



## Daily Devotionals – December 18 to December 24, 2021

By Dr. Charles Qualls and Rev. Steve Gibson -- Franklin Baptist Church

**December 18 - Hebrews 1:5-14**

**by Rev. Steven R. Gibson**

***The Son Is Superior to Angels***

<sup>5</sup> For to which of the angels did God ever say, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you”? Or again, “I will be his Father, and he will be my Son”? <sup>6</sup> And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, “Let all God’s angels worship him.” <sup>7</sup> Of the angels he says, “He makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire.” <sup>8</sup> But of the Son he says, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom. <sup>9</sup> You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.”

<sup>10</sup> And, “In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands; <sup>11</sup> they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like clothing; <sup>12</sup> like a cloak you will roll them up, and like clothing they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will never end.” <sup>13</sup> But to which of the angels has he ever said, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet”? <sup>14</sup> Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?

### **Devotion:**

How is your Advent going? Better yet, how is your Advent going in the midst of Covid? I see many pictures of your Christmas decorations in your homes, all of which are beautiful. Your pictures represent some of the best creative and artsy ideas that I’ve seen. If you are anything like me, the planning and placing of Christmas decorations have been a welcome diversion from the most gut wrenching news that Covid brings. If you are anything like me, your heart rejoices when placing an ornament on the tree, and you remember where you purchased it, or remember the person who gifted it to you.

These memories are like good medicine for our souls, reminding us that even Covid is temporary. These memories are like good medicine for our souls, because they have reminded us of lessons that we learned as children. These memories are like good medicine for our souls, because they allow us to anticipate a new and better day. These memories are like good medicine for our souls, because they allow us to calm our minds and allow God to enter and do God’s work in our lives. Covid or no Covid, this is the destination that God desires for us.

It is important for us to understand the uniqueness of Jesus and his message for us. God has spoken through a Son, which denotes the Son is far superior to even the angels. In this passage the Son joins the two quotations found in verse 5; the one quoted from Psalm 2, a royal Psalm that sought to idolizing the king as God’s Son and the other from Nathan’s prophecy establishing David’s house forever and also announcing that David’s son would be God’s Son. This connection reassures us in the midst of uncertainty and reaffirms the superiority of the Son to angels.

Verses 6-13 share other prophecies concerning the Son and by verse 14 the Son’s position has been firmly established and is not in question. But the writer adds one additional statement concerning angels and bridges this section to the next, including the noteworthy tasks of angels, messengers of God.

This first chapter of Hebrews has laid a foundation based on Old Testament texts that will continue throughout this letter. Both the Old and New Testaments affirm that it is God who speaks, it is God who redeems and it is

God who sustains. Dear reader, it is my prayer that you might gain strength for your journey from today's writing.

**Prayer:**

God of both old and new, stir in our hearts to believe your message of hope. May your hope permeate our lives during this holy season. Amen.

**December 19 - John 7:40-52**

**by Dr. Charles Qualls**

***Division Among The People***

40 When they heard these words, some in the crowd said, "This is really the prophet." 41 Others said, "This is the Messiah." But some asked, "Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? 42 Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?" 43 So there was a division in the crowd because of him. 44 Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.

45 Then the temple police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, "Why did you not arrest him?" 46 The police answered, "Never has anyone spoken like this!" 47 Then the Pharisees replied, "Surely you have not been deceived too, have you? 48 Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? 49 But this crowd, which does not know the law -- they are accursed." 50 Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, 51 "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" 52 They replied, "Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee."

**Devotion:**

Jesus was developing a pretty good following by John 7. He seemed to be laying down a strong record in what he was doing. People were being healed. He had disciples. Crowds were big. His teachings and deeds were powerful.

There was just one problem. He was from the wrong place.

