
Within Our Reach
A Christmas Devotional Journey
For Kingdom People

A Christmas greeting from Vineyard National Director Phil Strout.

Dear Friends,

Christmas is a time of year when many families gather, have festive meals, and exchange gifts. There is a sense of anticipation in the air, as December brings celebrations, laughter, gratefulness, and some much needed rest.

In other homes, though, times are not as joyful. Families have lost loved ones, and this year will be the first time they eat Christmas dinner without them present. In still other homes, there may be pain, difficulty, or physical challenges overwhelming any real sense of joy in the season.

Into our joy, and into our pain, Jesus walks. Born of the virgin Mary, under a star and to the sound of angel choirs, He walked smack into our humanity. Jesus showed us what the Father's love is all about. As the Gospel of John says, "Out of His fullness, we have all received Grace" (John 1:16 NIV).

Everywhere Jesus went, He *embodied* the good news that God's Kingdom was near, and *evidenced* that good news through the proclamation of the Father's saving love confirmed by healings, signs, and wonders. Jesus revealed to the world that God is near, God is close, God is *within our reach*.

This Christmas, that is our prayer for you. May you see the living God being within your reach as you enjoy this devotional. As you worship, may you come to experience His Presence, by the Spirit, in a way you never have before.

From the Vineyard to you, have a wonderful Christmas.

In Jesus, the Savior of the world,

Phil Strout
National Director, Vineyard USA

Christmas means the Kingdom of God is within our reach.

In Luke 17:20-21, Jesus responds to some Pharisees about the rule and reign of God – or the *Kingdom of God* – He was announcing.

> *"Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, 'The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst.'"*

Scholars tell us that the phrase "…*in your midst*," could also be translated "…the Kingdom of God is *within your reach*."

Within our reach. Could that be the message of Christmas for you, me, and everyone we care about in this aching world? God's presence, God's love, God's rule, God's reign, and God's matchless grace – these, because of Christmas, are *within everyone's reach*?

As you celebrate Christmas this year, no matter who you are, or how you are emotionally entering the season, know this to be true: *God's presence is within your reach*. His love is pursuing you. No matter who you are, how old you are, how good you are, or how bad you are, the same truth remains. Jesus is near you, right now.

Christmas reminds you and I that we are never far from the disarming embrace of God, because God has never been far from us. The Holy Spirit is reaching out to you, engaging you, with love.

These simple devotionals are meant to be read one at a time, each Sunday, leading up to Christmas (the 4 Sundays of what is called "Advent"). The fifth and final devotional is for Christmas day.

Use these devotionals personally, or read them with family and friends. More than anything, remember as you read each one, that Jesus and His Kingdom are *within your reach*.

Rejoice!

How to use the *Within Our Reach* Christmas Devotional.

The *Within Our Reach* devotional is broken up into **five devotionals**, with added resources at the end.

Each is intended to be read on the four Sundays leading up to Christmas, and the fifth one on Christmas Day.

The four Sundays leading up to Christmas are known as Advent. Advent comes from the Latin word, *adventus*, which means "the coming." More about the season of Advent can be read at the back of this booklet.

Each of the four Sundays leading up to Christmas represents a major theme that helps us prepare our hearts for a spiritually rich celebration.

The First Week Of Advent – *Hope*
The Second Week Of Advent - *Peace*
The Third Week Of Advent - *Joy*
The Fourth Week Of Advent - *Love*
Christmas Day - *The Incarnation Of Jesus*

In some church and family traditions, an "Advent Wreath" is used, and a candle is lit for each Sunday as it comes. Each Sunday has its own candle (four around the wreath), and the candle in the middle is saved for lighting on Christmas day.

If you've never used an Advent Wreath before, it's a great way to lead up to Christmas. (Children especially love to light the candles.) You might also choose to read one devotional each Sunday morning, or after your lunch meal.

Each devotional has five components.

