



SLOW ADVENT

**SPIRITUAL PRACTICES FOR
THE INTENTIONAL CHRISTIAN
FOR CHRISTMAS**



**Whoever claims to
live in him must
live as Jesus did.**

1 John 2:6



If you were asked to play a word association game with the word “Christmas,” several responses may jump to your mind: *music, decorations, shopping, family, tree*, and so on. How far down your list, if ever, would these words appear: *restful, calm, peaceful, quiet, slow*?

If you’re like me, those more tranquil words would be way down the list! I normally associate the Christmas season with a busy schedule, often accompanied by a nagging feeling of guilt that I haven’t managed to do even more.

The words “Slow” and “Christmas” don’t often seem to go together. The Advent season can see us juggling travel plans, family traditions, year-end reviews, shopping sprees, hosting, and social calendars that would make even an extrovert’s eyes wide.

What if, this year, you did the season differently? What if instead of getting swept up in the holiday hustle, you make a decision that you were going to use this season to slow things down?

The goal of this devotional is to guide you hectic to harmonious, frenzy to faithful, and from stressful to Spirit-filled. We can’t offer you quick tips or life hacks, and we can guarantee the path forward won’t be perfectly smooth. But if you choose to commit to a Slow Advent, our prayer is that you would find your joy increased and your home brighter.

DAY 1	SLOWNESS
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READ

Isaiah 9:1-7, Habakkuk 2:1-3, 2 Peter 3:9

REFLECT

I enjoy looking forward. An anticipated trip, a visit with a dear friend, a cup of coffee from my favorite café – sometimes, the excitement of the looking-forward is just as good as the thing itself!

Advent is the season of waiting with bated breath for a promise fulfilled, a looking-forward that contains both joy and agony (just ask any grade-school child how they feel about waiting for Christmas morning!)

No one knew what it's like to wait on God more intimately than the Israelites. They were oppressed by foreign nations and displaced from their Promised Land when they received a promise from God: *A Savior will come*. Full of faith, the Israelites watched for the signs of His coming. Centuries passed, and still Israel waited – until one day, their hope transformed into reality in the form of a baby born in a manger.

To practice slowness is more than just practicing patience and self-control (though it does help with those!). It is a commitment to trust in God's timing and plan for your life.

We can tend toward hastiness, racing to accomplish God's plans for us on His behalf (as if we ever could). But if you trust in our Father, who knows what is best for you, you'll get something even better than a fully completed to-do list; you'll get to know the heart of God and grow to be more like Jesus.

To practice slowness during Advent is to lean into the anticipation, so that the joy we receive can be *even greater*.

This Christmas season, what would it look like for you to surrender your tendency for speed, or your desire for instant gratification, and lean into the anticipation of a coming Savior? God's gifts never disappoint, and his promises never fail.

NEXT STEPS

What is your reaction to the idea of a slower-paced Advent? Relief, skepticism, anxiety? Pray and tell God how you feel. Ask him to help you slow down this December.

Up for a challenge? Take the slow lane today – literally! Wherever you go, drive at the speed limit, or choose the longest line at the store.

Written by Emily Whitten

DAY 2	SILENCE
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READ

Luke 2:15-19, Luke 2:41-51

REFLECT

Our carols at Christmas are full of references to silence. From "Silent Night" to the lyrics "How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given," we often (mistakenly) imagine the birth of Jesus as a quiet affair. In reality, this miracle was surrounded by a flurry of activity: Bethlehem spilling over with travelers, Heaven's hosts bellowing praises in the night sky, and shepherds bustling to a manger then hurrying to herald the Savior's birth far and wide.

Mary, however, responded *inwardly*, not outwardly. Scripture tells us the mother of Jesus "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:18-19). Nine months before, she experienced an angelic visit that altered everything, and had undoubtedly spent countless moments carefully considering what this news would mean, for herself as well as the world.

In Greek, the word for "treasured" means "to preserve knowledge or memories to draw from at a later time." It also implies carefully guarding something valuable. Mary silently stored up the words and wonders of Christmas

like a locked diary full of treasured truth to draw from later. She would do this again in twelve years as Jesus lingered in the Temple “about His Father’s business” (Luke 2:49).

