

AWAITING
THE
MANGER

O C I E A N N A
F L E I S S



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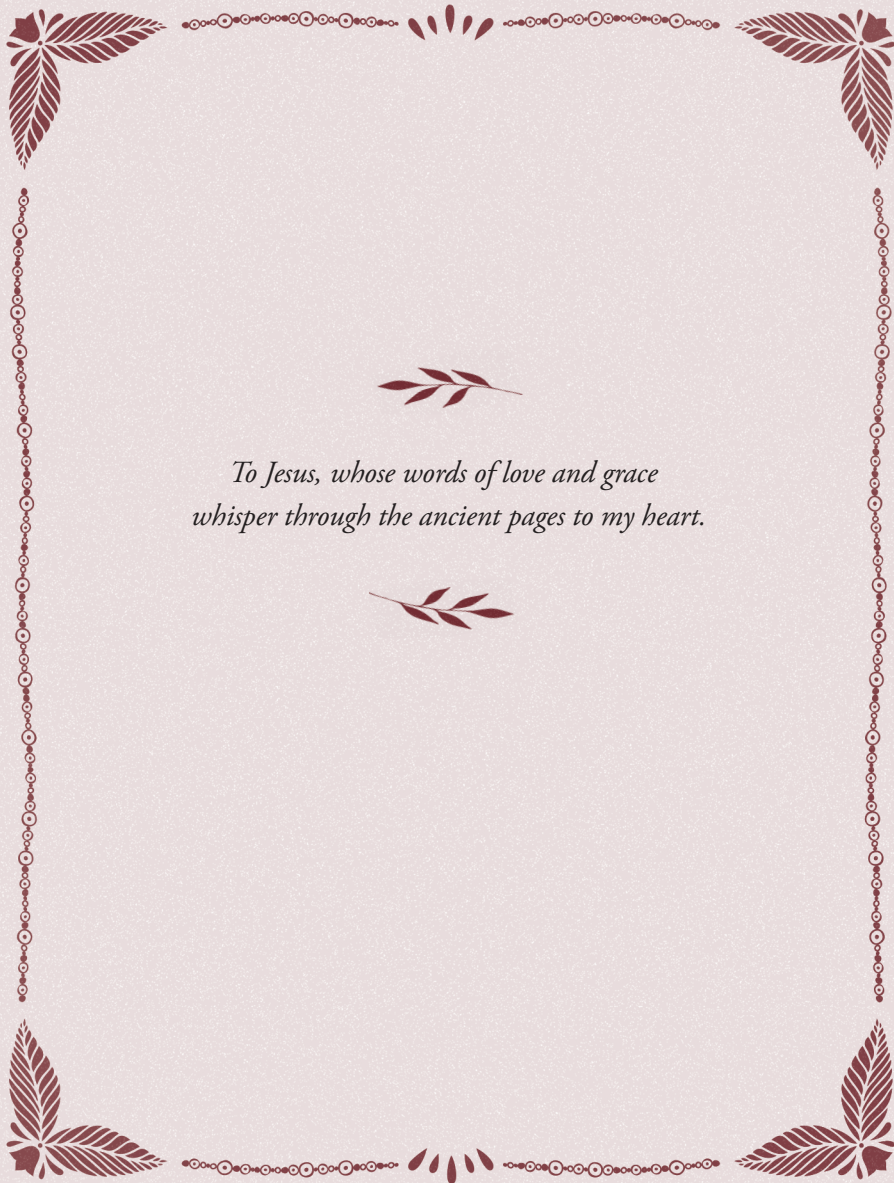
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*To Jesus, whose words of love and grace
whisper through the ancient pages to my heart.*



*Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!*

PSALM 115:1

*The Scriptures are like the swaddling clothes of the
holy child Jesus; unroll them, and there you find your
Savior. The essence of the Word of God is Christ.*

CHARLES SPURGEON

*Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he
interpreted to them in all the
Scriptures the things concerning himself.*

