

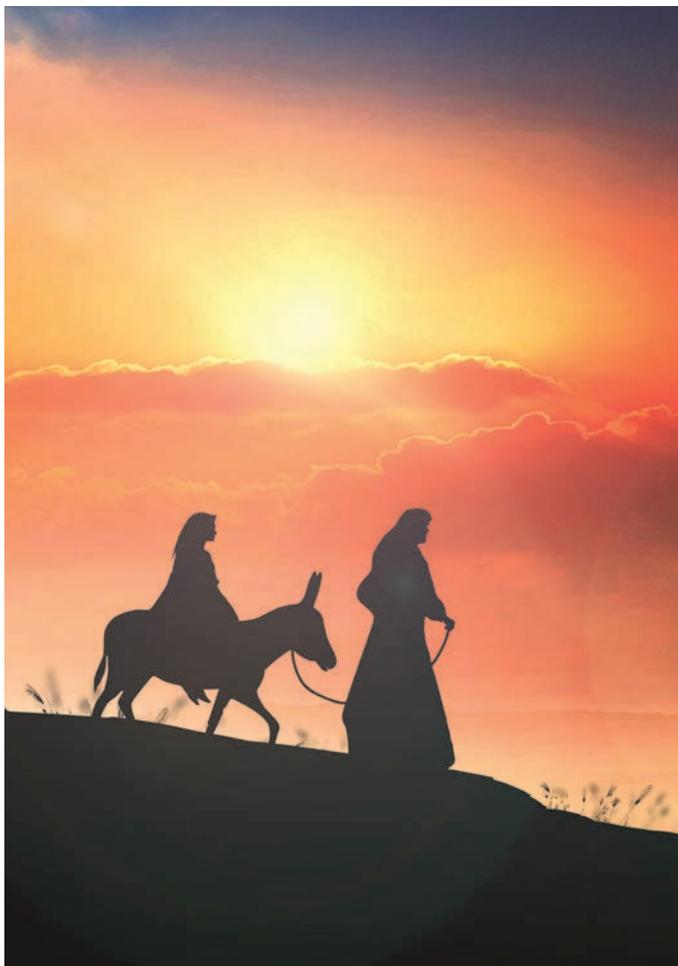
DECEMBER 2015

# TODAY IN THE **Word**

A MINISTRY OF MOODY BIBLE INSTITUTE

You are to give  
him the name  
Jesus, because  
he will save his  
people from  
their sins.

Matthew 1:21



Christmas: Good News for All

# TODAY WITH PAUL NYQUIST

President of Moody Bible Institute

## Unpacking the Nativity



Every Christmas, we unpack our family's nativity scene. Made of olive wood and purchased from a shop in Bethlehem, it traditionally occupies a prominent place on our fireplace mantle. While some nativity sets are made of wood and others are ceramic, they all celebrate the central reason for this holiday season: the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The word *nativity* means simply the occasion of birth, and it is most often associated with the birth of Christ.

In 1223, Francis of Assisi arranged a living nativity complete with a manger and live animals. He invited people to watch while he preached a sermon about Christ's birth. Later, the living scenes were reproduced into crèche sets using household materials to make the figures.

Although the characters in our nativity sets follow tradition, they are not always biblically accurate. The Magi, for example, did not attend Jesus' birth. They may have visited as much as two years later (Matt. 2:1). And, although it might be entirely plausible that they were nearby, the Bible does not mention donkeys, oxen, or sheep at the birth of our Savior.

What our depictions do get right is that the birth of Christ did not happen in isolation. God's Son was born to and

among ordinary people. French nativity scenes reflect this idea by presenting a wide cast of characters, including common members of ordinary village life: a farmer, a cobbler, a gardener, or a policeman.

The French tradition illustrates an important point, because the biblical account of Christ's birth involved a great cast of characters. The account tells the story of Zechariah, Elizabeth, Gabriel, the Shepherds, the Magi, Herod, Simeon, and Anna. And the news of Christ's birth extended far beyond the manger, impacting and changing lives. As the angel declared to the shepherds, "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for *all* the people" (Luke 2:10).

We return to the nativity, the birth of Jesus, because what God did at that moment changes us still today: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16). This was not just an ordinary baby; this was the Son of God become man, as the apostle Paul observes (Phil. 2:8). It was God's love displayed in a way we could see and touch and comprehend. The birth of Jesus has changed our lives forever.

The nativity is not just a symbol of the Christmas season, it represents God's plan of salvation. In this seemingly ordinary birth we find hope for the world. As Matthew's Gospel records, "They shall call His name Immanuel, which translated means, 'God with us.'" (1:23).

# THEOLOGY MATTERS

by John Koessler



## Revelation and Incarnation

In many churches, December is the season when tinsel-haloed angels dressed in bedsheets announce the birth of Christ to bathrobe-clad shepherds. This way of telling the nativity story has a kind of charm, but it also might fool some people into thinking that Jesus' birth is merely a rustic folktale. The Bible's account of the birth of Christ is not simply a children's story or fairy tale. The nativity was an historical event and part of God's divine revelation to us.

*Incarnation* is the theological word for Jesus taking to Himself a human nature. It means "to become flesh." The Gospels describe the incarnation of Christ as both historical fact and an act of revelation. The author of the letter to the Hebrews says that God has "spoken to us by his Son" and that Jesus is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Heb. 1:2–3). Jesus, the Son of God, was born to do more than make a poetic statement or inspire a holiday tradition. His incarnation has revealed God in human form. John describes Jesus as the eternal Word who "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). The Apostle also calls Him the Word of life "which we have looked at and our hands have touched" (1 John 1:1).

In addition to revealing God, the incarnation was necessary in order for Jesus to die on the cross and be raised from the dead for our sins. The entrance of sin into human experience obscured our knowledge of God. It made us God's enemies. Sin compels humanity to suppress the plain truth that God has revealed about Himself in creation (Rom. 1:18–19). Jesus took on a human nature not only to correct the record about God but also to rescue us from the sin that was the cause of this distortion in the first place.

Christ's incarnation cannot be separated from His sacrifice. Without the deliverance from sin, which the Savior's death and resurrection secured, the incarnation would be meaningless to us. We would suppress the truth about God that has been revealed to us in Jesus' life and teaching, just as we push down the truth that God has shown to us about Himself "from what has been made" (Rom. 1:20).

This is precisely what happens when we separate Christmas from the cross. All that remains is a story about a babe in a manger. That tale might entertain or even charm us, but it has no value for broken sinners. Without the cross, Christmas has no meaning.

### For Further Study

To learn more about the significance of the incarnation, read *The Incarnation of God: The Mystery of the Gospel as the Foundation of Evangelical Theology*, edited by John Clark and Marcus Peter Johnson (Crossway).

# FROM THE EDITORS

by Paul B. Currie

## Journey Together

Over the past few months, our team at Moody has been considering how we can best convey the core aspects of our ministry in a fast-changing world. As you may have noticed, we now have the name Moody Global Ministries to describe all we do through our three major divisions of education, publishing, and radio broadcasting. As part of this process, we have updated the logos and look of Moody Bible Institute, Moody Publishers, and Moody Radio. And we're excited to announce that *Today in the Word* will have a new look coming soon.

Not to worry! Just as a great house can be enhanced with a fresh coat of paint, *Today in the Word* will only get better with these improvements. You will still be receiving the same quality insight into God's Word along with encouragement in how to apply it to your everyday life, just as you have come to expect from *Today in the Word*. You'll see our new logo and enhanced design in the January 2016 print edition, and the website and daily emails will also have a refreshed, inviting look that will be unveiled in January.

One improvement that I hope you're enjoying has already been implemented this year. By God's grace, we have been able to move up our editorial and production schedules. This allows us to send *Today in the Word* several weeks earlier each month, resulting in your receiving it in a much timelier fashion.

We are also reorganizing the titles and roles of our team on *Today in the Word*. Vice President Bruce Everhart will be our new executive editor. He is a 28-year veteran of Moody Global Ministries, serving for many years as the station manager of our flagship radio station WMBL in Chicago and now leading our donor development and channel strategy team. I will continue to serve the Lord and our readers in my role managing the production process of *Today in the Word*, and it is my joy, honor, and privilege to make every effort to ensure that *Today in the Word* is something God can use to bless your life.

We at *Today in the Word* serve with the collective prayer that the devotional we produce each month is a valuable tool that you can use to study the Word of God. We care about your spiritual journey because we are right there alongside you, taking steps together in following Christ. We are learning more about God and His desire for our lives to glorify Him with each month's devotional, just as you are.

Thank you for sharing those experiences with us. I was encouraged by the Holy Spirit recently as I was reading letters and emails you have sent us. You bless and encourage me and our team with your words of testimony of God's working in your life! May God bless you and may He continue to bless *Today in the Word*.

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# TODAY IN THE **Word**

A MINISTRY OF MOODY BIBLE INSTITUTE

## Christmas: Good News for All

An article in a recent *Atlantic* magazine claims that people today view income disparities as a major problem. Inequality was presented as enemy No. 1 in a recent World Economic Forum report, and was a major theme this year at Davos, Switzerland, where the forum meets.

This month in *Today in the Word*, as we look at the panorama of people and places of Christmas, we'll see a huge income inequality among those who came to Bethlehem to find the newborn King, son of poor Jewish parents. We'll also see that when they came to this baby, the Word made flesh, their income didn't matter at all. The Christmas story shows us our enemy No. 1—sin—and our Savior who overcame the enemy on the cross.

As we study the Bible this month, let us include ourselves in the Christmas story. No matter our salary, status, or rank in life, let us go to Bethlehem to worship Jesus. And let us come to the cross, the great equalizer.

We hope our devotional this month will encourage you in the difficulties and struggles of life. And we pray you will keep your eyes on Jesus this Christmas season. As you walk with Jesus, you add your life's story to the Christmas scenery and you show others the way to Bethlehem. Thank you for your faithful support of *Today in the Word*! Merry Christmas!

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## Zechariah: How Can I Be Sure?

