



ARRIVAL

A 25 DAY CHRISTMAS DEVOTION

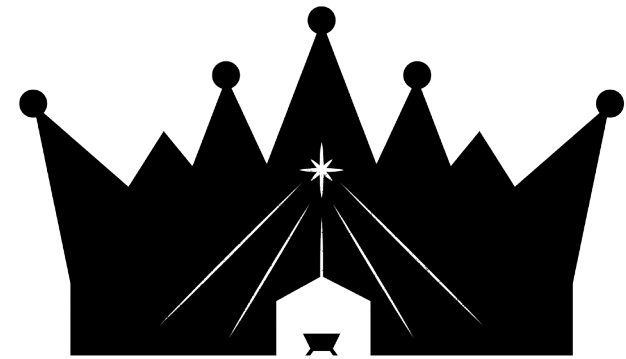
ARRIVAL: 25 Days of Devotions for Christmas & Advent
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Published by youthministry360 in the United States of America.

ISBN 13:
ISBN 10:

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ARRIVAL

A 25 DAY CHRISTMAS DEVOTION

BY KEVIN LEIGH JOHNSON

PUBLISHED BY YM360

A FEW WORDS ABOUT **ARRIVAL**

Did your parents ever make you eat leftover turkey sandwiches the week after Thanksgiving? I always hated that. A person can only eat the same thing so many times. But the good news was that it signaled the beginning of the Christmas season. As a kid, the end of Thanksgiving marked the start of the Christmas countdown. Each day was another day closer to the best day of the year. I could hardly wait.

Christmas has always been anticipated. Even before the first one, God had promised a Savior. Everyone was looking forward to what would happen. There were prophecies that parents taught their children about the Messiah. They wondered if their next king would be the One. They even sang songs that told about His coming. They knew that God was going to keep His promise, they just didn't know when.

Then, it happened: the arrival. At Christmas, God kept His promise in the craziest way: He came Himself. God didn't make a decree or send an earthly king. He didn't wave a magic wand or send an army. He came as a baby. Jesus showed up as God in person. He fulfilled God's promises to His people and the world!

Because Jesus was born thousands of years ago, it can be easy for us to miss the anticipation of His arrival. These people had been waiting forever! Can you imagine what it was like to grow up waiting so long that you almost lost hope? When Jesus finally came, some people were so surprised that they missed it.

Don't let that be you. Let's toss the leftovers and get ready for Christmas – Jesus has come! Over the next 25 days, feel the anticipation.

May the joy of a promise kept grow stronger in your heart.

ANTICIPATION

DEVOTIONAL PASSAGE: ISAIAH 55:1-13



When I was a kid, there was one family decoration that signaled the beginning of the Christmas season: the Christmas Tree Cookie Jar. There's a particular day, sometime after Thanksgiving, where it shows up in the middle of the kitchen table.

I grew up in what I like to call a “Kool-Aid® and Little Debbie® Family.” The go-to after-school snack for us was a plastic wrapped snack cake and a cup of sugar water. But of all the Oatmeal Creme Pies®, Swiss Cake Rolls® and Fudge Rounds®, there is one Little Debbie that rules them all: the Christmas Tree Cake®. The cookie jar that showed up on our kitchen table was always filled with Christmas Tree Cakes, but not until a particular day. Every day, I would run to the kitchen, pull the top off the cookie jar, and look in to see if the jar was filled with Christmas Tree Cakes yet. My days were passed in complete anticipation of Christmas coming, and the snack cakes with it. As this happened over and over, each day was only an opportunity to get to the next, and another chance to open the cookie jar.

I think the story of God's people is a story filled with anticipation. The story of God's relationship with Israel starts with God's special friendship with Abraham. God chooses Abraham and promises to make him into a great nation and bless the world through his children. No sooner does God make this promise than Abraham begins to anticipate its fulfillment.

Abraham has no children for a very long time. He takes matters into his own hands, and that doesn't turn out so well. Eventually God gives him a son Isaac, who has a son named Jacob, who is called Israel. Israel has 12 sons that become 12 tribes that become a nation. It is with this nation that God makes a covenant: an agreement based on love.

God promises the people of Israel that if they will follow Him and obey, they will be His treasured possession. But, if they choose to disobey, they're going to struggle. They will struggle to make their crops grow, they'll struggle to make their families grow, and ultimately, other nations will come and conquer them. If you know the story of Israel, you know that eventually, their disobedience mounts to the point of exile: God allows nations to conquer Israel. The prophet who delivers this news to Israel is Isaiah. As Israel stares down the reality of being conquered and humiliated, Isaiah delivers another message of hope.

Read Isaiah 55:1-13.

If you know the story of Jesus coming to save His people from their sins, you see the relief in this passage. But think how this must have felt for the Israelites. If one day, God was going to glorify them and use them to bless the world, why did they have to go into exile first?

We all have circumstances in our life we wish would end quickly. We're waiting for a test result, or a problem with our parents, or a relationship to develop. We just keep thinking, “If I can push through, I'll get to the other side.” If we're not careful, we can become convinced that God is there when the circumstances change, but not with us now. What does Isaiah tell the people of Israel to do? He doesn't tell them to grit their teeth and make it to the future where God is, but he tells them to “seek the Lord while He may be found,” because God's ways are higher than theirs (Is. 55:6-9). In short, look for God now, because He can see a bigger picture that you cannot.

When I was a kid, waiting on those Christmas Tree Cakes, the irony I missed is that when it comes down to it, Christmas Tree Cakes are not all that special. They're really just Zebra Cakes with different icing and some sprinkles. I spent so much time waiting on something that was already in the pantry. So often, I try so hard to see God in the future that I miss Him in the present.