LUKE 24:27



CONTENTS

Introduction	7
1. Before the Beginning	11
2. The Woman's Offspring	17
3. Noah's Hiding Place	23
4. Abraham's Rest	27
5. Hagar's Cry	31
6. Sarah's Laughter	37
7. Isaac's Near Sacrifice	41
8. Leah's Praise	47
9. Judah's Fear	53
10. Jochebed's Ark	61
11. Israel's Bread	67
12. Joshua's Trust	73
13. Manoah's Wonder	79
14. Naomi's Son	87
15. Hannah's Joy	93
16. Forever Shepherd King	99
17. Mephibosheth's Surprise	105
18. Elijah's Provider	111
19. The Woman in the Doorway	117
20. A Queen's Entrance	125
21. Isaiah's Plea	133
22. Daniel's Prayer	141
23. Hosea's Love	147
24. Micah's Town	155
25. Simeon's Light	163
Notes	169
Hymns Used	171
Resources	173



INTRODUCTION

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

ISAIAH 7:14

Instead of jumping into the chaos the Christmas season often brings, I'd like to invite you to relish these 25 days of Advent. While you wait for the celebration of Jesus's birth, join me in reflecting, listening, and watching for him.

In Isaiah 7:14, God tells us that the Messiah will be called Immanuel. (We'll explore the moment when God proclaimed this name in chapter 21.) Immanuel—Jesus—is the one I set my eyes on during this season. Why?

Immanuel means "God with us," and it is the name of God that whispers my personal story. I was separated from God—sinful, damaged, unable to enter his holy presence—but because of a love greater than I can grasp, the walls barring me from him collapsed. A Savior, gentle in a manger, glorious in his brokenness—with blood-stained brow, ripped hands and feet—climbed through the rubble to rescue me.

Is this your story too? It's a story woven over millennia in true tales etched by prophets and poets on stone and papyrus, then preserved for us in what we call the Old Testament. Here we find the shining face of the baby in the

hay. In those old stories he was there, as present with us as he has always been and will always remain.

Awaiting the Manger pauses to peek at the hints of Jesus's coming from heaven to earth whispered throughout the ancient pages of Scripture. Echoing from the deep past, thundering in ever greater clarity, we will watch the declaration of love trumpeted about on Christmas morning and know more deeply the Savior who did not leave us as orphans but came to us in love and grace.

I sit in humble anticipation as we begin this journey together, in awe of the majestic depth of God's Word, and overflowing with excitement for the encouragement that awaits.

A WORD ABOUT THE TEXT

Oh, how I love Scripture! It's God's holy Word, breathed from him to us. It is the normal way he speaks to us, and the Bible reveals all we need to know of who God is—imagine that!

To be honest, I tremble when I teach from Scripture and even more when I write about it. I deeply desire to honor God by first painstakingly studying the passages, and then choosing with care the words I use to communicate God's story to you. In *Awaiting the Manger*, as I retell Scripture stories, I do take the liberty to “put flesh on the bones,” as my pastor friend calls it. At times, in order to give a fresh perspective, you'll experience the story through one of the characters' points of view. Other times I'll use credible historical details to paint the scene. And in a few spots, I'll imagine a scenario that could have happened. Weaving through the stories, I strive to add only plausible details, based in research of the biblical text, the time period, and the language, but these parts are *not* the Word of God! As you read each chapter, I urge you to read the Scripture passages (found in the “Read” section), as well as examine the references run in the text, to hear what God is saying for yourself.

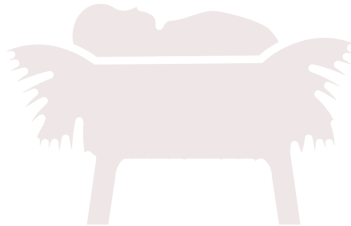
A WORD ABOUT THE HYMNS

At the end of each day's devotional, I've listed an Advent or Christmas hymn for you and your family to enjoy. If you're unfamiliar with the melody, feel free to search the internet for a version you like. Another option is to simply read the words of the hymn. They are rich and flowing with encouragement.



*“Yes,” said Queen Lucy. “In our world too,
a stable once had something inside it that
was bigger than our whole world.”*

LUCY PEVENSIE,
The Last Battle by C.S. Lewis





BEFORE THE BEGINNING

He chose us in him before the foundation of the world.

EPHESIANS 1:4

When did the story of Jesus begin? When the angel Gabriel descended to the dusty town of Nazareth to find a peasant girl who would be blessed among women? Or did it begin earlier in history's halls? Maybe in an easily skimmed-over verse from the book of Micah, when the prophet hailed the little town of Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah. Perhaps it was when Isaiah's aged hands scribbled down the Holy Spirit's description of a child born "unto us" who would be stricken, smitten, and afflicted (Isaiah 53:4).

