

# *Desire of the Nations*

**Christmas on the  
Front Lines of World Mission**



# Christmas: The Hinge of History

Isaiah's prophecy describing Christ's identity and sovereign rule offers hope amid the gloom of this world.

Alex Kocman



Have you felt any gloom this year—for the world, your nation, your family, or your own circumstances?

Gloom is the backdrop of Isaiah 9. God's nation faced invasion, exile, and collapse. But in the first verse, the prophet says that "there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish." Light would dawn with the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry in Cana, located, of all places, in Israel's north—that region most often invaded and mixed with pagans. Isaiah describes the eventual extent of his reign:

*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. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. (Isaiah 9:6-7)*

This familiar, profound text calls us to cast off our own gloom too, on two accounts: (1) the identity of this Son and (2) the activity of this Son.

## A Divine Son

First, who is this promised Son? Note in verse 6 the juxtaposition “a child is born . . . a son is given.” In ordinary language, children are conceived and born—not given. The implication is that this Son preexisted his own birth, a conclusion corroborated by two of the four titles that follow: “Mighty God, Everlasting Father.” This Son has no origin in time because he is the Mighty God, *El Gibbor* (a term used only of God himself and never of other beings, in contrast with a general word for God or gods like *elohim*). He is also the Father of Eternity, or Author of Eternity (as interpreted by John Calvin in his commentary on Isaiah). He is “true God of true God, light from light eternal . . . Son of the Father, now in flesh appearing”—familiar carol lines echoing the Nicene Creed.

That the eternal God would take on flesh is no small comfort. In part five of his demanding *Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn glosses fellow prisoner and poet Anatole Vasilyevich Silin’s theodicy: “Christ’s sufferings in the flesh he daringly explained not only by the need to atone for human sins, but also by God’s desire to feel earthly suffering to the full” (emphasis in original).

Solzhenitsyn is right to question Silin’s orthodoxy; the divine nature cannot undergo longing, suffering, or change. Yet the impassibility of God ought not diminish but heighten our astonishment at the incarnation. To think that the Mighty God and Author of Eternity would, in love, endure suffering alongside sinners—suffering surpassing even that of the gulag—is itself sufficient reason to cast off our gloom.

Having considered the identity of the promised child, the divine Son, we must also consider his activity.

## A Reigning Son

What does the Son do? Simply put: he reigns supreme. Here we draw our attention to the royal titles which bookend the set of four. Scholars debate the precise referent of the phrase “Wonderful Counselor” (some even splitting it in two), but the most insightful clue as to its meaning comes from earlier in the verse: “and the government shall be upon his shoulder.”

Much modern gloom is the fruit of our bureaucrat betters' failure to shoulder the government. We have all seen leaders, public and private, who cannot bear the weight of their office.

Not this Son. He alone can carry the load of cosmic rule. He alone is worthy to open the scroll of Revelation. Upon his ascension, Christ received the nations (Ps. 2:8), everlasting dominion (Dan. 7:14), and universal authority (Matt. 28:18). In principle, though not yet in full experience, the kingdoms of earth have become the kingdom of the Son (Rev. 11:15).

And to what effect? Let us not skip over the title "Prince of Peace." Yes, the gospel of the kingdom sets households at odds and empires on edge. But at Christmas we are reminded that Christ's rule brings "on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased" (Luke 2:14). Under the Son's reign, men beat their swords into plowshares (Isa. 2:4) and the wolf and lamb lie down together (Isa. 11:6, 65:25).

Further, we are told that there will be no end to the increase of his government and of this peace, and from David's throne the Son will establish his kingdom with justice and with righteousness forever (v. 7).

Christmas is the hinge of history. The spiritual kingdom that was inaugurated with the death, resurrection, and ascension of the Son of God has been steadily invading the city of man for two millennia. This kingdom is the unlikely pebble of Nebuchadnezzar's dream that topples the world's empires and becomes a global mountain (Dan. 2:44), the mustard seed that grows into a massive tree (Matt. 13:32-32), the leaven that leavens the whole lump (Matt. 13:33). It presided over both the fall of Rome and the fall of Roe. It has seen the abolition of the pagan sacrifices in the Roman Empire, the end of the transatlantic slave trade, and the explosive growth of Christianity throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, South

**“on earth *peace* among those  
with whom he is pleased”**

Luke 2:14

America, and East Asia. And, when every enemy will have been put under our Lord's conquering feet, he will consummate this kingdom by eradicating sin, injustice, and death for all eternity (1 Cor. 15).

