." Luke 2:10-12

Notice how this baby is described. As the angels announce the birth of the newborn, a helpless baby boy totally dependent on his parents, he is identified as a Savior. The gospels further reveal the Father's plan that Jesus, his one and only Son, would give his life to save people from their sins. Jesus, the Lamb of God, would become the perfect sacrifice, dying in our place so that he could take our sins.

The angels added that he is the Christ. The Old Testament name, Messiah, used 39 times, is translated as Christ. Jesus, this little baby in Bethlehem's manger, is the Anointed One who was promised centuries earlier; he is the anticipated Deliverer.

The third description of the baby is Lord. This title is used hundreds of times in the New Testament when referring to Jesus. He is Master, he is Ruler, he is God. Far from being le petit Jésus, the Jesus introduced by the angelic choir is one who is worthy of our worship and praise, adoration and affection, trust and obedience.

Consider one more passage, this one a prophetic word given 700 years before the birth of Jesus. The language once again reminds us that we aren't talking about le petit Jésus, a figurine in the nativity scene. As you read Isaiah

Tim and Barb
Vermilyea
QUEBEC



Prayer Requests:

- The church plant, Maison Coram Deo, that began when COVID-19 restrictions were being instituted, is once again able to meet. Pray for growth in 2023.
- New EveryEthne colleagues, Allen and Melissa Batts, moved to Quebec City in June 2022. Pray for their family to continue adapting to life and ministry in Quebec. Pray for their two girls as they adapt to school and language learning.
- Credo Church has met in rented facilities since it was established. Pray that God will provide a permanent location in Quebec City in 2023.
- Pray that the EveryEthne team will build relationships with people that will lead to gospel conversations and to salvation.

9:6-7, highlight the names and descriptions given of this “child who is born, this son who is given.”

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. (Isaiah 9:6-7)

Let the truths of Isaiah 9:7 give hope: his government and his peace will have no end; his reign, which will be eternal, will be marked by justice and righteousness. The baby in the manger was never le petit Jésus. May our celebration this Christmas reflect the truths of “the Savior who is Christ the Lord.”

Christmas in Quebec

You can count on having a nostalgic “white Christmas” since the average snowfall is 10 feet per winter. All those idealized postcard images really do happen in Quebec: skating, sledding, tobogganing, sleigh rides, frosted windowpanes, fireplaces blazing, and walks in the snow through giant snowflakes (or blizzard-like conditions and -20°F). And since Canada celebrates Thanksgiving in early October, Christmas decorations can go up on November 1.

One part of a French-Canadian Christmas celebration that was new for our family was the timing. Midnight mass on Christmas Eve is the centerpiece of the holiday. Families go to church together, which means that family traditions of opening presents, having a big meal, playing games, and singing all take place in the very early hours of Christmas Day.

While a turkey dinner might be prepared, there are other traditional dishes on the menu, such as Tourtière (meat pie) and Ragoût de boulettes de grand-mère (Grandma’s meatballs in gravy). The bûche de Noël (Christmas log) is the dessert of preference, with sugar pie a close second.

In Quebec, as in the rest of North America, Père Noël (Santa Claus) and the commercialized version of Christmas have overshadowed the true message of the arrival of the Savior.