In *All That Jesus Asks: How His Questions Can Teach and Transform Us*, Stan Guthrie wrote: “When it comes to religious matters, we all live in the ‘show me’ state. We are materialists like the apostle Thomas, who demanded physical evidence that Jesus had indeed risen. The atheists’ grievous mistake is not doubting, but prizing doubt over faith, when they should do the opposite.”

That’s the mistake that Zechariah made in today’s reading. Instead of trusting that God could do the impossible, he doubted Gabriel’s words that he and Elizabeth would conceive a son in their old age. Like Sarah, who laughed when God promised her and Abraham a son in similar circumstances (Gen. 18:10–14), he had too small a view of the Lord. His question “How can I be sure of this?” (v. 18) showed his weak faith. But God didn’t give up on him. Through all that would happen, Zechariah’s faith would be greatly strengthened—

just as had happened with Sarah (see Heb. 11:11–12).

In Zechariah’s case, this transformation happened through God’s gift of silence. Gabriel told Zechariah he would be mute until the child was born (v. 20). This was a rebuke and a sign, but also a gift. Unable to speak (vv. 22), Zechariah in his cocoon of silence could focus on doing business with God.

Do not be afraid,  
Zechariah; your  
prayer has  
been heard.

Luke 1:13

Zechariah opens this month’s study, “Christmas: Good News for All.” We’ll be reading many familiar, Christmas-related Scrip-

ture passages, focusing especially on the godliness and courage of key characters as examples for us to imitate. The larger thematic focus is on how the heart of the Christmas story is the good news of the gospel. Throughout the study, we’ll be asking what lessons can be learned this holiday season to apply in our own Christian lives.

### Apply the Word

How did a righteous priest stumble so badly? Perhaps the blessing God gave was not the blessing Zechariah was expecting. He anticipated a “mountaintop” experience in the Most Holy Place, but not an angel with a message about an answered prayer and the coming of the Messiah. This Christmas, pray to be open to whatever God gives, whether it’s what we expect or not.

### Pray with Us

Solheim Center, Moody’s athletic facility in Chicago, provides a wonderful opportunity for our students’ sports training and community outreach. Would you pray for Solheim’s staff: Troy Fichter and Josie Scott?

## Elizabeth: His Name Is John

Naming children after family members is common in cultures around the world. To name a son “junior” after his father, for example, or to give a daughter a middle name after her grandmother, is often done as a way of showing respect and love and of honoring the past.

So it was quite normal that Zechariah and Elizabeth’s friends and relatives expected them to name their miracle baby after his father, or at least after family. After all, this would surely be an only child. In addition, in that day childlessness was seen as a source of social shame and perhaps even of God’s disfavor. The pregnancy was therefore not only a source of personal joy but also evidence of God’s mercy (v. 58). Elizabeth rejoiced because He had indeed removed her disgrace (v. 25; cf. Gen. 30:22–24).

It’s safe to assume that during the nine months of pregnancy, Zechariah had

communicated Gabriel’s words to Elizabeth via writing. So when she spoke up at the circumcision and naming ceremony to say the child’s name was John (v. 60), it was an openhearted act of faith and obedience. Zechariah confirmed his wife’s declaration by writing the same name on a tablet, astonishing all who were present (v. 63). He had been waiting a long time for a second chance, and this time he didn’t stumble! Like his wife, he named their child in faith and obedience. His muteness was immediately lifted and he began to praise the Lord (v. 64).

The birth of John, and the faith and obedience of his parents, were a sign to the entire community. Indeed, word spread quickly through the region that God was at work (vv. 65–66).

When we imitate this example and step out in faith and obedience, His name is glorified!

No! He is to be called John.

Luke 1:60

### Apply the Word

Do you know the literal or figurative meanings of your name? Or why your parents chose it? This might be something to research, meditate on, or pray over today. Though the story of your name is probably less dramatic than John the Baptist’s, God knew you before you were born (Ps. 139:13–16). He is the Author of the book of your life!

### Pray with Us

Debbie Zelinski, vice president of Human Resources, brings to Moody a wealth of experience in leadership and personnel services. She welcomes your prayers today as she leads her team in Human Resources on Moody’s Chicago campus.

## Zechariah: A Prophecy for a Son

The color green increases our creativity, according to a recent study. When people looked at a green rectangle for two seconds prior to doing a given task, it boosted their creativity, compared to when they looked at other colors such as red or blue. Researchers believe this happened because the color green is linked with growth.

Zechariah's creativity in today's reading, on the other hand, was inspired by the Holy Spirit (v. 67). This song demonstrates how far he had come. On the day he entered the Most Holy Place, he had already spent a lifetime in vocational ministry and earned a reputation for godliness (v. 6). Nonetheless, his faith proved too flimsy to rise to the challenge of God's words spoken through the angel Gabriel. After nine months of doing business with God, Zechariah had clearly grown in his faith and spiritual maturity.

You will go on  
before the Lord  
to prepare the  
way for him.

Luke 1:76

Zechariah's prophetic song, filled with Old Testament allusions, was the Lord's answer to the people's question, "What then is this child going to be?" (v. 66). John was going to be the one who prepared the way for the Messiah, God's "horn of salvation" and the Light of dawn breaking into this dark world of sin (vv. 69, 76, 79; cf. Isa. 9:2).

John would preach repentance and forgiveness. His ministry, like those of the prophets before him, would highlight God's faithful, covenant-keeping nature, as well as His mercy (vv. 72–78). His life and work would be further evidence of how God acts to love

and redeem His people.

Zechariah did speak of his son, but the overall prophecy focused on God's Son. Zechariah's family's stories, like ours, are nested within God's larger story. Though the occasion was John's naming day, it is the name of the Lord that was glorified!

### Apply the Word

The story of Zechariah proves that you *can* teach an old dog new tricks—if the "dog trainer" is God! Zechariah had lived a good life. Why wasn't he allowed to retire and "run out the clock" in peace? Because the Lord loved him too much for that. He had more for him to learn, especially about Himself. Praise be to God that He loves us that much as well!

### Pray with Us

Uphold in prayer Moody Alumni Association and the service of executive director Nancy Hastings and project coordinator Diane Janchenko. Their ministry to thousands of alumni across the globe helps many generations of Moody graduates stay connected.

## Gabriel: The Lord Is with You

Stroll around any card or gift shop and you'll see "angels." They are chubby little fellows with a bow and arrow, or perhaps kindly looking adults with soft wings and beaming faces. They might be holding a book or a scroll or standing with hands open in a nonthreatening posture.

Representations of angels in popular culture fall far short of the reality. When angels appeared to people in Scripture, they invariably provoked fear and trembling. That's why they often say, "Do not be afraid," as Gabriel did to Mary (v. 30). Angels are certainly extraordinary, which has led some to wrongly worship them (see Col. 2:18). Yet, like us, they are servants of God and take an eager interest in God's redemptive plans (1 Cor. 4:9; 1 Peter 1:12). Also like us, they apparently have an ability to choose, since some, like Satan, chose wrongly (Jude 1:6).

I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.

Luke 1:19

Gabriel, whose name means "God is my hero" or "God is my strength," is one of only two angels named in Scripture (see Dan. 8:16; 9:21). A major character in the Christmas story, he appeared to Zechariah and Mary with birth announcements. Today's reading includes what is surely the most important such announcement in all of history: the virgin Mary would bear a son, Jesus, conceived by the Holy Spirit. He would be both divine—"Son of the Most High"—and human—the Messiah, sitting on the throne of King David (vv. 32–33).

Gabriel served as God's messenger—and so can we! He brought God's words to the unlikeliest of persons in the unlikeliest of places—and so can we! Jesus commissioned us to take the gospel to all nations, making disciples, baptizing, and "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19–20).

### Apply the Word

If we think God is lucky to have us on His team, the truth that we are simply messengers should put things in proper perspective. We didn't originate the message. We didn't make the plan. We're not doing it in our own strength or wisdom. God did and is doing all that. Our part is to share the good news, to bring His message to those who have not heard.

### Pray with Us

Please pray for Moody's president, Dr. Paul Nyquist, as he speaks during Candlelight Carols today at The Moody Church in Chicago. May Christ's name be glorified at this celebration of His birth.

## Mary: I Am the Lord's Servant

In one version of the Mexican legend of the poinsettia, a young girl wove a blanket as a Christmas offering. When it was spoiled, she felt Christmas was also ruined. She had nothing to give. Desperate to offer something, she gathered an armful of weeds outside the church. As she entered the Christmas Eve service, the weeds were transformed into beautiful red flowers. That's why in Spanish poinsettias are called *la Flor de Nochebuena*, the Flower of the Holy Night.

The girl offered what she had with an open heart, and in the story God honored that. Mary responded to the angel Gabriel in the same way. She was young, poor, and uneducated. She was also engaged, that is, committed to a binding betrothal, so if she turned up pregnant she had a lot to lose. People would assume she had acted immorally, and the consequence could be death. Even if not, a pregnancy would likely mean that she, her child, and

her family would endure a lifetime of social shame and exclusion.

Nonetheless, Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant" (v. 38). She submitted to God's words and offered her complete obedience. Her question "How will this be?" flowed not from fear or doubt but from faith (v. 34). She believed God could do the impossible and cause a virgin to conceive (see Matt. 1:22–23). With much to lose, upon hearing an impossible and unprecedented promise, Mary fully believed God.

Perhaps Gabriel breathed a sigh of relief, remembering Zechariah's inadequate response to the earlier, easier-to-believe message. In any case, he explained that Mary would conceive by the Holy Spirit, and that the child would be the Son of God (v. 35). He also communicated news of Elizabeth's pregnancy as both an immediate sign and encouragement.

May your word to  
me be fulfilled.

Luke 1:38

### Apply the Word

The legend of the poinsettia mentioned in today's illustration would be an excellent Christmas tale to share with your children or children you know. Your local library probably has a classic illustrated version by Tomie dePaola. Many other retellings may be found online, including video versions on YouTube, Vimeo, and other multimedia sites. An actual poinsettia flower would be a great visual aid!