I've reminded you before that the Pharisees and other church officials had a job to do. I know, I know... they're the bad guys and that's the way we've become conditioned. The gospels are clear that a lot of Jesus' problems were with these church officials. But they didn't start off being bad guys. In a best case scenario, they were there to ensure authenticity, compliance and order. They were keepers of the theology, tradition and practice of the Hebrew faith. Of course, by Jesus' time, the system had become unwieldy, somewhat corrupted and all too powerful.

A "Messiah" was a particular thing. Isaiah and the Psalms had foretold the hope that could be found in such a risen savior. They had long since been promised that God would send such a hope. Since he would be of the house and lineage of David, he would naturally be somewhat connected. Perhaps he would even be wealthy, important and proven in the military. For centuries, that's what they had looked for. Now, in Jesus' times the streets were teeming with fake, self-proclaimed *Messiahs*. The Pharisees took this sort of thing seriously.

So, Galilee was a little too "wrong side of the tracks" for the Temple crowd. Surely nothing good could come from there, as at least once was said. Still today, we transfer what we admire in a man (handsome, athletic, strong), a speaker (dynamic, uses no notes!) and leader (forceful, loud even?) and superimpose this onto what we assume God must be using for pastors. It's why in my 2012 book (*A Hungry Soul*), I devoted one prayer to the question: "Would Jesus Get the Job?" That prayer mused on most church pastor-search processes, and openly wondered if most churches would hire Jesus? Meanwhile, the Pharisees (and others) ignored the very presence of God-come-near because he didn't fit the bill.

**Prayer:**

Lord, awaken our souls. Help us to have a hunger such that we want to learn enough about our faith that we would recognize you if we saw you -- or heard your voice. Rather than you fitting what we want, help us to fit what you want. Amen.

**December 20 - Luke 1:26-38****by Dr. Charles Qualls*****Greetings, Favored One!***

26 In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

**Devotion:**

The messenger Gabriel greets her as *God's 'favored one.'* There is so much we probably wish we knew and understood better than we do about this. These mysterious biblical "messengers" or angels evade our rational understanding. In this story, though, Gabriel gave Mary news that continues to perplex and encourage us. God was going to do a new thing. And, God was going to do that new thing in ways beyond our expectation. Mary was somehow favored, and we could wish we knew more about how or why. We won't get insight from the biblical account. But what she was about to take part in had never been done before. This was medically impossible. Even more important, God was sending a Son to live among us.

Today, in my opinion we have far too much attention being paid to a couple of aspects in this story. Sadly, we have far too little attention being paid to what should be highlighted more. First, folks get a little fixated on "angels." If we follow our Bibles, angels were the offensive linemen of scripture. That is, they were out front of the real action. They had a message to deliver but they were never supposed to be the focus. Football fans know that the only time an offensive lineman's name is called is when he has messed up.

Today, even more attention is given to the word "favor." Almost always by prosperity-gospel Christians in churches that preach/teach a message far different from ours. If you are living your life on a treasure hunt for *God's favor*, we probably need to talk.

Instead, what if God -- and what God is doing -- remained our focus?

When you think of God, what would you say your expectations of God might be? Take a moment and be specific. You might even keep track with a list. When has God moved powerfully within these expectations? Now, let's move beyond...as in beyond your or my expectations. In scripture, or perhaps in your life, when has God worked in new ways that were beyond or outside your expectations? Again, take a few minutes to meditate on this.

What is some news that you have received that changed your life? As I scroll my way back through the years, a few highlights come to mind. Sometimes, though, that news was challenging and changed my life in ways I wouldn't have chosen. Here in Luke 1, God has noticed humanity and has stepped into our realm in the form of Jesus. Mary received news that changed not only her life, but her entire family structure and history. We hear her surprise and overwhelm. We hear her questions but then we also hear her availability to God. As you read, reflect on the ways God has surprised humanity. Including ways that have affected your own life!

**Prayer:**

God of our days, may you find us open and expectant even of the ways you surprise us. Amen.

