

A photograph of a wooden manger, a traditional structure used for feeding animals. It is filled with dry straw and a white, fringed cloth. The manger is set against a dark background, and the lighting is warm and focused on the manger, creating a sense of intimacy and reverence.

WHAT CHILD IS THIS?

ADVENT REFLECTIONS ON A GENEALOGY OF HOPE

WITH AN INTRODUCTION FROM

CHRISTOPHER J. H. WRIGHT

INTERNATIONAL AMBASSADOR FOR LANGHAM PARTNERSHIP



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What Child is This? Advent Reflections on a Genealogy of Hope

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The Genealogy of Jesus

Matthew 1:1–16

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham:

² **Abraham** was the father of Isaac, **Isaac** the father of Jacob, **Jacob** the father of Judah and his brothers, ³ **Judah** the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was **Tamar**, Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, ⁴ Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵ Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was **Rahab**, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was **Ruth**, Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶ and **Jesse** the father of King David.

David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been **Uriah's wife**, ⁷ **Solomon** the father of Rehoboam, **Rehoboam** the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asa, ⁸ Asa the father of Jehoshaphat, **Jehoshaphat** the father of Jehoram, Jehoram the father of Uzziah, ⁹ Uzziah the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, ¹⁰ **Hezekiah** the father of Manasseh, **Manasseh** the father of Amon, Amon the father of Josiah, ¹¹ and **Josiah** the father of Jeconiah and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon.

¹² After the exile to Babylon: Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, ¹³ **Zerubbabel** the father of Abihud, Abihud the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor, ¹⁴ Azor the father of Zadok, Zadok the father of Akim, Akim the father of Elihud, ¹⁵ Elihud the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, ¹⁶ and Jacob the father of **Joseph**, the husband of Mary, and **Mary** was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah.

Luke 3:23, 36–38

²³ Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought . . . of **Shem**, the son of **Noah**, the son of Lamech, ³⁷ the son of Methuselah, the son of **Enoch**, the son of Jared, the son of Mahalalel, the son of Kenan, ³⁸ the son of Enosh, the son of **Seth**, the son of **Adam**, the son of **God**.

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Introduction

“At least they didn’t read the first seventeen verses” might be the relief in the mind of someone at a Christmas carol service when one of the readings begins at Matthew 1:18, “This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about.” Surely that’s all we need to know! What is this long list of names and “begettings” (in older Bibles) doing on the first page of the New Testament? Well, a lot more than we might think.

The list matters. In ancient Israel, lists of ancestors (genealogies) mattered greatly. Just as in many traditional societies in the Majority World today, your identity includes your family. Who you are depends on who you belong to – not just your living relatives, but your family line going back many generations whose names you will remember from childhood. Genealogies in Israel (there are many in the Old Testament) proved your rightful place among God’s people and your share in God’s land. And for Jesus, the claim that He was Israel’s Messiah required proof that He was genuinely descended from King David and a legitimate son of Abraham. Have we got the right man, the true Messiah? Yes, says Matthew, and here’s the proof in the standard and accepted legal terms. The claim is valid.

The story matters. You’ve picked up Matthew’s Gospel because you want to know something about this Jesus the Christians keep talking about. “You won’t understand Jesus,” Matthew begins, “unless you see Him as the climax of this story, the story of God and Israel. This is the story, pinpointed through the names of all these historical people, that makes sense of who Jesus is and why He came.” This – the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Messiah Jesus – is the central act of the great drama of scripture, but we need all that went before to understand it. That’s why Matthew traces the story back through Abraham (to whom God promised to bless all nations on earth), and David (to whom God promised an eternal kingdom through his messianic heir), while Luke traces it right back to the first Adam (created in God’s image to rule and care for the earth and its creatures and proto-ancestor of the true Son of God, the heir of all creation).

The women matter. Matthew includes five women in his genealogy of Jesus – a most unusual thing to do in such lists: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary. All of them suffered in various ways: abandonment, prostitution, widowhood,

adulterous abuse, teenage pregnancy. But all of them participated in the way God was working out his purposes in history, purposes that led to the salvation of the world by the One who was “despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain” (Isaiah 53:3), who earned the insult “friend of sinners.” And four of them were foreigners, not Israelites. The Messiah of Israel had Gentile genes in His ancestry and climaxed His earthly ministry (as Matthew also pointedly records) by sending His followers to make disciples of “all nations.”

That is the mission of God that is still ongoing, to the ends of the earth and to the end of the age. But it is the mission of God that was promised and programmed in the story that is traced in the genealogy of Jesus – the great story of the Bible in which we still participate in our own generation until He returns to claim His inheritance in the new creation and dwell with us, our Immanuel, forever.

Oh yes, this story with all its characters really matters! So enjoy getting to know some of them this Advent as Langham-connected friends from around the world introduce them to us.

Chris Wright

International Ambassador, Langham Partnership

Adam

For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.

— 1 Corinthians 15:22



In Eden, Adam walked with God. There was no veil, no fear, no intermediaries. It was pure communion, the Creator and His creature in perfect harmony. This is what we are made for.

But one act of disobedience was enough to break that relationship. Sin entered the world, death passed to all and humanity was cast away from God's presence.

The story of Adam is the story of all of us. Wanting to "be like God," we choose autonomy and, ironically, become slaves – slaves to sin, shame and distance. It is in this abyss that we begin to outsource not just our faith but our very relationship with God. Instead of drawing near, we delegate intimacy, preferring that others climb the "mountain" and speak to God for us, as Israel did with Moses. Sometimes, we rely on spiritual leaders to believe, hear and discern on our behalf. At other times, we turn to substitutes – rituals, systems or even human relationships – in a desperate attempt to fill the void of communion we were created for. The tragedy of the fall was not primarily moral. It was relational. We lost the intimacy for which we were designed and still long, but in our fear of facing God directly, we allow others or other things to manage the relationship for us.

But the Bible does not end in Genesis 3. In Christ, the second Adam, God descends again into the garden, no longer asking "Where are you?" but declaring "It is finished." Where the first Adam brought condemnation, the second brought justification. Where the first opened the door to death, the second opened wide the way to life. If in Eden, man hid from God, on Calvary, God revealed Himself completely to man.

This truth is deeply relevant in my context. I see people living a borrowed faith, dependent on gurus, leaders or the experiences of others to draw near to God. But Christ tore the veil. In Jesus, there is no need for human mediators. We all have direct access to the Father. The second Adam not only reversed the failure

of the first but inaugurated a new kind of humanity, one that lives in the freedom of obedience and the joy of communion.

If Adam teaches me about the gravity of the fall, Christ teaches me about the greatness of grace. And it is precisely this grace that calls us to rise from the dust, drop the fig leaves with which we try to cover ourselves and run into the arms of the Father. Today, the voice that echoes is not one of condemnation but of invitation: "Come to me."

So, before the first and second Adam, my prayer is this: that we no longer live in the shadow of our inheritance of rebellion but in the light of our new identity in Christ. Because, if in Adam all die, in Christ all are made alive. And this life is to be enjoyed now, face to face with the God who does not outsource or skimp on love but gives it directly and entirely.

TOMÁS CAMBA *Brazil*

Tomás is a pastor, theologian, professor of philosophy and the founder of Editora Quitanda, a publishing house based in São Paulo, Brazil, and Luanda, Angola. He is husband to Thayna Karen and father of Agatha.



Seth

At that time people began to call on the name of the LORD.

— Genesis 4:26



The births recorded early in the Bible are seen as evidence that God is still involved, despite the rebellion and brokenness now present in His creation. Following the fall into sin in the Garden of Eden, God pronounced judgements on the serpent, Adam and Eve. For humanity, the original harmonious relationship between the man and the woman would now be tainted with strife. The woman's responsibility of being the mother of humankind would be accompanied by pain, the ground would no longer yield bountifully as intended and they would not be allowed to remain in Eden, enjoying the presence of God (Genesis 3:14–24).

Despite all of this, God does not abandon His people or His purposes. He continues to be available to help them in their struggles. In Genesis 4:1 and 4:25 respectively, we see Eve acknowledging the help of God for the birth of both Cain, allowing her to continue the mandate to be fruitful and multiply despite the pain now involved, and Seth, graciously replacing the son, Abel, lost to violence in the now-broken world. The fact that Seth also gets a son, Enosh, assures us that the fruitfulness and multiplication will continue.

But that's not all that God cares about in His creation. The last statement of the text is worth our attention:

At that time people began to call on the name of the LORD.

This statement testifies to the character of God. It is part of God's sovereign purpose for men and women to seek after Him, as Acts 17:26–27 affirms:

From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.

Years ago, when I read this, I wondered to myself, who taught Seth and the people at the time to call on the name of the Lord? Perhaps Adam and Eve were among those who called on the name of the Lord since, according to Genesis 5:1–5, Adam lived for many hundreds of years after the birth of Seth. What would it have been like for them to call on the Lord with whom they used to fellowship in Eden in the cool of the day? The text doesn't say more or give any details about how or why people did so, just that they did. And its mention means that it is important to God.

In fact, it looks like, since the time of Seth, God continues to put in the hearts of men and women a desire to invoke His name. In Uganda where I live, there is a wave of this awakening of people invoking the name of God. They loosely refer to their fellowship meetings as "the altar." At such meetings, there is an abandonment of the individuals to the rule of God Almighty through confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, repentance of past sins and renouncing involvement in other religious practices outside of Christ's lordship. Membership in some of these fellowships is by people with not much education. Some of them cannot read and write, but their experience of the living God cannot be denied. Similar fellowships can be found in high-end professional offices and in church communities.

Indeed, God responds when we call upon Him and is present among His people, making the truth of Immanuel, God with us, a reality for God's people in my context today and around the world. May God's stirring of the hearts of men and women to invoke His name continue to be heeded and His gracious presence experienced as we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ this Christmas.