### **A Certain Promise**

None of this is to imply that we do not live in a vale of tears. We still suffer for the cause of Christ in a fallen world. But the deathblow to our gloom comes in the prophetic seal to Isaiah's oracle: "The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this" (9:7).

How much zeal can an infinite God muster? Our theology can assist us in answering this question. There is no passive potentiality in God. He is *actus purus*, pure act. The zeal of the Lord, then, connotes the entire commitment of God's infinite being to effect his perfect, decretive will for his glory and our good.

Experience bears this out. The church would have died with the apostles had not the zeal of the Lord sustained it. No saint would complete his journey to the celestial city without the Lord zealously outpouring persevering grace. Our commission to go and make disciples of all nations would seem impossible were the zeal of the Lord not undergirding us with his authority, provision, and strength. And the zeal of the Lord will bring about the day when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

We have been given none other than the Son of God himself to dwell with us, suffer for us, and reign eternally, world without end. May we cast off our gloom in the light of Christ.

#### **Prayer Requests:**

- Pray for believers elsewhere in the world suffering persecution and living in fear because of their faith.
- Pray that God would meet and even exceed the needs of missionaries, and pray for these saints to trust unwaveringly in his goodness.
- Pray for your church to be marked by the warmth of mutual affection, especially during the holiday season.
- Pray for the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to strengthen his people for the work of mission, starting with you.

# No Room in the Inn

Rosalie Duryee  
ABWE missionary to Spain

*“And 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.” (Luke 2:7 ESV)*

At the end of a five-day road trip from South Texas, where we had just graduated from language school as new missionaries, to our home near Seattle, we pulled off the interstate so I could accompany my daughter to the restroom while my husband filled the gas tank.

As we hurried back to the car, I saw my husband rush to unbuckle our son from his car seat while fuel pooled under his feet. We stared, frozen as much by the winter weather as by the shock of the situation, while the last drops of gas emptied to the ground. Due to the weight of our trailer, the engine had been touching the gas tank for much of our trip, melting a hole in it, and that was the end of our trusty, rusty Toyota Highlander.



While we waited for the tow truck to come for the car and my husband's parents to come for us, we made ourselves at home in the minimart, making small talk with the young clerk and buying a couple snacks. I sat cross-legged on the grimy floor and plugged my phone into an outlet underneath a refrigerator chest. The young man working there showed my daughter everything he could about how to run a minimart, including the button under the counter he can push in case of emergency.

For months afterwards, she considered working at a gas station store (and having the chance to push that button) her dream job. Heavy in my memory is the fear I felt as I watched fuel spread under my husband and son, and the disappointment of losing our transportation during a cross-country move. But the gas station clerk was a hospitable hero who, in his small way, eased the burden we felt that night.

In art, literature, Christmas pageants, and many of our pastors' sermons, "the innkeeper" has a certain reputation in the nativity story. Some imagine the story like this: Joseph and Mary, desperate for a hotel room, go door to door looking for a place to stay in Bethlehem, but everyone turns them away, disgusted by their poverty. Finally, one innkeeper reluctantly ushers them around back to a space in his barn, where Mary ultimately delivers Jesus. We are indignant, wondering how the innkeeper would feel knowing that he didn't make space for a poor couple to have their baby in the comfort of his roadside inn so that the Savior of the world could have his first nap on a real bed instead of a feeding trough.

For North Americans, words like stable, barn, manger, inn, guest house, room (and "no room") conjure up midwestern farm scenes and motels with bad customer service and "no vacancy" signs. But this vilified innkeeper is a rendering of our imaginations. The owner of the lodging place isn't even mentioned in the story of Jesus' birth. In fact, Luke is the only gospel writer to mention the manger at all.