Some Bible scholars believe Mary may have kept a written memoir of these events, sharing it much later in her life with Christ’s followers who penned the gospels. Who else could have borne witness to these magnificent moments?

In the midst of extraordinary events going on around her, Mary turned inward to experience the wonder of the Word becoming flesh, indwelling her to dwell with us. She did not simply surrender, but savored what the Lord had for her – she did not want to miss anything!

As attractions, activities, and alarms compete against attentiveness to His still, small voice this holiday season, will you choose some intentional moments of silence to savor the sacred?

NEXT STEPS

Turn off the music in the car or media at home. Resist the urge to fill your space with sound, and instead sit still with God. Ponder His presence. Treasure His every Word.

Set aside a quiet space in your day to read and reflect on Psalm 62. As a young woman of worship, Mary surely would have known these truths. What did they mean for her? What do they mean for you?

Written by Jill Rhodes

DAY 3	SOLITUDE
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READ

Psalms 23:1-3

REFLECT

In 1931, a drought struck the Great Plains and kicked off what came to be called the Dust Bowl, a region-wide eroding of the soil resulting in dust clouds from Oklahoma to the East Coast. An estimated 35 *million* acres of farmland were rendered completely useless. The cause was not actually the drought, but the relentless tilling that occurred throughout the 1920s.

Tilling soil has a lot of benefits, like introducing fresh nutrients and destroying those pesky weeds. The thing is, the topsoil of the Great Plains was held together by the deep roots of the land's native grasses. It was the *roots* of the grass that prevented erosion. When those roots were destroyed, the ground became a multimillion-square-mile sheet of dust ready to be blown away.

The human heart is a lot like soil (Matthew 13). It needs times of tilling to be softened and enriched! That takes work, the often-challenging work of regularly spending time in Scripture. It should come as no surprise that fruit of our lives will suffer to the degree that we neglect the enriching gift of God's Word.

Our hearts need time to be still, an act of surrender that Jesus modeled for us. In Mark 1:35, Jesus hits “pause” on his incredible healing ministry, taking time to rise early in the morning and retreat to a “desolate place” to pray to his Father. This behavior is a pattern that repeats throughout the Gospels, one that Jesus continually models for his disciples. He wanted them to have the habit of getting away from hustle and bustle to be with the Father.

In 1931, the problem with the Great Plains’ soil wasn’t nutrient deficiency or the drought. The soil had simply been churned and tilled to the point of instability, and needed rest.

Practicing solitude is to acknowledge that there are things our soul needs that only God can accomplish. And unlike other spiritual practices, our participation is simply in surrendering our time and withdrawing to be with alone with the Father in the “solitary place.”

NEXT STEPS

Take 10 minutes to be completely alone with God, free from screens. Let your family know that your phone will be off for that time, and arrange to be uninterrupted as best you can.

Use Psalm 23 as a prayer to God. Ask him to speak to you through the Psalm, even as you read it as a prayer to him. Read it once, or repeatedly, or even just a single verse. Simply take this time to be with your heavenly Father.

Written by Caleb Whitten

DAY 4	SERVICE
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READ

Luke 1:67-79

REFLECT

The first chapter of Luke reminds us that the children of Israel had been waiting for the Messiah for many years, each generation telling and re-telling the stories of God's perfect faithfulness. As the Advent story unfolds, we see the births of John the Baptist and Jesus foretold, the naming of John the Baptist, and Zechariah's prophecy about his son.

Verses 74 and 75 say that the purpose of God's redemption is "to enable us to serve Him without fear in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days."

To serve requires *action*. When we slow down, we can more clearly see the spiritual and physical needs all around us. When you discover a need, you can begin to pray about your part in meeting that need. When you learn that a friend has no relationship with God, ask the Lord to guide you into conversations about Jesus. Share how your life has changed because of what God has done in and through you.

But how will you overcome your fear?