### Pray with Us

Today is the second day of Candlelight Carols at Moody. We invite you to pray for the students who participate in the performance and who are in the audience, that their hearts would be glad with the joy of Christmas.

## Mary: Blessed Relatives

Walter Wangerin Jr. wrote in *Preparing for Jesus* of the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth: “Elizabeth is on the edge of tears, for here in young, fresh Mary is the mirror of her own condition: sisters, sisters! They are both with child! But before the tears drop; before the woman can rush to her cousin to hug her; before she can utter the first word of greeting in return, the tiny prophet low in her womb expresses his first prophecy! Already filled with the Holy Spirit, already preparing the way, the baby leaps for joy at the sound of the voice of the mother of his Lord!”

**Blessed are you  
among women, and  
blessed is the child  
you will bear!**

Luke 1:42

Mary and Elizabeth may have been related in a way other than cousins, as the term is used of other extended family relationships as well. In any case, they were mutually encouraged by the visit. Mary was no doubt glad to confirm that Gabriel’s words about Elizabeth being pregnant were true. Elizabeth in turn was filled with the Spirit and proph-

esied, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!” (v. 42). And as Wangerin so vividly describes above, little John leapt for joy in her womb.

Elizabeth’s words verify the quality of Mary’s faith. Why was she so blessed to carry this Child? Because she had put her faith 100 percent in God’s promises (v. 45). This kind of faith is not mere agreement or assent, but a full-fledged, holding-nothing-back, stake-my-life kind of faith. God’s promises, after all, were on a huge scale (ful-

filling the Davidic covenant), somewhat incomprehensible (God to be born as a man?), humanly impossible (a virgin conceiving), and came accompanied by many apparent negative consequences.

Do we prefer the promises of God we can understand and that clearly benefit us? Or do we view and trust them all without reserve, as Mary did?

### Apply the Word

Biblical promises were not made merely for our personal advantage or benefit. Faith needs to believe God’s promises on *His* terms. For example, He has promised that followers of Christ will suffer and be persecuted. Both Jesus and Peter insist that this is a blessing—meaning not that it will be pleasant but that it is a privilege within God’s plan (Matt. 5:10–12; 1 Peter 4:12–16).

### Pray with Us

Collin Lambert, vice president of Moody Radio, will appreciate your prayers today. Will you pray that many people will come to know Christ as they tune in to Moody Radio’s special Christmas programming across the country this month?

## Mary: My Soul Glorifies the Lord

God's plan of redemption began long before Christ's birth in Bethlehem. His plan for humanity was never about earning salvation through good works or obedience to the Law. As far back as Abraham, believers were justified by faith. The same was true for Moses, David, and Israel in general (see Romans 4; 7; 9). From this perspective, "Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes" (Rom. 10:4).

Mary's song, a beautiful response to Elizabeth's words of blessing, revealed her worshipful awareness of God's grace throughout history. In a way similar to Zechariah's song, it is full of Old Testament allusions. At the personal level, she was glorifying God and rejoicing in Him, for He had richly blessed her. She understood that through this childbearing she would play a key role in the story of God's kingdom, to the point where "all generations will call me blessed" (v. 48).

In general, Mary's song focused on the larger picture: God and His covenant faithfulness. His grace toward her was typical of His actions throughout Israel's history, which was full of examples of His power and love exercised on behalf of His people. Just as He had chosen her, who by no human standard deserved the privilege of being Jesus' mother, so also does He strike down the proud and lift up the humble (vv. 51–52). The Lord shows no favoritism.

The Mighty One  
has done great  
things for me—holy  
is his name.

Luke 1:49

From Gabriel's message, Mary knew her Son would be the fulfillment of ancient promises and covenants (v. 55). This echoes Elizabeth's words: "Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!" (v. 45). In the words of another psalm: "He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God" (Ps. 98:3).

### Apply the Word

It has often been suggested that Mary's song be studied side-by-side with the prayer of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1–10. If you have time for some extra Bible reading today, we encourage you to read this additional Scripture passage. The two share many themes and flows of thought, and it may be that Mary was remembering Hannah's story when she composed her own song.

### Pray with Us

Moody Radio Marketing helps our stations expand their reach so that they can touch countless lives via radio waves. Ask the Lord to bless the work of George Economos, Michael Chapin, Cody Fraser, and David Woodworth as they serve Christ at Moody.

## Joseph: Faithful to the Lawgiver

Landon Donovan is one of the greatest American soccer players ever. Named U.S. Soccer Athlete of the Year four times, he holds the U.S. Men's National Team all-time records for goals (57)—including five in the World Cup—and assists (58). In Major League Soccer (MLS), he was selected as an All-Star an unsurpassed fourteen times and holds a fistful of career MLS records. Because of his tremendous accomplishments, Landon Donovan is considered a sports hero.

Because of his tremendous obedience in today's reading, Joseph is considered a hero of Christmas. Mary's faith and obedience are definitely worth imitating, but we don't want to neglect Joseph's part in the story. From his perspective, the idea of a virgin birth sounded absurd. He simply couldn't believe it. As a righteous man "faithful to the law," he could not move forward with the marriage, but as a kind man, "he had in mind to divorce her quietly" and avoid

a public trial, condemnation, and possibly execution (v. 19).

God spoke to him in a dream, however, and told him to move forward in his betrothal to Mary (v. 20). In the eyes of the world, he would be ignoring his fiancée's presumed sexual immorality, making him

look like either a fool, a person who didn't value purity, or more likely, her partner in sin. Like his wife, he risked becoming an object of mockery.

He did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

Matthew 1:24

To obey—which he did promptly (v. 24)—Joseph believed two amazing things. First, he accepted

the truth of the virgin birth, God's assertion that Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Second, he trusted that Jesus would "save his people from their sins" (v. 21). This child would indeed be the Messiah and the Son of God (see Luke 1:30–33). Joseph was faithful not only to the law but to the Lawgiver first of all!

### Apply the Word

Joseph refrained from sex even after marriage (v. 25). He understood that there had to be no doubt about the virgin birth, so he and Mary did not consummate their union until after Jesus' birth. What a difficult act of obedience (see 1 Cor. 7:1–5)! Are we willing to sacrifice our comfort or priorities in order to obey the Lord?

### Pray with Us

Today, please mention in prayer Ben Chelladurai, Daniel Hassler, Norma Malave, and Camille Ward from the Institutional Effectiveness Office. Praise God for all they do to facilitate research and accreditation at Moody in Chicago.

## Isaiah: The Sign of Immanuel

Earlier this year, The Gideons International gave out their two-billionth Bible or New Testament. Currently more than 300,000 members in 200 countries distribute the Scriptures in over 90 languages. The Gideons president said: “We are placing Bibles because they save souls. Behind every number is a face, behind every face a story, behind every story a priceless soul that could live throughout eternity.”

The work of The Gideons reminds us that the Christmas story is God’s story, not ours. All Scripture is essentially one story—the story of God’s redemptive love for His people. This is why Isaiah, although he lived long before Jesus’ birth, is part of the good news of Christmas. In today’s reading, he prophesied concerning the virgin birth, an important article of the Christian faith (Matt. 1:22–23).

What was the original context of this prophecy? The northern kingdom of Israel had fallen to Assyria, and it looked

like the southern kingdom of Judah would soon follow. God sent the prophet Isaiah, however, to tell King Ahaz that the nation’s enemies would not be allowed to defeat it (vv. 7–9). They were merely human and would not overcome His divine protection. Judah should stand firm in faith and trust in God, unlike the choices made by the northern kingdom.

The virgin will  
conceive and give  
birth to a son,  
and will call him  
Immanuel.

Isaiah 7:14

God encouraged Ahaz to ask for a sign, but he refused in a show of false humility that revealed his weak faith. The Lord graciously gave him a sign anyway. With reference to the immediate crisis, Isaiah’s prophecy would come true by the time he had

married his betrothed—who at the time of the prophecy was still a virgin—and they had a son (fulfilled in 8:1–10). This child thus represented the protection and promise-keeping of “God with us.”

Ultimately, God fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy through a literal virgin birth, that is, the birth of Christ, who is fully in every way “God with us.”

### Apply the Word

Today’s verse, Isaiah 7:14, is well known as a messianic prophecy. But how much do you know about the original historical background? If you wish, make time for additional Bible study of this fascinating passage and perhaps even the entire book of Isaiah. You can consult helpful commentaries or even take a personal enrichment course on Isaiah through Moody Distance Learning.

### Pray with Us

Frank Leber, vice president of Information Technology Services, welcomes your prayer support today. Ask for God’s guidance and wisdom as Frank heads several teams and oversees all of the day-to-day computer technology needs at Moody.

## Bethlehem: City of David

Originally built in the fourth century and rebuilt in the sixth century, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is one of the oldest surviving Christian churches. Tourists can go down a flight of steps by the church altar to visit the Grotto of the Nativity, a cave traditionally held to be the actual birthplace of Jesus, including a silver star in the floor said to mark the exact spot.

As the presence of this church signifies, Bethlehem played a major role in the Christmas story. But in what sense can we as people see good news from a place? In the sense that it points, like many of the people we've studied, directly to God's sovereignty and covenant-keeping faithfulness.

Bethlehem was the hometown of David, Israel's greatest king, to whom God had made a promise of an eternal throne (see 1 Sam. 17:12; 2 Sam. 7:16). How fitting that Jesus, David's descendant and the ful-

fillment of that promise, would be born in Bethlehem as well!

Interestingly, Gentiles are also involved in this aspect of the story. Mary and Joseph ended up in Bethlehem instead of Nazareth for the birth as a result of Caesar's decision to conduct a census (vv. 1–3). The

young couple had to go there to register for taxes. No doubt the ruler of the powerful Roman Empire believed he did this for policy reasons, but it's further evidence that God is King over all nations, managing the big picture and every detail as He wills.

Out of you will  
come a ruler who  
will shepherd my  
people Israel.

