

# The Twelve Days of Christmas



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Morning and Evening Thoughts on  
Immanuel: God with Us

Roger Ellsworth



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## *About this Book*

**C**hristmas comes but once a year, so the old song goes. Why is this wonderful holiday celebrated and so loved all these years since the birth of Jesus?

Immanuel—meaning God with us—was born in obscurity, a humble birth that would probably have gone almost unnoticed unless angels had appeared to shepherds and brought the good news of his first advent.

What does this mean to us today? Find out more by reading and reflecting on these short, enjoyable devotions. Use them in the twelve days leading up to December 24th (two a day) or even read just one a day from December 1st, finishing up on the night before Christmas!

# *A Christmas Hymn*

O come all ye faithful joyful and triumphant  
Oh come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;  
Come and behold him born the King of angels;  
Oh come let us adore Him,  
Oh come let us adore Him,  
O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.

God of God, Light of light  
Lo, He abhors not the virgin's womb;  
Very God begotten not created:  
Oh come let us adore Him,  
Oh come let us adore Him,  
O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.

Sing choirs of angels, sing in exultation  
Sing all ye citizens of heaven above;  
Glory to God in the highest:  
Oh come let us adore Him,  
Oh come let us adore Him,  
O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord

# *A Christmas Hymn*

Once in royal David's city  
Stood a lowly cattle shed,  
Where a mother laid her Baby  
In a manger for His bed:  
Mary was that mother mild,  
Jesus Christ her little Child.

He came down to earth from heaven,  
Who is God and Lord of all,  
And His shelter was a stable,  
And His cradle was a stall;  
With the poor, and mean, and lowly,  
Lived on earth our Savior holy.

And through all His wondrous childhood  
He would honor and obey,  
Love and watch the lowly maiden,  
In whose gentle arms He lay:  
Christian children all must be  
Mild, obedient, good as He.

And our eyes at last shall see Him,  
Through His own redeeming love;  
For that Child so dear and gentle  
Is our Lord in heaven above,  
And He leads His children on  
To the place where He is gone.

*The First Day:  
Morning*

## The Christmas Curiosity of the Angels (1)

*To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven — things which angels desire to look into.*

*1 Peter 1:12*

There has always been a tremendous interest in Christmas, and now there seems to be an equal interest in angels. Angels are on television and in magazines. Angel sales are sky-rocketing. Angel books continue to flood the market. Angel pins and angel figurines are constantly seen.

Polls indicate that most people believe in the existence of angels. One poll showed that forty-six percent of Americans believe they have a guardian angel.

The Bible is also interested in angels, so much so that its authors mention them 273 times (108 in the Old Testament, and 165 in the New).

While there is a constant and ongoing interest in angels, that interest increases each Christmas. The Christmas season inevitably makes us think of angels. The angel Gabriel was given the responsibility of announcing the forthcoming birth of John the Baptist, Christ's forerunner (Luke 1:11-20) to his father Zacharias, as well

as the forthcoming birth of Jesus to His mother Mary (Luke 1:26-33).

A single angel announced the birth of Jesus to shepherds outside Bethlehem (Luke 2:8-12). No sooner were the words out of his mouth than he was joined by “a multitude of the heavenly host” who burst into praise of God (Luke 2:13-14).

It is evident, then, that angels were closely associated with Christmas.

### **The Angels Are Interested in Salvation**

The association of angels with Christmas runs far deeper, however, than merely announcing it. In this text, the apostle Peter asserts that the angels are intensely curious about the very matter Christmas was designed to deal with, that is, the salvation of sinners.

Simon Peter could not get over this business of salvation. To him it was the most marvelous and glorious thing imaginable. After addressing his readers (vv.1-2), he immediately launches into a song of praise to God about salvation. He thanks God for the “abundant mercy” that has given believers “a living hope” (v.3). He rejoices in the “inheritance” that is “reserved in heaven” for believers (v.4). And he freely and gladly acknowledges that all of this is made possible in and through the Lord Jesus Christ (vv.3,7).