CONSIDER THIS . . .

- What are you experiencing now that you wish would end quickly? Ask God to give you the courage to seek Him in your waiting.
- Find a new way to seek God today. Listen to a new worship song. Go for a walk. Ask God to show you a blessing that you've overlooked.

MARY, HIS MOTHER

DEVOTIONAL PASSAGE: LUKE 1:26-33



Think about the scenario: a young woman, betrothed to a man, cautiously awaiting the beginning of her life. This is who Mary was before Jesus. And in a moment, everything changes. Mary's circumstances go from simple to eventful. Mary's coming marriage goes from certain to doubtful. The moment is recorded in Luke 1 with the words of Gabriel the angel. He starts with "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" (Luke 1:28). Those nine words start the rattle in Mary's heart. Gabriel goes on to explain that Mary is going to conceive and give birth to a son. His name will be Jesus and God will establish His kingdom forever.

I think the magnitude of this moment is lost on us. Because we live on the latter side of the cross, we tend to see more than we realize. Our perspective on this moment is slanted a certain way because we know what Gabriel is talking about. We know what happens next. We know that Joseph will stay, Mary will give birth, her son will be Jesus and that He will reign forever. Imagine none of those things being certain. Imagine hearing this idea for the first time. Mary knows that she will have to face Joseph as a pregnant fiancé. She tries to process what it means to raise God's Son. I don't think I'd be able to catch my breath. I would have no idea what to do next.

This is why I think it's important to look at what Gabriel says to Mary.

Read Luke 1:26-33.

What does Gabriel make sure that Mary knows before anything else? The simple truth that God is with her. Think about that. God is with her. The God who created everything. The One who is so big that sometimes He feels too big. The One who sees everything, knows everything, and sometimes feels attentive to everything but me.

Mary knew that God was calling her to a big task, but she had to have misgivings about her own capability. She probably had understandable fears about what Joseph would say. Would he believe her? Would he stay? What would her parents think? Surely she wouldn't have to do this alone, right?

I feel certain that, more than once, Mary fell back on those first words from Gabriel. "The Lord is with you." So often we see the grand significance of Christmas - God is coming to save the world from their sins, but we miss the way a big God ministered to individual hearts. God was not using Mary to accomplish His grand plan at her expense. He was inviting her to play a role in the story of the redemption of mankind. God would work through Mary's sacrifices and small steps of faith to bring about the salvation of everyone who believes. Mary would walk through triumph and sorrow, celebration and pain alongside her first son, Jesus. With every step, Gabriel's words had to return: "the Lord is with you."

Are you walking through something that you can't wrap your hands around? Are you struggling to see a way forward in some situation, relationship or conflict? The truth of Christmas is not just that God cares about the world, but that God cares about you. Don't miss the significance of a God who begins His message to Mary with the simple fact that He is with her. He's not moving your piece on a chessboard to accomplish some task. He is inviting you into His story of redemption. His story of second chances and love that changes hearts. Ask God to be with you, today.

CONSIDER THIS . . .

- Do you ever feel lost in God's plan? How are you encouraged by the truth that God is with you? What is God inviting you to be a part of for His glory?
- What is God inviting you to be a part of for His glory?

JOSEPH

DEVOTIONAL PASSAGE: MATTHEW 1:19-21



Imagine what it was like to be Joseph. You've entered into an arranged marriage, probably set up by your parents, and then Matthew 1:18 happens: "When [Jesus'] mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." Because we know how Joseph ultimately responds to this, I think it's easy to skip over how he must have felt. Think about what it means to hear that your fiancé is pregnant while you know that you've remained faithful and pure. That would be crushing.

Carefully read Matthew 1:19-21.

Joseph didn't know what to do. Matthew tells us that because he was "a just man," Joseph decided that it would be best to break off the engagement with Mary behind the scenes and let them both move on with their lives. Obviously, Mary had made some mistake, and he was willing to walk away without shaming her further.

Then the angel shows up.

An angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him the child is conceived from the Holy Spirit. It's a crazy thought. In short, Mary has remained faithful to Joseph and God is calling them to raise His Son. Joseph and Mary are going to raise the One who would "save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21).

When we read this particular part of the Christmas story, it's like we're waiting on Joseph to see the big picture. We know Mary finds out what's going on, she's on board, and we have to watch Joseph drag his feet. Once the angel shows up to convince Joseph of what we already know is true, we're ready for the baby to come!

There is one thing that I think we underestimate in Joseph: faith. We don't know a lot about Joseph, but what we see in this paragraph from Matthew is one very important trait: he trusted God more than he trusted himself. Joseph's brain had read the circumstances and decided that the right thing (even the just thing) to do was to end his relationship with Mary and let her move on with her life. Then he has a dream where an angel appears. Think about that happening to you. That would be hard to believe - but Joseph trusts. In his ears, the voice of God is louder than the voice of Joseph.

Is that true of you? When something happens in your life, when the circumstances break down to the point of panic, where do you run? More often than not, I find myself running to the altar of experience. What did I do last time and how did it work out? Or I run to others, asking the persistent question, "What would you do?"

To be fair, I think this is probably where Joseph started. He probably got advice from his parents, close friends and his own experience. Admirably, he chose a path that showed he cared for Mary. But, in the end, when God spoke, Joseph listened.

CONSIDER THIS . . .

- What situation are you dealing with right now that seems too big to handle?
- God speaks into our troubles with a call for us to trust Him. Joseph trusted God more than he trusted himself. Who are you listening to? Who are you trusting?



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