

Bible Challenge - December 18-24, 2016

Advent's weekly Bible Challenge is based upon the readings assigned for each Sunday. The Basic challenge is to re-read the texts that were read on Sunday morning and included in the Sunday bulletin. The Adventure and Explorer challenges are suggestions of different ways to deepen your knowledge of the Bible. The challenge is organized as one reading for each of five days, but find a pace or style that fits your schedule.

INTRODUCTION

Today Isaiah prophesies that a young woman will bear a son and name him Emmanuel. The gospel is Matthew's account of the annunciation and birth of the one named Emmanuel, God-with-us. During these final days of Advent we pray, "O come, O come, Emmanuel," a beloved hymn based on ancient prayers appointed for the seven days preceding Christmas. On this final Sunday in Advent we prepare to celebrate the birth of the one born to save us from the power of sin and death.

DAY ONE: Isaiah 7:10-16

An Israelite and Aramean military coalition presented a serious threat to King Ahaz of Judah. In response, Ahaz decided to secure his throne and kingdom by seeking refuge in Assyrian help. Isaiah reminds Ahaz that human attempts to establish security will fail. The prophet gives the sign of Immanuel that is the only source of true safety: God is with us!

¹⁰The LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹²But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. ¹⁵He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted."

Adventure Challenge: Isaiah 7.

Explorer Challenge: Research King Ahaz and the historical situation for Isaiah's prophesy.

DAY TWO: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

The community pleads to God for restoration: let your face shine upon us, and we shall be saved.

¹Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock;
shine forth, you that are enthroned upon the cherubim.
²In the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh,
stir up your strength and come to help us.
³Restore us, O God;
let your face shine upon us, and we shall be saved.
⁴O LORD God of hosts,
how long will your anger fume when your people pray?
⁵You have fed them with the bread of tears;
you have given them bowls of tears to drink.
⁶You have made us the derision of our neighbors,
and our enemies laugh us to scorn.
⁷Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine upon us, and we shall be saved.
¹⁷Let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
the one you have made so strong for yourself.
¹⁸And so will we never turn a-way from you;
give us life, that we may call upon your name.
¹⁹Restore us, O LORD God of hosts;
let your face shine upon us, and we shall be saved.

Adventure Challenge: Psalm 80.

Explorer Challenge: Research the names in verse 2 to learn who are they and what they represent.

DAY THREE: Romans 1:1-7

Most of the Christians in Rome do not know Paul. In this letter's opening he introduces himself as an apostle divinely appointed to spread God's gospel. The gospel's content is the promised coming of Christ, and Paul's mission is to bring about the obedience of faith among all nations, including his Roman audience.

¹Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ²which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, ³the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, ⁶including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, ⁷To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Adventure Challenge: Romans 1.

Explorer Challenge: *Option A.* Read an introduction to Romans to learn more about the early church at the time that Paul was writing.

Option B. Research the phrase *obedience of faith*.

DAY FOUR: Matthew 1:18-25

Matthew's story of Jesus' birth focuses on the role of Joseph, who adopts the divinely-begotten child into the family of David and obediently gives him the name Jesus, which means "God saves."

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Adventure Challenge: Matthew 1.

Explorer Challenge: *Option A.* Research the source and meaning of the names *Messiah* and *Jesus*.

Option B. Research *Jewish views on marriage* to learn about customs and traditions that enrich this story.

DAY FIVE:

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. With your abundant grace and might, free us from the sin that hinders our faith, that eagerly we may receive your promises, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel. (*Matt. 1:23*)

Adventure Challenge: During these final days of Advent expectation, consider and pray for what you are doing to prepare the way of the Lord--preparing the way both for yourself and for others.