



STAR of WONDER

AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL
TO ILLUMINATE THE PEOPLE, PLACES,
AND PURPOSE OF THE FIRST CHRISTMAS

Angela Hunt

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For Jim Whitmire, Derric Johnson, and Gordon Luff

You three have invested in so many lives.

Thank you for investing in mine.

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INTRODUCTION

When we are children, the Christmas season is usually sprinkled with fairy dust and scented with cinnamon. We count the days and camp in front of the Christmas tree, anticipating the hour when we'll be allowed to open presents and see if our heartfelt wishes have come true.

Our modern Christmas features baby Jesus and Nativity scenes, holiday music and crowded malls, shiny presents and houses festooned with lights. We've heard the Christmas story dozens of times and we know each character's part: Mary had the baby, Joseph stood guard, the shepherds came to visit, and the three wise men brought gifts.

Traditions have preserved the Nativity story in pristine simplicity, but what was that first Christmas *really* like?

After writing several novels set in first-century Judea, I've discovered several practical and theological insights about the reality of the Savior's birth, and those realizations have opened my eyes to the divine majesty surrounding the people, places,

promises, and purposes of Christmas. As you prayerfully contemplate this collection of readings, I hope your sense of wonder will be reignited just as mine was.

Rejoice! Unto us a child is born!

Angela Hunt

PART 1

THE PLACES OF CHRISTMAS





BETHLEHEM

We've all seen the images depicting Mary and Joseph's journey to the City of David. Mary is usually riding a donkey, with Joseph patiently leading the way as they travel through a desolate wilderness.

But what would that journey *really* have looked like?

Nazareth and Jerusalem were seventy-five miles apart, while Bethlehem was five miles farther south. Though their journey may not have been an easy one, it was far from lonely.

Back in the first century, people traveled in groups both for safety and companionship. Remember the account of twelve-year-old Jesus at the Temple? Mary and Joseph began the trip home, assuming Jesus had joined the large group from Nazareth.

Since Joseph was from Bethlehem, it's possible that some of his relatives would also be traveling to Bethlehem to register for the tax. Traveling together meant protection from bandits and mishaps. A couple traveling alone was asking for trouble.

As for that donkey, according to Fred Wright, "If Joseph had taken the position ascribed to him by many artists, of walking

beside a donkey carrying Mary, he would have been the laughingstock of his contemporaries.”¹ Why? Because in those days, women—even pregnant women—lived to serve men, not the other way around.

Though people occasionally rode a donkey, the beasts usually carried food and water for the journey. If a heavily pregnant woman was traveling to Bethlehem with only one donkey, she would have walked or ridden in a wagon. While the thought of trudging eighty miles is enough to exhaust most of us, people in the first century were accustomed to walking such long distances. Only wealthy people and Romans owned horses, while a working-class merchant might ride a mule and use a donkey to pull a cart or carry provisions.

Though the Jews hated the Roman occupation, the Romans *had* made travel easier. They paved the roads, making travel not only safer but also faster. An average family could usually cover ten miles a day. A single man could travel twenty miles if he wasn't slowed by companions, animals, or other circumstances.

What circumstances? The Romans had the right of way. When a Roman chariot or lone horseman came riding up behind a group, civilians had to leave the road and let the Romans pass. This did nothing to improve relations between Romans and Jews. Can you imagine having to pull your wagon, women, children, and pack animals off the road while an impatient Roman officer drove by?

Tax collectors also set up shop along the road, especially during pilgrimage festivals. If you were transporting crops or animals, they could detain you and levy a tax on the spot.

Given these circumstances and the length of their journey, Mary and Joseph likely needed more than a week to reach Bethlehem, and they would have rested on the Sabbath.

With so many people returning home for the tax enrollment, naturally there was “no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7). Bethlehem probably didn’t even have an inn. The Greek word translated as *inn* is *katalyma* (kah-TAL-ee-ma). The *katalyma* was a guest room in a private home.

The Jews considered hospitality a *mitzvah* (command) and so, upon arriving in another Jewish town, travelers would go to the city center and wait for someone to invite them to stay. Bethlehem was filled to the brim when Mary and Joseph arrived. Families would already have people sleeping in their guest rooms.

So where did Mary and Joseph find shelter? Most first-century houses had two stories—three if you count the *katalyma* on the flat roof. The family kept livestock on the ground floor—such as a donkey, a goat, and chickens, all of which could wander from the stable to the courtyard as they pleased—while the family lived upstairs. When guests arrived, they were escorted to the roof where they would sleep in the *katalyma*.

Luke tells us that Mary “gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him in strips of cloth and laid him in a feeding trough, because there was no place for them in the guest quarters” (Luke 2:7 ISV). Where was the feeding trough? On the ground floor in the sheltered stable area.