Matthew 2:6

The prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem was apparently widely known (Micah 5:2; Matt. 2:6; John 7:42). Both Mary and Joseph were from the line of David. At every level, Bethlehem, as the main setting of the Christmas story, stands clearly as a symbol of God's authorship of redemption history.

### Apply the Word

An appropriate way to respond to today's devotion would be to praise the Lord for His sovereignty over all of space and time. Nations and empires? He rules them. The unfolding of history? It's in His hands. Covenants and promises? He keeps them. As Scripture proclaims: "God is the King of all the earth; sing to him a psalm of praise. God reigns over the nations" (Ps. 47:7–8).

### Pray with Us

While praying for ITS, please add Frank Leber's leadership and administrative team to your list: Paul Walker, John Saucedo, Ben Dallmann, and Rebekah Campbell, as well as Emily Semer and Allison Ferguson.

## Angels: Good News for All Humanity

Sweden enjoys an unusual Christmas tradition. For more than 50 years, at 3:00 p.m. on December 24 the nation has watched what was originally a 1958 Disney Christmas special. Called *Kalle Anka* in Swedish, the program consists of Jiminy Cricket introducing a series of vintage cartoons. Families often plan their entire day around watching the show.

When it comes to tradition, what is familiar to some might be foreign to others. The nativity scene, so familiar and meaningful to us as Christians, is only an empty decoration to many others.

And yet the proclamation of the angels remains: The birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is good news for all humanity. Because they delivered this news with joy, the angels in today's reading are Christmas heroes.

We would have booked Carnegie Hall and performed the "Hallelujah Chorus," but God thinks differently. He sent the

angels and their good news to a group of hillside shepherds. The first angel said, "Do not be afraid," just as Gabriel had done. Why? Because the "glory of the Lord" was overwhelming (vv. 9–10). He then announced that the Savior had been born, the Son of God Himself. As a result, true peace—meaning peace in every sense, beginning with peace with God—had come to earth (see Rom. 5:1).

I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.

Luke 2:10

For millennia, angels had been waiting and watching human history unfold, longing for momentous turning point. So it's no wonder what happened

next. As if they could wait no longer, a host of angels suddenly appeared and thundered out, "Glory to God in the highest" (vv. 13–14). In Latin, that's "Gloria in excelsis Deo," so we follow their example whenever we sing the Christmas carol "Angels We Have Heard on High."

Their spirit of joyful praise is worth imitating at Christmas and throughout the year!

### Apply the Word

Now would be a great time to invite an unsaved friend, neighbor, or family member to a Christmas Eve service, Christmas concert, or other evangelistic event. Those to whom a Nativity scene is merely a seasonal decoration need desperately to hear the good news of the gospel. Like the angel chorus at the first Christmas, we can communicate to others the love and glory of God.

### Pray with Us

Dr. Junias Venugopal, provost and dean of Education, oversees our undergraduate and graduate schools on three campuses. We thank God today for his capable service in the area of Moody's education ministry.

## Shepherds: The First Eyewitnesses

Seventeenth-century English poet and pastor George Herbert penned a poem, “All After Pleasures As I Rid One Day,” that has also been sung as a Christmas carol. It includes these lines: “The shepherds sing; and shall I silent be? / My God, no hymn for thee? / My soul’s a shepherd too: a flock it feeds / Of thoughts, and words, and deeds. / The pasture is thy word; the streams, thy grace / Enriching all the place.”

As the first outside eyewitnesses to the birth of Christ, the shepherds rejoiced and shared the good news with all who would listen. Once they had picked themselves up off the ground after the angels’ visit, they responded to the message by going immediately to find the Child (v. 15). They could have doubted their senses. They might have sent one of their number as a scout or investigator. They could have waited until their shift had ended (cf. Luke 9:57–62). But their

actual response showed unbridled faith and joy—they *all* had to go *now*! They were as eager as children waiting to unwrap Christmas presents!

Their second response was also commendable: They spread the word and praised God for what they had seen and heard (vv. 17, 20). This also took great faith, since almost no one other than Mary (v. 19)—who was possibly Luke’s source for this portion of the narrative—would have been prepared to believe them or even treat them as credible sources. For us, it would be like reading the news in a grocery store tabloid.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen.

Luke 2:20

The shepherds were poor, marginalized members of society, generally regarded as unclean. Yet they were the first people besides Mary and Joseph to know of Jesus’ birth and the first to worship Him in the manger. Truly, Jesus came for the “least of these”!

### Apply the Word

In what ways do your family’s Christmas traditions and activities bear witness to the gospel? Are they a testimony to your friends and neighbors? This season is too important to be only about wish lists, baking, and television specials. Follow the example of the shepherds and share the good news of Christmas in every way you can with all the people you can.

### Pray with Us

Would you pray for the important ministry to students provided by Moody’s Counseling Services staff? Pray that the Lord will encourage Stephen Brasel, Gayla Gates, and Holly Porter as they counsel and help our students.

## The Star: Following a Mystery

Various explanations have been proposed for the “Star of Bethlehem.” Using both historical records and computer simulations, British astronomer Mark Thompson has concluded that it was a natural phenomenon caused by conjunctions between the planet Jupiter (the “king of planets”) and a star named Regulus (the “king of stars”). That event would have attracted the attention of the Magi, who were likely Persian scholars and astrologers.

The Magi (whom we’ll study on Dec. 15) are major characters in the Christmas story, but the mysterious “Star of Bethlehem” is worth examining for its role in the good news of Christmas. First, it symbolized the mystery of following by faith. Just as Abram left home for an unknown land in obedience to God (Gen. 12:1), so also did the Magi follow the star to an unknown land in search of a newborn king. They journeyed by faith and God saw to it that they found the Christ-child.

We saw his star  
when it rose and  
have come to  
worship him.

Matthew 2:2

Second, the “Star of Bethlehem” honored God as Creator. Especially if it was a natural phenomenon, such as the planet-star conjunction theorized above, it would be an example of nature testifying about God (see Ps. 19:1–4). As the “firstborn over all creation” (Col. 1:15–17) lay as a baby in a manger, nature couldn’t help but make

its own dramatic birth announcement! As always, creation bears witness to the Lord (Rom. 1:20).

Finally, the “Star of Bethlehem” fulfilled prophecy. How did the Magi know about all this? Their line of knowledge may go as far

back as Balaam, who had been given a glimpse of Christmas: “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel” (Num. 24:17). Perhaps they had read Daniel or other biblical prophets through exiled Jews in Babylon. However it happened, God had clearly set eternity in their hearts (Eccl. 3:11).

### Apply the Word

How well do you know your stars? Most people can point out the Big Dipper and the North Star but not much else. If you have a smartphone or tablet, many free apps can help you learn to recognize stars, constellations, and other astronomical phenomena. Telescopes are another great option for learning more about the wonders of God’s creation. We worship a great God!

### Pray with Us

Join us today in praying for Dr. Larry Davidhizar, VP and dean of the Undergraduate School, as well as Paula Siebold and Claudia Beguin, his assistants in the Academic Dean’s Office. May they walk close to Christ in all seasons of their lives.

## Religious Leaders: Knowledge without Faith

In the classic tale *A Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens, Jacob Marley and Ebenezer Scrooge were business partners. Seven years after his death, Marley returned as a ghost to admonish Scrooge of the dangers of heartless greed. Though Marley wore heavy chains forged by his deeds when alive, Scrooge at first dismissed the warning as “humbug” possibly caused by indigestion.

Scrooge should have known better—the outcomes of his life were clear enough even before the visit from Marley’s ghost. Similarly, the religious leaders of Israel should have known better. When the Magi asked about the birth of a king, they gave the correct answer from Scripture. According to prophecy, the birthplace of the Messiah would be Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). God thus used them to guide the Magi on their way.

The city of Jerusalem had taken notice of the arrival of the distinguished-looking foreign visitors, along with their retinue

and baggage. They took even more notice when these strangers asked an unexpected question with serious political implications (v. 2). After all, Herod had assassinated many previous potential challengers to his throne, including his own family members.

He asked them  
where the Messiah  
was to be born.

Matthew 2:4

Sadly, the religious leaders did not act on what they knew. Their “answer” was an academic exercise, not a truth to be acted upon in faith. There’s no evidence that they were at all interested in investigating the Magi’s claim, much less accompanying them on

the rest of their journey. The Magi were themselves living testimonies that something unusual was going on, but the leaders saw things only in terms of political power. They were comfortable with the status quo. Even worse, they knew what kind of man Herod was, and what would probably happen to any baby rumored to be a king. In the Christmas story, they serve as tragic examples of the emptiness of knowledge apart from faith.

### Apply the Word

Do we live what we know? Or as they say, do we walk the talk and practice what we preach? These days we have more Bible study resources—textual, cultural, historical, archaeological, and theological—available to us than ever before. The “answers” are often at our fingertips. The danger is that we could become like the religious leaders, quick with an answer and blind to its meaning.

### Pray with Us

Final exams start today for our students. It’s also a busy week for the Moody faculty. We appreciate your prayers for the Communications department professors: Angela Brown, Rosalie de Rosset, David Fetzer, and Bob Gustafson.

# Question and Answer

by Michael Rydelnick, Professor of Jewish Studies and *Open Line* Host



**I have heard it said that the Bible doesn't really address the issue of abortion at all. In fact, some people have told me that Exodus 21:22 proves that the Bible does not equate a fetus with fully human life. How would you respond?**



There are many good reasons to support a pro-life position regarding preborn babies. Beyond the moral, legal, ethical, and medical evidence for life in the womb, this answer will just focus on four biblical reasons to support the pro-life position and oppose abortion.

First, God is at work as the designer of life in the womb. In Psalm 139:13–16, the psalmist maintains that God formed him in the womb, including his immaterial, spiritual aspect. God's fearful and wonderful creation included ordaining all the days of the preborn baby's life. Clearly, the psalmist recognized that God was forming life while a child was yet in the womb.

