



REFLECTING ON ADVENT & THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

A FOUR-PART DEVOTIONAL TO PREPARE OUR HEARTS FOR CHRISTMAS

DECEMBER 2023



GLOBAL
CHRISTIAN
RELIEF

REFLECTING ON ADVENT & THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

ABOUT THIS ADVENT PRAYER GUIDE

Introduction

This Christmas season, you're invited to join Global Christian Relief and persecuted Christians around the world as we collectively celebrate Advent!

It's a reverent time to prepare our hearts before we recognize the ultimate thrill of hope on December 25—the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

The word “advent” means *arrival* and throughout history there has never been a greater arrival than the Infant King, who came to take away the sins of the world.

The celebration of Advent has been around for over 1,500 years and has always been a special time of spiritual reflection and preparation.

On each of the four Sundays leading up to Christmas Day, a symbolic candle is often lit. Then the candles—which represent hope, faith, joy and peace—are placed on a wreath for all to enjoy, whether at church or in the home.

The final and fifth symbolic candle is white, representing the purity and sinless life of Christ; it is typically lit on Christmas Eve.

Many believers, including some of our persecuted brothers & sisters around the globe, take time each Advent Sunday to reflect on the biblical story of Jesus' birth before the Body of Christ celebrates on Christmas Day.

In keeping with the Advent tradition, the team at Global Christian Relief is excited to provide you with four Advent Sunday devotionals to help you draw near to the Lord and remember His persecuted church.

We encourage you to take some time in the coming weeks to quiet your heart and remember the true reason for the season: Jesus Christ! May God bless you immensely as you reflect on His arrival.

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. —1 Timothy 1:17



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Suggested Usage

We encourage you to read one devotional per week on each Sunday in December. Start on Sunday, December 3 and conclude on Sunday, December 24 on Christmas Eve.

You may wish to read these devotionals alone as part of your quiet time with the Lord, or enjoy them with a family member, friend or fellow church member. Optionally, you may wish to journal your responses to the questions for contemplation.

Consider the stories of Christ's birth and your persecuted family throughout your week and see how your faith grows this Christmas season!

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SUNDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2023

Week 1 Devotional – Hope: The Prophets’ Candle

Some scholars believe Jesus fulfilled hundreds of Old Testament prophecies. Perhaps the most well-known prophecy is this one, given in Isaiah 7:14:

“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a Son, and will call Him Immanuel.”

What profound words of hope—words that would encourage God’s people, even in the hardest of times. This prophecy would sit in the hearts of the children of Israel. They would fall into captivity and exile, but still the words of the prophet would ring in their ears, that Immanuel—meaning “God with us”—was promised to come.

Over 2,000 years ago, Isaiah’s words of the coming Christ were hopeful, and those words remain just as hopeful today. And maybe no one knows that better than our friend, Omar.

Omar (pictured to the right) is a believer living in the Middle East, where he faces grave persecution. Being a fervent Christian and former Muslim comes with daily discrimination and serious threats against his life.

But Omar can’t hide the hope he has in Jesus. He currently ministers to a growing network of 40 underground house churches, smuggling Bibles to new converts so they can be disciplined in their newfound Christian faith. He says of his ministry work, *“I see people turn from darkness into light. They come from death to life.”*

When he’s not busy with ministry, Omar works as a taxi driver to pay his bills. In a courageous move, he plays an audio Bible on his car’s radio—so that all of his Muslim passengers can hear about the hope of Christ prophesied by Isaiah all those years ago.

To watch a video about Omar, please scan the QR code below or visit [globalchristianrelief.org/video](https://www.globalchristianrelief.org/video) for more.



Prayer of Reflection

Heavenly Father, we’re grateful for this reminder during Advent to slow down and focus on You—the true meaning of the season.

We’re grateful for the unsurpassed hope You’ve brought into this world through the birth of Your Son, which was prophesied long ago.

Like our persecuted brother in Christ, Omar, may we be filled with courage to share Your love with those around us.

May we have the boldness necessary to tell Your story and pray for those far from You—those who need Your hope most. Amen.

Questions for Contemplation

How do biblical prophecies continue to inspire the Body of Christ today—including our persecuted family?

Are there specific ways I can pray for my persecuted brothers and sisters to experience hope this Christmas?

What inspires me the most about the story of my persecuted brother in Christ, Omar?

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SUNDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2023

Week 2 Devotional – Faith: The Bethlehem Candle

Mary and Joseph had plans in Nazareth. They were going to be wed and live a quiet life together. But God interrupted.

Suddenly, Mary was carrying the hope of the world in her womb as she and Joseph headed toward Bethlehem for a census—an arduous trip some scholars believe could have been upwards of 90 miles.

But it was a trip they were destined for. In fact, 700 years prior, it was prophesied:

“... Bethlehem ... out of you will come for Me one who will be ruler over Israel ...” –Micah 5:2

It wasn't the plan Mary and Joseph initially had in mind but it was God's path; they placed their trust and faith in Him.

Just as in biblical times, God continues to interrupt lives today. Just look at Shackla (pictured right). She and her husband, Omar, were once devout Muslims. It was the only faith they had ever known. Then one day, her husband told her that he had accepted Jesus into his heart. Recalling that fateful moment, Shackla says, *“I was not only afraid, but also angry with my husband, that he changed his faith.”*

Her plans had been interrupted. But God was at work. Omar continued to share the gospel and read the Bible with his wife. And over time, Shackla's heart began to soften. She was amazed at not only the miraculous birth of Jesus, but His sacrifice, saying, *“He gave his life for us, and He is our Savior. I will live the rest of my life for Jesus, not for myself.”*

Today, Shackla welcomes Muslim seekers into her home so they can have conversations about the gospel. Although her life was interrupted, her Christian faith is everything to her now—and she wouldn't change it for the world.

