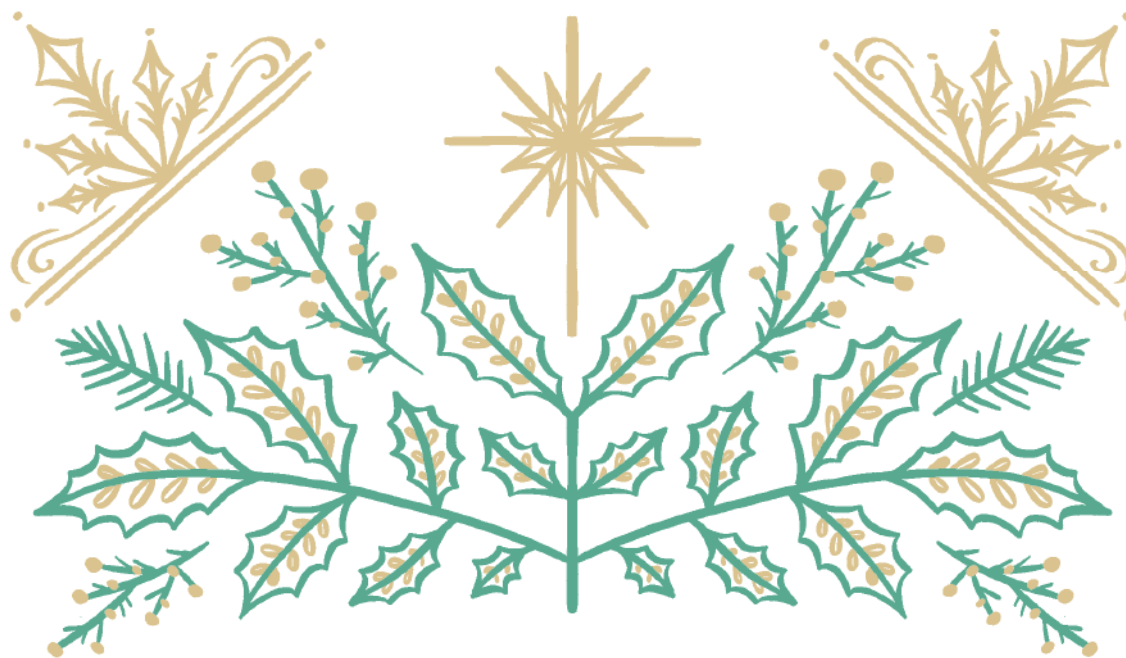


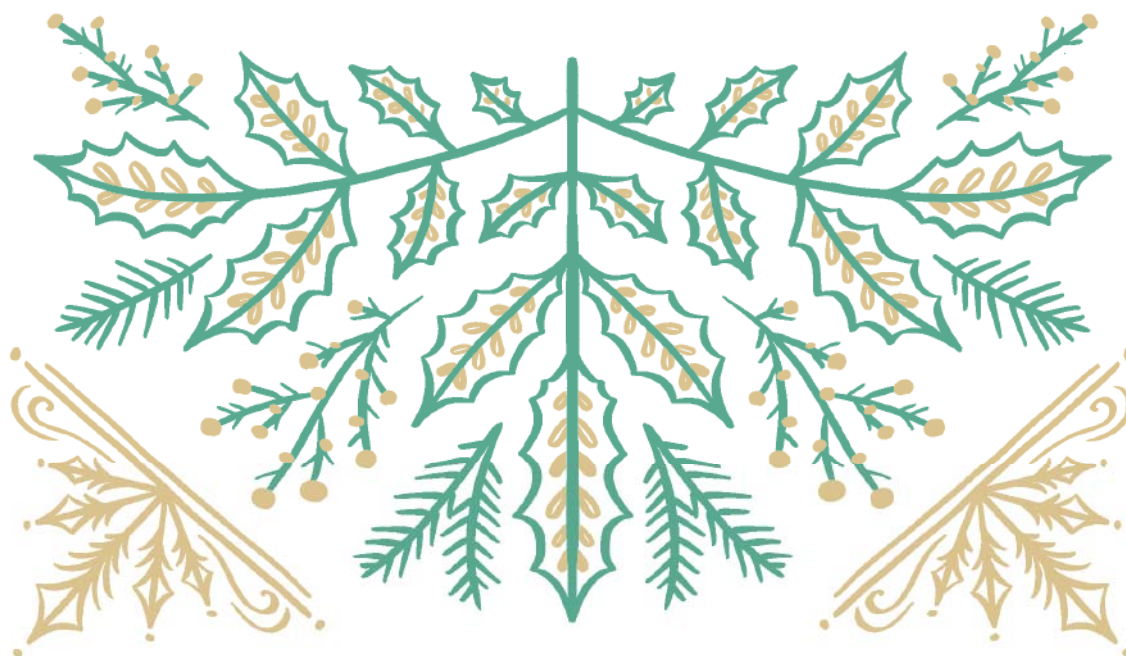
Review Only - Not for Redistribution



*A Family Devotional to Help You Celebrate Jesus*

## *The 25 DAYS of CHRISTMAS*

JAMES MERRITT • *Illustrated by Connie Gabbert*



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS

*Eugene, Oregon*

# Contents

Day 1: Christmas in the Garden.....Genesis 3:1-15

Day 2: What Child Is This?.....Isaiah 9:6-7

Day 3: The Masterpiece.....Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-28

Day 4: Jesus's Family Tree.....Matthew 1:3-6

Day 5: The Waiting Room.....Luke 1:5-25

Day 6: Timing Is Everything.....Galatians 4:4

Day 7: Believe and Say Yes.....Luke 1:26-38

Day 8: Magnify.....Luke 1:39-55

Day 9: A Man of Few Words.....Matthew 1:18-25; 2:13-23

Day 10: Stay Tuned.....Matthew 1:18-25

Day 11: Share Your Story.....Luke 1:68-79

Day 12: O Little Town of Bethlehem.....Micah 5:2

Day 13: Away in a Manger.....Luke 2:1-7

Day 14: Three for the Price of One.....Luke 2:8-14

Day 15: Joy to the World.....Luke 2:8-14

Day 16: Party like the Shepherds.....Luke 2:8-20

Day 17: Paul's Christmas Story.....Philippians 2:5-11

Day 18: God's Christmas List.....John 3:16

Day 19: Christmas Is Coming!.....Luke 2:25-35

Day 20: Star of Wonder.....Matthew 2:9-10

Day 21: Seeking Christmas.....Matthew 2:1-12

Day 22: A Bittersweet Holiday.....Matthew 2:11-12

Day 23: Exceeding Expectations.....Galatians 4:4-7

Day 24: He Wanted to Come.....Colossians 1:15-20

Day 25: The Most Beautiful Christmas Tree Ever.....1 Peter 2:24



Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Verses marked nlt are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Verses marked tb are taken from The Living Bible, copyright © 1971. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Cover design and interior design by Connie Gabbert  