Second, God sets people apart for service to Him from the womb. God told the prophet Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" (Jer. 1:5). God sees the totality of a person's life and has plans for a baby even before formation in the womb. Paul described his call from God as an apostle as ordained from the time he was in

his "mother's womb" (Gal. 1:15). How could Jeremiah and Paul be appointed to service if they were not yet fully alive? Calling in the womb indicates life in the womb.

Third, God is at work spiritually in an unborn child. For example, the angel Gabriel revealed to Zechariah that his son, John the Baptist, would "be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born" (Luke 1:15). And indeed, John had not yet been born when he first responded to the presence of the Messiah Jesus, who was Himself still in the womb: "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb" (Luke 1:41).

Fourth, and just as importantly, God cares as much for the life of a preborn child as He does for any other life. Some use Exodus 21:22 to maintain that a preborn baby is considered less valuable than a fully born baby. The verse states, "If people are fighting and hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows." Some versions of the Bible translate "she gives birth prematurely" as "she miscarries." Abortion proponents therefore argue that since capital punishment isn't required for the life of the baby, then God did not consider an unborn baby as fully alive. This would be a strong argument—if it were not based on a mistranslation. The Hebrew word here literally means "to go out." So if a man strikes a pregnant woman and the child comes out—in other words, a premature birth—

*Continued on next page*

## God sets people apart for service to Him from the womb.

*Continued from previous page*

the offender still has to pay a penalty. This translation shows that God is concerned for the rights of preborn children and is in no way a justification for considering a baby in the womb as less than a human being. The Scriptures are clear that preborn babies are truly human life. Therefore, believers must use all their influence to defend those lives.



**Since Jesus taught that we are to be merciful (Matt. 5:7), would it not be obedience to Him to assist an aged, suffering, or terminally ill person in dying?**



Although mercy is certainly a commendable virtue, with regard to euthanasia (literally, “good death”), it allows a fallible person to usurp the prerogative and responsibility of God alone. Believers must remember the following biblical principles when considering “mercy killing.”

First, all people are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26), and therefore God demands that all human life be treated as sacred. Taking a life without cause rejects the sacred nature of life. Therefore, the image of God in humanity is the basis for forbidding murder (Gen. 9:6).

Second, according to the Scriptures, God alone is sovereign over life and death. For example, Deuteronomy 32:39 says: “See now that I myself am he! There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring to life,

I have wounded and I will heal.” God alone creates life, and He alone has the authority to take it. The psalmist also marvels at a God who is so sovereign that He determines not only the beginning of our lives but the end of them as well: “All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (Ps. 139:16). Human beings are not to shorten God’s determined lifespan in other people.

Third, God uses suffering to accomplish His purposes in our lives. “We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Rom. 5:3–4). Even in all his suffering, Job did not attempt to cut short his life; instead, he used the occasion of his physical and emotional torment to beseech God. We are not to short-circuit God’s purposes in our lives.

In light of the above perspective, how should we care for the suffering and the terminally ill? One step to take is to provide painkilling medications to limit their pain and suffering (see Prov. 31:6). We should also distinguish between “mercy killing” and “mercy dying.” Mercy killing wrongly puts people to death to alleviate suffering. Mercy dying allows people to die by not taking extraordinary measures to preserve life. It allows God to take someone mercifully rather than artificially prolonging life. In the end, it is the One in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28) who determines both the beginning and the end of our lives.

## Magi from the East: Gifts and Worship

Though we often connect Christmas gift giving with the Magi's presents of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, an ancient pagan festival held during the winter solstice also involved exchanging gifts. As a result, some past Christians such as the colonial New England Puritans banned Christmas, declaring it too pagan or secular to be a Christian holy day. In fact, they didn't legalize Christmas celebrations until the 1680s.

Significantly, the Magi presented their gifts to Jesus along with their genuine worship. Not everyone agrees about this. Some believe they were simply showing respect and could not have understood the meaning of their experiences. Given the story as a whole, however, it seems more likely that they understood enough to truly worship (v. 11). They were aware of prophecy, went on a journey by faith, and persisted until they had found the newborn king. They believed what they had been shown and they acted on what they knew.

We know relatively little about them. The term *Magi* indicates they were scholars. They would have known about science, astrology, religion, the interpretation of dreams, wisdom literature, and other sacred writings.

But where exactly were they from and how long did their trip take? Suggestions are numerous, as study Bible notes and commentaries attest. At the very least, they were Gentiles, further evidence that Christ came for all people and to be a blessing to all nations (Gen. 12:3).

They saw the child  
with his mother  
Mary, and they  
bowed down and  
worshipped him.

Matthew 2:11

The Christmas journey of the Magi was filled with faith and joy. Their gifts and worship were no mere formality. God had guided them all the way, and He brought their journey to a successful conclusion. By warning them in a dream to avoid Herod and return home another way, He also protected both them and Jesus.

### Apply the Word

Mary and Joseph did not expect the gifts they received from the Magi. One appropriate way to honor Christ this Christmas season might be to give an unexpected gift. If you wish, ask God to lay on your heart a specific present for a specific person, one that they have not asked for and aren't expecting. God might use you to give a surprise blessing!

### Pray with Us

Keeping Moody's undergraduate faculty in prayer, please uphold Karyn Hecht, Brian Kammerzelt, Maria Mocuta, Jill White, and Kelli Worrall. Ask for the Holy Spirit's guidance as they teach their students to communicate the gospel through various media.

## Egypt: A Place of Refuge

Last year, a Christmas controversy made headlines in Britain. During the holiday season, a supermarket chain began selling reindeer meat. Though reindeer meat is nutritious and resembles regular deer meat, some people couldn't stomach the idea of eating Santa's sleigh-pullers. In addition, food critics generally disliked the product, with one judging the taste "disgusting."

Controversy also surrounded the birth of Jesus. Sadly, the only person who initially seemed to take the visit of the Magi seriously was King Herod. When he realized that they had given him the slip, he was furious (more on that tomorrow).

As a result, for the second time in the Christmas story, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and Joseph promptly obeyed. To escape Herod's soldiers, the family fled to Egypt, taking refuge there until Herod died. This is still more evidence

that the gospel and the story of Christmas are for the entire world. God has a plan for every nation. In fact, one day Egypt will experience a mass revival and turn to the Lord, who goes so far as to call them "my people" (Isa. 19:19–25).

Even so, Egypt is an unexpected setting for this part of the Christmas story. After all, the people of Israel had been in bondage there for 400 years, and through the centuries Egypt had often been a military enemy. And yet at this crucial time, when staying home would have meant death, Egypt provided a safe haven for the Son of God. This was

no accident, but a fulfillment of prophecy and history (see Hosea 11:1). In other words, God authored the story so that the early life of Jesus deliberately echoed the Exodus. Just as He had liberated His people from slavery then, so also did He act now to save them from slavery to sin.

So was fulfilled  
what the Lord  
had said through  
the prophet:  
"Out of Egypt I  
called my son."

Matthew 2:15

### Apply the Word

The gospel is the good news that we do not need to remain slaves to sin (Rom. 6:6–7). There is nothing we can do to free ourselves, but God has made a way. To trust in Christ and receive His gift of salvation is to move from bondage to freedom and from death to life. If you've never taken this step before, we urge you to accept the greatest gift of all this Christmas!

### Pray with Us

Please include Scott Pinnow from Records Management in your prayer time today. We thank God for Scott's faithful service at Moody that helps keep our students' progress well documented from the first day to graduation.

## Herod and the Innocents: Fury and Slaughter

In 2013, radio commentator Eric Metaxas lamented the anniversary of the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision that legalized abortion in the United States. Since 1973, 55 million unborn babies have been killed, a number so large as to be mind-numbing, or rather, conscience-numbing. To grasp the evil of abortion, Metaxas recommended watching the documentary *3801 Lancaster* (available on YouTube).

Our focus this month is “Good News for All,” but we can’t avoid a painful part of the Christmas story—the original “slaughter of the innocents.” When King Herod realized that the Magi would not return to Jerusalem and report back to him, he angrily determined to stop at nothing to protect his throne from the threat of a newborn king. As Jesus would point out, anger and murder are closely related (Matt. 5:21–22).

Herod gave orders to kill all baby boys two years old and younger in Bethlehem

and the surrounding area. This age was chosen in accord with what the Magi had previously told him about when the “Star of Bethlehem” had first appeared (v. 7). The paranoid Herod was already well known for having rivals assassinated, including family members. In this case, while a baby “king” could hardly be viewed as a political threat, Herod acted quickly to stamp out even the hint of trouble.

Rachel weeping  
for her children  
and refusing to be  
comforted, because  
they are no more.

Matthew 2:18

Infants and young children lost their lives as a result. The church has traditionally described them as the “innocents,” with their massacre memorialized on December 28.

This event was a grievous fulfillment of another messianic prophecy, Jeremiah 31:15. It was originally a reference to the Exile, quoted in today’s passage: “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more” (v. 18).

### Apply the Word

“Coventry Carol” was composed during the English Renaissance in memory of the “slaughter of the innocents.” YouTube and various hymn websites contain many vocal and instrumental versions of this masterpiece. Singing or listening to this carol reminds us that one day, “There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain” (Rev. 21:4). Hallelujah!

### Pray with Us

Proclaiming the Word of God with boldness across the globe, cultures, and generations is the mission of Moody’s various media ministries. Please pray for Greg Thornton, senior VP of Media, and his leadership in this important area.

## Simeon: Moved by the Spirit

Author and musician Michael Card meditated on the story of Simeon in a song entitled, “Now that I’ve Held Him in My Arms”: “Now that I’ve held Him in my arms, / My life can come to an end. / Let your servant now depart in peace, / ‘Cause I’ve seen your salvation, / He’s the Light of the Gentiles, / And the glory of His people Israel.”

Simeon had waited a lifetime for this moment. A “righteous and devout” man, he longed for the “consolation of Israel,” that is, the Messiah (v. 25). A strong believer in God’s love and covenant faithfulness, he had received a special individual promise that he would live to see the Messiah’s arrival (v. 26).