BARBARA TUMWINE *Uganda*

Barbara served Langham Preaching in the role of regional coordinator for East Africa until just recently and continues as a facilitator for the preaching movement in Uganda. She is married to Paul Majoli, and they are members of Rubaga Baptist Church in Jinja, where Paul is on the preaching team and Barbara is involved with the women's ministry.



Enoch

Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away.

— Genesis 5:24



There's a quiet, almost hidden figure in the long list of names that make up the genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3. His name is Enoch. If you blink, you might miss him. But in the ancient story of Genesis, Enoch's life stands out like a lantern in the dark. While most of the names in Genesis 5 are followed by the refrain ". . . and then he died," Enoch's story is different. The text simply says, "Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away" (Genesis 5:24).

Enoch's story is brief, but it is profound. In a world that was growing increasingly dark – where violence and corruption would soon bring about the flood – Enoch's life was marked by a simple, daily faithfulness. He *walked with God*. Not just for a season, but for 300 years. The Hebrew phrase suggests intimacy, friendship and steady companionship. Enoch's life wasn't defined by grand achievements or dramatic miracles but by a long obedience in the same direction.

And then, in a moment that still stirs our imagination, Enoch "was no more, because God took him away." The New Testament writer to the Hebrews says, "By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death. . . . For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God" (Hebrews 11:5).

What does Enoch's story have to do with the gospel? His life is a signpost pointing forward. In a world where death reigned, Enoch's walk with God broke the pattern. He was *taken* – not by death, but by God Himself! Enoch's story is a whisper of hope – a hope that death need not be the end, that God can do something to change the reign of death. And this idea of walking with God is the key.

In Jesus Christ, that hope becomes reality. Jesus, the better Enoch, walked with God perfectly, and through His death and resurrection, He opened the way for us to share in His resurrection life and not have death as our end. The genealogy in Luke 3 reminds us that Jesus stands in the line of this Enoch who walked with God, and He invites us to join Him on that journey.

I think about Enoch's story often. In Romania and across Eastern Europe, the pressure to prove ourselves – whether through education, career or even emigration – can be overwhelming. Our history is marked by seasons of hardship, uncertainty and the struggle to build a better future for our families. It's easy to feel that our lives only matter if we do something spectacular.

At the same time, in Bucharest and in towns and villages across Romania, faithfulness often requires caring for aging parents, raising children in a rapidly changing society or holding onto hope in the face of economic and political uncertainty – things that feel ordinary and mundane, not spectacular.

Enoch's story offers a quiet but radical alternative: that God is present in these daily realities and values our daily faithfulness more than our visible achievements. What matters most is not what we accomplish but who we walk with.

And in Jesus, we have the promise that our walk with God is not in vain. He has conquered death, and He walks with us by His Spirit every step of the way. One day, just like Enoch, we will be with Him forever – not because of our achievements but because of His grace. In a region where trust in institutions can be fragile and where the wounds of the past still shape our present, Jesus's faithfulness stands as a sure foundation. Through the disappointments, He promises that our story – like Enoch's – is held securely in God's hands.

So, as we wait and hope this Advent, let's remember Enoch. Let's choose to walk with God, one step at a time, trusting that He is leading us home. And let's encourage one another that, in Christ, even the most ordinary life can become extraordinary in God's story.

REV. DR. CIPRIAN GHEORGHE-LUCA *Romania*

Ciprian is a Romanian theologian and lead pastor of Emmanuel Christian Center, a vibrant, multi-ethnic Pentecostal church in Bucharest, Romania. A published author and translator, he regularly appears on national TV and radio programs discussing religious and cultural topics. Ciprian is married to Liliana, a well-known Romanian Christian novelist, and together they are the proud parents of three children.



Noah

Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God.

— Genesis 6:9



Being part of the crowd is easier than being an exception to it. By nature, we love friendship over opposition. And there's wisdom in that. In Africa, for example, one tries not to be at odds with one's neighbour in case of emergency. A very important question we must all answer, however, is this: what side am I on in relation to the will of God? Being part of the majority or minority is not what matters. Rather, we must find ourselves on the side of trusting God's way.

Noah, the tenth listed ancestor in Luke's genealogy of Christ, lays before us a challenge as a model in this matter. The society of Noah's time is described in Genesis 6:5: "The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time." In the midst of that society stood the man Noah.

Noah is described as "a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time" and one who "walked faithfully with God" (Genesis 6:9). The writer of Hebrews refers to him as one who acted "in holy fear" and said that, by the faith shown in building the ark, he became "heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith" (Hebrews 11:7). The Apostle Peter, in his second letter, refers to him as a preacher of righteousness (2 Peter 2:5). What does all this mean?

Righteousness is defined by the nature of God whom the Scriptures describe as "the righteous judge" (2 Timothy 4:8). It carries the idea of being in good standing before God by acting in line with God's ways in the world. This was the status of Noah in his day. He believed what God said and acted accordingly. That made him blameless amid all the people of his time who were definitely not walking in God's ways. What was it that God revealed and Noah believed and acted on? That God would deliver from the coming judgement through the ark that Noah was to build. By trusting the means of salvation that God revealed He was providing and faithfully building the ark, Noah condemned the world (Hebrews 11:7).

In Noah's time, salvation was provided by God through the ark. In our day, it is provided by God through the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Trusting God then looked like grabbing hold, by faith, of the means of salvation He provided – building and entering the ark. Trusting God now looks like grabbing hold, by faith, of the means of salvation He provided – following Jesus as Saviour and Lord. It is not Noah that points us to Christ in his story but rather the ark that God provided to save Noah that points us to Christ. Just as the ark protected them when God's judgement came in the form of a flood, so Christ will protect us from God's judgement in the form of eternal punishment away from His presence.

The invitation today is not "build an ark" but "come to me," as Jesus said in Matthew 11:28. Just as there was no salvation outside the ark, there is no salvation outside Christ. The choice is ours. As we put our faith in Jesus as our Saviour and Lord and so hope in Him and walk in His ways, we display righteousness and find salvation.

Each generation comes with its challenges. Many of us today are surrounded by all forms of immorality, unending corruption, murder and all other kinds of evil. If we trust in Jesus and walk in His ways, many will think we're crazy – as they thought Noah was as he built an ark over many years. Just as Noah remained an exception and set a righteous example, we too can remain faithful to God's will in our generation and point people to salvation and life in Jesus.

DR. SAMUEL M. NGEWA *Kenya*

Samuel is a Langham-published author who serves as a professor of Biblical Studies at Africa International University in Kenya. He has written commentaries on the Gospel of John, John's epistles, the Pastoral epistles and Galatians.



Shem

Praise be to the LORD, the God of Shem!

— Genesis 9:26



Shem is likely Noah's first son, as his name appears first (Genesis 5:32). Together with his brothers, he helped build the ark, gather creatures and care for them through the judgement of the flood. While little is said about his character in the Bible, God's blessings over him were vividly clear. Shem lived in a world filled with corruption and evil yet entered the ark in obedience with his family. It is notable that his survival was not by his own merit but because of God's grace and faithfulness. Shem and his brothers became the forefathers of all humanity, and Shem, through Abraham, became the custodian of God's covenant.

Shem stands out as a remarkable figure among Noah's sons. His actions not only brought honour to his family but also glorified God. When Noah lay uncovered in his tent after becoming drunk, Shem's response reflected deep respect and responsibility. Instead of exposing his father's shame like Ham did, Shem, along with Japheth, chose a careful and respectful way to cover him. This act became a testimony to Shem's character of honour and faith.

Noah, recognizing this, blessed Shem and Japheth while cursing Ham for his dishonour. In Shem's case, Noah went even further by declaring, "Praise be to the LORD, the God of Shem!" (Genesis 9:26). It is noticeable that this blessing is unique because its focus was not on Shem, but on the LORD, the God of Shem. What a privilege for Shem! God is being recognized as his God, similar to the way later generations referred to the LORD as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God's name is being glorified through him.

Moreover, this statement showed that God's presence and favour rested on Shem and that Shem enjoyed a close fellowship with God, demonstrated through acts of worship and through a strong living testimony. Shem's greatest treasure was not his own identity and fame but that the LORD was his God. One writer puts it this way, "This is the starting point of true blessing: belonging to God." Shem's identity was that he belongs to the LORD, which is above every oth-

er blessing. This reminds us that the greatest honour is not glorifying ourselves but being connected to God.

In Pakistan, Christians live as a minority and often experience discrimination, prejudice and significant marginalization on the basis of their faith. Just as it was a privilege for Shem that God was recognized as his God, it is likewise a privilege for Christians in Pakistan to be recognized as God's people. This identity gives them dignity and courage to live with confidence in a society that ostracizes them. All who face such challenges should be mindful to remember that their true identity is in Christ, who has called them to take up their cross and follow Him, promising to be with them even in their sufferings. Shem's story reminds Pakistani Christians that their true worth and calling do not come from social status or the opinions of others but from belonging to the Lord Jesus Himself.

Shem holds a significant place in God's redemptive plan. From his lineage came the Semitic nations and, most notably, Abraham, through whom God established His covenant. The people of Israel came from Abraham, and through them, God gave His written revelation to the world. The blessing on Shem found its ultimate fulfilment in Jesus Christ, who brought salvation to the world for all people, regardless of lineage. Despite disruptions like the Tower of Babel, God's plan continued through Shem's line, making him a vital link in the chain of divine promises and blessings which culminate in Jesus Christ for the whole of humanity.

SEMINARY DIRECTOR IN SOUTH ASIA

Details withheld for security reasons



Abraham

I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

— Genesis 12:2



In the past fifteen years or so, the growth of Christianity has flattened in Singapore. In April of this past year, a key thrust at a children's ministry conference in Singapore was whether another generation will rise and still fear God. The question gripping parents, Sunday school teachers and children's ministry leaders in my country echoes the same concern: how do we pass on this living faith to yet another generation?