From this burst of praise for salvation, the apostle proceeded to make it clear to his readers that it fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament (vv.11-12). This was only one of many evidences that the work of Christ was genuine and could be completely trusted.

Specifically, Peter asserts that the prophets of the Old Testament were enabled by “the Spirit of Christ” (v.11) to see both “the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow” (v.11).

Suddenly and unexpectedly Peter brings his discussion of this matter to a close by adding this phrase: “things which angels desire to look into” (v.12).

The Greek word translated “look into” is the same word used to describe what Peter himself did when he came to the tomb of the risen Christ. We are told that he stooped down and looked into the tomb (John 20:5). The same word is used of Mary Magdalene when she also looked into the tomb of Christ (John 20:11).

By using this word, Peter portrays the angels bending over, or, as it were, leaning over the balcony rail of heaven to carefully and intently peer down upon the earth so they can see what God has done and is doing in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Old Testament depicts the very same thing. On top of the Ark of the Covenant was the mercy seat, where the blood of atonement was sprinkled by the high priest. And on each side of that mercy seat was a golden cherub looking down at the very spot where the blood was sprinkled (Ex. 25:18-22).

Cherubim were also depicted on the veil that separated the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place of the tabernacle (Ex. 26:31). The Most Holy Place was that chamber into which the high priest entered once a year to sprinkle the blood on the mercy seat. The depiction of the cherubim on that heavy veil also conveys the desire of the angels to look into salvation through the shedding

of blood.

### **To Think About**

- ▮ God's salvation plan for people is so significant that it captures the interest of angels! If angels marvel, and are amazed by the work of sending Jesus, how much more should ordinary humans be!
- ▮ There is a sense in which we are even more privileged than angels, for we receive a benefit from Christmas that angels can never receive. Jesus died for human beings, not for angels!

*The First Day:*  
*Evening*

## The Christmas Curiosity of the Angels (2)

*To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven — things which angels desire to look into.*

*1 Peter 1:12*

### **Why Angels Are Interested. . .**

**W**hy are the angels so interested in the salvation of sinners? We are not surprised to read that the prophets of the Old Testament “inquired and searched carefully” (v.10) regarding this matter of salvation. We can well understand them desiring to understand better those truths which they were prophesying. But what is this about the angels? Why do they marvel at the mercy of God?

We are out of our element here. Perhaps they study salvation out of amazement that God could love those who had so grievously sinned against Him and were, therefore, deserving of nothing but His wrath. The book of Jude tells us that there were also angels who fell into sin. These “did not keep their proper domain” because they rebelled against God, but there was no salvation provided for them. They have rather been “reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of



the great day; ... " (Jude 6, see also 2 Peter 2:4). The fact there was no salvation offered for the fallen angels must have made salvation for fallen men and women even more amazing to the angels in heaven.

Perhaps the unfallen angels study salvation out of amazement that the Prince of Glory, the eternal Son of God, would stoop so low as to take to Himself the humanity of sinners, and in that humanity would suffer the hostility of sinners and die on a Roman cross.

Perhaps they study salvation out of amazement at the peace and joy of those who have received it. Could it be that there is among the angels a bit of envy (sinless envy, of course) for those of us who have been saved? Do the angels in heaven, who have not sinned and never needed mercy, find themselves wishing that they could experience the joy that such mercy brings? The author of this verse seemed to think along these lines:

*When I sing redemption's story,  
The angels will fold their wings;  
For angels never knew the joy  
That my salvation brings.*

There is yet another reason the angels are so keenly interested in salvation. The angels are interested in anything that brings glory to God, and nothing so glorifies God as His wonderful work of salvation. This work displays His grace, His justice and His wisdom in such a way that the angels, who delight in His glory, cannot help but be fascinated by it.

In all likelihood the angels marvel at our salvation for

all of these reasons and perhaps for reasons that have never even occurred to us.

### **The Challenge to Us**

It is all well and good to know that the angels are interested in salvation, but what does it have to do with us? The fact is their interest in our redemption speaks a very powerful word to us.