God kept His promise, of course. The Spirit guided Simeon through the crowd to an unremarkable-looking young couple. Mary and Joseph had brought baby Jesus to the temple in obedience to the

Law. They were required to make an offering for Mary’s purification, forty days after childbirth. In addition, firstborn children belonged to God and were to be dedicated to His service. (Nationally, the Levites served in their place.)

Suddenly an old man stopped them, looking intently at their baby. He took the child in his arms and praised God: “My eyes have seen your salvation” (v. 30). He understood that the Messiah was for both Jews and Gentiles and that suffering would be involved. His words of blessing and prophecy included an affirmation to Mary that

her soul would be “pierced” by what was to come (v. 35). As with the episode of the shepherds, she was probably the source for these eyewitness details in Luke’s narrative. By then she would have come to know, as we do, that her Son came expressly to suffer and die for the sins of the world.

A light for  
revelation to the  
Gentiles, and the  
glory of your  
people Israel.

Luke 2:32

### Apply the Word

As Simeon waited for the first Advent of Christ, so we should wait for His second Advent or Coming. If we follow Simeon’s example, we’ll wait in righteousness, living with godly obedience that shows Christ to the world. We’ll wait in faith and patience, knowing that God keeps His promises. When Christ returns, we, too, will be able to shout, “My eyes have seen your salvation”!

### Pray with Us

Today we invite you to pray for Moody Publishers Finance staff: Harrison Gunter, Susan Malnati, and Richard Peterson. Though working behind the scenes, they make an important contribution to Moody Publishers’ ministry.

## Anna: The Redemption of Jerusalem

Antoinette Tuff might be the bravest person you've never heard of. Two weeks into the 2013 school year, a suicidal young man armed with an assault rifle and other weapons slipped into an elementary school just outside Atlanta. He took Tuff and another staff member hostage, threatening to kill them and others. She prayed, talked with him sympathetically, and shared some of her own hardships, eventually helping him calm down enough to surrender to police. She's an unsung hero!

Similarly, the prophetess Anna, whose name means "gracious," is an often-unsung hero of the Christmas story. As a prophetess who recognized the infant Messiah, she was Simeon's counterpart, though her story is given less prominence in the narrative.

After a brief period of marriage, only seven years, Anna's husband had died, leaving her a widow. In that day, widows were often socially and economically vulnerable. But as we've seen a number

of times this month already, God does not judge human worth by conventional measures. Despite her presumed poverty and low social status, she remained faithful and obedient to the Lord and fully committed to worshiping Him. In fact, she practically lived in the temple, fasting and praying.

She gave thanks  
to God and spoke  
about the child.

Luke 2:38

Arriving moments after Simeon, Anna responded with gratitude and witness. She was thankful that God had kept His promises and sent the Messiah. Her entire life, all those years of struggle and loneliness and widowhood, had climaxed

in this moment (as with the man born blind in John 9:1–7). The phrase "redemption of Jerusalem" was a shorthand way of referring to God's covenant relationship with Israel, including the promise of a Savior (v. 38). Anna also shared the good news about the child with everyone who would listen. As with the shepherds, bearing witness or testifying is a key response to encountering the Christ of Christmas.

### Apply the Word

Even in our post-Christian world, Christmas is the perfect season to share the gospel with friends, neighbors, and relatives. Why? Because it's still the biggest holiday on our calendars. Nearly everyone celebrates it, and people tend to be in more generous or reflective moods. Pray for unbelievers and ask the Spirit for opportunities to share the Christmas story with them.

### Pray with Us

Keeping our prayer focus on Moody Publishers Finance department, please commit to prayer the service of Thinh Pham, Jeffrey Reynolds, and Edgar Santiago on Moody's campus in Chicago. We praise God for their attention to detail and team spirit.

## Nazareth: Jesus' Hometown

Christmas trees are a familiar part of the holiday landscape, but it was not always so. Because evergreen branches were associated with Druid festivals, early Christians rejected them. Later believers saw the Lordship of Christ as redeeming these previously pagan cultural symbols, but trees have only been part of Christian Christmas celebrations since the Renaissance.

Nazareth is also a familiar part of the Christmas story—like many hometowns, so familiar that we tend to ignore it. That's one of the reasons we've chosen to include this place in this month's study. Bethlehem (see Dec. 10) rightly gets the main attention, as the birthplace of Jesus and the ancestral home of David. But Nazareth was where Jesus actually grew up—where He grew and learned and matured (see Luke 2:40)—so even though we know little about those years in Jesus' life, the place is worth examining.

Today Nazareth boasts a metropolitan area population of more than 200,000.

Interestingly, it is the Israeli city with the largest number of Arab citizens, about two-thirds Muslim and one-third Christian. For obvious reasons, tourism is a major industry. In Jesus' day, it was a small town of perhaps 400 people, halfway between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea. Nazareth has been excavated by archaeologists who have discovered that it was an agricultural settlement.

So was fulfilled  
what was said  
through the  
prophets, that he  
would be called  
a Nazarene.

Matthew 2:23

In the biblical narrative, Nazareth was Mary and Joseph's hometown. When Gabriel appeared to Mary, it happened in Nazareth. When the family returned home from Egypt, home was Nazareth. Matthew recorded that the fact that Jesus was from Nazareth fulfilled prophecy (Matt. 2:23), though the exact Old Testament reference is uncertain. To be from Nazareth was not a good thing, as "Nazarene" apparently suggested "despised" (Isa. 53:3; John 1:46). Sadly, during Jesus' adult ministry, his hometown did not honor or respond to Him (Mark 6:1–6).

### Apply the Word

Today might be a good time to reflect on and pray over your own hometown and roots. God knew the places where you would be born and grow up, and He knew how that would influence your life. Your origins have played a role in making you the person you are today. What does that look like from your viewpoint? How can you see the ways that God has worked in your life?

### Pray with Us

Moody Publishers Sales staff, Gene Eble, Stephen Gemeiner, Denise Ortiz, Laurence Rogers, and Roger Williams, welcome your prayers today. Ask God to increase their ministry amidst the advantages and challenges of digital publishing.

## Luke: A Careful Investigator

A recent survey found that Americans want to put Christ back into Christmas. Though religious content and language are often omitted in public contexts, 79 percent agreed that “Christmas should be more about Jesus” and 63 percent that “Christmas activities should include a visit to a church service.” A whopping 86 percent favored children singing religious Christmas songs at school concerts, including three quarters of the respondents who claimed no religious faith.

Much of our historical information about the birth of Christ comes from the Gospel of Luke. He interviewed eyewitnesses in order to write an “orderly account” based on careful research (v. 3). Of course, the Holy Spirit’s inspiration also guarantees that every word Luke wrote is true. His motivation was to provide believers with a firm foundation for faith (v. 4).

Luke was a Gentile, educated (which we deduce from his writing style), a doctor

(and thus probably a slave or ex-slave), and a friend and missionary companion of the apostle Paul. Theophilus, whose name means “lover of God,” could have been the financial sponsor for Luke’s research, or it could be a generic title along the lines of “Dear Believer.” Either way, this Gospel is clearly written for a wider audience than just a single individual.

I myself  
have carefully  
investigated  
everything from  
the beginning.

Luke 1:3

Today’s reading is a preface, shorter but otherwise similar to those found in other historical writings of that time period. The idea was that rumors, legends, and wishful thinking were not enough. In modern terms, the original Christ-

mas story was not a so-called social construction of the early church. Luke framed his Gospel as history, with its veracity and credibility testified to by the soundness of his research methods, especially the testimony of eyewitnesses. This approach was particularly important to Gentiles, who did not have the tradition of messianic prophecy that Jews had.

### Apply the Word

Christianity is a religion built upon historical facts. A virgin birth and a resurrected Lord are literal, foundational truth. The contemporary world prefers a personal, inward-focused spirituality in which we become “gods” or in which God is seen in merely human terms. Praise Him that the good news of Christmas is not a symbolic abstraction but as concrete as the baby in the manger!

### Pray with Us

Stephen Mogck, executive vice president, requests your prayers today for the men and women in the Operations group who serve to keep the Institute running smoothly. They are a vital part of the effective ministry of Moody.

## John the Baptist: Preparing the Way

Though the custom is declining, sending Christmas cards remains popular. About 1.5 billion Christmas cards are sent annually in the United States alone—that’s nearly half of all greeting cards! The average family spends about \$30 on buying and mailing cards. While the artwork varies in quality, a good card can beautifully and memorably communicate the reason for the season.

Like such Christmas cards, John the Baptist proclaimed the good news of Jesus. Specifically, he preached about repentance and the kingdom of God (v. 2), preparing the way for the Messiah, just as the angel Gabriel and his father Zechariah had said he would, and just as Isaiah had prophesied (v. 3; Isa. 40:3). John’s simple food and clothing further associated him with the prophet Elijah. Reading about John is an extension of what we usually think of as the Christmas story, but it’s essential to understanding the good news of Christmas.

Repent, for the  
kingdom of heaven  
has come near.

Matthew 3:2

To call people to repentance is to condemn sin, and that’s exactly what John did. He also spoke truth to power, condemning the hypocrisy and pride of the religious leaders. To repent from sin is more than saying “sorry.” It means to grieve over and feel remorse for sin, so much so that one turns away from sin toward God. It indicates a radical change of heart and will. When many people repent, as they did in response to John’s ministry (v. 6), a revival begins. This specific revival helped prepare the way for the coming and ministry of the Messiah. People were baptized by John to signify their acceptance of his message, change of heart, and spiritual cleansing by God.

The phrase “kingdom of heaven” is used only in Matthew’s Gospel and denotes the reign of God brought about through Christ. Evil and death will be defeated and God’s *shalom* will rule!

### Apply the Word

Intriguingly, the verb “prepare” in Matthew 3 is the same verb used by Jesus in John 14. That is, just as John the Baptist prepared the way for Christ, so also is Christ preparing a place for us in heaven. In what ways is your own Christian life one of preparing for His Second Coming? Reflect today on the theme of *preparing* in Scripture.