Published in association with the Christopher Ferree Agency

THE 25 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS  
Copyright © 2018 by James Merritt

Published by  
HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS  
Eugene, Oregon 97408  
www.harvesthousepublishers.com

ISBN 978-0-7369-7310-6 (hardcover)  
ISBN 978-0-7369-7080-8 (eBook)  
[CIP to come]

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, digital, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Printed in China

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 / / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



## Christmas in the Garden

### GENESIS 3:1-15

**Santa Claus, Rudolph,** Jack Frost, the Grinch, Ebenezer Scrooge—all of these stories have become part of our modern celebration of Christmas. But most people, even those who don't go to church regularly, could probably tell you that none of these is the *real* story of Christmas. Everyone knows that the Christmas story started 2000 years ago with the birth of Jesus, right? Actually, no! The story of Christmas actually starts at the beginning of the first book of the Bible, at the very beginning of human history, in a place about as far removed from our idea of a cozy and snowy Christmas setting as possible. The story of Christmas begins in a garden. The Garden of Eden was as close to heaven on earth as a place could possibly be. The

weather was perfect, the flowers never withered, and if there were wasps, they never stung anyone. Adam and Eve didn't have to worry about hunger or animal attacks or splinters. They were at perfect peace with each other, and God even walked with them in the garden.