The angels are God's mighty ones who "excel in strength" (Ps. 103:20). The angels are God's immortal ones who are beyond the reach of death. The angels are God's faithful ones who ceaselessly and perfectly serve the God who made them (Heb. 1:7). And they stand in awe of redemption.

If God's mighty, immortal and faithful ones stand in awe of redemption, how much more should those who are weak, dying, and sinful. If angels, who have never experienced salvation, are so keenly interested in it, how keen an interest should those have who have experienced it!

Is this the case? Is this characteristic of people who profess to know the Lord? Are we keenly interested in our Christ and the salvation He has provided? Is it evident to others that this is the main thing in our lives? Is there among us a keen interest in learning more about our salvation? Do we seize opportunities to study the Word of God? Do we have a keen interest in expressing gratitude to God for our salvation? Are we anxious to join in public worship and sing praises to His name? Are we eager to do whatever we can to advance His kingdom?

Can we take the following words and truthfully say them to ourselves:

*Pause, my soul! adore and wonder!  
Ask, "O why such love to me?"  
Grace has put me in the number  
Of the Savior's family;  
Hallelujah!  
Thanks, Eternal Love, to thee!*

### **To Think About**

- ▶ In New Testament times, some Christians began drifting away from the Lord and neglecting their salvation (see Heb. 2:1-4). What would the author say if he could observe us for a while? Would his assessment of us be the same as it was of those to whom he wrote? Would he accuse us of neglecting "so great a salvation"? (Heb. 2:3).
- ▶ It is such a great salvation that the angels of heaven themselves are intrigued by it. May God help us to see the greatness of it and to rejoice in it. Let's learn from the angels. Let's allow their interest in salvation to rebuke us for our lack of interest and to renew us in fervent desire to worship and to serve the Lord.

*The Second Day:*  
*Morning*

## God's Special Christmas Angel—Gabriel (1)

*Now while I was speaking, praying, and confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the Lord my God for the holy mountain of my God, yes, while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the beginning, being caused to fly swiftly, reached me about the time of the evening offering.*

*Daniel 9:20, 21a*

*Read Daniel 9:20-27*

Christmas has to do with the salvation of ordinary people —sinners. Christ came to Bethlehem so He could go to Calvary and there offer Himself as a substitute for those who would trust Him.

We have seen that the angels are keenly interested in this matter of salvation. Since Christmas has to do with salvation, it is legitimate to say angels are interested in Christmas.

It is not enough, however, only to say that angels are acutely interested in salvation. Their association with Christmas goes much farther than that. Angels were also deeply involved in announcing Christmas. An angel appeared to Joseph to announce that Mary would bear a Son who was to be named "Jesus" because He would "save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). An angel appeared on the night Jesus was born to announce the

good news to shepherds (Luke 2:9).

No angel was more engaged in announcing the birth of Christ than Gabriel. The Bible records four appearances of Gabriel—two in Daniel and two in Luke—and three of these appearances were to do with Christmas.

The first of Gabriel's three Christmas appearances came almost five hundred years before Christmas became a reality. On this occasion he appeared to Daniel in Babylon (Dan. 9:20-27). Daniel had been reading the Scriptures to ascertain exactly when his people's period of captivity in Babylon would come to an end. Suddenly Gabriel appeared and announced that he had come to give him understanding (Dan. 9:2,22).

Daniel, of course, expected to be given understanding on the matter with which he was occupied, that is, the end of his people's captivity. But Gabriel came to give him insight into a far greater matter: the coming of Christ. In effect Gabriel was sent to Daniel to lift his eyes off the pressing issue of the present (the date of Israel's release from captivity) to an event of far greater importance.

Gabriel's second Christmas appearance was to Zacharias (Luke 1:5-20). On this occasion he announced the forthcoming birth of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, to Zacharias.

Six months after appearing to Zacharias, Gabriel appeared to Mary to announce the forthcoming birth of the Savior (Luke 1:26-38).