### Pray with Us

During your prayer time today, please mention Christine Gorz, vice president of Marketing Communications. Ask the Lord to guide and inspire her ministry of bringing Moody’s vision and values to the public in the most effective way.

## John the Baptist: I Must Become Less

In his book *John: The Gospel of Wisdom*, writer and musician Michael Card commented: “In the splintered religious world that was first-century Judaism, John the Baptist had sounded a clarifying note of repentance, and the starving people had responded by the thousands. It was God’s perfect preparation for the coming of the light to make people aware of the depth of the darkness in their own lives.”

John the Baptist’s ministry was extremely successful. That would have gone to many leaders’ heads, but when the time came for him to step aside and make way for Jesus, he did so with obedient humility. Right from the start, he had said it wasn’t about him. One was coming after him who would have far greater power and who would deserve far greater honor (v. 11). Throughout his ministry, John consistently testified to the superiority of Christ, even going so far as to give up his

own disciples to Jesus. This behavior is the opposite of people who try to gain a following or make a name for themselves.

John’s and Jesus’ ministries overlapped for a bit. This could have led to jealousy or competition, but John refused to respond in such ways. He took no credit for his

success, giving God all the honor (v. 27). He reiterated that he was simply preparing the way, as a best man would do for a bridegroom (vv. 27–29; Mal. 3:1). It was the best man’s responsibility to protect the bride (Israel) and to keep her safe for the groom (Jesus).

He must become  
greater; I must  
become less.

John 3:30

The best man plays an important part, but the wedding day is not about him. The bottom line was that John knew his role and prominence would and must decrease (v. 30). He accepted this not grudgingly but with joy, because true humility seeks the glory not of self but of God.

### Apply the Word

To follow the example of John the Baptist will require us to be countercultural. We live in a society in which self-promotion is encouraged and even affirmed. Assertive self-confidence is expected in both marketplace and ministry. Jesus, however, has flipped that way of thinking on its head. If we wish to be great in His kingdom, we must become the slave of all (Mark 10:43–45).

### Pray with Us

Your prayers will be an encouragement to our Event and Guest Services department. We thank God for Benjamin Jacobson, Amber Rae Adames, Stacey Craelius, Samuel Ju, and Lysa Ellis whose faithful service touches hundreds of Moody’s guests in Chicago.

## Jesus: God's Final Word

The average American spent \$720 on Christmas presents this year. *Scroogonomics* author Joel Waldfogel sees this as foolish. He points out that 18 percent of the money, or \$12 billion, goes for items we don't want and won't use. In addition, two months after Christmas, one third of the spending still isn't paid off. Christmas gift purchases might spur the economy, but what is the actual cost?

All this is quite far from the true spirit of Christmas! As you know, we've been considering the "Good News for All" theme this month, especially through the lens of the Christmas story's main characters. In this final week of our study, we want to focus on the role of God in the gospel story, including each Person of the Trinity. We'll also spend two days on ourselves as believers—those who have by faith gained the benefits of God's good news. Amazingly, we too are characters in the Christmas story!

In the beginning  
was the Word.

John 1:1

Jesus, the second Person of the Trinity, is God's final Word. The Greek term is *Logos*, which referred not only to language but also to reason and the ordering principle or purpose of the universe. Jews would have understood the term to refer to Scripture, God's rulership of all creation, and His covenant relationship with His people. John knew and intended to convey these meanings to his audiences, but he also meant something new. Jesus was something unexpected. For a flesh-and-blood person to be the Word would have astonished both Jews and

Gentile readers.

This surprising *Logos* is the ultimate good news! Humanity has been poisoned by sin and death. We're powerless. We have no hope in our own strength. But thanks be to God, Jesus made His gift of life available to us. In fact, He *is* the gift of life (v. 4; John 14:6).

### Apply the Word

Often on Christmas Eve, the traditional Christmas story from the Bible is read aloud, including many of the passages we've studied this month. Tonight, why not read John 1:1–18 as your personal or family Advent reading? This is one of the most beautiful and poetic passages in all of Scripture, and it captures perfectly the true meaning of Christmas.

### Pray with Us

Please continue to pray for the rest of Event and Guest Services—Nathan Jacobs, Hannah Morely, Kevin Utecht, Teresa Mast, and Sonya Valeff. Ask God to multiply the ministries of conference attendees and campus visitors with whom EGS interacts.

## Jesus: The Word Made Flesh

The early church didn't celebrate Christmas. Leaders such as Origen taught that it would be wrong to honor Jesus' birthday in the same way as was done for false gods. When Christians did begin to observe Christmas, the December 25 date was chosen because it was already a secular festival and church leaders wanted to use the occasion to transform existing culture.

While December 25 is thus not the literal birthday of Jesus, it has become the holy day on which we celebrate the Word made flesh, the Incarnation (v. 14). He became one of us! He also "made his dwelling among us." Just as Israel had experienced God's presence with His people, such as in the pillar of cloud and fire during the Exodus, so in Jesus does all of humanity see and know that God Himself is with us. John can personally testify to this; for example, he witnessed Christ's glory during the Transfiguration (Luke 9:28–36).

The Word became  
flesh and made his  
dwelling among us.

John 1:14

Jesus, sent by the Father as the Word, was "full of grace and truth" (v. 14). This phrase suggests God's covenant love and faithfulness. Though the Word made flesh was in some ways surprising or unexpected, He was consistent with all that God had said up to that point in history.

The bottom line is that in Christ we see God Himself (v. 18). It was impossible to see God and live, but Jesus has changed that forever. Verse 18 is a clear statement of His deity as well as of the close relationship between Father and Son in the Trinity.

As Paul put it, "In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Col. 2:9). This is the Christ of Christmas—not a cute baby or a gifted teacher, but the arrival of God Incarnate to show His love, conquer sin and death, and accomplish our redemption.

### Apply the Word

If you're reading today's devotion at home surrounded by Christmas art—including cards, nativity scenes, Christmas tree decorations, paintings, and other items—examine the available artwork and then re-read today's Scripture passage. Which pictures or objects best capture the wonder and truth of the Word made flesh? How did the artist accomplish this?

### Pray with Us

Will you join us on this Christmas Day in praying that people who don't yet know Christ would believe the good news and experience the greatest gift of Christmas—His salvation? We pray that God would fill you with hope in the coming year.

## Jesus: One God, One Mediator

Describing the Incarnation has been a challenge for theologians down through the centuries. What did it mean for God to become a human being? The fifth-century Creed of Chalcedon described Jesus as “perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man.” He possessed both a divine and a (sinless) human nature, “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.” Though He had two natures, He remained one Person, the “Son, and only begotten, God, the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

In this way, Christ was perfectly positioned to be the mediator between God and humanity (v. 5). A mediator was needed because the Christmas story is part of a larger war story. We as sinners stood opposed to God; we were His enemies. But now in Christ the war is ended. Those who believe in Him are reconciled to God. We could not make peace ourselves—Christ

has done it on our behalf (see Rom. 5:1–2, 9–10; Col. 1:21–22).

How did He do it? The baby placed in the manger was born to die. Jesus paid sin’s penalty and died on the cross. God raised Him from the dead, and Jesus ascended into heaven to present Himself as the offering who makes peace with God possible. This can also be described as our “ransom” (v. 6), which at that time meant specifically the price paid to release a slave (v. 6; Matt. 20:28). We could not ransom ourselves, only God Himself could do that (see Ps. 49:7–9).

For there is one  
God and one  
mediator between  
God and mankind,  
the man  
Christ Jesus.

1 Timothy 2:5

Jesus didn’t just end a war, He established a peace! He is the mediator of a new and superior covenant between God and His people (Heb. 8:6; 9:15). Through Him, all who believe receive the gift of eternal life. God has called Paul and us to share this good news widely (v. 7). We are “heralds” with a message from the King!

### Apply the Word

If you’ve never made peace with God, do so today! Jesus is the only way to be free from the power of sin and be in relationship with God, who loves you so much that He sent His Son to provide a ransom for you. Believe in Jesus today and receive the gifts of pardon, freedom, and eternal life with God. Your eternal destiny is at stake!

### Pray with Us

Today, please express appreciation in prayer for the service of Bruce Everhart, VP of Donor Development and Channel Strategy. He leads several teams in Chicago that oversee fundraising and develop new ways to increase Moody’s outreach.

## Believers: Born Again

“Mary’s Song,” a poem by Luci Shaw, reflects on the birth of Jesus: “Older than eternity, now he / is new. Now native to earth as I am, nailed / to my poor planet, caught that I might be free, / blind in my womb to know my darkness ended, / brought to this birth / for me to be new-born, / and for him to see me mended / I must see him torn.”

These lines capture the hope, wonder, and pain inherent in the Christmas story. Christ was born not for gifts and lights and cookies and tinsel, but to die for our sins, that we might be saved. It is in this sense that we as believers are additional characters in the Christmas story: As born-again followers of the Christ-child, we embody the reason He came and the depth of His love for us. God very much intended to frame the story of Christ’s birth in terms of the spiritual rebirth of those who believe in Him. After all, one made the other possible!

No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.

John 3:3

When Nicodemus visited to inquire about these matters, Jesus honored his desire to learn. Though a religious leader, Nicodemus, unlike many of his colleagues on the Sanhedrin, was truly interested in understanding what God was doing. When Jesus used the phrase “born again” (v. 3; see 1 Peter 1:23), Nicodemus responded by asking for an explanation, which Jesus graciously provided (v. 4). Being “born again” indicates new spiritual life, a transformation so complete that the best comparison is the start of physical life outside the womb.

Spiritual rebirth involves “water and the Spirit” (v. 5). Water is a symbol of purification from sin, one which Ezekiel associated with the giving of a new heart (Ezek. 36:25–26). Such purification can only be accomplished by God’s Spirit. Salvation is His sovereign work!

## Apply the Word

Luci Shaw, one of the foremost living Christian poets, has been writing Christmas poems for many years. These have been collected in a book, *Accompanied by Angels: Poems of the Incarnation*, a wonderful inspiration throughout the year but especially during the Christmas season. She also has written other volumes of poetry and essays that are available in stores and online.