**December 21 - Luke 1:46-55**

**by Dr. Charles Qualls**

***My Spirit Rejoices in God My Savior***

46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

**Devotion:**

I've been a part of just enough non-profit organizations (read: churches mostly) that were trying to raise capital to become familiar with "the big ask." I can recall heading to visit with a gentleman one time to ask him to leave \$1 million in his bequest to the cause. (He did commit the \$1 million, btw.) A co-worker asked how I was feeling that day because, "That's a big ask!"

The messenger of God visited Mary, and he gave her much good news. She would be entrusted with carrying and safely delivering God's own Son for humanity. He would be the One in whom we could place our hopes for salvation. He was going to redeem humanity, but at some cost. For Mary herself would one day have her heart broken at how the world would respond to this One of hers. That was a big ask.

Except that really, God wasn't *asking* Mary. The favored one was more...I'm going to use the term "voluntold"... what her place was to be in God's unfolding drama. This young woman, almost a child herself still, had the spiritual weight of a world placed upon her little shoulders. Her song, then, rings rather remarkably in our ears.

Mary's song begs some questions of each of us --

- Does your soul "magnify" the Lord? We can detract, or subtract from the way others see the Lord just based on who we are, you know. Or, we can make God more evident to others.
- When God, or even your church, asks something of you do you view that as "favor" or are you bothered?
- Would my response to God on an ask of such magnitude take into account the larger picture -- that includes a lot of other people -- or would I focus solely on myself?

Mary's "song" here is a remarkable response to the messenger. A tremendous stewardship is being placed upon her by God. She will be blessed and she is indeed favored, perhaps mostly because she was chosen. But she will suffer hardship and will be displaced because of him also when he dies.

Her song is nothing short of inspiring!

**Prayer:**

Lord of our hearts, help us to listen for your voice too. May our willingness be thankful, not begrudging. Shift in us our vision toward what you are doing, rather than so much on what we are doing. Amen.

**December 22 - Galatians 4:4-7**

**by Dr. Charles Qualls**

***If a Child Then Also An Heir***

4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.

6 And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" 7 So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

**Devotion:**

Has anyone ever referred to you as "A child of God"?

This scripture text just might be as close as we get to the origins of that phrase. The apostle Paul adds to the Advent good news by recapping the essence of the Christmas story. I hope you took that in just now.

Occasionally, we'll hear someone quip -- "He/she called me everything except a child of God!" to describe a time of conflict. A time when someone spoke harshly to them. I have to tell you, though, that the older I get the more I am drawn to this designation. I yearn to one day hear God call me a child of the Almighty.

Here in our text, the apostle Paul wanted to remind the Galatian believers of all the connections. The first one, in v4, could escape us. He reaches back to make the connection that God's son was actually born of a woman who was from a system known as "the Law." That is, Mary (and Joseph, too!) was of Jewish descent. She was of the ethnic and religious heritage of God's ancient and chosen people. But, his main point is to illustrate that Jesus bridges that old understanding with a new one now.

In Christ, they (and we alike) could be God's children in the new covenant. In Christ, we could *choose* an eternity rather than relying on mere birthright and the hope that we could keep the Law. In v6, one of the greatest gifts first of Christmas, and then of Easter, is that we could have direct access to God. We could all call God "father." We have gone from being "slaves" to a Law-based system we could never escape nor fulfill. Now, we are heirs instead. That is a far leap when compared and contrasted. That which we could never earn, we now inherit based on full adoption through grace.

That makes Jesus Christ perhaps the greatest one-size-fits-all (who choose) gift in the history of Christmas. Yes?!

**Prayer:**

Lord, it is with grateful hearts that we try to understand what was made possible for us in you. Help us to live into our full identity found only in your grace. Amen.

**December 23 - Luke 1:46-55**

**by Rev. Steven R. Gibson**  
***The Magnificat: Mary's Song of Praise***

<sup>46</sup> And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

<sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

<sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

<sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

<sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, <sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

**Devotion:**

Scholar Walter Brueggemann utilizes a phrase that is well suited for the Magnificat. This phrase states simply the *lyric of abundance*. This phrase reminds us of the abundance of our God as compared to the myth of scarcity that is found throughout Scripture. With this as backdrop, we study Mary's Magnificat.