Once Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem, they most likely went directly to a relative’s house or waited at the town center for someone to offer them shelter. Then they moved to a house and

settled down with the animals because the katalyma was occupied. This is why the Son of God spent His first hours in a manger.

Someone in the house might have supplied the strips of cloth for swaddling the infant. A woman in the home probably assisted with the birth. Joseph must have spent the night pacing upstairs or in the street as the women served Mary.

But after the birth, as the house quieted and Mary rested, a group of ritually unclean shepherds left their fields and slipped into the city, going from house to house in the dark, peering over low courtyard walls as they searched for a swaddled baby in a manger.

They found Him because they sought Him.

I wonder if the people upstairs knew what had happened beneath the floorboards. Did they sense angels around the house? Did they know that all of creation had waited thousands of years for that baby's first cry?

Little Bethlehem had learned to expect the unexpected.

Bethlehem, *house of bread*, became the birthplace of One who would call himself the Bread of Life.

In Bethlehem, Ruth had married Boaz, and she, a Gentile, became the great-grandmother of King David.

In Bethlehem, Samuel the prophet found David and anointed the youngest of Jesse's sons to be king over Israel.

In Bethlehem, Mary gave birth to Jesus, the One who would sit on the throne of David forever.

The City of David, the tiny town outside Jerusalem, was never too small to host great events.

And no person is ever too insignificant to do great things for God.

A Moment for Wonder

Have you ever felt God calling you to do something, but then thought yourself too ordinary to attempt the task? You wouldn't be alone. When God called Moses to deliver His people from Egypt, Moses had a list of excuses. When God called Gideon to fight the enemies of Israel, Gideon asked for a miraculous sign—twice! Many who sat under Jesus' teaching found excuses to avoid following Him.

But Mary didn't hesitate to accept God's call. And once Joseph, her fiancé, understood the true nature of their situation, he didn't quibble. Even the shepherds, who could have dismissed the angels' news and stayed to guard their sheep, hurried out to seek the newborn Savior.

What is God calling you to do during this holiday season? Open your home to someone who's lonely? Share a meal? Reconcile with a former friend? Call that family member you haven't seen in years?

The most valuable thing you can give anyone is *time*. Your lifespan consists of a finite number of minutes, and how you invest your minutes matters greatly to God.

Father, how would you like us to invest our lives this month? Who needs us? Who is lonely? Who might enjoy spending time with us? Which ministry could use a helping hand? Show us what we can do, Lord, because Christmas isn't about us—it's about giving our time, our lives, to those you love.





THE GARDEN

Most people would say Christmas began in Bethlehem. But from a biblical perspective, Christmas began in Eden, otherwise known as “the Garden of God.”

You’re probably familiar with the story. In six days, God created light out of darkness, the sun, moon, and stars, land and sea, plants and animals, and finally, a man and a woman. Out of all the created beings, only Adam, the first man, and Eve, the first woman, were created in God’s image, just as all their descendants would be. That doesn’t mean we *look* like God, for He is invisible Spirit, or that only humans *think* or *feel* like God, because animals think and feel emotion, too.

Being created in God’s image means we are His image-bearers or *representatives*. Just as the Roman army carried a golden image of the Roman eagle into every battle, we carry God’s image into every earthly transaction.

The Lord planted a garden in the East, and He put Adam and Eve in it. Every desirable tree was in the garden, and every tree with food fit for eating.

Two other trees lived at the center of this garden: the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. We don't know what those trees looked like, but eating from the Tree of Life bestowed life. Eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil bestowed knowledge . . . of evil. Adam had known nothing but *good* since his first breath because everything God made was good.

God gave Adam the responsibility of cultivating and managing the garden, yet He included a warning: "From all the trees of the garden you are most welcome to eat. But of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil you must not eat. For when you eat from it, you most assuredly will die!" (Genesis 2:16-17).

Was the fruit poisonous? No. The forbidden tree could have borne apples or oranges or pomegranates. Death would not come from the tree, but from the act of disobedience to God's command. Death would result from *sin*.

If that tree had not been in the garden, Adam and Eve would have obeyed and loved God because they had no other choice. But God wanted to fellowship with thinking beings who *chose* to love Him. So God placed that tree in the garden, giving them a choice.

Adam and Eve were allowed to eat freely from the Tree of Life. If they had ignored the forbidden tree, they would have lived forever. They would have filled the earth with their descendants, and the entire planet would have been a paradise.

But then the serpent appeared in the garden. Pleasing in appearance, he approached Eve: "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from all the trees of the garden?'"

Eve responded: “Of the fruit of the trees, we may eat. But of the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God said, ‘You must not eat of it and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

Eve twisted the truth—God didn’t say they couldn’t *touch* the tree.

The serpent replied, “You most assuredly won’t die! For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:1–5).

The serpent responded to Eve as she had answered him—with truth and with a twist. God *did* know that eating from the tree would open His children’s eyes. But Adam and Eve would never be God, and if they sinned, they *would* die.