There's actually a lot we don't know about this precious moment in history, including the precise date. Most of the details are based on tradition and speculation. In my host country of Spain—where elaborate nativities are set up to decorate for Christmas—most people believe that Jesus was born in a cave.

Some Bible scholars think that the "inn" or "guest house" in Luke 2:7 alluded to a series of naturally protected caves where travelers could



stop for the night. Similarly, other commentators have suggested that Luke referred to a *khan*, an enclosed community space surrounded by recesses with raised floors where people slept. If these communal sleeping platforms were crowded, the traveler must be content with a public corner of the courtyard among the cattle, or in the stable.

Some interpreters speculate that Jesus was born during the Feast of Tabernacles, and so, when there were no beds available in the house, the host offered his *sukkah*, or booth, which would have been set up outside.

The most likely interpretation is that the location lacking space refers to a guest room attached to a family home. The Greek word used in this passage, *kataluma*, also appears in Mark 14:14 and Luke 22:11, where it is commonly translated “upper room” or “guest room.” Excavations of first-century dwellings and historical references reveal that some homes had an additional room located beside the main dwelling space or on an upper level. Guests could stay in this private room while the family slept in the larger, open main level. On cold nights or for safety, the family could bring their animals into a designated space in a portion of the main level near the door, or into another semi-enclosed room on a lower level.

According to this view, Joseph and Mary would have arrived at the home of a relative in Bethlehem, who welcomed them hospitably. With the guest room already full of extended family visiting for the census, when Mary’s labor began, she would have been moved to the lower portion of the house kept for animals in order to have the space and privacy needed to give birth.

When examining the interpretations of the word *kataluma*, it is worth noting that there is a specific Greek word used to describe an inn with an innkeeper, *pandocheion*, which is not used in this passage. That’s the word used to describe the place that the Good Samaritan took the wounded traveler in Luke 10.

So, it’s possible there was no innkeeper on the night of Jesus’ birth. And if they stayed in a family home, it’s highly unlikely that the host served them reluctantly, given the cultural importance of hospitality in the Middle East (for example, in Luke 11:5-8, not having bread for guests constitutes an emergency). What’s most likely is that our weary travelers made



do with the best they could find, with a little help from those around them, and a little ingenuity.

Most missionaries are intimately familiar with harrowing travel experiences, whether we recount missed flights and nights spent in airports, broken down cars, or emergency evacuations. Citizenship and visa requirements sometimes mean frequent treks into neighboring countries or even back to our passport countries. We've made our way from one part of the world to another with sturdy suitcases, babywearing gear, and a lot of waiting in lines with grumpy children.

As it did for Mary and Joseph, all this traveling sometimes requires the help of family, friends, or even a stranger, as well as some old-fashioned mother wit. A casual survey of expat moms found dresser drawers, closet shelves, bathtubs, and airport floors to be common beds for babies, while clean dog beds, the bath mat, and lots of hotel blankets have created a soft place for babies to sleep. These expat moms have constructed blanket forts, used shower curtains as room darkeners, and enclosed the bottom bunk to provide some separation. Is any of this really that different from Mary, who simply laid her baby in a nearby manger after a long trip (not to mention the labor)? Perhaps she gave birth in a house overflowing with people, or perhaps a hospitable innkeeper ushered them to the stable to have some privacy from the community lodgings he managed, and Mary figured it all out on her own.

That night at a Tacoma gas station is an important part of our family's story of how God provided for us. And the same is certainly true of Mary and Joseph's night in a Bethlehem stable. How has God provided for you in your journeys in life and mission? And, in your comings and goings, consider: has the Lord found room in your home and heart?

#### **Prayer Requests:**

1. Pray that Spanish churches will honor God with their Christmas worship services and outreach events.
2. Pray for more laborers for the harvest in Spain, and for more teachers and staff for Evangelical Christian Academy in Madrid.
3. Pray for our church plants to remain faithful to Christ and to glorify God.
4. Pray for the missionaries in Spain to find our rest and joy in Christ.

# The Sword of *Christmas*

The arrival of Christ is a reminder that the Prince of Peace came to redeem and overcome our earthly battles.