1. *A Theme*
2. *A Value*
3. *A Scripture*
4. *A Devotional Thought and Prayer, and*
5. *A Suggested Christmas Carol*

The **Theme** focuses us in on the emphasis for that particular Sunday. While different traditions order their themes for each Sunday differently, the sequence we will use is very common.

The **Value** helps us tune in to one central value that is vital to Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God, and what it means to be people of the "already and not yet" of God's Kingdom.

The **Scripture** typically points to a verse that helps us see what the Word of God has to say about the theme. Reading these out loud is always a good idea to get the Scripture into our hearts.

The **Devotional Thought and Prayer** is intended to help you, and your family, connect with the theme for the week. Reading these aloud can be encouraging and can aid discussion.

The **Suggested Christmas Carol** is provided if you want to sing each Sunday at the conclusion of your devotional. Lyrics for these carols are provided at the back.

Use this devotional in any way that is meaningful for you and yours. Share your thoughts in a church setting, in a small group, at a meal table, or even on Facebook. Get a few more of these booklets (one for each family member) and have others join you in the journey. Take the time this year to walk the path leading up to Christmas – it will heighten your experience of the season.


"...And He will be called
Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God,
Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace."
Isaiah 9:6a

Christmas Hope

Week 1 Theme: Hope
Value: Seeing what the Father is doing, and joining Him.
Scripture: Isaiah 9:6-7 NIV

"For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of His government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this."

Imagine

an ancient scene, where people are gathered around a tribal fire on a desert evening at twilight. They are discussing prophecies, whispering to one another about divine promises, and retelling their sacred stories with hope in their voices, looking for clues as to what God was up to.

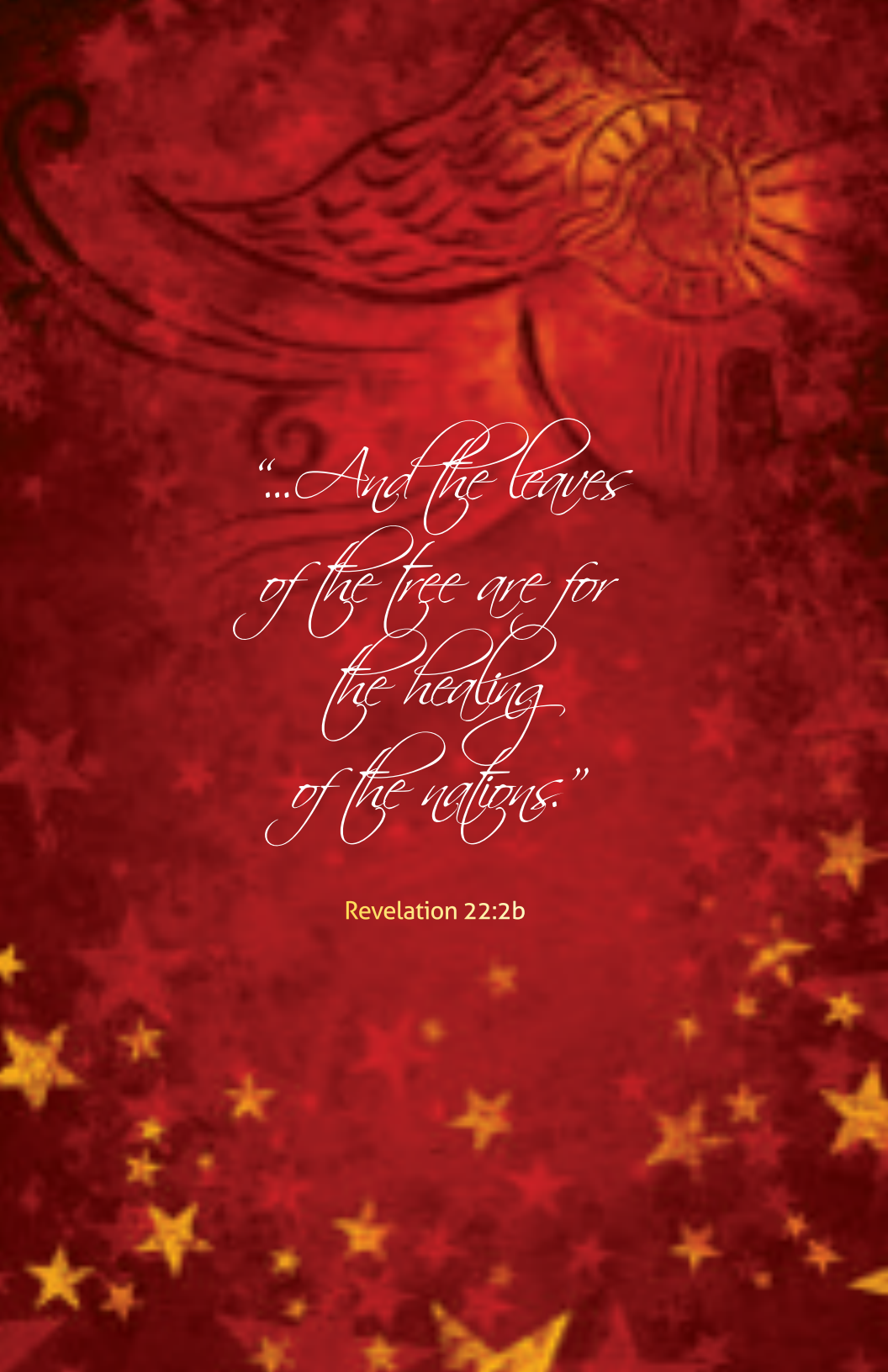
The Hebrews of ancient times were actively looking for God's actions, and we are designed to do the same. God is pleased for us to search, as hope-filled discoverers, for what He is about in our lives and the lives of others. He is honored when we start our days asking Him, "Open my eyes to see what You're already doing," rather than "God, bless my day and the plans I've made." Hope looks for God – everywhere.