Verse 74 says that God will enable us to serve Him "without fear." Zechariah was filled with fear when the angel appeared to him, but God replaced that fear with the promise of a son, John. An angel told Mary, "do not be afraid." God fulfilled His promise to Mary with the birth of Jesus. If we know He has a plan, and we know that He has been faithful for all of these years, then we have nothing to fear.

The Lord will strengthen you to serve Him and fulfill His purpose in your life when you trust him. The Advent message from the angels to the shepherds was, "fear not!"

As you slow your pace down in the next few days, look around for the places and people whom the Lord has uniquely called you to love and serve. They don't just need to see the baby Jesus in a Nativity scene; they need to see Jesus in *you*!

NEXT STEPS

What might happen to you and through you if you were to slow down a bit this Advent season? Instead of the blur of a crowded calendar, you may see and hear details in the lives of our family members, friends, and neighbors. What will you do about the needs you see?

Pray that God would give you eyes to see the people around you like He sees them. Pray for help in laying down your fear. Accept the gift of God's courage to live out His love.

Written by Dick Stafford

DAY 5	SIMPLICITY
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READ

Luke 2:1-7, Isaiah 53:1-3, Mark 8:35-37

REFLECT

From Black Friday sales (that really start five days prior) to Christmas Eve door-busters, we are met at every turn by companies marketing the products that we *need* to purchase to make our lives better – or at least more convenient. Because of advances in technology, the advertisements that pop up seem eerily well-suited to us as individuals, resulting in an almost irresistible siren call to spend.

In a world like ours, embracing simplicity is a radical act. Our Savior, who had “no place to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20) while on this earth, taught that our Heavenly Father can take care of our every need. After all, what could be simpler, or more humble, than a birth in a manger?

I don’t blame Joseph and Mary for seeing what rooms were available at the local hotel before committing to laboring in the nearby stables. We don’t know what Mary’s emotional state was when she realized she’d have a donkey instead of a doula nearby for the birth of her son, but we can imagine the stress it would have caused.

We do know that, when baby Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph used what little they had available to them – just some spare cloth and a feeding manger – and rejoiced in the miraculous birth of their Savior.

Practicing simplicity is surrendering to the God who can take care of all our needs. When we give in to the world's lie that *more = better*, we are denying ourselves the chance to rely on God to provide for us. I'm not saying you should stop purchasing groceries or sell your home, but today, consider what it would mean to trust that God has given you everything you need.

"Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?"
Matthew 6:26

NEXT STEPS

Watch your language today. Notice when you mislabel a "want" as a "need," and correct yourself (even if it's just to yourself). Pray that God would help reorient your perception of what you truly need.

Written by Emily Whitten

DAY 6	SILENCE
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READ

Luke 2:8-15, 1 Kings 19:9-13

REFLECT

What sounds do you associate most with Christmastime? Maybe it's the happy sounds of children or grandchildren in your home. Maybe it's your favorite holiday song, or the friendly crackle of a fire in the hearth.

As a culture, we are becoming less and less comfortable with silence. More than half of adults in the U.S. say they need background noise to fall asleep (whether that's white noise, music, or a TV show). Noise can often be used to cover up our anxious thoughts, or entertain us so we never have to experience boredom.

Try to imagine the sounds of the shepherds keeping watch over their sheep at night. Maybe the wind is blowing in the grass; the sheep may let out an occasional sleepy bleat; the crickets may chirp. Mostly, though, the night is silent. No audiobooks keep the shepherds' minds occupied. It is simply the sheep, the shepherds, and the weighty presence of God in their hearts and minds. The song of the angels declaring the arrival of the Savior is all the more significant because of the silence that preceded it.

When's the last time you experienced true silence? Maybe silence is rare in your home because it's filled with children. Maybe you live alone, silence your constant companion, and you long for the company of noise. Can you make room for true silence today, so that God can have room to speak?