But something happened that plunged this perfect world into the conflict that still rages today, something that causes all the suffering on the planet. The first sin was committed. You may think of sin as breaking a rule, but as we see in the Eden story, sin is simply disobeying God's word and disobeying his will. From the moment Eve disobeyed and disobeyed, everything and everyone has been infected by sin. Roses have thorns. Airports

need metal detectors. Cities need cemeteries. And sin has poisoned more than the world around us. Why do we do things we know we shouldn't, and why don't we do what we know we should? Something is wrong in our hearts.

But God never leaves a problem unsolved. In the same moment sin entered the world, God had the solution ready, and he revealed it almost immediately in a single verse holding hope for the entire world. "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15). The serpent would bruise the heel of this Savior, but the Savior would trample the head of the serpent. You don't have to be a doctor to know which injury is worse—a bite to the foot or a kick to the head! Sin was to be defeated. We were to be rescued.

You may never have heard this verse referred to as the first Christmas story, but that's exactly what it is. It's the very first verse in the Bible to tell of a Savior who would bring us salvation

from our sin. The most familiar Christmas verse in the Bible is probably Luke 2:11: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." The very first word used to describe the newborn baby is "Savior" because that is what the world had been waiting for all those long years since Eve ate the fruit. Only when we understand our need for a Savior can we fully experience the celebration of his birth. So with every Christmas movie we watch, every cookie we bake, every carol we sing, and every decoration we hang, let these words echo: "I need a Savior—and he is here!"



*Father God, thank you for solving the problem of our sin so we could once more walk with you. Thank you for sending us a Savior, and help us to remember our need for him every day of this Christmas season. Amen.*

## Celebrate

Write "I need a Savior, and he is here!" on some index cards. Parents or older children can print them, and younger children can decorate them. Put these notes where you'll find them as the Christmas season unfolds—filed with the Christmas cookie recipes, stored the gift wrapping supplies, and tucked in the cases of your favorite Christmas CDs or DVDs. As you enjoy your favorite Christmas activities, you'll find these reminders of the reason behind all the fun and celebration.



## What Child Is This?

ISAIAH 9:6-7

**In 1865, as Christmas** was approaching, an insurance salesman named William Chatterton Dix wrote a poem he called "The Manger Throne." Dix imagined that those who passed by the manger 2000 years ago might have been confused about who the child was who lay before them. Why was he in a feedbox? Why were shepherds worshipping him? Why were angels singing over him? Part of the poem was set to a traditional English melody, and it eventually became the well-loved Christmas song "What Child Is This?"

The world has been asking that question and debating the answer for the past 2000 years. Muslims, for example, believe that Jesus was born of a virgin just as Christians do,

but they see him only as a great prophet, not as God. Many Jewish people now see Jesus as a great teacher and political activist but not the Messiah. Buddhists see him as a perfectly enlightened being, full of compassion, who helps others. And millions of people who don't embrace any particular religion don't know what they think about him. So the question remains, what child is this? Well, 700 years before Jesus was born—before the star shone, the shepherds knelt, and the angels sang—a prophet of God named Isaiah told us in no uncertain terms exactly who child this was.

Jesus would come to be known by many names and titles—Lord, Savior, Christ, King of Kings, the Lion of Judah, the Rose of Sha-

ron—but Isaiah gives us four special names that tell us specifically what Jesus would be to us. To the hurting and confused, Jesus is the Wonderful Counselor. Isaiah 28:29 says, "The Lord of hosts...is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom." Unlike human counselors, Jesus doesn't give advice or opinions—He gives truth. He is the truth (John 14:6). The greatest counselor you can ever have is the Son of God; the greatest counsel you will ever find is in the word of God.