What is God already doing in the lives around you? This Christmas season, actively look for what the "Wonderful Counselor" is up to. Listen for the next opportunity to join the "Mighty God" in His healing work. Draw near to your "Everlasting Father," and join the "Prince of Peace" in righting His world. Look for what God is doing, and join Him.

Prayer

Lord, I come to You with an expectant, hopeful heart today, knowing that You are already at work in the world around me. Teach me to see what You are doing, so I can join You.

Suggested Carol: *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*


"...And the leaves
of the tree are for
the healing
of the nations."
Revelation 22:2b

Christmas Peace

Week 2 Theme: Peace
Value: Bringing healing in all aspects of life.
Scripture: Revelation 22:1-2 NIV

"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations."

Peace is one of the most powerful words on human lips. Newscasters say that peace is the absence of conflict. Social media suggests that peace is what happens when someone finds a job, strikes it rich, or gets an iPad. The Hebrew word for "peace," *shalom*, means something very different than these smaller visions of peace.

Shalom peace, the kind that the Prince of Peace came to bring at Christmas, is deeply rooted in the idea of *healing*. Shalom speaks of wholeness, a fixing of broken things, in every aspect of life. Shalom speaks of wholeness in our hearts before God, solace in our bodies and minds, right-relating with one another, justice in society, and more.

Christmas highlights the most important truth about shalom peace – that true peace is not found primarily in the absence of conflict or pain, but rather in the *Presence of Someone*. When we pray for the sick, we are inviting the Spirit of God to touch them and make them whole. When we work for peace in the city we love, we are partnering with God to bring wholeness to our streets. His Presence is Peace.

Prayer

Loving Father, I am so aware of my own need for peace and healing. Make me an instrument of your wholeness in the world around me, by making me a person of Your Presence.

Suggested Carol: *O Come, All Ye Faithful*


"The people
walking in darkness
have seen
a great Light."
Isaiah 9:2a

Christmas Joy

Week 3 Theme: Joy
Value: Everyone gets to play.
Scripture: Isaiah 9:2 NIV

"'The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.'"