Katelyn Hawkins

Sometimes the joy of Christmas seems overshadowed by the encroaching darkness of this world.

“[W]e did not plan to celebrate Christmas during a cruel war, but God in his perfect will allowed it to happen,” an Israeli friend and pastor recently wrote in an update.

Within the last two months, his nation has experienced the unimaginable pain and horror of a massacre, rocket attacks, civilians held hostage, and families separated and displaced. Rather than anticipating peaceful holidays in the land of Christ’s birth, he and other believers provide supplies for those lacking necessities and comfort those in their community overwhelmed with grief and fear.

Meanwhile in Ukraine, believers prepare for their second Christmas celebrated under brutal invasion. There, too, families remain separated by war, and many face the cold of winter without sufficient resources or infrastructure.

We often feel a disconnect between the season of glad tidings and the circumstances we witness and experience in our lives and ministries on this fallen earth. Conflict, opposition, financial hardship, family struggles, distance from loved ones, endless responsibilities, illness, or loss weigh heavy on our shoulders. When suffering prevents us from feeling the happiness we’ve grown to expect from the holiday season, it can be easy to fall into



guilt or discouragement. But the full panorama of the nativity includes both great joy and tremendous sorrow, and our Messiah—through the full extent of his humanity and his divinity—offers hope in the darkness.

### **Joy and Sorrow in the Christmas Narrative**

The account of Simeon in Luke’s gospel illuminates the wonder and sorrow surrounding the Savior’s birth. Introduced by Luke as righteous and devout, Simeon lived in Jerusalem “waiting for the consolation of Israel” (2:25 ESV).

He did not wait alone. For generations, the Jewish people had longed for deliverance from Babylonian exile, then Greek subjugation, and finally, after a brief hopeful period of national autonomy, oppressive Roman rule. Though 400 years had passed since the last prophet had delivered the word of the Lord, the idea of a coming Messiah as a political, military, and religious leader had taken root in the dusty earth of first-century Israel.

Into this culture, the Christ child entered the world. Matthew and Luke describe the shocking angelic annunciations to Mary and Joseph, the fear of social shame for Mary as an unwed expectant mother, the joy of elderly Elizabeth’s conception of John the Baptist, and the arduous journey to Bethlehem to be registered.

And then Mary gave birth. The Son of God lay fully human in a manger. His tiny fingers extended, his mouth opened in newborn cries, and those swaddling clothes undoubtedly became soiled. He lay as a helpless baby—even while visited by shepherds directed by angelic hosts.



In nearby Jerusalem, Simeon waited faithfully for God's deliverance. The Holy Spirit had revealed that he would not see death before he saw the Lord's Christ (2:26). We do not know the extent to which Simeon was aware of the miraculous circumstances of Jesus' birth, but, when Joseph and Mary brought him into the temple, he immediately recognized the infant's divinity. Taking the child into his arms, he glorified God, exclaiming, "my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" (2:30-32). The Messiah first promised at the fall of mankind had finally arrived to accomplish salvation.

But the narrative of Christ's birth does not end with Simeon's joyful declaration. Jesus, in his humanity, was born into a world overrun with sinful depravity and demonic forces. Even as when he was but a small baby, his existence confronted the powers of hell. Matthew records that when wise men arrived to worship the child and bestow upon him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, they avoided Herod's order to report his location. Joseph, warned by God in a dream, fled with his family to Egypt. Incensed with rage, Herod sent emissaries to massacre every precious infant and toddler boy under the age of two in Bethlehem and the surrounding region.

Matthew records the despair, quoting Jeremiah: "Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more" (2:18).

Through the incarnation, Christ entered and experienced the suffering of our world. And throughout his earthly ministry, he confronted those same powers of sin and death, proclaiming good news to the poor, healing the sick, comforting the brokenhearted, and liberating those oppressed by demonic control.

Simultaneously, the Light of the World and the Good Shepherd was also the Man of Sorrows. He bore our griefs and carried our sorrows to the cross. In fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, "he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed" (53:5). All of the pain, hardship, and suffering of this sin-scarred world collides with hope at the cross.