Scripture shows us it is possible for another generation who does not know the LORD to rise quickly (Judges 2:10). By about the third generation of Moses, we gasp that his grandchildren had abandoned faithfulness to YHWH (Judges 18:30). If Moses's own grandchildren turned away from God, will our grandchildren keep faith? In the face of this concern, the chain of four generations – Abraham to Joseph – commended for faith in Hebrews 11's hall of fame deserves more attention.

In Genesis 12:1–3, we see the call of Abraham to go to the Promised Land. God promised Abraham that he would become a great nation, his name would be great and he would become a blessing to others. Abraham held on to these promises to the end of his life, despite seeing very little fulfilment. In the same way, his son Isaac received the promises, held on to them and saw little fulfilment of what God had promised. Such faith was again passed on to Jacob, who, in spite of seeing little fulfilment of God's promises at the end of his life, sought to bless his own children with the same promises of God. And, of course, his son, Joseph, displayed incredible faith and faithfulness through many challenges in his life.

What we see is an incredible intergenerational faith that persists and thrives through scant fulfilment. But how was this accomplished?

To be sure, God has, in every generation, kept a people for Himself. God was determined to make for Himself a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. He does

so by revealing Himself anew to each generation and reiterating His promises to another generation. This continuity of God's covenantal promises is seen afresh in the stories of Isaac (Genesis 26:2–5), Jacob (Genesis 35:11–12), and Joseph (Genesis 48:3–16; 50:24–26). We also see that in each generation, faith was not simply inherited but tested and proven. Each generation learned to trust and commit to the same God through challenging circumstances. For example, we read of Jacob learning to trust the God of his fathers in Genesis 31:42. In short, each generation demonstrated the trustworthiness of God to the next, by the grace of God, and God kindly revealed Himself and His covenant promises anew to each successive generation.

Just as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and the Old Testament figures of faith in Hebrews 11 did not receive what was promised (Hebrews 11:39), we do not yet see the fullness of God's kingdom realized – which can lead to losing heart and turning away. How can the Singapore church raise another generation of Christ-believers with a fire-tested faith that withstands scant fulfilment amid false gospels and the discouragement of life in a broken world?

Christian parents must lead the way, first by pointing this generation of Christians to our trust in God's fuller revelation of Himself and His better covenant promises: the resurrection of our bodies and a glorious inheritance where all things are made new – all through His Son Jesus Christ, who is the founder and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). Second, we have the privilege of praying and trusting the Holy Spirit to teach the next generation to trust and commit to the same God, even as those lessons come through life's challenges.

In this Advent period, may the hope of the stories of Jesus's ancestors and the new covenant realities of His first coming inspire our perseverance in faith. And may the example of Abraham encourage us to pass on our faith through the lives we live.

PETER HO *Singapore*

Peter is a Langham-published author who serves as the Academic Dean and Associate Professor of Old Testament at Singapore Bible College. He publishes in the areas of Psalms, Prophets and biblical Hebrew poetry. Peter and his wife, Wendy, have four children.



Isaac

On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.

— Genesis 22:14



We approach Christmas in the fourth year of a full-scale war in Ukraine. Once again, we need to be ready to sing “Silent Night” with its “all is calm, all is bright” accompanied by the sounds of sirens, military drones and ballistic rockets. Our Christmas candles will remind us of our mourning for those killed in the recent air attack.

Looking for the point of connection between Christmas and our struggles, I remember that the story of Jesus’s birth is tied to the life of His earthly ancestors and the harsh reality of their everyday lives. He came to the world as the answer to the hopes of those who felt rejected, confused and full of fear.

The opening line of Jesus’s genealogy, “Abraham was the father of Isaac” (Matthew 1:2), compressed many years of Abraham’s family history (Genesis 12–21). Through many years, challenges and his own failures, he awaited the fulfilment of God’s covenant with him. Finally, God gave Abraham and Sarah their only and beloved son, Isaac, whose birth was a miracle and a clear sign of God’s provision.

But God’s promise was bigger than just a child. Through Isaac, Abraham was going to become a great nation and a blessing to all peoples on earth (Genesis 12:2–3; 17:21). A blessed life for nations and tribes, then and now, would be a life of justice and mutual respect, a life without wars and violence. The first step to that future would be to develop the character that can produce such a life. But how could Abraham know that his own life might be a good example of righteousness and faithfulness to God?

Abraham’s challenge is also our challenge today. If God sends us to witness to the blessings He prepared for people, how can they know that we are trustworthy? From Abraham and Isaac’s story, we learn, as their spiritual children, how God might build the needed character in our lives.

And so God gives Abraham a test – not about intercultural relationships, war ethics and peacebuilding but about his ability to trust the Lord who is the only source of justice, peace and love. What will Abraham do if asked to sacrifice his greatest dream and love in obedience to God?

Abraham!

Here I am.

Take your son, your only son, whom you love – Isaac – and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there. . . .

Go to the region of Moriah? It looks like God wanted to give Abraham three days of walking through the desert to struggle with challenging questions. Why did God turn out to be so cruel? Why did He acknowledge how painful it would be for Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son? Could Abraham still trust God? By the time Abraham and his son started to climb the mountain, he had come to some conclusions. Before he placed the heavy wood for the burnt offering on Isaac, he was ready for his son’s poignant question: “Father . . . where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” By faith, he replied, “God himself will provide the lamb . . . my son.”

This was the only correct answer that Abraham could give his son. He learned this truth all his life. This is what he has to pass on to millions of believers who need to discover this hope for themselves over thousands of years. Our current circumstances might be a version of our own “Abraham’s test” so that the faith of Abraham may become our own faith. We must know within our own hearts not only the happy ending of Isaac’s story but also the deeper meaning of the ancient saying *On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.*

Thinking about Jesus’s genealogy amid the war tragedies reminds me that God’s magnificent story unites all believers’ stories together. He provided His only Son – the perfect Lamb for our salvation. He loves us, and one day we will see the whole picture of God’s grand story.

DR. SERGIY TYMCHENKO *Ukraine*

Sergiy is a Langham Scholar and Langham-published author who serves as rector and president at the REALIS Christian Center in Kyiv.



Jacob

Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.

— Genesis 32:28



Jacob was no stranger to uncertainty. He fled his home as a young man, leaving behind a trail of deception and a brother who wanted him dead. On the way out, he had no plan, just fear and a stone for a pillow. Years later, he returned with wealth, family and position but still no clarity about how things would turn out. Would Esau greet him with a sword or a hug? Would everything unravel again?

The night before meeting Esau, Jacob was left alone. And in that loneliness, God came – not in comforting words or angelic light but in the form of a mysterious man who wrestled with him till daybreak. Jacob, the struggler, the deceiver, the survivor, meets the God who struggles with him. And when the sun rises, Jacob is changed. He walks away limping but with a new name: Israel, “the one who wrestles with God.” His identity is no longer defined by fear, schemes or the uncertainties ahead but by his encounter with the living God.

Centuries later, another story of fear and uncertainty unfolded. A child was born, Jesus, son of Mary. But even before His first birthday, He was being hunted. The ruler of the land, King Herod, sought to kill Him. And for a moment, the story seems fragile, just one sword away from ending in tragedy. We often forget how terrifying this must have felt for Mary and Joseph. If we didn’t know how the story ends, we would assume the worst. After all, what chance does a poor family with a newborn have against a king?

But the same God who knew Jacob’s full story, the beginning and the end, was also in control of Jesus’s life. He was not absent from the danger; He was present in it. In fact, the one being hunted was none other than God Himself, clothed in fragile flesh. And that child would one day provide not just physical escape but eternal salvation.

Jacob’s story and Jesus’s infancy reveal something profound about the nature of our God. He meets us in our fears, wrestles with us in the dark and walks with us when the future is uncertain. And even when everything seems to hang by a thread – our safety, our calling, our very lives – He remains sovereign.

In our context today, we know this tension well. Many people in Central Asia (and around the world) live under the cloud of uncertainty. The last few years have shown how quickly peace can be shattered, whether by war in Ukraine, conflict in Israel and Gaza or economic and political upheaval elsewhere. Entire nations have felt what Jacob must have felt: everything could change overnight.

But Jacob’s limp and Jesus’s escape remind us: God is not only the God of the mountaintop but also of the valley, not just of clarity but of chaos. He knows your story, beginning to end, even when you do not. And because He has walked through danger Himself, He is not asking us to trust Him blindly. He is asking us to trust Him deeply.

This Advent, may we learn to walk with a limp like Jacob, not because we are broken beyond hope but because we have encountered the God who wrestled with us and named us His own. May we remember the fragility of Jesus’s early days not as a sign of weakness but as proof that our Saviour stepped fully into our uncertainty. And may we find in Him the courage to trust, even when the way ahead is unclear.

He knows your story. And He is not done with it yet.

PROFESSOR IN CENTRAL ASIA

Details withheld for security reasons



Judah

*The sceptre will not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet . . .*

— Genesis 49:10



Graveyards provide history lessons. We understand this well in Poland, where numerous graveyards remind us of our troubled history – trouble from wrongs done to us and trouble from our own wrong choices. Moreover, in the town where I currently live and serve, families face complicated lives due especially to unemployment and addiction – issues arising from factors outside and within their control.

When you read the genealogy of Jesus, you might feel as though you're walking through an old graveyard – reading the tombstones of His ancestors, one name after another. Behind each name lies a story, and many of those stories are complicated. Jesus was born into a very problematic family.

As you stroll through this “graveyard,” one tombstone stands out, more magnificent than the others: Judah. It sounds familiar. Jesus came from the tribe of Judah. In the Book of Revelation, John describes Jesus as the Lamb on the throne and calls Him the Lion of the tribe of Judah. He is the true King.

Hearing this, you might assume Judah was a great hero or a strong leader. But as with every name in Jesus's genealogy, there's a story – and often a difficult one. Judah is no exception. Though born into a remarkable family, Judah never felt special. Through no fault of his own, he was the fourth son of Jacob and Leah, the wife Jacob loved less. The favoured place in the family was reserved for Joseph, the son of Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife.