One note: silence is not the "secret ticket" to hearing from God. Do not be discouraged if you begin this practice and don't immediately experience deeper intimacy with Jesus. To practice silence is to make yourself available to the presence of God, to eschew distractions and focus instead on the goodness of the Savior. It is in the practice of silence that we draw closer to God and learn to depend more deeply upon Him to fulfill our needs. Rather than depending on background noise to ease our anxiety or keep us from certain thoughts, we can entrust those moments to our God who asks us to cast our anxieties on Him.

NEXT STEPS

Next time you're in the car, try turning off the radio (or whatever you use for audio entertainment). Spend your travel time in silence. Notice what you think about. Pray that God would direct your attention to Him in these moments.

Written by Emily Whitten

DAY 7	SLOWNESS
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READ

Luke 2:25-32

REFLECT

These days, we spend a lot of time waiting. Our lives are filled with moments of disappointment when something does not happen "on demand." Whether it's an Amazon package, a repairman, or a medical report that doesn't arrive when you want; we are well experienced in waiting.

In the Advent story, there is a man named Simeon. God revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. One day, he felt moved to go to the temple. While there, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to be purified and consecrated as the Jewish law required. When Simeon saw the baby, he took him in his arms and praised God. He said, "Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation."

Simeon, had been waiting a long time, but he trusted the Lord. He believed that God keeps his promises. In this story, we can find two lessons to keep in mind this season.

First, God is always at work to fulfill His purpose for our life, even when we are waiting.

That's not always the comforting truth that it should be. Perhaps you've been praying for a long time about a specific situation. Is God truly listening? A large part of waiting is practicing trust in God. We can remember that God is perfectly faithful (Isaiah 25:1). Even though we want to see God's answer to our situation immediately, we can rest in our understanding that God is at work even when we cannot see it.

Here's our second lesson: seasons of waiting should *not* be seasons of passivity. While you wait for resolution in one area, remember that God is still at work around you in other ways. Consider cornbread. Before baking, each individual ingredient tastes *awful*. Cornmeal feels (and tastes) like coarse sand. Dry flour is unpalatable. Salt, baking powder, baking soda, buttermilk – each distasteful on its own. But mix them together in the right proportions and bake them for the right amount of time, and the finished skillet of golden cornbread is *delicious*! The interaction of all the ingredients for just the right amount of time produces your desired result.

God uses all of the ingredients of your life (even the painful ones) to shape you for His purpose. Sometimes waiting for His perfect time produces just what we need.

NEXT STEPS

Pray for patience and faith as you wait on God. Celebrate His love and mercy in the meantime.

Written by Dick Stafford

DAY 8	SIMPLICITY
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READ

Colossians 2:6-10

REFLECT

Do you know someone who is particularly good gift-giver? Someone who manages to always get you something you need or desire? Maybe, if they're really skilled, they accomplish both at once – gifting you something both wonderfully practical and deeply personal.

My wife is one of those people. Gifts from Emily reveal just how thoughtful and loving she is. They show that she pays close attention to what brings me great joy, as well as how aware she is of what would meet a need in my life. Really, that's what any great gift-giver is striving to find – a gift that will satisfy at once both a need and a desire.

Such a gift is what believers celebrate in Christmas: when God gave his son to satisfy our desperate *need* for a Savior and our deep *desire* for intimacy with Him. The nativity on your mantle or entryway table is a picture of the all-sufficient gift of God in Jesus Christ. What a remarkably humble and simple way for God to present the Savior of the world to you and me!

The Apostle Paul's message in Colossians is a good reminder for us in this season. As we draw near to Christmas day and celebrate the birth of Jesus, let's resist our culture's "hollow and deceptive philosophy" of materialism; that notion that our lives are better with more presents under the tree. You can trust that that message is a lie, because "in Christ you have been brought to fullness." All we need this season is Jesus – he is truly the perfect gift!

NEXT STEPS

Take a few minutes to be still and quiet. In prayer, ask God to help you look at your own heart's needs and desires. Ask him to help you think through these questions:

Do I believe Jesus has satisfied my deepest needs and desires?

Am I looking to wealth, possessions, or relationships to satisfy me this Christmas? Would I be content if I received nothing?

Does the way my family exchanges gifts celebrate the sufficiency of Jesus, or the sufficiency of material possessions?