The Christmas part of Gabriel's appearances might well lead us to refer to him as "God's Christmas angel." On the other hand, the "announcing" part of these occa-

sions has led some to refer to him as “God’s preaching angel.”

### **The Purpose of Christ’s Coming**

As we examine the preaching of Gabriel on these occasions, we see certain major themes emerge. We may say Gabriel preached the purpose of announcing Christ’s coming.

In his message to Daniel, Gabriel said the Messiah would be “cut off but not for Himself” (Dan. 9:26), that is, He would die but His death would be for others. Through that death He would “finish the transgression”, “make an end of sins”, “make reconciliation for iniquity”, “bring in everlasting righteousness”, “seal up the vision and prophecy” (fulfill prophecy), and “anoint the Most Holy” (Dan. 9:24).

There could be no better statement of the redeeming work of Christ. He died not for himself but for others, and in doing so provided forgiveness for their sins and eternal righteousness before God. After dying on the cross, the Lord Jesus entered into heaven to make intercession for His people and thus anointed “the Most Holy”. All of this not only fulfilled the prophecies of Daniel but many other prophecies of the Old Testament as well.

## **To Think About. . .**

- ▮ God communicates! Angels are, literally, messengers, ones whose responsibilities include taking messages from God to people. In the purposes of God, centuries before Jesus came to this world, God was beginning to prepare people for the wonderful news of the Savior who was to come!
- ▮ What an encouragement to consider the Old Testament's prophetic message of the coming of Jesus. How much more may we enjoy the clarity of the New Testament revelation of Jesus!

*The Second Day:  
Evening*

## God's Special Christmas Angel—Gabriel (2)

*Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.*

*Luke 1:34,35*

*See also Luke 1:5-20, 26-38*

### **The Manner of Christ's Coming**

**W**hen he came to Mary, Gabriel stressed the manner of Christ's coming. Christ was to be born like no other. He was to be born of a virgin.

Gabriel explained it to Mary in these words: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

The virgin birth has been much disputed in recent years, but the evidence for it is inescapable. Two of the Gospel writers, Matthew and Luke, deal with it. Luke's account of the virgin birth is especially noteworthy because he was a physician and would have been naturally skeptical of the possibility of a virgin birth. He begins his Gospel by telling us that he had examined carefully the entire gospel story. His words "having perfect understanding of all things from the very first" (Luke 1:3)



## Afterword

The first line of one of the verses cited in the preceding pages is:

*Pause, my soul! adore and wonder!*

Those words put before us our great duty and our glorious privilege each Christmas season. It is to “adore and wonder”. To wonder is to feel a sense of admiration and amazement.

It is wonder that we are so apt to miss at Christmas-time. I’m sure that the vast majority of those who have read these chapters have been very familiar with the Christmas message for a very long time. We only need to think of the many people who have little or no understanding of the Christmas message to realize how very blessed we are to be so familiar with it.

But our familiarity can also be a serious obstacle for us. Before we know it, we can be numbly going through another Christmas without savoring the wonder and glory of it. If we’re not careful, we can find ourselves focusing on being amused instead of amazed.

What are we to do if we have lost the wonder that is so central to Christmas? The author of the line above tells us. It is obvious that he was talking to himself or coaching himself, and this is what we must do with Christmas. We must tell ourselves to think deeply about what we are celebrating and to truly appreciate it.

If the devotions I have offered in this book help each reader to do those things, I will feel very blessed.



## *About the Author*

**R**oger Ellsworth is a retired pastor who now lives in Jackson, TN. He and his wife, Sylvia, love the message of Christmas and enjoy sharing the Christmas season with their sons, Tim and Marty, daughters-in-law, Sarah and Rebekah, and five grandchildren, Daniel, Emmalee, Noah, Isaiah, and Eramin.

Roger has written numerous books on the Christian faith, and has exercised a preaching ministry for over fifty years. His sermons are available to listen for free on [SermonAudio.com](http://SermonAudio.com).