To watch a video about Shackla, please scan the QR code below or visit globalchristianrelief.org/video for more.



Prayer of Reflection

Father God, Your plan is divine and inspired.

We look at the story of Mary & Joseph. You took a faithful young woman and made her the mother of Your Son.

We see where You interrupt lives, You have a plan; you don't abandon Your children.

May we surrender our wants and faithfully live in Your will for our lives. Help us follow Your path—even if it detours from the road we had once laid out for ourselves.

Let us be deeply inspired by our persecuted sister Shackla's faith and may we join her in saying, “I will live the rest of my life for Jesus.” Amen.

Questions for Contemplation

What perceived interruptions in my life were actually a part of God's plan?

How does faith play an important role as our persecuted family responds to the Lord's calling?

What can I learn from Mary and Joseph's response? What can Shackla's story teach me?

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SUNDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2023

Week 3 Devotional – Joy: The Shepherds’ Candle

Imagine standing amid the quiet countryside. No passing airplanes or the hum of distant traffic. Just the bleating of sheep under the starry night sky. You’re a humble shepherd in biblical times, watching your flock.

Then, all of a sudden, an angel bursts into the sky. Your first reaction? Pure terror. But the angel hasn’t come in a spirit of fear. It’s here to give the greatest news of all time:

“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord.” –Luke 2:10-11

In one moment, overwhelming fear. The next, unbridled joy! Not only has the Savior come, but you get to share the news with everyone who has been waiting.

Fast forward to the present day, and Simco (pictured right) gets to share the same good news in the same region where Christ was born. He’s a Bible smuggler in the Middle East, where he manages a secret Bible printing press.

He’s been arrested three times and survived five assassination attempts. But amid the fear, the joy of the Lord is his strength: *“The Holy Spirit that I have ... He made me really strong and gave me the strength to keep going.”*

Just like the shepherds, Simco gets to tell the incomparable news of Jesus with those he encounters. He delivers Bibles to those far from Christ. He shares the gospel with all who will listen.

When reflecting on the Bible and the good news it holds, Simco says, *“These words strengthened me and helped me not even think about giving up.”* What joy!

To watch a video about Simco, please scan the QR code below or visit [globalchristianrelief.org/video](https://www.globalchristianrelief.org/video) for more.



Prayer of Reflection

Lord, help us choose Your joy this Christmas season. So many things are vying for our attention.

Our world is broken. We see angst, fear and panic flicker across our televisions and cell phone screens. But You came to bring the Body of Christ joy.

Though the shepherds were first filled with fear, they went out and spread the good news, just as our persecuted brother in Christ, Simco, is doing today.

Help us follow their example. Embolden us to share Your Son with all those who will listen. Let it be a joy we can’t keep silent about. In Your name we pray. Amen.

Questions for Contemplation

How has God sustained me with supernatural joy during trying times?

In what ways do I see my persecuted family clinging to joy amid profound hardships?

What actions can I take to share joy this Advent season? How can I make my prayer life more joyful?

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SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2023

Week 4 Devotional – Peace: The Angels’ Candle

Natural disasters. Inflation. War. There’s so much trying to steal our peace. But in Luke 2, we read the following:

“Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men ...’” –Luke 2:13-14

In Biblical times, Joseph and Mary needed the Lord’s peace. Especially after an angel warned them to flee to Egypt because King Herod would seek to destroy the Infant King.

Today, so many of us are overcome by the worries of life. But like Joseph and Mary, we can keep our eyes on Christ—our Savior—and find peace in any circumstance. And not just any peace, but *perfect* peace (Isaiah 26:3).

Let’s turn our attention to the persecuted church, for example. We’re deeply inspired by the story of Azad. He grew up Muslim but is now an underground church leader in the Middle East, as well as a Bible smuggler.

He’s faced intense persecution in his life. In his own words, because of his faith, *“Islamic leaders wanted to kill my wife and children.”* But he’s found peace in Jesus to continue on: *“God tells you in a different way—in various ways—that there’s always a way, and that He’s there.”*

Though he’s surrounded by Islamic extremists who wish to destroy him, Azad bravely straps 50-pound sacks of Bibles to his back and sneaks into Middle Eastern countries where the gospel is needed most. If caught, he could face prison, torture or death. But still he perseveres. And how? Through the peace of Jesus Christ that surpasses all understanding.

To watch a video about Azad, please scan the QR code below or visit [globalchristianrelief.org/video](https://www.globalchristianrelief.org/video) for more.



**Note: Names have been changed to ensure safety and anonymity.*



Prayer of Reflection

Lord, in these fraught times, we earnestly desire You and Your peace. This Advent season, let us consider the angels’ words: peace has come.

Help us hold those words close to our hearts and treasure them. When the enemy tries to destroy our peace, help us keep our eyes on You and feel Your presence.

Let us learn from the example of our persecuted brother in Christ, Azad, who experiences Your peace despite great challenges all around him.

This Christmas season, may we and our persecuted family members draw ever closer to You as we acknowledge that You are with us. Amen.

Questions for Contemplation

How does God invite me to experience His peace during tumultuous times?

How were Joseph and Mary able to maintain their peace amid King Herod’s threats?

What does Azad’s story teach me about my persecuted family members? How do they remain at peace?