To the helpless, Jesus is the Mighty God. Present everywhere, limitless in power, with nothing hidden from his knowledge, he is an ever-present help (Psalm 46:1). Nothing is impossible with this Mighty God. To the orphan and the lonely, Jesus is the Everlasting Father, a Father who will never leave or forsake you, who was before all things and will outlast all things, and who knew your name from before the foundations of the earth. And to the hopeless and weary, Jesus is the Prince of Peace. The peace he gives is not like the peace the world gives, which depends on fragile treaties and temporary solutions. Jesus gives perfect peace that can weather any storm.

Someday, the whole world will no longer have to ask, "What child is this?" The child who was laid in a manger will sit on a throne. The babe worshipped by shepherds will be worshipped by kings and rulers. And of the reign of this Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace, there will be no end.



*Everlasting Father, thank you for loving us before the beginning of time. Mighty God, thank you for being our helper and our defender. Wonderful Counselor, thank you for giving us your word to guide us. And Prince of Peace, help us to share your peace with those around us this Christmas. Amen.*



Find a recording of "What Child Is This?" As your family listens to the carol, consider who Jesus has revealed himself to be and who he is to you. Next, find a recording of "For Unto Us a Child Is Born" from Handel's *Messiah* and listen to it as a family, noting every time one of Jesus's names is sung. See if you can memorize all four names by the end of the song—or even the whole verse!



## The Masterpiece

MATTHEW 1:1-17; LUKE 3:23-38

**When reading the book** of Matthew or Luke, it's tempting to skip over the long lists of names found in the early chapters. After reading three or four names into one of these lists, you may feel your eyes start to glaze over. *Get to the good part, you may be thinking!* These long family trees may not seem as interesting as the familiar stories about the shepherds and the wise men, but every word of the Bible is from God, so if he thought it was important for us to know who was in Jesus's family tree, we need to pay attention.

To understand why the genealogies listed in Matthew and Luke are important, think of the story of Jesus as you would a huge painting or mosaic—a masterpiece by a master artist, like the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Vatican

City. Michelangelo took four years to complete the huge work, and only when viewed from a distance, from the floor of the chapel, can the scale and scope of the full work be appreciated. In the same way, when we look at the big picture of Christmas, we can appreciate the thousands of years and millions of tiny brushstrokes God used to complete the masterpiece of the birth of Christ.

Matthew presents Jesus as the Messiah, a figure the Jews had been told would be a king. Unlike a president, a king does not come to rule by ballot, but by birth. A king has to prove his right to the throne by proving he is descended from the royal family. God had revealed that the Messiah's "right to rule" would be proven by three things: He would come from the fam-

ily of Abraham (Genesis 22:18), he would come from the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:10), and he would come from the house of David (2 Samuel 7:12-13). Now you see why God thought it was important for us to see these names in Jesus's family tree—they demonstrate his legal right to the throne.

But the genealogies reveal even more than that. Jesus's legal right to rule came through Joseph, but the Bible makes clear that the Messiah would be a descendant of David. As Joseph's adopted son, Jesus was a legal descendant but not a descendant of David by birth. Just so

there would be no doubt at all about Jesus's claim to the throne, God told Luke to include the other side of his genealogy—his mother's side—which can also be traced back to David through one of his other sons. Jesus was physically born of Mary, so her genealogy shows us that he was a literal descendant of David as well as a legal descendant.

God didn't leave one square inch of his canvas unfinished. He didn't use one brushstroke too many or too few, but just the right strokes and just the right colors to create the masterpiece of the birth of Christ.



