

December 25-29, 2023 Edition

Following The Year_(s) Of Jesus Part 104

Experiencing The Nativity:

Simeon & Waiting

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner

December 24, 2023



When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;o) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday:

We will lovingly follow the truth at all times-speaking truly, dealing truly, living truly-and so become more and more in every way like Christ. Ephesians 4:15 (TLB)

And all of us... can be mirrors that brightly reflect the glory of the Lord. And as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like him and reflect his glory even more. 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 (NLT)

Reflection: If someone asked you, "what does God want most from you?" what would you say? I used to would've said that He wants me to do right, to read my Bible, to pray, to go to church...

And all of those things are good things... but none of them are what saves me. As far as I can tell, God's number one plan for you today is that when it's all said and done you became more like His Son rather than less like Him. And while doing good and reading the Bible and praying go into that if we lose sight of Jesus through it all we end up in trouble.

I remember very clearly a day in 1997 when I realized I knew a lot about the doctrines of the church but not as much as I'd like about the One that church and doctrines are really all about. I was listening to Max Lucado speak... He was telling about a time in the gospel of Matthew when Jesus withers a fig tree because it didn't have any fruit on it. That always seemed like a strange thing for Jesus to do. Why use His power to wither a fig tree just because it didn't have any fruit? Was He really THAT hungry?

Max Lucado talked about how this happened just days before He would be killed. He talked about what had happened to Jesus just prior to that event (some of it from Matthew's gospel but some of it from other gospels that told about other events that Matthew left out). He talked about what was coming for Jesus (again pulling from all four gospels to really lay out what was happening in a different way than just reading one persons account) and how that stress was impacting His human side and maybe leading Him to show that stress from time to time.

I can remember thinking... "wow... Max just seems to know Jesus so well. I wish I knew Jesus that well." (Did you notice I called Max Lucado, "Max"? Like I knew him well? Some of you are probably thinking... wow... Ed knows Max Lucado so well... it's true! I do know him and we are on a first name basis. If you ever meet him please tell him I said hello. He'll pretend he doesn't know who I am but that's just a game we play with each other ;o) So where was I? Oh yeah- knowing Jesus like a friend. I wanted that for myself.

So I began reading the gospels and really focusing on Jesus' life. I started in Matthew and when I finished with that I went on to Mark, then to Luke, then to John and then back to Matthew. I did that for a couple of years until I felt like I was starting to know Jesus better.

That's what I'm inviting you to do with me in 2024. Get to know Jesus better. Start with Matthew and read a chapter a day and when you finish what many scholars consider to be the most "Jewish" gospel. Then you can go on to the next gospel (Mark- the action gospel written to Gentiles to try to help them wrap their brains around who Jesus is) and then the

next and then the next until you've finished all four (if you stick with the reading plan you will have read all four gospels in 89 days. What do we do then? Start over.

What can I guarantee you of if you do this with me? Only this- by the time we get done with 2024 we will know Jesus better than we do today. And I don't know about you but I'm thinking after 2023 we could all stand to know Jesus better in the coming months.

Prayer: Lord, I want to know Your Son better. I want to understand how He treated people, how He saw You, how He wants me to treat other people based on how He treats me and how He taught that I should treat others. I pledge today to make 2024 the year of just Jesus in my life. Show me Who He is. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Tuesday:

At that time there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him and had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying, "Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace, as you have promised. I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all people. He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!" Jesus' parents were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them, and he said to Mary, the baby's mother, "This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, but he will be a joy to many others. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him. As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul." Luke 2:25-35 (NLT)

Reflection: There are two ways God works out His plans for all of human history and our own small lives (well not small to us but compared to God's overall plan... come on ;o) One is called "kronos" and the other is called "kairos".

Kronos is the orderly progression of time. God set it in motion when He created the universe. The idea is that time moves forward in an orderly, logical progression. In other words, if it's 4:00 PM right now then in a minute it will be 4:01 and a minute after that it will be 4:02 (and after another 178 of those minutes have ticked off I'll be at Riverside and theoretically this week's worth of devotional thoughts of which this is only the second will be printed out and orderly stacked on the resource table but I digress ;o)

Kairos on the other hand is when God steps into the orderly progression of time and does something amazing, something miraculous. You see these moments peppered throughout the Bible. Moments when God steps in and interrupts the ordinary progression of time and rescues His people or moves them miraculous forward giving them the ability to do things they couldn't have done on their own. We all love those moments but if we're not careful we'll miss them because we don't do our part during the kronos moments.