Judah also made some terrible choices. It was his idea to sell his brother Joseph into slavery. We know little about his parenting, but two of his sons dishonoured God and died as a result. Later, Judah unknowingly slept with his daughter-in-law and made her pregnant. Then, unaware of her identity, he nearly had her executed. Judah had a knack for complicating life – his own and others'.

Yet even Judah had moments of reflection and transformation. The same man who sold Joseph into slavery eventually offered himself as a slave to rescue his

younger brother Benjamin. He was ready to sacrifice his own freedom to save his brother's life, and in this beautiful act, he pointed ahead to the king we all need.

Some time later, as Jacob sensed the end of his life approaching, he called his sons to bless them. Judah, fourth in line, likely waited with apprehension. The first three brothers received harsh words – Jacob spoke of their past sins rather than their future. Judah probably didn't expect much better.

But then came a surprise. Jacob referred to him as a lion, a creature indicating strength and royalty (Genesis 49:8–9). Judah the Lion? He could hardly believe his ears. As he tried to understand these words, his father continued:

*The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his.*

Jacob said that Judah's descendants would reign over God's people until the arrival of One who would rule the nations. Then he spoke something about a donkey and robes dipped in the blood of grapes (Genesis 49:10–12). It was overwhelming. Who is this King?

We know Him. He was born into the tribe of Judah, into a deeply flawed family. He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. The wine-red robes remind us of His blood. He will one day rule the nations and bring peace, but He first came to save people whose choices complicate lives.

This King – Jesus Christ – didn't just offer His life for others, like his ancestor Judah did for Benjamin. He actually gave it, sacrificing Himself for our salvation. Because of His grace, people like Judah – and like you and me – can begin again, no matter how troubled the past or how complicated life seems. Walking through the graveyard of Jesus's ancestors and reading the names on the tombstones is more than a history lesson. It's an invitation to be honest about our own troubled histories and receive the grace of Jesus to join the family of God.

ADAM SZUMOREK *Poland*

Adam Szumorek is a Langham-published author, preacher, writer and teaching pastor at TOMY Christian Fellowship in Tomaszów Mazowiecki, Poland. He teaches preaching in various contexts and currently serves as an adjunct professor of homiletics at the TCM International Institute.



Tamar

Judah recognized them and said, "She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah."

— Genesis 38:26



Surely, she cannot be counted among the matriarchs and, by extension, cannot participate in God's redemptive plan. Not only was she a foreigner, likely of Canaanite descent, but God also seemed notably absent from her story – except for His intervention in the deaths of her first husband, Er, who left her childless, and Onan, his brother and her second husband, who refused his levirate duty to preserve both the family line and a widow's future. Judah also failed to act honourably, neglecting the cause of his vulnerable daughter-in-law and deceased son. He sent Tamar back to her father's house under the pretense that he would give her his youngest son when he came of age, thus binding her to remain unmarried while having no real intention to fulfil his promise. Unmarried yet no longer a virgin daughter, she didn't belong in her father's household. And as a childless widow, she had no legal claim to her deceased husband's inheritance. As a result, Tamar was left in a state of profound social vulnerability and humiliation, a misfit within the established structures of her world.¹

Yet cultural expectations and the deceit of her father-in-law did not stop Tamar from taking a bold, life-risking stand against injustice. Aware that, according to Ancient Near Eastern customs, the father-in-law could assume the role of the *levir* in the absence of a brother-in-law, she seized her opportunity.² When she heard that Judah would attend a festival after mourning the death of his wife, she disguised herself and sat in the roadway. Not recognizing her and mistaking her for a prostitute, Judah asked to sleep with her. Later, when it was discovered that she was pregnant, Judah ordered that she be brought out to be burned. However, when she confronted him with his involvement in her situation, he publicly acknowledged, "She is more righteous than I" (Genesis 38:26). His confession affirmed that Tamar had acted justly not only on her own behalf but also for the sake of the family line, including Judah himself.

In her determination to see justice done, Tamar embodied the very character of God, who delights in kindness, justice and righteousness (Jeremiah 9:24)

and calls His people to stand with the vulnerable and oppressed (Isaiah 1:17). Tamar's brave action transformed a story marked by death and oppression into one of life and renewed hope. And she was afforded a rare and remarkable designation, given in Genesis only to Noah and Abraham: righteous. Moreover, Tamar became one of the matriarchs, playing a pivotal role in Israel's history and the unfolding of God's redemptive plan, and secured her place in the genealogy of Jesus.

By introducing Jesus with the long history of Israel's God with His people, Matthew highlighted that the decisive climax of this history – the establishment of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven – had broken in in the person of Jesus. His mission to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind and to release the oppressed (Luke 4:18–19) revealed what this kingdom looks like.

¹ Susan Niditch, "The Wronged Woman Righted: An Analysis of Genesis 38," *HTR* 72 (1950): 143–49.

² Nahum M. Sarna, Genesis 1–11, *JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 264.

PROFESSOR IN NORTH AFRICA

Details withheld for security reasons



Rahab

“... for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on earth below.”

— Joshua 2:11



The Gospel of Matthew includes four women from Israel’s history in Jesus’s genealogy – Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba – who were either Gentiles (Genesis 38:6; Joshua 2:1; Ruth 1:4) or associated with a Gentile (2 Samuel 11:3). These women are featured while four matriarchs – Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah – the wives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the patriarchs of Israel, are not. The Matthean genealogy signals that God’s redemptive mission has always extended beyond the Jewish people to include all nations (Matthew 28:19).

That’s a great message, but it raises a compelling question: why include Rahab, a Canaanite and a prostitute, in the genealogy? Should we not question her morality, due to her profession, or her integrity for deceiving the king of Jericho in order to protect Joshua’s spies? The biblical narrative about her does not primarily concern itself with her morality or deception. Rather, it highlights her faith. Indeed, the letter of James commends Rahab’s active faith alongside that of Abraham (James 2:25).

We read about her faith in action in the book of Joshua. In Joshua 2, Joshua sends two spies to Jericho ahead of battle. Rahab hides the spies as the king of Jericho sends men to capture them, then helps them escape by lowering them from a window using a rope. As she does, she secures a promise from the spies that her family will be spared during the coming invasion. In Joshua 6, when the walls of Jericho fall after the Israelites’ shouts and trumpet blasts, Joshua honours the promise, and Rahab and her family are spared.

This story communicates significant theological themes, including God’s grace to a Canaanite woman of disrepute and Israel’s triumph over its enemies. At the center of the narrative, however, stands one key emphasis: Rahab’s faith.

Her confession in Joshua 2:9–13 is one of the longest speeches by a woman in a biblical narrative. In it she declares, “...for the LORD your God is God in heaven

above and on earth below.” In so doing, Rahab acknowledges the covenant name of God – Yahweh, the God of Israel (cf. Exodus 6:2–8). In a polytheistic world where both heaven and earth were believed to be ruled by various pagan deities (e.g., Baal, “the lord of the earth”), Rahab affirms that the God of Israel is the sovereign Creator of all. Recognizing who Yahweh is, she knows that siding with Him is the right thing to do. Her lived-out faith leads not only to her personal deliverance but also to the salvation of her entire household. The author of Hebrews includes Rahab among the great examples of faith in a list that culminates in Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith (Hebrews 11:31; 12:2).

Rahab’s confession resonates deeply with Christians in Japan. In a culture steeped in animism and polytheism – where the concept of “the myriad gods” (a Japanese expression that literally translates as “eight million gods”) reflects the ubiquity of spiritual belief – confessing the exclusive name of the God of the Bible presents significant challenges. Yet, as with Rahab, recognizing the one true God can overcome immorality and compromised integrity and bring the grace of salvation not only to individuals but also to their families and communities. Japanese Christians are encouraged by Rahab’s story to hope that their own faith may be the conduit through which salvation reaches their families, friends, coworkers, classmates and the 99% of the population who do not yet know the Saviour.

We look ahead to Christmas, a season not merely of celebration but also of proclamation of the salvation by grace through faith for all that Jesus came to bring, even for Canaanite prostitutes. Therefore, let us, with boldness and conviction, proclaim and live out our faith in Him, echoing Rahab’s confession: “The LORD our God is God in heaven above and on earth below.”

DR. KEI HIRAMATSU *Japan*

Kei is the first Langham Scholar from Japan. He teaches New Testament at Central Bible College in Tokyo. Kei is married to Saki, and they have four daughters: Hanaka, Kaho, Rin and Ann.



Ruth

But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God."

— Ruth 1:16



The story of Ruth weaves into God's grand story of redemption – the larger story line of the Bible. A Moabite from outside Israel, at great personal cost, made a radical and brave choice to cut off ties with her past of unbelief and idolatry not only to serve Naomi, her mother-in-law, but also to commit to Naomi's God and people. Through this action of pledging herself to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Ruth found herself playing a role she couldn't have imagined.

When Boaz showed unexpected kindness to her and redeemed her, the resulting marriage and subsequent birth of Obed brought her into the ancestry of King David. And this new identity further culminated with a position in the lineage of David's greater Son, Jesus Christ, the divine kinsman-redeemer who brought unexpected kindness to us and the whole world. Ruth, the Moabite, is part of the bloodline of redemptive grace.

How beautiful that, embedded in the lineage of the Messianic seed, Ruth's story pictures the triumph of God's grace! Eyes of faith recognized Israel's God as the one true God and produced a piety of unswerving selfless devotion and daily self-giving love, despite difficult circumstances. The God she trusted showed her unexpected kindness that brought her redemption. And her story demonstrates how He advances His plan to redeem mankind through the faithful, everyday actions of His people as they manifest divine loyalty and friendship in their interactions with those around them. He redeems from the bondage of sin, brings the blessings of security and employs people in His kingdom purposes.