Laughter is truly one of the best medicines. You can come home from a hard day, and all it takes is someone to get the laughter rolling for us to experience our cares seeming to slip away.

Recently I visited a site where the family members of coal miners could descend into a real mine, deep under the earth. As we descended, the light seemed to trail away behind us, and the darkness grew stronger and thicker.

Walking around in a dimly lit, enclosed space, you could feel the tension begin to mount in the group. Then, it was announced that we were getting back on the coal car to leave. You could hear the sighs of relief, and when the light at the end of the tunnel came into view, giggles and the sounds of nervous laughter could be heard everywhere.

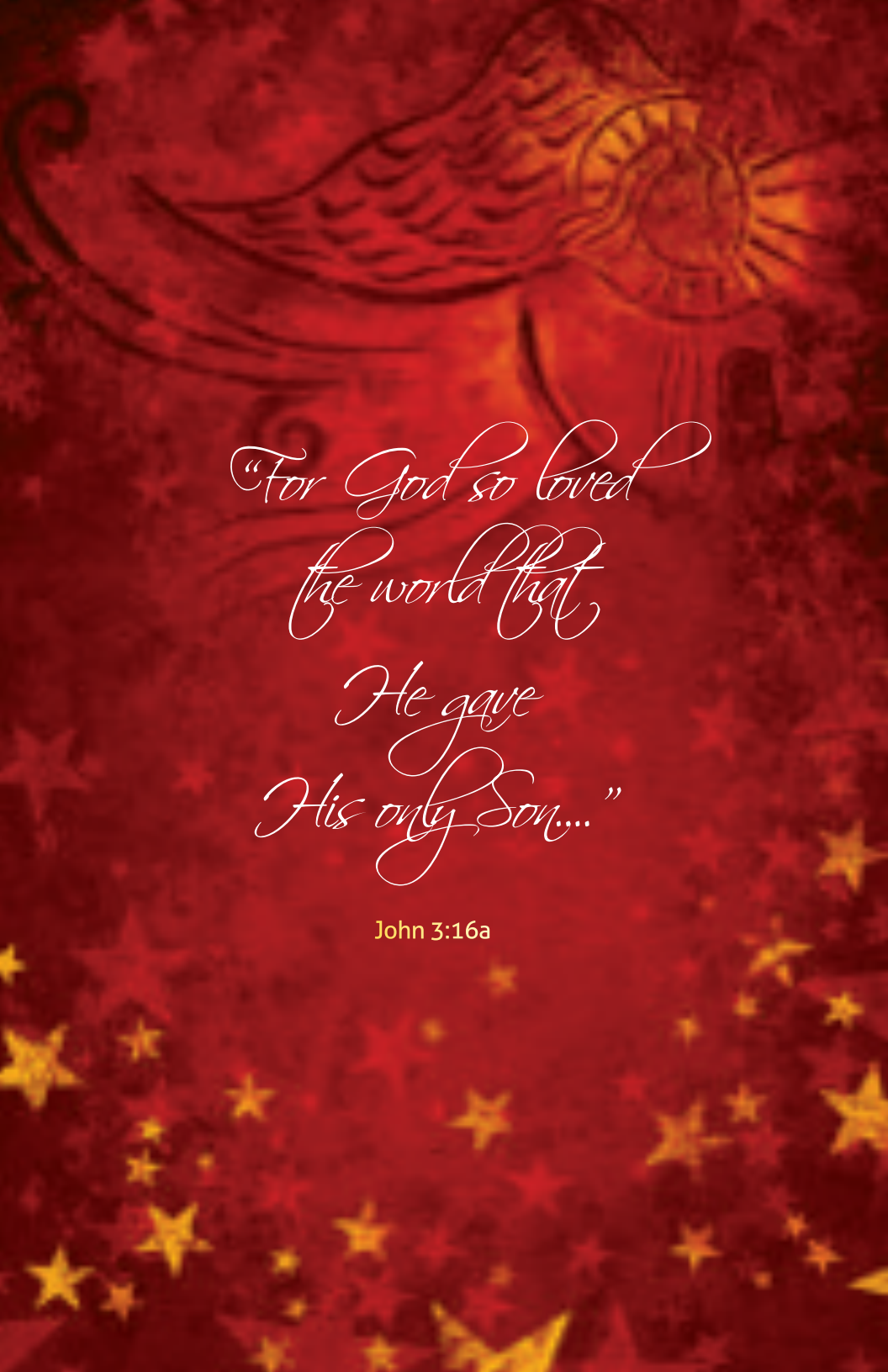
In Matthew 5:16, Jesus tells us that we are lights in this world, carrying the radiance of God's joy into dark places by good deeds done in His name. This Christmas, become a bright spot of joy in the middle of someone's dark world.