*Dear Father, thank you for being the master artist who arranges our lives the same way you arranged Jesus's claim to his throne. Help us to trust that you are always working to place us exactly where you want us in the masterpiece you're creating.*



## Draw

Decide as a family on the subject for a group art project. Pick a simple object or animal whose parts can be assigned to the members of the family. For example, an elephant can be divided into tail, body, trunk, and ears. A tree can be divided into branches, trunk, roots, leaves, and fruit. Decide who is going to draw or paint each part of the picture, but don't discuss any other details about the picture, such as how big it will be or what color it will be. On separate pieces of paper, everyone draws or paints their individual part of the picture. When everyone is finished, try to assemble your picture using all the separate pieces to make the whole.

How did you do? You might have created a pretty decent picture of your object, or you might have created a monster! What does this exercise teach us about the "big picture" of our lives?



## Jesus's Family Tree

MATTHEW 1:3-6

**Have you ever examined** your family tree? A family tree is a diagram that shows all the individuals who make up your family, from your great-great-great-grandparents all the way to you. Some people love to research their family tree because they like to find out where they came from and who they're related to. It can be especially fun to discover that you're distantly related to a famous person from history, like George Washington or Thomas Edison!

You might think Jesus's family tree would be full of some of the wisest, most influential, and most righteous people who ever lived. But the truth is, Jesus's family tree has quite a few names on it that we wouldn't necessarily want to brag about having in our family. Abraham was a liar who pretended his wife was his sister. Jacob was

a cheater who stole his brother's birthright. And though David was a king, he was also an adulterer and a murderer. Perhaps the most surprising person to appear on Jesus's family tree, however, is Rahab, David's great-great-grandmother.

In Jesus's time, Jewish culture didn't regard women very highly, so it's surprising that Rahab is mentioned in Jesus's genealogy at all. We might conclude that she was an exceptionally righteous or humble person to be Jesus's ancestor and mentioned by name in his family tree, but when we read her story, we find out that she was not only a Canaanite—an enemy of the Israelites and an idolater—but also a woman with a very bad reputation. Respectable society wouldn't have had anything to do with this woman, yet God changed her heart, changed her life, and

included her in his master plan. He gave her an important part to play in giving the Promised Land to his people, and he even included her in his own Son's family tree.

None of the names in the first chapter of Matthew are there by accident. God guided the marriages and births that had to take place through the centuries to form Jesus's family tree, and every person in his lineage was handpicked by God to be part of it.

I'm willing to bet that most of those people had no idea during their lifetimes of the way God was using them in his much bigger plan to save the world. That's an important truth for us to remember—our lives might seem obscure or unimportant or broken or sinful, but God can use every person who's ever been born and fit us exactly where he wants us to be in his plan for the world.



*Lord, thank you for the reminder that you are willing to use any of us, regardless of the mistakes we've made or the way we've messed up in the past, as long as we are available to you. Help us to see the ways you want to use us this Christmas, and give us grace to be obedient to your leading. Amen.*



# Explore

Make your own family tree as far back as you are able. Call an older relative or two to ask for help if you need to, and wish them a merry Christmas while you're at it! Once you've completed your family tree, try to find pictures of all the people on it. Do you see any family resemblance in the photographs? Tell any interesting or funny stories you might remember about various family members. If possible, call grandparents and ask if they have any good stories to share with the kids about their parents! Enjoy exploring your own family tree, and thank God for putting your family together exactly as he did.



## The Waiting Room

LUKE 1:5-25

**Sitting in a hospital** waiting room is no fun. Not knowing what the doctor will say, not knowing whether the cancer is back, not knowing if the operation was successful...these are difficult situations.

You may find yourselves in other "waiting rooms" too—waiting for a job, waiting to meet someone to spend the rest of your life with, or waiting for enough money to pay the rent. If you've ever found yourself in one of these waiting rooms, you know what the Jewish people had been feeling like for hundreds of years before Jesus was born.