Our country, Kenya, has many widows, single mothers and orphans struck by hardship and adversity of varied nature. Many are ignored, taken advantage of and poverty stricken. Often, they feel helpless, dejected and abandoned. I believe the story of Ruth has important lessons for them – and all of us – as we wrestle with the challenges in our lives.

First, God, the Creator, made known through Israel's story and in Jesus, is the only sure foundation for every life. He orders life and dictates our circumstances of origin – where we live, what we eat and where we go, the continent, the country, the county and the family. Consequently, He wants us to view our day-to-day life within His bigger plan for us in His world, not bragging or complaining but trusting.

Second, His plan is to draw all mankind to Himself through the redeeming grace of the consummate Son of David, Jesus Christ, who fully pays the cost for our sin, adopts us into His family and bestows on us eternal security. His grace is for all people, Jew and Gentile alike. No person is too insignificant to be used for His glory regardless of their ethnic background, marital status or whether they are rich or poor. *All* who believe and faithfully get to the feet of Jesus are made heirs of salvation.

Third, He provides gifts of fellowship such as our marriages, our friendships, our families and communities. These demand commitments of time, money and talents in loving sacrifice, but He works through them to care for us *and* accomplish His purposes. Faithfully and thoughtfully showing love for others in sacrificial actions as the Spirit prompts, as Ruth did, could translate to great personal cost. Nonetheless, such acts have eternally significant value.

No matter how broken life feels, accessing Christ's redemptive love and His restoring grace is the only way to receive and experience wholeness. He embraces the brokenhearted and makes them part and parcel of the covenant people. Just as Ruth moved from emptiness to fullness by committing to Israel's God and living a life of loving sacrifice, so the personal initiative of the one who believes, trusts and reflects selfless love in his or her daily life brings meaning and purpose in connection with the eternal kingdom of Jesus. The love and grace He showed Ruth are available to us today.

REV. CANON DR. ROSEMARY MBOGO *Kenya*

Rosemary is a Langham-published author, teacher of the Word, counsellor, mentor and speaker. She is married to Rev. Eng. Sospeter Mbogo with whom she partners in counselling and marriage and family ministry. Rosemary and Sospeter have four children.



Jesse

The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.

— 1 Samuel 16:7



In *The Prayer of the Frog*, Anthony de Mello shares a conversation that may resonate uncomfortably with many South Asian families:

“How are your children?”

“Both of them are very well thanking you.”

“How old are they?”

“The doctor is three and the lawyer is five.”¹

Humorous? Yes! Honest? Perhaps painfully so. Too often, our children’s worth is measured by external markers of “success”: grades, trophies, talents, appearance or prospects for prestigious careers. But are we looking at and investing in the right things?

Jesse, who stands in the honoured line of Jesus’s genealogy, is best known as David’s father. When Samuel arrived in Bethlehem with a divine commission to anoint Israel’s next king, Jesse paraded seven sons before him. But why did he leave out David? Perhaps because David was the youngest and smallest or because tending sheep was considered a lowly occupation (1 Samuel 16:11).

Even the great prophet Samuel was misled by outward appearances. Seeing Eliab, Jesse’s firstborn, he thought, “Surely the LORD’s anointed stands here” (1 Samuel 16:6). Although the text does not explain *why* he thought so, God’s swift retort reveals that Samuel was seeing superficially, focussing on cosmetics rather than character: “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

In Jesse’s world – as in many South Asian cultures today – the firstborn enjoyed privilege and prominence, and boys were valued over girls. Jesse’s overlooking of David illustrates how easily we may dismiss those who don’t meet society’s standards of worth. Do we impose our ways of seeing on God rather than inviting God to shape how we see ourselves, others and our world? If

Samuel and Jesse had viewed this situation through God’s eyes, they might have glimpsed in this young shepherd boy what the Lord himself saw: “a man after his own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14). Will we choose to look beyond the labels assigned by society – or even by family – and see each individual as a precious image-bearer of God?

Jesus’s genealogy includes many flawed figures, and Jesse is no exception. Yet God’s faithfulness transcends human shortcomings. From this flawed father came David – the overlooked youngest son – who grew up to be Israel’s beloved shepherd-king. And from Jesse’s line came another child – Jesus – who defied the expectations of His time. Instead of the warrior king Israel expected and eagerly awaited, God sent a suffering servant who was ridiculed, rejected and, ultimately, crucified. But He was God’s servant, perfectly suited to fulfil God’s plan.

Our Advent hope reminds us that “from the stump of Jesse” (Isaiah 11:1) – a flawed father who failed to see his son right – came the King of kings, a Saviour who sees us with grace-filled eyes, not judging superficially or by outward and external standards but seeing the heart with true wisdom, justice and righteousness (Isaiah 11:2–4). Even when our families or societies fail to see us for who we are or value us only for what we produce or achieve, our perfect heavenly Father sees and values each one of us as beloved sons and daughters, precious and priceless, each with a unique purpose in His kingdom. And having freed us from the crushing weight of human expectations, our Lord now calls us to see others with the same grace-filled eyes.

¹ Anthony de Mello, *The Prayer of the Frog, Part 2*, <https://ia601306.us.archive.org/27/items/ThePrayerOfTheFrog-PartTwo/frog2.pdf>.

TANYA FERDINANDUSZ *Sri Lanka*

Tanya is the author of Marriage Matters and works with couples preparing for marriage. She writes regularly for Scripture Union UK (Encounter with God and Daily Bread) and is a freelance editor for Langham Partnership and the Asia Theological Association. Tanya lives in Sri Lanka with her husband, Roshan. They have two adult sons, Daniel and Joshua.



David

I have found David, son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.

— Acts 13:22



What does it mean to be “a man after God’s own heart”? This bold declaration was God’s verdict on David, the shepherd boy who became king. Some assume this means moral perfection, but the Bible shows David was both deeply flawed and remarkably devoted. What set him apart? It was his close identification with God’s purposes – his willingness to act as God’s representative, pursuing God’s will above all else, even in hardship and failure.

In ancient Israel, the throne belonged to God. Kings were God’s appointed stewards, reigning on His behalf. Saul, Israel’s first king, failed by acting impulsively and disobeying God’s commands, often motivated by fear and pride. David, however, demonstrated a heart aligned with God’s will – even when the path was difficult or costly. He ruled, worshipped, repented and served with humility, aware that he reigned not for himself but for God.

This was clear when David had the chance to kill Saul in a cave. Despite Saul pursuing him unjustly, David refused to harm Saul “. . . because he is the LORD’S anointed.” He chose restraint and faith in God’s timing over personal vengeance or ambition. It is a common temptation in Ethiopia to take matters of vengeance into one’s own hands, given the corruption that exists in our justice system. David’s example teaches us the importance of trusting God’s justice and prioritizing His will above our own agendas, even when it’s tempting to take control.

David’s heart for God was also expressed in passionate worship. When the Ark was brought to Jerusalem, David danced “with all his might” before the Lord, casting aside royal dignity. When criticized by his wife Michal, he replied, “I will celebrate before the LORD.” His uninhibited joy reminds us to worship God sincerely and boldly, regardless of others’ opinions or cultural expectations.

But David’s example extends beyond kings and spiritual leaders. All believers are called “a royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:9). Wherever we are – in the home,

workplace, ministry or community – we represent God. Being a person after God’s heart means living with humility and trust, allowing His priorities to shape our thoughts, desires and actions daily. This calling is lived out in the ordinary, yet vital, decisions of everyday life: telling the truth in a culture of falsehood, showing kindness instead of bitterness, choosing forgiveness over resentment and pursuing justice rather than exploiting others. These counter-cultural but faithful acts reveal God’s heart and submit us to His lordship in every sphere of life. Such obedience, even in seemingly small things, powerfully displays God’s kingdom through us.

David also teaches us how to face failure with humility and repentance. His life was marked by significant sins – most notably his adultery with Bathsheba and the arranged death of her husband Uriah. When confronted by the prophet Nathan, David did not make excuses but confessed, “I have sinned against the LORD.” Psalm 51 captures his broken and contrite heart crying out for God’s mercy and restoration. In an Ethiopian culture that often prizes appearances over integrity, David reminds us that God desires honest and humble hearts above all.

David’s faith also shines through in moments of great courage. When he faced Goliath, David did not rely on armour or human strength but on God’s power and faithfulness. “The battle is the LORD’S,” he declared, his confidence rooted in his knowledge of God’s past protection. Likewise, our courage grows as we deepen our trust in the God who fights for us.

Ultimately, David’s life points us to Jesus – the true King after God’s own heart. Jesus perfectly fulfilled God’s will, ruling not from a throne but from a cross. He embodied God’s justice, mercy and truth in every word and deed. Through the Spirit, He now shapes us to live like Him as God’s ambassadors. In every place we find ourselves, every act of obedience makes visible the kingdom – and heart – of the ascended King.

DR. TEKALIGN DUGUMA NEGEWO *Ethiopia*

Tekalign serves as head of the Biblical and Theological Studies Department at the Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology and is a research fellow at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. He is also the executive director of Onesimus Publisher in Addis Ababa, a publishing partner of Langham Literature. Tekalign is married to Kalkidan Hiruy, and they have two children, Nathaniya and Noah.



Bathsheba

David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife...

— Matthew 1:6



Devotional Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of life and the grace that meets us this Advent season. We come wounded and broken yet confident in your love. Like Bathsheba, we have known shame and silence, but you did not abandon her. You redeemed and repurposed her life. Thank you that your mercy runs deeper than our sin and your love stronger than our failures. We surrender our shame, receive your grace and trust your plan. You are our refuge, the lover of our souls. Do in each one of us what you did in her – redeem, restore and repurpose. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Meditation Hymn 1

Grace Greater Than Our Sin by Julia Harriette Johnston (1849–1919)

Marvellous grace of our loving Lord,
Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt!
Yonder on Calvary's mount outpoured,
There where the blood of the Lamb was spilt.