## Pray with Us

Please support in prayer the faculty of Moody Theological Seminary in Chicago. Ask the Father to bless the teaching ministry of Jayanthi Benjamin, James Cookley, Ryan Cook, Daniel Green, and Sajjan Matthews.

## Believers: Faith in Christ Alone

The modern hymn “In Christ Alone” is already a classic. The first verse proclaims: “In Christ alone my hope is found; / He is my light, my strength, my song; / This cornerstone, this solid ground, / Firm through the fiercest drought and storm. / What heights of love, what depths of peace, / When fears are stilled, when strivings cease! / My comforter, my all in all, / Here in the love of Christ I stand.”

Faith in Christ alone is the long-term theme at the center of Christmas. Our part in the story is to believe it (v. 1). This might sound easy, but already in the early church, there was a heresy denying that God had actually come in the flesh (see 2 John 1:7). Gnostics said that Jesus had only appeared to have a human body. “Not so!” responded the Apostles (see 1 John 4:2–3). Believing in the Incarnation is essential for theological accuracy and knowing the true God.

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.

1 John 5:1

Furthermore, believing the Christmas story, or putting our faith in Christ alone, is not simply an internal idea; it is a belief that changes the way we live. To believe in Christ is to love God the Father. To love the Father is to love His children and to obey His commands (vv. 2–3).

Because Jesus laid down His life in love, so should we (1 John 3:16–18). Specifically, this involves using our material resources to help our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Living in this true spirit of Christmas is not some impossible goal or a noble abstraction. It should be a joyful result of Christ’s victory over sin and death (vv. 4–5). To live by faith in Him is to reap the results of that victory. To put it another way, because of what Christ did, we are spiritually reborn and can live obediently in the power of the Spirit.

### Apply the Word

Jesus is the only way to God (John 14:6). This is not a popular message. People prefer to think that many roads are possible or that personal choices trump objective truths. Christians are called to be countercultural about this. One way to prepare yourself in this area is by reading *Jesus Among Other Gods: The Absolute Claims of the Christian Message*, by Ravi Zacharias.

### Pray with Us

Lift up in prayer these professors at Moody Theological Seminary in Chicago: Andrew Pfleederer, William Thrasher, Julius Wong Loi Sing, and David Woodall. Pray that as they guide their students, they also would be fed and encouraged by the Lord.

## God the Holy Spirit: A New Mind

Several years ago, a holiday video went viral online. It showed dozens of Walmart shoppers in Little Rock, Arkansas, literally fighting over a limited supply of \$2 waffle makers. The waffle maker had been a Black Friday deal, but when quantities ran low a riot broke out. As one might expect, viewers were horrified by the blatant greed and lack of concern for others.

What a stark contrast to the new mind of the Spirit! The spiritual rebirth made possible by the Christmas story changes everything. Left to ourselves, we're at heart no better than the people in the video. But as followers of Christ, we're empowered to live differently. This is truly "Good News for All"!

Today's passage describes the results of being "born again." First, life. We do not stand condemned or under sin's penalty of death. Second, freedom (vv. 1–2; Gal. 5:1). We had been in bondage to sin and

death, unable to escape, but the Spirit has brought true spiritual liberty. And third, power (v. 3). Jesus has accomplished what nothing else could. Previous sacrifices for sin only foreshadowed the reality of His sacrifice, the only possible means of redemption.

Through Christ  
Jesus the law of the  
Spirit who gives life  
has set you free  
from the law of sin  
and death.

Romans 8:2

These new realities must lead to an entirely new way of life (vv. 4–8). We do not live "according to the flesh," which here is a metaphor for sinfulness, but rather "according to the Spirit," that is, in keeping with the life, freedom, and power provided by God. Our minds are occupied with different topics. We live by different priorities. We evaluate right and wrong by different standards. We aspire to love what, how, and why God loves, and to be governed by His desires and purposes. As friends of God—which was not even possible in the flesh—we submit, obey, and seek above all to please Him.

### Apply the Word

Romans 8 would be a great chapter to memorize. If that sounds a bit intimidating, choose one or more favorite verses from this chapter to memorize. Write or print out the verse or passage, then practice it during the day when in your car or doing household chores. Studying these words allows them to soak into your mind and soul, transforming your thoughts and actions.

### Pray with Us

Ken Heullitt, chief financial officer, is thankful for your prayers for the service of his teams. Please pray that Moody will always uphold the high standard of integrity and the desire to please God in the area of finances.

## God the Father: The Master Planner

The Christmas story and all that followed—including the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus—was God’s plan from all eternity. Throughout the Old Testament, prophecies of a suffering Messiah foreshadowed the mystery to be revealed (Col. 1:25–27; 1 Tim. 3:16). Isaiah described the Christ in this way: “He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. . . . He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isa. 53:3, 5).

All this was God’s idea. According to Isaiah, “It was the LORD’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer” (Isa. 53:10). Or in the words of Peter in today’s reading, everything that happened was done “by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge” (v. 23). The word “plan” is a strong term indicating the Lord’s sovereign will and purpose.

The gospel story, then, is the breathtaking masterpiece of God the Master Planner. Even the painful parts such as the massacre by Herod serve to show the darkness of sin and the horrible consequences of rejecting God’s Son.

In his Pentecost sermon, Peter did not shy away from these realities. Rather, he proclaimed that all that had happened had been God’s perfect will. There could be no doubt that Jesus was the Messiah (v. 22). The signs and miracles He had done showed God’s power and represented God’s validation of His identity. Instead of accepting Him, however, the people had crucified Him (v. 23). Even so, God had been in control the whole time—a truth that gave hope without absolving the listeners of their responsibility. Death had not been able to hold Him anyway, and so Jesus’ resurrection conquered the grave (v. 24).

This man was  
handed over to  
you by God’s  
deliberate plan and  
foreknowledge.

Acts 2:23

### Apply the Word

You might not have thought of 1 Corinthians 15 as a “Christmas text” before, but we encourage you to read or study it this holiday season. It sets forth the centrality of Christ’s resurrection: “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith” (v. 14). Thankfully, “Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (v. 20).

### Pray with Us

Student Services staff on Moody’s Spokane campus work hard to make each student feel welcome and appreciated by the Moody community. Would you mention in prayer Daniel Ward, Brian Jaworski, and Tina Armagost and their ministry to the students?

## God the Father: Revealed in His Son

The early Christian Ignatius of Antioch, before he was martyred in A.D. 107, prayed: “Father, make us more like Jesus. Help us to bear difficulty, pain, disappointment and sorrow, knowing that in your perfect working and design you can use such bitter experiences to shape our characters and make us more like our Lord. We look with hope for that day when we shall be wholly like Christ, because we shall see him as he is. Amen.”

Becoming perfectly Christ-like is the ultimate goal of the Christian life and in our relationship with God. And Jesus, as God’s Final Word, is the perfect revelation of the Father (v. 2; cf. Col. 1:15–20). As we close this month’s Christmas-themed study, it is appropriate to consider the superiority of Christ. From looking down at the baby in the manger, we should move to looking up in worship at our Lord, seated at the right hand of the Father.

The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.

Hebrews 1:3

Today’s reading, which is a single sentence in Greek, outlines several facets of Christ’s superiority. First, He’s a better revelation. God used to speak through His prophets, but there’s no need for that in these “last days” (the present era of the church). Second, Jesus is the “heir of all things” (cf. Rom. 8:17), indicating that all that belongs to God belongs also to His Son. Finally, the Son of God is not less than God, but is the original Creator (see John 1:3).

For emphasis, the writer of Hebrews repeated the point: Jesus is God (v. 3). He could not radiate God’s glory unless He is God. He could not sustain all things unless He is God. He could not be “the exact representation of his being” unless He is actually God. God Himself is the One who has accomplished redemption and “provided purification for sins” (v. 4).

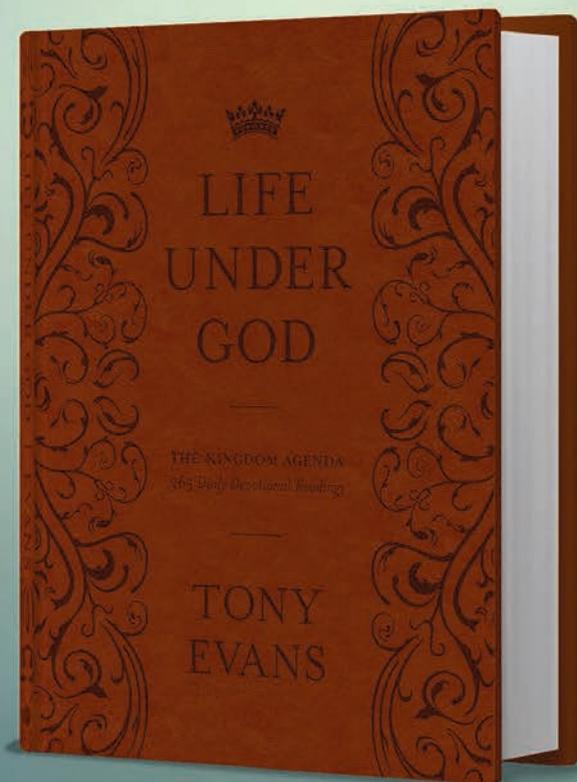
### Apply the Word

New Year’s Eve is traditionally a time for reflecting on the year past and setting goals for the year to come. In this spirit, we suggest you imitate the example of Ignatius of Antioch and write out a prayer for increased Christlikeness. If you wish, include as praises or requests some of the key lessons you’ve learned from this month’s devotions. We pray God’s best for you in 2016!

### Pray with Us

We pray for God’s rich blessings on Radio Moody and its staff, Elsa Masón, Gerson García, and Cindy Rojas. We rejoice in the growth of their programming that touches the lives of Spanish-speaking listeners in Chicago and beyond.

*Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD,  
who walks in His ways. —Psalm 128:1*



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