Lots of children today hear the story of Santa Claus and wait anxiously for him to bring gifts on Christmas Eve, but for thousands of years, children in Jewish families were told

a true story far more wonderful and awe-inspiring. They learned that God would one day send a Messiah, a Deliverer, someone who would rule over the entire world. They waited anxiously for him, but as the centuries passed and the Jewish people were subjected to captivity, foreign rule, and persecution, no Messiah appeared. Now, just before the birth of Christ, they'd been sitting in the waiting room for 400 years without even a whisper from God—no prophecies, no miracles, nothing.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had been in their own waiting room throughout their marriage. For decades they had prayed that God would bless them with a child, and for decades their arms and Elizabeth's womb had remained empty. Zechariah and Elizabeth probably felt

as if the nation of Israel—wary of praying, losing hope that God would respond, wondering if he was even listening—when an angel suddenly showed up in the waiting room.

"Your prayer has been heard," the angel said. If you've ever felt as if your prayers were being spoken to an empty room, you know how encouraged Zechariah must have been when he discovered that God had been listening to every word. What's more, God had not been idle or forgetful during those years of silence. God had marked the birthday of Zechariah's child on his calendar before Elizabeth and Zechariah were married...before they were even born! Throughout their long years of praying, he had been moving in the events of the world to bring Zechariah, Elizabeth, Joseph, Mary, Caesar

Augustus, and the nation of Israel to this exact point in time when everything would align for his plan of salvation to be set into motion.

Even when you feel as if you've been in the waiting room forever or God has forgotten all about you, Zechariah and Elizabeth's story shows that while we are waiting, God is moving. During those 400 years of silence, when the Jews were tempted to lose faith that a Messiah would ever come, God had already made and confirmed his reservations for his time on earth. His arrival date was on the calendar before the creation of the world. Christmas proves that God never forgets his promises and always keep his appointments. So no matter how long you've been in the waiting room, keep watching—God is coming!



*Lord Jesus, thank you for your perfect timing at the first Christmas and in each of our lives. Help us to trust that when you seem to be silent, you're still working to accomplish your purpose in our lives. Give us patience when we're in the waiting room, and thank you that we have Christmas as a reminder that you came once and are coming again. Amen.*



Play a family game that includes a timer, such as Catch Phrase, Boggle, or Scattergories. Notice the excitement you feel when the timer is started. How does "God's timer" help you when you're waiting for his plan to unfold?



## Timing is Everything

GALATIANS 4:4

**Hitting a baseball** has been described as the most difficult feat in all of sports. I played baseball in high school, and I believe it! It takes incredible hand-eye coordination to swing a piece of wood three inches wide at a little white ball traveling 95 miles an hour. If you manage to connect ball to bat, a difference in timing of a *hundredth of a second* can determine whether a hit will be a foul ball or a 400-foot home run. Timing is everything in baseball.

Have you ever wondered about the timing of Christmas? Why was Jesus born when he was? Why didn't he come much earlier? Why did God wait around for thousands of years before sending Jesus onto the scene? The apostle Paul answers those questions with a simple statement about Christmas, one that would be easy

to miss if you weren't looking for it: "When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son" (Galatians 4:4).

The phrase "fullness of time" comes from a Greek expression loaded with meaning. It describes something that is completely and fully developed, like a ripe apple that is ready to be picked or a pregnant woman who is ready to deliver her baby. It refers to a time appointed in advance for something to happen. According to Paul, the birth of Jesus came at the exact moment when everything was in place, when everything was perfectly lined up and the stage was perfectly set.

If we walk down the road of history a little way, we can see why God's timing of Jesus's birth was so perfect. Three hundred fifty years

before Jesus was born, a Greek named Alexander the Great set out to conquer the known world. In 12 years, he had done just that. Because of Alexander's conquest, the world adopted a universal language—Greek, which was still common during Jesus's earthly ministry.