Reading through the Gospel of Matthew, one discovers a single line from Jesus's genealogy with a "powerful echo of grace" (in Kiswahili, *Mwangwi wa neema ito-shayo*). We read "whose mother had been Uriah's wife." The reference is to Bathsheba, whose story is superbly woven into the very line of the Messiah. Reflecting on the extended narrative in 2 Samuel 11–12 and 1 Kings 1–2 and linking this with Psalm 46:10; Psalm 126:5; Psalm 107:2; Romans 5:20 and Proverbs 19:21, it is obvious that, as a lady entangled in scandal, grief and loss, her life could have ended in shame. Surprisingly, in this Advent season, we are reminded that God's grace stepped in for Bathsheba. God did three things for her, and He is still ready to do these for us today: He redeems, He restores and He repurposes. Out of the shadows, Bathsheba became a powerful symbol of redemption as the mother of Solomon and an ancestor of Jesus. The worst moments can be met with divine

grace. Each one of our stories can be rewritten for God's glory. This is the heart of Advent: no one is too far gone. It is time to open your eyes, hearts and minds for the light of Christ to reach into the darkest places and reclaim what was lost. Come to God with your woundedness and brokenness and be ready for God's grace to overcome your sin and shame. Rest assured that, in God's kindness, tears turn to triumph.

Bathsheba's place in Christ's lineage speaks powerfully to us in Africa: God redeems broken stories and calls us to build families rooted in justice, dignity and mutual honour. Let's confront abuse, live with integrity and let grace rewrite our legacy beyond shame and harmful culture.

Take a moment of silence to let your heart connect with Bathsheba's journey, from scandal to salvation, from brokenness to grace. Reflect on her story:

1. From pain and loss came redemption.
2. God restores what's broken.
3. She became a woman of influence, helping crown Solomon.
4. Our past does not disqualify us.
5. In Advent, we remember that God often writes His greatest chapters after our hardest trials.

Meditation Hymn 2

Just as I Am by Charlotte Elliott (1789–1871)

Just as I am, though tossed about
With many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fightings and fears within, without,
O Lamb of God, I come!

REV. CANON DR. ALFRED SEBAHENE *Tanzania*

Alfred is a Langham Scholar and Langham-published author who serves as the head of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at St John's University of Tanzania in Dodoma. Alfred is also a priest in the Anglican Church, husband to Ruth Niyonzima and father of two children, Joan Niyonkuru and Samuel Niyitegeka.



Solomon

God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore.

— 1 Kings 4:29



For a long time, judges ruled over the Israelites after they entered the Promised Land. When they demanded a king, Samuel was flabbergasted, but God allowed it to happen. In His infinite wisdom, through the monarchy, He revealed the shortcomings of human kings and established the expectations for the one true king the people longed for.

God planned to bring the true king through David and promised just that in 2 Samuel 7:12–13. Solomon was the immediate fulfilment of the promise to establish David's offspring, and, as such, he carved a path for the ultimate fulfilment, Jesus, who would restore the throne of David and reign from it eternally. In the best traits of Solomon, we learn much about our true king, Jesus.

Solomon was known for his unparalleled wisdom. God honoured his humility and showered him with that wisdom (1 Kings 4:29–34). It wasn't innate. It was a divine gift granted to a human king. Jesus surpasses Solomon in wisdom (Matthew 12:42). He is the Word in the flesh who came from the Father full of truth (John 1:14) and, in His humanity, grew to be filled with wisdom (Luke 2:40).

Solomon appealed to God's covenant with David throughout his prayer at the temple dedication (1 Kings 8:23–26), interceding for God's people based on the relationship God established by grace. Jesus, too, taught His followers to pray based on the relationship He came to establish by grace: Our Father in heaven . . . (Matthew 6:9).

Solomon led the huge undertaking to build the temple in Jerusalem, where God would dwell among His people (1 Kings 6–8). Jesus refers to His body as the temple (John 2:19–21) because He is God dwelling among His people. And by His life, death and resurrection, He creates a new, spiritual temple, the church, indwelt by God the Holy Spirit (1 Peter 2:4–5).

In a deeper search for meaning, Solomon (in Ecclesiastes) explored the futility of life "under the sun," which led to fearing God by keeping His commandments. Jesus offers the ultimate answer to life's meaning, having eternal life through knowledge of the one true God whom Jesus makes known (John 1:18; 17:3).

Solomon's reign plays a pivotal role in the overarching biblical storyline. He rules over a time of peace, wisdom, prosperity and influence – a kind of "golden age" for Israel. Jesus is the Prince of Peace who will reign over a kingdom of peace, justice and righteousness that will have no end (Isaiah 9:6–7). His reign brings not just outward peace but true, everlasting reconciliation with God.

Of course, we know that Solomon did not finish well. His mixture of righteous and flawed living assures us that God uses the broken to bring about His purposes. Solomon gives glimpses of what God's kingdom is meant to be while warning of the failure of human kingship and the danger of drifting from the Lord while pointing to the King who is without sin and will never fail!

Jesus triumphs where Solomon failed. Being just, righteous and wise, Christ fulfils the parameters of monarchy that were set by God. He is the perfect King. Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts 2 concludes by asserting that Jesus Christ is resurrected and already on His throne at God's right hand, sending His Spirit to bring the power of the kingdom and everlasting life to all those on their journey of faith in Him.

In my country, where I live as a marginalized minority under leaders and rulers who do not rule following God's ways, I take great comfort in knowing that the descendant of Solomon is enthroned over God's kingdom and my service to Him is not in vain. May that hope find you, too, whatever rule or reign you find yourself under this Advent season. And may Jesus come again soon to restore broken relationships and fully establish His eternal Kingdom.

PREACHING COORDINATOR IN SOUTH ASIA

Details withheld for security reasons



Rehoboam



The king answered the people harshly. Rejecting the advice given him by the elders, he followed the advice of the young men . . .

— 1 Kings 12:13–14

Rehoboam appears in Jesus's genealogy in Matthew 1:7. He was the son of Solomon and initially reigned over Judah and Israel after Solomon's death. However, during his reign – and due to his actions – the kingdom was divided around the tenth century BC between Judah in the south and Israel in the north.

We can summarize his behaviour toward the people of God in these lines:

- He did not heed the counsel proposed to him by his father Solomon's advisors. Rather, as king, he listened to and acted on the advice of his young peers.
- He did not serve and help the people of Israel. Rather, he treated them roughly and harshly, imposing forced labor upon them to serve himself.
- He caused Israel to rebel against his government, dividing the kingdom.
- Under his watch, Judah did what was evil in the sight of the LORD.

Could it be, then, that Rehoboam appears in Jesus's genealogy to bring us hope, as the driving idea of these Advent devotionals intends? I don't think so. In fact, I think the opposite! The inclusion of Rehoboam among Jesus's ancestors is strictly due to kinship. In essence, Rehoboam is the antithesis of Jesus. And that's where I want to focus: on the contrast. Through the tension between one character and another, we find hope seeing the kind of king that Jesus is.

The Gospel of Luke presents Jesus in the same land that Rehoboam ruled almost a thousand years earlier, called Galilee in the first century (Luke 7:11–17). There, passing through the village of Nain, Jesus sees a funeral procession – a widowed mother on her way to bury her only son. The widow's situation of loss, vulnerability and social risk touches Jesus. He is deeply moved. Animated by that compassion – which is "suffering with" or "suffering alongside" – Jesus addresses the widow's grief with words of tenderness and comfort. Then He uses His authority to command resurrection and life to the deceased young man and restores him to his mother. Faced with this miracle, those present recognized great power wielded for good. "They were all filled with awe and praised God. 'A great prophet has appeared

among us,' they said. 'God has come to help his people'" (Luke 7:16).

The contrast between Jesus in first-century AD Palestine and Rehoboam in tenth-century BC Israel is striking:

- In the same land where Rehoboam delivered harsh words to God's people contrary to God's will, Jesus is recognized as a prophet who brings words and realities of abundant life in the name of *Yahweh*.
- In the same land where Rehoboam refused to act as a servant of the people, Jesus is recognized as the one who comes to help the people on behalf of God.
- In the same land where Rehoboam treated its inhabitants with brusqueness, inconsideration and coercion, Jesus treated them with compassion and tenderness in the power of God.
- In the same land where Rehoboam divided the kingdom, Jesus united the inhabitants of Palestine and neighbouring nations by inviting them to be part of God's kingdom through faith in Him.

What child is this we remember in Advent? It is this Jesus – attentive, empathetic, compassionate, gentle, acquainted with suffering, powerful in restoring life, worthy of our faith and our following. This is who draws near to us in Advent.

In Argentina and much of Latin America, daily life reflects the attitudes of Rehoboam. Governments serve the leaders, not the people; churches peddle religious wares rather than form communities of care and worship; policies pit against rather than pull together; and public words wound and manipulate to preserve power rather than heal and encourage to promote unity. On a continent whose rulers have lost credibility and do not provide inspiring leadership models, Jesus, the antithesis of Rehoboam, is who we need.

May we all encounter Jesus, the hope of Advent. Amen.

WILFREDO WEIGANDT *Argentina*

Wilfredo serves as the coordinator for Langham Preaching in the Southern Cone region of Latin America. He is a Langham-published author and develops native resources for Langham Preaching for all of Latin America.



Jehoshaphat

His heart was devoted to the ways of the LORD...

— 2 Chronicles 17:6



Like his father Asa, Jehoshaphat was a king of Judah who did what was right in the eyes of the LORD. Yet, like his father – and like all those in Jesus’s lineage – his belonging to God and intention to walk in His ways was not done with perfection. Life is often muddy and dirty, as Jehoshaphat’s life demonstrates.