Parents, consider leading your kids in a conversation about expectations for the Christmas season. Are there any traditions that could be tweaked to better point to Jesus? Are there any traditions you want to start, specifically to remember Jesus?

Written by Caleb Whitten

DAY 9	SERVICE
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READ

Luke 1:26-56, Romans 12:1-2,
Hebrews 13:15-16

REFLECT

Weighty words tend to become indelibly etched in history at strategic times. Whether battle cries or calls to sacrificial service, politicians and poets alike speak with stirring strength in monumental moments.

In the Christmas story, the one delivering immortal words is the same one who will deliver the Immortal Word made flesh. We might not expect a teen girl visiting with an angel to speak with such clarity. Yet Mary's replies are both weighty and worth emulating in character and clear mission this Christmas.

Her first response is one of service: "Behold the bondservant of the Lord." Mary follows this response with a simple statement of her submission, "May it be done to me according to your word." She finishes with a sacrifice of praise as she fills the atmosphere with a spontaneous song of worship, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!" These declarations changed her life that first Christmas, and they will change ours if we let them.

Mary's was a radical service that would involve upheaval, public scrutiny, and the loss of a much-anticipated wedding and a fresh start as a newlywed. There would be no room to deliver the Deliverer, a death threat toward her newborn, a night flight to Egypt, a life as a refugee, a tarnished reputation for the rest of her life, and a sword that would pierce her soul as her sovereign Son suffered the torturous death of a condemned criminal.

Ours is a reasonable service, according to Romans 12:1-2. Yet, many times our response to cheerful giving in this season is less than enthusiastic, given all the other areas of our life that constantly demand *more* of us.

What if, instead of reluctance, we dedicated ourselves the way Mary did this Christmas? May our hands be ready to serve, and our hearts be raised in sacrificial praise to the One who came to serve, not to be served; the One who gave His very life to save ours.

NEXT STEPS

What sacrifice of praise will you offer the Lord in response to all He has done for you?

Choose a tangible way to reach out to others; a gift to a needy child, a donation to a food bank or shelter, offering a helping hand at church, or being hospitable to your neighbors.

Written by Jill Rhodes

DAY 10	SIMPLICITY
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READ

Matthew 6:19-34

REFLECT

Sometimes, when January rolls around and it's time to take down the lights and the tree, I'm hit with regret that I didn't accomplish all the things I wanted to in the Christmas season. I didn't have time to send out holiday cards, or make that favorite dessert, or go see the lights in the fancy neighborhood. Christmas came and went, and I didn't manage to do everything on my list!

This attitude can easily overtake us, whether at the end of the holiday season, the end of the year, or just the end of the week. We look back on our to-do lists and sigh, feeling we haven't done enough.

On the last day of our devotional, I want to draw our attention to a passage that you may be familiar with, but probably don't associate with Christmas. In this section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, we're instructed not to worry about our clothes and our food. The birds and the lilies don't worry, and our Father takes care of them – and how much more precious *you* are to God!

Just as we don't need to worry about the food

we eat or the clothes we wear, we are called to lean into a mindset of simplicity in our salvation. God does not love you for what you do; he loves you simply because you *are*. The practices we've been talking about in this devotional are simply tools you can use to more deeply experience the presence of your heavenly Father.

You don't need to earn your way into God's kingdom. There is no list of rules you need to follow, no expectations you have to meet, and no to-do list you have to complete to become a child of God. The radical simplicity of the gospel is this: all you have to do is say "yes" to Jesus. Because he lived a perfect life, died on a cross, and defeated death by rising from the grave, you can enter into God's family. Jesus accomplished everything for you; you can rest from your earning.

It all started with Jesus' birth in a lowly manger, and it was finished when He paid for your sin on the cross. You're invited into His family – will you respond?

NEXT STEPS

Have you surrendered your life and heart to Jesus? If you'd like to talk to someone about a spiritual decision, flip the page and reach out to someone on staff; we'd love nothing more than to have a conversation with you.

Written by Emily Whitten

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