When the Romans defeated the Greeks, they used their wealth to build roads patrolled by soldiers, and that allowed for relatively safe travel throughout the empire. The most efficient postal system in existence at the time allowed letters to be written and dispatched all over the known world. Into this time in history, when most of the civilized world was within reach, the Savior of the world was born. The time was just right for the good news of the Messiah to spread like wildfire. Less than a generation after Jesus's crucifixion, the early disciples had carried his story to every country in the Roman Empire. Within three centuries, Christianity was the official religion of the empire.

In the fullness of time, God sent his Son to a world desperate for a Savior. Just as there was an exact time for Jesus to be born, there is an exact time when he will come again, so the exact time for us to put our faith in him is now.



*God, thank you for sending your Son to earth at just the right time. Thank you for never being too early or too late. Help us to trust your perfect timing in our lives when we feel impatient or anxious. Amen.*



## Create

Make a family timeline. Start with the birthdate of the oldest person in your immediate family and add as many significant events as you can—other birthdates, vacations, moves, graduations, job changes, losses you may have suffered, major world events, changes in technology, and so on. If you want too, look up the birth year of each family member and read a few of the biggest headlines from that year.

How would your lives have been different if you were born even a little sooner or later? Thank God for working out the timing of your lives just right so you can enjoy your life, your family, and your friends.



# Believe and Say Yes

LUKE 1:26-38

**Without question**, the most famous mother in history is Mary the mother of Jesus. She has been the subject of countless paintings and sculptures and songs. More little girls have been named after her than after any other woman who has ever lived.

Mary was the only person who was present at both the birth of Christ and his crucifixion. She saw Jesus enter the world as her son and leave as her Savior. Without a doubt, Mary's job was one of the most special and most sacred of any that God has ever given to anyone, so naturally, people have spent a lot of time trying to figure out exactly why God picked Mary for the honor of being Jesus's mother.

Nowhere does the Bible say she was perfect or sinless. Nowhere does it say she was God or equal with God. And yet out of the whole world, God chose this poor, undistinguished peasant girl from a nondescript city to be the mother of Jesus.

If there was anything extraordinary about this ordinary Jewish girl, something that would explain why God chose her for this role, it was her immediate response to the incredible things the angel told her: "I am the Lord's servant. May everything that you have said about me come true" (Luke 1:38 nlt). Mary knew her life was going to look different from what she had expected. She probably guessed

she would encounter gossip and scorn when she was found to be pregnant. Yet when she learns what God's will is for her, Mary simply believes and says yes.

Christmas has a lot to do with God's promises. He promised Adam and Eve that their offspring would overcome evil. He promised Isaiah that a virgin would conceive and bear a son. He promised Mary that she would conceive and give birth to the Savior. Evidently, God wants us to know without a doubt that he keeps his promises. The angel even affirms that "every promise from God shall surely come true" (Luke 1:37 tlb). Why then do we continue to live as if we're not sure whether God can be trusted? Why do we hesitate to believe his promises and to follow his will when it's revealed?

Though he may not send angels with personalized instructions very often, God has a custom plan for every one of us, a purpose he wants each of us to fulfill. God didn't choose Mary because she was smart or sinless or talented, and those aren't the reasons he chooses us. Rather, he uses ordinary people who believe his promises and act as if they are true, following his will even when it seems unpleasant, difficult, or even dangerous. Mary's cousin Elizabeth says, "You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said" (Luke 1:45 nlt). Like Mary, we can be used in extraordinary ways if our response to God is to believe and say yes.



*Jesus, help us to be like Mary, to be open to hearing your will. Make us ready to believe and say yes when you speak to us. Thank you for all the times you've kept your promises to us. Amen.*



## Connect

Throughout history, people have done some amazing things simply because they believed and said yes to God. Noah built an ark—and saved the human race. Abraham moved his household hundreds of miles—and inherited the promised land. Moses led Israel out of slavery, young David defeated a giant, and Peter walked on water...because they believed and said yes.

Take turns sharing one way your life has changed because you have believed God and said yes to him.