Because the words and phrases flow almost seamlessly, one has to wonder if it in fact was sung by Mary. Countless composers have set this flowing, almost dreamy text to music. During Advent, we often hear one of the many settings of the Magnificat.

The unifying factor of the Magnificat is found in the praise of God, her Savior. The words remind her that the promises of God to her forefathers is about to come to fruition. Of course, we need to remember that Mary was a pregnant teenage peasant girl. It was this poor girl that God chose to bear God's Son, and also this girl "from the wrong side of the tracks" that God chose to announce what this Son would do. God's Son was to literally turn the world upside down. The plots of the poor and the marginalized were soon to be replaced with the extravagant love of God. Just as God made promises to Abraham, God also made promises to Mary. It was through Mary that these promises were to be applied to even the lowliest of people.

Every Advent we hear the retelling of this story, and each time that I read or listen to the Magnificat, new realities stick with me. Some of my recent discoveries are: God is willing to utilize anyone (regardless of background), to achieve God's purposes; God is willing to turn the world upside down to accomplish God's purposes; God's people have learned that God is enough; and God's message is to encompass politics, ethics, social structures and economics. In other words, we have the ability to not only rely on God's provisions, but also to respond to others with the same generosity that we have received from God.

This is depicted in a TV commercial that I've seen this year. The scene opens with a family preparing Christmas dinner, and then they sit down all in their places and the food is on the table. Before they begin to eat, a young man enters the doors, looks at his family and with a wide smile says, "You waited for me!" Friends, God is waiting for you and I, and in the final analysis, God is enough.

**Prayer:**

Inspire us, O God, that we may share with others as you have shared with us. Amen.

**December 24 - Isaiah 9:2-7**  
**by Rev. Steven R. Gibson**

## ***Hope Even in Darkness***

2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined.

3 You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder.

4 For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

5 For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

6 For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7 His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

### **Devotion:**

Many of our Christmas Eve services incorporate these verses. For the four weeks of Advent, we have travelled to Bethlehem with the themes of hope, peace, love and joy. Darkness is a part of our journey because of the season of the year. But, this year is quite different because of the “deep darkness” (V2) that is cast over all of us by the pandemic. Can we draw inspiration from ancient Israel? What lessons can be gleaned from the passage?

The problem defined:

Verses 2-5 describe the reality of their lives. Though they have seen darkness, even deep darkness, they still have hope. Even though they have lived the reality of darkness, they still have hope. Despite all of the hardships and burdens placed upon them, they still have hope. What is hope? Romans 5:3 states “...knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

The remedy revealed:

The Israelites were looking and hoping for God’s deliverance through the birth of a new descendant of David. This comes to fruition in verse 5, “for a child has been born for us, a son given to us.” This is truly Good News of great joy, as Luke would describe the birth of Jesus. The birth of Jesus is a sign of hope. The birth fulfills the ancient promise of a son of David that will be on the throne. I am struck by the contrasting images of dark and light -- dark is a metaphor for depression and death; while light symbolizes life and joy.

This scene is repeated as the Israelites begin to see a vision of a world that is free from pestilence and one of peace. The birth of a son announces that a royal birth has indeed arrived, and the promised blessings would soon come. Why would they believe the promises? Read the words from verse 6:

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

This passage can be summed up in a single sentence -- the birth and celebration of that birth are signs for hope and grounds for confidence in God's future. Isn't it amazing the hope and optimism that a baby can bring!

The following is taken from Hymn # 133, stanza 3 in the Celebrating Grace Hymnal:

All out of darkness we have light, which made the angels sing this night,  
all out of darkness we have light, which made the angels sing this night,  
Glory to God in highest heaven, now and forevermore. Amen.

**Prayer:**

Prepare our hearts to receive your great light and then to share that light freely. Amen.