### **‘A Sign That Is Opposed’**

After Simeon’s blessing of the newborn Jesus, he included a warning: “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed” (Luke 2:34-35).

Simeon foresaw that Jesus’s ministry would cause division by confronting people with the truth, inducing a decision to either accept or reject him. He would be opposed, leading to suffering not only for his mother and disciples during his earthly ministry, but for all believers following him on his mission to proclaim the gospel throughout the world. Simeon offers this message as preparation: by expecting opposition, believers can be emboldened to courageously, steadfastly contend for the faith. Undismayed by hostility, they hold firm to the promise of Christ’s authority to accomplish his mission.

If we feel overwhelmed by suffering during this holiday season, let it drive us back to the account of Christ’s birth rather than hiding in feelings of shame. The narrative of Christmas—and its resolution in the cross—is expansive enough to contain all our human longings, pains, and joys.

And even as we mourn, let us fix our hope on the promise that Christ will come again, when at long last all will be made new and there will be eternal “glory to God in the highest, and peace among those with whom he is pleased” (Luke 2:14).

#### **Prayer Requests:**

- Pray for believers in the Middle East, Ukraine, and other locations facing war. Pray that they would find hope and strength in Christ, and pray as they serve the hurting around them.
- Pray for those experiencing pain, loss, or hardship during the holidays.
- Pray for local churches to follow Christ’s example in showing compassion and hope to those in their congregations and in their communities who are suffering.

# Focusing on *Gratitude*

Tanzania missionary Stephanie Boon reflects on the challenge of seeing holiday decadence and ministering to the poor.

Stephanie Boon  
ABWE missionary to Tanzania

*“And he said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.’” (Job 1:21 ESV)*

One of the hardest things about being an American living in a developing country is the constant tug between the world you left and the world you’re in.

To Americans, we’re the missionaries who are always in need, the ones who sacrificed all. But to many in our host country, we’re the wealthy who should give more.



I felt this internal tug-of-war acutely one Christmas morning. I sat watching my children open their gifts, my grandmother’s coffee mug in hand. We ran the AC all morning for relief from our unwelcome guest, the hot season. I felt so thankful, as I looked at our beautiful, glistening tree and the many gifts under it.

And then the feeling came. That familiar puncture to the heart. I thought about the local children who rummage through our trash. I thought about the lady who had just knocked on our door begging for money. I thought about the many parents desperately looking for funds to pay their children’s school fees. And I felt guilty as I watched my children’s joy.

I hadn’t taken another sip from my coffee when my mind and heart switched to my other mode, my American side. I looked at that same

tree and felt embarrassed by its size. I scanned the gifts and considered how sad our little display would look to an American. I wiped sweat off my forehead, because, let's be honest, one AC unit can only mitigate the heat so much. I coveted the sweaters, boots, and cozy, blanketed family nights I had seen on social media.



I thought about taking a picture and posting it online, but I didn't want to provoke either of my two worlds to pity or envy. That emotional tug-of-war was even less welcome than the hot season itself.

It's hard to articulate the pendulum swings between guilt and jealousy, gratitude and shame. Enjoying life is far from simple, but this is where God has placed us.

This Christmas let's face our circumstances bravely with the faith that God is in control. Like Job, who lived faithfully in plenty and in little, may we always bless the name of the Lord. Finding peace and contentment in our shaky and fluctuating middle ground.

*Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of where you've placed each one of us in life. No matter what, we can always rest in the promise that you're guiding us and watching over us. As we go into Christmas, give us a heart of peace and contentment with where we are. Help us fix our gaze on you and not on the material world and the expectations placed on us. Thank you for the gift of your Son! Amen.*

#### **Prayer Requests:**

- Pray that missionaries around the world would have peace and contentment as they navigate the tension of living with different standards of material prosperity.
- Pray for comfort for missionaries celebrating the holidays away from family and loved ones.
- Pray for the ABWE team in Tanzania and their national partners as they serve their community through evangelism, healthcare, counseling, entrepreneurial and sewing skills courses, and theological training for pastors.
- Pray for new Tanzanian believers to be strengthened and firmly rooted in their faith.