Pastors and spiritual leaders aren't the only ones who get to be those bright lights. We all get to shine. We all get to radiate lasting joy. This Christmas, invite God to place you in dark places where the light of His joy is desperately needed.

Prayer

Lord, Your love has made a clear way for me to be joyful in the midst of my own challenges. Thank you; let me be a shining light of joy for others in need this Christmas.

Suggested Carol: *Angels We Have Heard On High*


"For God so loved
the world that
He gave
His only Son..."
John 3:16a

Christmas Love

Week 4 Theme: Love
Value: Loving God, and loving people.
Scripture: John 3:16 NIV

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life."

Love is perhaps one of the most talked about words in our day. If you live on Facebook, or follow any of the movies and music trends of the age, you'll know that hundreds of ideas about "love" are getting a lot of airtime.

But loving our dog (fondness), loving good food (appreciation), loving our spouse (commitment), loving a boyfriend or girlfriend (romance), and loving our favorite band (affinity), are completely different things. The Love embodied in Jesus punches through the middle of all lesser loves, and unveils a self-emptying, self-giving, self-offering grace that cracks the foundations of fear and releases the fragrance of hope!

All versions of love ultimately bow to the overwhelming Love pouring into our lives through Jesus. His Love heals us by the transforming power of God's complete acceptance. You are loved, and there's nothing you can do about it!

As you celebrate Christmas this year, ask God to stir the kind of love in you that is empty of our own desires, and is filled with God's desires. Ask for your own love to be shaped more by unconditional grace than by the movies. As we learn the art of Jesus' Love, together by the Spirit, we are becoming like Him. We are becoming lovers of God and people.

Prayer

Lord, it's my desire to learn the art of Love. Shape me this Christmas to love you, and to love people, more deeply. Let my love not be a show; let it be real.

Suggested Carol: *The First Noel*


"The Word
became flesh, and made
His dwelling
among us."
John 1:14a

Christmas Day

Christmas Day Theme: Jesus' Incarnation
Value: Becoming Kingdom people in the world.
Scripture: Luke 2:6-7; John 1:14 NIV

Luke 2:6-7 "While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed Him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them."

John 1:14 "The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

A Star in the night sky, an aligning of celestial objects, watches over one of the most common, yet majestic, experiences of human life – the birth of a child.

When a little one comes into the world, everything seems to change. People who are grumpy, under the spell of a cooing infant, make funny faces and strange noises. Innocence and purity rule and reign; everyone becomes better because of this tiny one who can't even speak a word.

Jesus' entrance into our humanity was no less common, and no less majestic, than the birth of any child. Yet, in this case, conceived by the Holy Spirit, Jesus was destined to become the King of all Kings, and the Lord of all Lords. His Presence among us demands all human allegiance, places a claim on your life and mine, and draws us to Him by healing love and irresistible grace. All this, from a child.

Give in this Christmas. Offer your allegiance again to your loving King, and take your place as His child in the world.