Upon receiving an invitation from Ahab, the king of the northern kingdom of Israel, Jehoshaphat allied with him to attack Ramoth Gilead. Helping a wicked ruler is displeasing to God, but Jehoshaphat failed to recognize this. Still, because his heart was set on seeking God, God repeatedly delivered him from dangers. With this heart, he asked Ahab to “First seek the counsel of the LORD” (2 Chronicles 18:4). After Ahab gathered 400 men who prophesied success, Jehoshaphat could have left it there. Instead, he insisted on hearing from a “prophet of the LORD.” One faithful prophet outweighs 400 false ones; he truly wanted to seek God’s will.

Eventually, the true prophet Micaiah was summoned. Through Micaiah, God revealed that, if they chose to go against Ramoth Gilead, Ahab would die in battle. Ahab believed it and so disguised himself. This left Jehoshaphat – still dressed as king – exposed to grave danger. Yet on the battlefield, he was miraculously spared by the LORD’S intervention while Ahab was struck down by a random arrow.

Upon his return to Jerusalem, Jehoshaphat was rebuked by Jehu the seer for helping the wicked and loving those who hate the LORD (2 Chronicles 19:2). Jehu’s rebuke reflects a consistent biblical message: choosing to be the world’s friend makes oneself God’s enemy (James 4:4). But Jehoshaphat didn’t stubbornly defend himself, grow discouraged or get angry with God. Instead, he established a reign that drew the people back to the LORD, appointing judges and instructing them to uphold justice not for themselves or for man but “for the LORD” and in “the fear of the LORD” (2 Chronicles 19:6–9). God’s law must be enforced; the “fear of the LORD” must govern those in power. Only then is justice

neither delayed nor denied. Jehoshaphat’s kingdom became a fitting reflection of his name: “The LORD judges.”

After some time, Judah was attacked by the Moabites and Ammonites. This time, Jehoshaphat didn’t seek Israel’s help but turned to God for guidance, calling his people to seek the LORD with him. God answered his prayer, sending His servant to assure them that the battle was not theirs but God’s. Confident in the LORD, Jehoshaphat sent a choir to go ahead of the army. As praise rose, God delivered. The Valley of Beracah – once a gathering place for enemies – became a place of rescue and abundant plunder. Fear gave way to joy and blessing, and the surrounding kingdoms were filled with awe toward God (2 Chronicles 20:1–30).

Sadly, even after this great victory, Jehoshaphat again faltered, allying with Ahaziah (Ahab’s son) for a misguided maritime venture which a prophet condemned and the LORD thwarted (2 Chronicles 20:35–37).

A life walking before God is never easy. In Hong Kong, Christians struggle to discern God’s work and to know what faithfulness looks like day to day in a society full of ever-changing economic and political realities. However, we find hope through Jehoshaphat’s journey. He faltered, got back on the right track, experienced God deeply, led others to fear God and then faltered again. Through it all, the LORD saw him through, sometimes protecting, sometimes delivering and sometimes thwarting bad plans.

A struggling faith is still genuine faith. The God who acted in the past is still at work among His people. And the first advent of Jehoshaphat’s greater son, Jesus, gives us all the more reason to pursue hearts devoted to the ways of the LORD until He comes again.

REV. DR. JOSAPHAT C. TAM *Hong Kong*

Josaphat is a Langham Scholar who serves as the Vice President and Academic Dean of Evangel Seminary. He is also a pastor-elder at an evangelical church in Hong Kong (Tsing Ying Peace Evangelical Centre).



Hezekiah

Once more a remnant of the house of Judah will take root below and bear fruit above.

— Isaiah 37:31



In the days of King Hezekiah, the nation of Judah was under severe threat. The powerful Assyrian empire had surrounded Jerusalem, shouted threats and boasted of their victories. All the people in the country were very afraid, as if it were the end.

Cambodia and Thailand are currently having a border conflict with heavy weapons. Houses, schools, families and soldiers have been lost to gunfire. The noise of the guns, bombs and air force mixes with the cry of people not knowing if they can return home. Thai forces were armed with advanced weapons while Cambodian soldiers in the battlefield and civilians behind could only hope for wisdom from our leader.

King Hezekiah didn't panic. He didn't rush into political alliances or military action. He went into the temple, laid the enemy's threats before God and prayed. The only hope was to rely on God's protection and deliverance. The Lord responded with a message of hope that they would be protected and restored. Like the scripture says, crops would grow again. Families would rebuild. A faithful remnant would take root and bear fruit (Isaiah 37:31). Only the God of the universe, who has great compassion, would make this happen.

That moment in history and the current situation of Cambodia tell us something about the character of God. When His people are weak, when they are afraid, when they are surrounded by forces that are very strong for them, God is not absent. He is their protector. God is still at work and stands forever to restore their hopes.

With the same passion, the Lord Jesus has come to the world. Isaiah's prophecy of the remnant taking root and bearing fruit is ultimately fulfilled in Christ. Our celebration of the coming of Jesus reminds us how God stepped into human history through a child in Bethlehem. Jesus came not as a military leader but as

the Prince of Peace, the Saviour who rescues us not just from human enemies but from sin, fear and death itself.

The story of Hezekiah feels deeply relevant for Cambodia. We understand what it feels like to be surrounded by fear, by uncertainty, by the threat of the conflict. Our recent tensions with a neighbouring country have stirred anxiety in many hearts of our people. Once again, people were wondering, "Who will lead us? Who will protect us? Will we be safe?"

We long for a leader who is wise and just, someone who will defend the people and bring us peace. And while we pray for good governance and peace among the nations, we must think of the Redeemer who can bring us the deepest hope: Jesus the Christ. He is the one who does not lie, does not fail and does not use power for Himself. His rule brings healing; His leadership brings life.

The promise of the Lord in Isaiah 37 is still true to us these days. God allows His people to take root below and bear fruit above. It happens not because of our own strength but because of the passion of God's love for the world – and Cambodia. Thus, like Hezekiah, each time we pray to the Lord, we must remember that the hope has already entered the world. Jesus has come. He is with us, and He is the only King who can bring us true peace.

May we learn from Hezekiah, who turned to God in prayer, trusted in His promises and rested in His power. The true leader, the Lord God, who saved a nation with no army, still rescues today, for His heart is for us. To Him be the glory!

VA VACHNA *Cambodia*

Vachna is the pastor of Fellowship Church of Neak Loeung and the coordinator for Langham Preaching in Cambodia. He is married to Sakireyseyla Rath, and they have one child, Karuna.



Manasseh

In his distress he sought the favour of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors.

— 2 Chronicles 33:12



“I am not ashamed of you. You are my brother. I love you.” These were the words a young pastor I know spoke to his older brother who was caught by the police in a case involving drugs and prostitution. In Northeast India, where culture is mostly driven by shame and honour, this affirmation was a huge act of love and sacrifice. It involved some risk to his reputation as a pastor, too. But these words of faith, hope and love bore good fruits in the life of his wayward brother.

The older brother honoured the risk taken by his brother and never looked back. He repented. His life was transformed. For many years, he lived a productive life with his family. Sadly, years of substance abuse took a toll on his body, and he passed away at an early age. But he died happy and confident in his faith.

This story reminds me of King Manasseh, one of Jesus’s ancestors. Manasseh was not just the longest ruling king in Judah (he reigned for fifty-five years), but he was also among the most wicked kings. From sacrificing his own son to building altars for Baal worship and shedding innocent blood in Jerusalem, he did more evil than the neighbouring pagan nations whom the Lord destroyed because of their sins. Even though God kept calling out to him, he ignored the voice of God (2 Chronicles 33:10). What a great sinner Manasseh was! He deserved punishment for his sins and for leading an entire nation to sin against God.

But the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He called out to Manasseh again, this time bringing him down to the pits through the brutally ruthless Assyrian king.

God often brings people down to the pits to grab their attention and bring them to repentance. He rescued King David from the pits many times. He pulled Joseph from the pit of despair. He pulled Daniel’s friends from the pit of fire. He snatched Paul from the pit of self-righteousness. He helped Moses out of the pit of self-pity and an inferiority complex. He rescued the pastor’s brother from the

pit of shame and guilt. Yes, He can even save someone as evil as Manasseh. That is exactly why God sent His beloved son Jesus into the world – to save people from their sins, shame and guilt.

What God seeks is a repentant heart. Repentance becomes difficult when our hearts are hardened by power and arrogance or numbed by wealth and fame. God may have to bring a difficult storm to bring us back to Himself, just like He did to Manasseh. The turning point in Manasseh’s story is in 2 Chronicles 33:12: “In his distress he sought the favour of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors.”

As I ponder Manasseh’s story, three lessons stand out. First, God in His sovereign grace reveals Himself to us so that we might respond in repentance, faith and submission to Him. God’s revelation demands a human response. Second, leadership is important. Through the evil life of one king, the whole nation was led astray. But through his repentance and obedience, the entire nation was brought back to the right path. We experience this in Nagaland, where all political leaders are professing Christians yet there is a high level of corruption in the government, with devastating consequences. We need to raise up and elect godly leaders. Third, we are loved and accepted by God as His new family. This great privilege must motivate us to walk in obedience.

Why is Manasseh mentioned in Jesus’s genealogy? I believe Manasseh is included in Jesus’s genealogy to show us God’s great mercy and demonstrate for us what Jesus came to give, namely forgiveness, salvation and restoration. Jesus is not ashamed to call Manasseh His family. He loves him.

PASTOR IN SOUTH ASIA

Details withheld for security reasons



Josiah

In the eighth year of his reign, while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David.

— 2 Chronicles 34:3



King Josiah was a descendant of the famous King Hezekiah. He led one of the greatest revivals among God's people since King Solomon's days despite facing significant challenges and coming to power at age eight. At that time, the northern kingdom of Israel had been destroyed by Assyria, and the southern kingdom faced threats from Egypt. His grandfather, King Manasseh, did much evil in the eyes of the Lord and had aroused the Lord's anger by introducing idols and sacrificing children. His father, Amon, also served idols and ruled for only two years before his death (2 Chronicles 33:2–6, 21–23).