What is my part to be doing while time marches orderly forward? Well, to wait. God has to get everything ready before He acts and if there's one lesson you can see clearly in the Bible it's that God's not in a hurry. The people of Israel had been waiting for God to send His

messiah for thousands of years. They were wondering why God was taking so long. They didn't understand His plan. But when the time came... things really started to happen. At least for a bit.

Think about the Christmas story. The people have been waiting and suddenly there's a flurry of activity. Angels, virgins giving birth, shepherds, wise men from foreign countries coming to worship the baby, a star announcing His birth, more angels...

Everyone who saw what was happening had to be thinking... finally! Now we're going to see God's plan unfold. But what happened then? Hurry up and wait some more. What? But I thought it was time...

And that's the problem- at least for me- thinking. I learned long ago I can't predict when God is going to propel me forward and when I'm just supposed to wait. So I stopped trying. Now I do my best to wait patiently. What should we be doing while we wait? Ahhhhhhhh... we'll get to that tomorrow. For today just spend some time thinking about kronos and kairos and how you've seen them both play out in your life.

Prayer: Father, teach me patience. I want to wait patiently for You to act. Show me how to do that. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Wednesday:

But these things I plan won't happen right away. Slowly, steadily, surely, the time approaches when the vision will be fulfilled. If it seems slow, do not despair, for these things will surely come to pass. Just be patient! They will not be overdue a single day!
Habakkuk 2:3 (TLB)

Those who wait on the LORD will find new strength. They will fly high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint. Isaiah 40:31 (NLT)

Reflection: Waiting. Is there anything worse? I used to HATE waiting. But now I actually kind of enjoy it. Why? Because I've learned that when I do my part while waiting God does a lot more of this breaking into the ordinary progression of time to do something amazing and miraculous. And as much as I love those moments... they can be taxing ;o) And so now when I'm just sort of plodding along doing my part while I wait I have learned to appreciate those calmer moments. Judy calls it my "lazy river".

Have you ever been on a lazy river at a water park? It's the place where you float gently on a river that runs on the outside of the water park and when you get to the end of you find yourself back at the beginning. It's my favorite part of any waterpark.

For the first 17 years of my time at Riverside Community Church I was pretty much on a lazy river. Don't get me wrong- there were moments when my life and career hit crazy, turbulent rapids but for the most part we floated through our calendar pretty much knowing what was coming next and at the end of the year we'd find ourselves at the beginning ready to do it all again. But starting in 2017 the lazy river has been difficult to attain in my life. A series of events that led to so much turmoil and uncertainty and change over the last 3 1/2 years culminating in 2020- a year we all lost our lazy rivers. During this time I'm learning that

while I really like the lazy river moments of my life I have to admit that more growth takes place during times of turmoil and change. So I've done my best during the last few years to wait on God's timing and do my part while I wait.

But what's my part? Well, it's not just sitting around twiddling my thumbs, watching soaps and eating bonbons until God is ready (although sometimes it might seem like it). My part is to be working on my own life while I wait for God to do the part I can't. To work on the things I already know He wants from me. The fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, self control), forgiveness, acceptance, faith, hope...

In other words, to be becoming more like Jesus every day (yes, you read that right... I said to "be becoming" ;o) And the more I do that, the more God can use me. The more prepared I'll be when He does use me. When Isaiah says that those who "wait" on the Lord will find new strength he isn't talking about sitting around doing nothing. He's talking about praising while we're waiting, worshiping while we're waiting, loving while we're waiting... And if we do that then what happens?

You find "new strength" according to Isaiah chapter 40. This isn't strength you never knew you had... this is strength you never had. I wonder if Isaiah could be talking about God breaking in to the orderly progression of time with His miraculous power to give us the ability to do things we never dreamed we could? Sounds logical.

But if that's going to happen I have to do my part WHILE I wait. We'll talk a little more about that tomorrow... for today you'll just have to wait.

Prayer: Father, today I will wait for you while working on me. I want to become more like Your Son. Show me the way. In Jesus Name I pray, amen.

Thursday:

For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. Jeremiah 29:11 (NLT)

Reflection: Jeremiah 29:11... what a fantastic verse of hope. Have you ever seen that verse stitched on a pillow or on a poster or mug or card? Christians LOVE that verse and I'm not saying that it's wrong... but we generally pull it out of context when we use it.

What does that verse mean to you when you read it? For me it meant that if I just am patient then eventually God will give me everything I want the way I want it. Gee, it almost sounds bad when I actually write it down like that. But that's what I thought.