Prayer

Lord, I will be evidence to a hurting world that You are within our reach. I will care for the poor, heal the sick, and join You in Your Kingdom work of pursuing the world You love.

Suggested Carol: *Joy To The World*

Why is it good to celebrate Advent & Christmas?

"It's the most wonderful time of the year…" ring the words of an old Christmas song. But why? Why does celebrating Christmas and the season of Advent that leads up to it matter?

In the early centuries of the Church, it became clear that the rhythms of time – days, weeks, years, and lifetimes – could be used to help Christians remember and reclaim the saving events of the Gospels. Jesus' birth (the Incarnation), and Jesus' triumph over death (the Resurrection), were the two obvious themes that would shape the year.

By repeating certain "cycles" each year, based around these two themes, Christians could begin to orient their entire lives around remembering, reclaiming, and retelling what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. This was called the "Christian Year," or for our purposes, the Worship Year.

Two cycles take us through the year, and enable us to order our lives around a Christ-centered spirituality. The *Cycle Of Light* includes Advent (anticipation), Christmas (celebration), and Epiphany (proclamation) . The *Cycle Of Life* includes Lent (anticipation), Easter (celebration), and Pentecost/ After Pentecost (proclamation).

Advent is the official beginning of the Worship Year, and is a season of hope, of expectation, and of waiting. In Advent we remember the longing for deliverance from evil and oppression experienced by the ancient Jews, and the anticipation of God's Kingdom breaking in on their behalf.

Scriptures for reading through the Christmas Story.

Like a child who loves to have a story read over and over again, we reclaim the powerful saving events of Christmas by retelling them – the Story of God's love breaking into our reality in Jesus.

Have you ever considered reading the Christmas story aloud with family or friends on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day?

Reading through the Christmas Story is a wonderful way to re-member what the holiday season is all about, and to connect all family members with the heartbeat of God in sending Jesus to us.

The following verses, in this order, provide a way of reading through various Gospel accounts related to the Christmas story in a way that feels like it flows together as one story.

Details are given beside each set of verses for you to mix and match the story in a way that you would prefer to read it.

One suggestion: Have family members, in a male/female order, read the verses. Then conclude with a prayer.

Luke 1:26-38
(The Angel visits Mary, Mary's response, the Magnificat - Mary's song of worship)

Matthew 1:18-25 or Luke 2:1-7
(Matthew: The engagement, Joseph's dream, and the birth of Jesus; Luke: Census and short birth narrative)

Luke 2:8-20
(The Shepherds see the Angelic Host)

Matthew 2:1-12
(The Wise Men come from the East)

Words to Christmas Carols for Personal or Family Worship

O Come, O Come Emmanuel

O come, O come Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel;
That mourns in lowly exile here,
Until the Son Of God appear

Rejoice, Rejoice,
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel

Traditional, Public Domain

O Come All Ye Faithful

O come, all ye faithful,
Joyful and triumphant,
O come, ye, o come ye to Bethlehem;

Come and behold Him,
Born the King of angels,

O come let us adore Him,
O come let us adore Him,
O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.

John Francis Wade, Public Domain (1751)

Angels We Have Heard On High

Angels we have heard on high,
Sweetly singing o'er the plains;
And the mountains in reply,
Echo'ing their joyous strains

Gloria, in excelsis Deo
Gloria, in excelsis Deo

Come to Bethlehem and see,

Him whose birth the angels sing;
Come adore on bended knee,
Christ the Lord the newborn King

Gloria, in excelsis Deo
Gloria, in excelsis Deo

Traditional, Public Domain

The First Noel

The first Noel, the angel did say,
Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay;
In fields where they lay keeping their sheep,
On a cold winter's night that was so deep

Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel, born is the King of Israel

W. Sandys, John Stainer, Public Domain

Joy To The World

Joy to the world, the Lord is come,
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart, prepare Him room

And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

He rules the world, with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove;
The glories of His righteousness,

And wonders of His love,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders of His love.

Isaac Watts, Public Domain

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