Or was it further back into the dark past when our first parents Adam and Eve sided against God, turned their hearts to the serpent, and broke the commandment to not eat from the forbidden tree? Or maybe shortly after this, when God promised a Deliverer would come from the seed of the woman to crush the serpent's head, restoring the shattered relationship between God and his sons and daughters? (Genesis 3:15). Surely that was when the story began.

But no. Not even then.

Jesus's story—the story of our deliverance from the shackles of sin to new life—began here: "Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4).



Before the universe was created, back in the pre-creation womb that our minds fail to fathom—yes, way back then—he loved us. No space, no stars, no planets, no Earth. The Spirit wasn't moving over the waters—there were no waters. Before the molecules of life connected, or a neuron vibrated, or blood pumped through a heart valve. All that existed was the perfect union of love amid the Godhead—Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Three in one. Holiness, love, creativity.

And there, before time and space, he thought of us. The next verse says, “In love he predestined us” (Ephesians 1:4-5).

During this mysterious age, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit made a divine promise—the Immanuel promise—that Jesus would dwell among us (John 1:14). He would heal the sick with a word or touch or spit. He would restore the outcasts. He would speak redemption to the broken bride who ventured to a well on a hot afternoon (John 4:1-45). He would refuse to condemn the woman caught in adultery, sparing her from being stoned to death by self-righteous Pharisees (John 8:1-11). He would remove the shackles of the demon-possessed, cave-bound man, replacing his torment with peace (Mark 5:1-20). He would weep with sisters and raise a brother (John 11:1-44). He would cry to his Abba Father in a garden, alone (Matthew 26:36-46). When the time came, he would walk the ugly road to the cross, paved with thorns and mockery and lashings (Matthew 27:27-31). On a dark Friday, he would drink the full cup of his Father's wrath (Matthew 27:46)—and on a bright Sunday he would rise in glorious victory (1 Corinthians 15:4).

And, all of this would first be heralded in a tiny space crammed into a crowded town, when, begotten of the Father's love, the Son would trade his throne for a manger (Luke 2:7).

A lot happened before the beginning.



BEFORE THE BEGINNING

Artist and saint alike grope in awe to comprehend... the Master of the Universe, become of earth, earthy, in order to be one with his creatures so that we may be one with him.

MADELEINE L'ENGLE

PRACTICE

God loved us before the stars twinkled, but “knowing” his love eludes us at times. Today, speak of his ancient and unbreakable love to yourself and those around you. (Ephesians 3:19)

REFLECT

What response do you have to knowing that before the beginning, God chose to love you? If you really grasped that he cherishes you, how would your thoughts, words, and actions change? (Zephaniah 3:17; Jeremiah 31:3; 1 John 4:19)

PRAY

Father, before the foundation of the world you knew me, you loved me. Awaken me to rest in the knowledge of your eternal love.

READ

Ephesians 1



OF THE FATHER'S LOVE BEGOTTEN

Translation by J.M. Neale (1851), extended by Henry W. Baker (1861)

Of the Father's love begotten
Ere the worlds began to be,
He is Alpha and Omega,
He the Source, the Ending he,
Of the things that are, that have been,
And that future years shall see,
Evermore and evermore!

O that birth forever blessed,
When the Virgin, full of grace,
By the Holy Ghost conceiving,
Bore the Savior of our race;
And the babe, the world's Redeemer,
First revealed his sacred face,
Evermore and evermore!

This is he whom heav'n-taught singers
Sang of old with one accord,
Whom the Scriptures of the prophets
Promised in their faithful word;
Now he shines, the long-expected;
Let creation praise its Lord,
Everymore and evermore!

BEFORE THE BEGINNING

O ye heights of heav'n, adore him;
Angel hosts, his praises sing;
All dominions, bow before him,
And extol our God and King;
Let no tongue on earth be silent,
Ev'ry voice in concert ring,
Evermore and evermore

Christ, to thee, with God the Father,
And, O Holy Ghost, to thee,
Hymn, and chant, and high thanksgiving,
And unwearied praises be,
Honor, glory, and dominion,
And eternal victory,
Evermore and evermore.