So through the serpent’s tempting words and Eve and Adam’s decisions, sin and death entered the world. And as Satan had predicted, their eyes were opened—to guilt, shame, and fear. To a host of emotions that tore at their hearts. Their Creator had lovingly designed them, given them everything they needed, including free will, and they had chosen to oppose the will of their Father.

Standing naked in the heavy silence, Adam and Eve staggered beneath the weight of their guilt. Flooded by remorse, terrified lest God see their sin, they took leaves from the lush vegetation and attempted to hide their shame.

As the evening breeze whispered through the garden, Adam and Eve heard the approach of their loving Father. Distressed because He would see what they had become, they hid themselves.

“Where are you?” God called.

Of course, He knew where they were, and from eternity past, God knew that love involves risk. He also knew what would happen after Adam and Eve sealed the fate of humanity. He had given them free will, and their disobedience had turned their desire to obey into an inclination to yield to their own desires. Their free will became a natural bent toward sin, and all their descendants would inherit that same tendency to sin.

God listened as Adam blamed Eve, and Eve blamed the serpent. Then the Lord cursed the serpent to crawl on his belly for the rest of his life. This was no ordinary snake; this was “the ancient serpent, called the devil and satan, who deceives the whole world” (Revelation 12:9).

Because God loved Adam and Eve, He would forgive them, and His forgiveness would be costly.

God said to the serpent, “I will put animosity between you and the woman—between your seed and her seed. He will crush your head, and you will crush his heel” (Genesis 3:15).

This verse has been called the *protevangelium*, the initial proclamation of the Gospel. It’s the first of many prophecies that foretell Christ’s birth, life, death, and resurrection. Satan would crush Christ’s heel and cause much suffering, but Christ would crush the serpent’s head.

With those words, God foretold that the Savior would come from the seed of the woman, not the man.¹ Isaiah 7:14 explained further: “Behold, the *virgin* will conceive.” The oldest uncensored Jewish source texts make references to this miraculous birth, one of them stating that “the Messiah will be born from a ‘closed womb.’”²

After promising deliverance from the effects of their sin, God made garments of animal skins to clothe Adam and Eve, rehabilitating their dignity by covering their shame. Innocent animals died to restore their fellowship with God, demonstrating that atonement for sin requires the shedding of innocent blood.

God expelled the first man and woman from Eden, so they no longer had access to the Tree of Life. Cherubim guarded the entrance (Genesis 3:24).

Scholars have tried to pinpoint the exact location of Eden, but it has been veiled from mortal eyes. I believe it now exists in a spiritual dimension, and those whose sins have been forgiven are allowed entry when their mortal bodies—which still hold a sin nature—perish. *Eden*, you see, is another word for *Paradise*, and Jesus told the thief on the cross, “I promise that you will be with me today in Gan-’Eden” (Luke 23:43 CJB).

Jesus—the innocent sacrifice for the sins of all people—provides entrance to the Garden of God, where redeemed human beings can enjoy the life God wanted for Adam and Eve. The apostle John wrote, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the *Ruach* [Spirit] is saying to Messiah’s communities. To the one who overcomes, I will grant the right to eat from the Tree of Life, which is in the Paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7).

Christmas began in the garden because that’s where sin entered the world and required a cure. Because we are Adam’s descendants, we have inherited a fallen nature. “For since death came through a man,” Paul wrote, “the resurrection of the dead also has come through a Man [Jesus]. For as in Adam all die, so also in Messiah will all be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:21–22).

A Moment for Wonder

The most significant events in history occurred in Eden. God knew Adam and Eve would choose to sin and Jesus would have to redeem corrupted creation. God also knew the final result would be worth the suffering and sacrifice. In Paradise, He would finally be able to fellowship with people created in His image, people who had freely chosen Him and learned to love Him.

After turning Adam and Eve out of the garden, God waited. While He waited, He taught people through signs, patterns, and prophets. He called Abram to leave his home in southern Babylonia and established the nation of Israel through that obedient man.

He waited as the Israelites suffered in Egypt, and then He sent Moses to deliver them. He gave the children of Israel a Holy Law. He waited until they had completely disobeyed that Law and the warnings of His prophets, then sent them into a seventy-year-long Babylonian exile.

Yet He did not leave them hopeless. Through His prophets, He spoke of a coming Prophet and King, a righteous Branch who would shoot up like a sapling from the trunk of Jesse.

He waited until the civilized world was connected with roads, until His people lived again in Israel and longed desperately for their Messiah.

Then God sent His unique, divine Son.

The birth of Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of God's plan for the human race.

As you prepare for another Christmas, consider the scope of history—from the first until the last, everything in the divine plan revolves around the incarnation and birth of Christ.

Father, as we prepare for another Christmas season, help us to see the big picture—the beginning and the end, the human failure, and the future glorious finish. Make us mindful . . . and grateful.