But that's not what this verse means... what it means is to bloom where you're planted because often your plan and God's plan are two very different things. Take the Israelites that Jeremiah is writing to. They've been conquered by a foreign army. They've been exiled into captivity in Babylon and they're just sure that God will be doing something VERY soon to fix this mistake. The only problem is, it's not a mistake in God's eyes. They are EXACTLY where He wants them to be... they just don't know that yet. So God sends them a letter. It

contains Jeremiah 29:11 but to feel what they must have felt when they read that little nugget you need to read what comes right before that:

This is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let your prophets and fortune-tellers who are with you in the land of Babylon trick you. Do not listen to their dreams, because they are telling you lies in my name. I have not sent them," says the Lord. This is what the Lord says: "You will be in Babylon for seventy years. But then I will come and do for you all the good things I have promised, and I will bring you home again. For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.

Does that change what that verse means to you at all? Maybe your view of God's promises isn't all warped like mine was and this is nothing new to you... but even if you know how God's promises work it's not easy to remember when you're the one whose life has been thrown out of whack and you're waiting for God to put things right. Which is why I need to be reminded all the time.

Bloom where you're planted. Wait for God's timing. Even if the future and hope that God promises aren't what you hoped for, He's the only One Who can make resurrections out of crucifixions. So wait on God... and don't forget to work on you while you're waiting.

Prayer: Father, forgive me for the times I've been impatient with Your plan. Today I want to turn my life over to Your plan... do whatever You want to do in my life. I'll do my best to work on me while You do Your thing. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Friday:

Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business? Luke 2:49 (NKJV)

Jesus became wiser and grew physically. People liked him, and he pleased God. Luke 2:52 (NCV)

The LORD says, "Forget what happened before, and do not think about the past. Look at the new thing I am going to do. It is already happening. Don't you see it?" Isaiah 43:18-19 (NCV)

Reflection: Have you ever wondered why Jesus had to grow up? Why be born a baby and then wait 30 years before you start to change the world? Why not just beam Jesus down into the midst of the Temple during Passover as a fully formed adult and introduce Him that way?

I can't speak for God but it seems to me that He wanted to show us how committed He is to organic, natural, time consuming growth. I wonder if Jesus ever got impatient with His Father's timing (the human part of Him... I wonder if He ever did)? But God is never in a hurry. You will never read in the gospels that Jesus ran to get somewhere on time or that He rushed to finish something on time. So what did He do during that 30 years before He began His ministry?

He waited. But while He waited He was "about His Father's business" according to the scripture you just read from Luke 2. What was Jesus talking about? What was the business that He was talking about?

Well, I think Luke 2:52 gives us a hint (ok... I am probably over simplifying this but it works well as a New Years lesson so please don't anyone show this to any of my theology professors

because they'd probably roll their eyes and say, "I knew this is how Ed would turn out... he always was a slacker... ;o)

Luke 2:52 gives us four areas in which Jesus "grew". He grew mentally (wisdom), physically, socially (the people liked Him) and spiritually (He pleased God). So what does that mean for me in 2024?

I am going to make 4 goals for myself for 2024 and I hope you'll do the same. A mental goal, a physical goal, a social goal and a spiritual goal.

For a mental goal I am going to try to get my work spaces under control. If you know me you know that isn't going to be easy (Hi, I'm Ed and I'm a slob [hi Ed!] {We love you Ed!}).

Why is that a mental goal? Because for me I'm afraid the clutter may be impacting my focus and ability to get things done. What about you? What might you do for a mental goal? Maybe learn a language or an instrument? Maybe you're in school right now so you just want to do better at your mental tasks. I don't know but think about it.

For a physical goal I'm shooting for stretching and cardio this year. Both would do wonders for my aging frame. How about you? What will you do this year to grow physically (some of you are smiling and thinking that you did just fine "growing" physically 2023- especially during the holidays. Am I right? Yeah, I'm right)?

For a social goal... I'm not sure... I'll probably let my wife decide on that one. I have half a clue for me my social goal may end up doing less than I'm currently doing. We'll see. What about you? How will you grow socially this year?

And as far as a spiritual goal, I'm going to read a chapter of the gospels every day in 2024. If I do that I know I'll have read through all 4 gospels 4 times by the time 2024 is done. How about you? Join me with the reading? Commit to coming to the weekly Bible study where we'll be going verse by verse through the book of Mark? Adding prayer to your schedule How does God want you to grow spiritually in 2024?

Whatever your goals might be, write them out and put them someplace you can see them regularly. Because the power of goal setting is not in the sophistication of the goal-setting-system that you use. It's in keeping the end in mind and taking small steps on a consistent basis to achieve those goals. Even my theology professors would be in favor of that.

Prayer: Father, I want to be like Your Son. Show me where I should be putting my energy in 2024. Open my eyes to the goals You want me to make. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Mental goal- _____

Physical goal- _____

Social goal- _____

Spiritual goal- _____