How could Josiah remain unaffected in such a chaotic world? Surrounded by pagan influences, what brought the dramatic change? Josiah chose to seek the Lord. The Bible tells us that "while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David." It seems that, as he did so, he came to love the Lord and value the things the Lord values. Ultimately, he was willing to lead all of Israel back to the Lord, paying the price to establish the Lord's kingdom.

This should not surprise us. It's a principle we see throughout the Scriptures, from King David's experience reflected in Psalm 34 to Isaiah's great invitation in Isaiah 55 (esp. verse 6) and Jesus's instruction in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:33). When we seek the Lord and value the things of the Lord, we find Him, He helps us and He brings about the goodness of His kingdom as is His desire.

However, patience and perseverance are often required as we seek the Lord and try to advance His kingdom, as Josiah's story demonstrates. It wasn't until the twelfth year of his reign that he began to take action. At that time, "he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of high places, Asherah poles, and idols" (2 Chronicles 34:3). Why didn't Josiah take immediate action to cleanse Jerusalem? Why wait twelve years? We don't know for sure. It may be that at age twenty Josiah was considered an adult and thus afforded more credibility. It is also likely

that he faced significant opposition. Under Manasseh, Judah had practised idol worship for eighty years. During that time, society became familiar with these customs, and festivals were established around them. The habits of idol worship were deeply intertwined with the political, economic and social fabric of the nation. Therefore, reform required great courage, which undoubtedly grew as Josiah diligently sought the Lord.

Indeed, Josiah's courage is shown in that his reformation did not limit itself to Jerusalem. He extended his influence to "the towns of Manasseh, Ephraim, and Simeon, as far as Naphtali, and in the ruins around them" (2 Chronicles 34:6–7). This was a risky move that could have offended Assyria. Yet Josiah boldly pursued the Lord's will and the honour of the Lord he was seeking.

Many of us find ourselves in similarly challenging circumstances – facing family pressure because of our faith, hoping to change workplace culture or confronting corruption in our city. In Hong Kong, conflicts over differing perspectives on social issues divide families and churches. Increased migration in recent years also challenges our churches as they struggle to retain young people and to convey gospel hope that resonates in the lives of those who choose to stay. In such situations, we feel powerless and yearn for God's intervention. The story of King Josiah encourages us that his success stemmed from a simple heart seeking the Lord. Through actively participating in God's work, we, too, gain a deeper understanding of Him and the strength to face our challenges. Josiah may not have envisioned the extent of his influence at eight, but God worked through him, resulting in an impact beyond imagination.

This Advent, let us all cultivate a heart focused on seeking the Lord and trust in the words of the psalmist: "My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me" (Psalm 63:8 ESV).

DR. YI-SANG PATRICK CHAN *Hong Kong*

Yi-Sang is the General Secretary for the Hong Kong Campus Crusade for Christ. He also teaches at East Asia School of Theology (Singapore) and Evangel Seminary (Hong Kong). He is married to Emily Lai, and they have three children.



Zerubbabel

"I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel," declares the LORD, "and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you."

— Haggai 2:23



Probably one of the most neglected texts for readers of the New Testament is the genealogy of Jesus Christ in Matthew. Yet, for the attentive reader, the text contains, first, the trajectory of the entire gospel (Matthew 1:1), namely, the truth that Jesus Christ is the heir promised to David and the one through whom the promise made to Abraham becomes reality. Second, the text contains a powerful witness to the revelation of God in the micro-history of His people. Matthew 1:2–6 lists people who were part of the *formation* history, by His mercy, that culminates with the people of God established as a kingdom. Matthew 1:7–11 lists people who were part of the *crisis* history that, because of His righteousness, led to God's judgement and culminates with the exile in Babylon. Finally, Matthew 1:12–17 lists people who were part of the *restoration* history, through God's faithfulness, that culminates in the incarnation of the Son of God in Jesus Christ. In fact, the genealogy of Matthew 1, together with the stories of its people, shows history is a space not only for human experience but also for God's revelation of His mercy, justice and faithfulness.

For Christians in Romania, a society enslaved for decades in communist materialism and denials of God's involvement in the world, this is an essential encouragement. God's work in history fuels our endeavours to reintroduce the spiritual dimensions of living to our lives, families, neighbours, communities and institutions.

Biblical details are sparse concerning the last group of people in the genealogy, but Zerubbabel's story has some details we can learn from. First, he is portrayed as royal. In Haggai 1:1 and 2:2, he is addressed as the governor of Judah. He is not the king, as God's people were under foreign rule in his day. But Haggai, the LORD's prophet, addresses the kingly and high priestly lines as part of God's remnant with instructions and then with covenantal promises (2:20) to assure that He's not yet done with His people as He had constituted them. Listed as an ancestor of the Lord Jesus Christ, Zerubbabel reminds us that God's promises to David and the royal line are still valid.

Zerubbabel is not only an ancestor of Jesus but also His archetype. He prefigures Jesus in his obedience to the Word of God. Zerubbabel was a person to whom the LORD spoke His Word and who obeyed the Word of God spoken to him, a person whose spirit was stirred up by the LORD and thus did the LORD's work in the LORD's power (Haggai 1:12, 14; Zechariah 4:6–10). Jesus testified that He came to do only what was the Father's will (John 6:38; Philippians 2:8) and that the Spirit was upon Him to bring about the realities of God's kingdom (Luke 4:18–21).

Zerubbabel also prefigures Jesus as a faithful servant in the house of God. He was instrumental in the rebuilding of the altar for burnt offerings in the house of God so that access to God in daily worship could be restored (Ezra 3:1–6). In this, he also points to Jesus, whose death on the altar of the cross opened access to the presence of God for all who are His by faith (Mark 15:38; Hebrews 10:19–22).

Looking at these three facets of Zerubbabel's story, we should ask two important questions: How great is our Lord Jesus, the descendant of Zerubbabel? And how can we be part of His work in history? For we, too, as Zerubbabel, have the honour to be part of the people of God by grace through faith, to be called and instructed by His Word and to participate in worshipping God as living sacrifices. When we unite the honour to be written in God's book of life with the responsibility of obedience and worship in everyday life, that will transform our lives into signposts of the Kingdom of God and conduits of His work in history.

DR. DANIEL G. OPREAN *Romania*

Dani is a Langham Scholar who serves as an associate professor on the faculty of Humanistic and Social Studies at "Aurel Vlaicu" University in Arad. He teaches historical theology, systematic theology, apologetics, pastoral theology, Christian thought and ecclesiology.



Joseph

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

— Matthew 1:24



Throughout our lives, we make countless decisions – some monumental, others seemingly minor. The major ones shape our future, while the smaller choices impact our daily lives. Among the most profound decisions we face are these: Whom will we serve as our God? Whom will we marry, if called to marriage? What path will we follow in our vocation? And many others. We all try to make such decisions based on whatever trustworthy information we have.

Joseph, the son of Jacob and the earthly, adoptive father of Jesus, found himself confronted with one of life's most pivotal decisions. He was betrothed to Mary, but when he discovered that she was pregnant, he was faced with a crisis. In first-century Jewish culture, betrothal was a legally binding agreement – similar in weight to marriage today. In the honour-shame society of ancient Palestine – still resonant today in many Asian cultures, including my own – Joseph would have felt not only heartbreak but also public disgrace.

According to Jewish law, Mary could have been stoned for perceived infidelity (Deuteronomy 22:23–24). Yet Joseph, described as a righteous man, chose mercy over judgement. He resolved to divorce her quietly to shield her from shame. But just as he was considering this, God intervened. An angel appeared to him in a dream and said, “Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife.”

Joseph could have disregarded the divine message. Yet Scripture tells us, “When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.” This act of obedience, contrary to his original plan and cultural expectations, demonstrates his trust in God and confirms the Bible's testimony about him: he was a righteous man. The dramatic shift in Joseph's decision came from listening to God and fully trusting His word. His obedience wasn't passive compliance – it was active faith. Joseph not only heard God's voice, he believed in God's guidance and acted on it. This is a great picture of what righteous decision-making looks like.

Joseph is mentioned two more times in the next chapter (Matthew 2:13–15, 19–23), and each time, he listens and trusts God, which becomes evident through his obedience. Obedience was not the easy path, but it was the faithful one. In choosing it, Joseph was entrusted with the extraordinary role of raising the Son of God. Through his faithfulness, he played a vital role in fulfilling God's redemptive plan.

We often claim to trust God, yet it is our obedience that truly reveals whether that claim is genuine. Obedience is rarely convenient, but it is always significant. It advances His purposes and ultimately brings glory to His name.

Joseph's obedience prefigures that of his foster son, Jesus Christ, who “became obedient to death – even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8). Jesus's ultimate obedience advanced God's purposes and brought glory to His name by securing the reconciliation of humanity with God.

Throughout my life, I have faced and made many decisions – some wise, others less so. The best decisions have always been grounded in prayer, guided by Scripture and aligned with God's will – trusting Him whose obedience brought me salvation. More than twenty-eight years ago, I married Virginia – but only after years of prayer and waiting on God. It remains one of the most important and blessed decisions of my life. While our journey has included challenges, the God who brought us together has faithfully sustained us through each one.

Praise the Lord for the wisdom He delights to give to guide our steps! One day, each of us will stand before the judgement seat of Christ to give an account for what we have done (2 Corinthians 5:10). My deepest desire is that, like Joseph, I will be found among those who have listened to God and trusted Him – in other words, “did what the Lord had commanded.”

PUBLISHER IN SOUTH ASIA

Details withheld for security reasons



Mary

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."

— Luke 1:38



In 2025, the seminary where I serve had to cancel our in-person Doctor of Ministry classes in Cairo. Our Syrian and Lebanese students could not travel due to Israel's bombing of their nations and the closing of airspace. The bombing and war interrupted our lives and taught us the value of flexibility and resilience.

As I meditate this year on Christ's incarnation, I find myself reflecting on Mary, the mother of Jesus. She deserves the first prize for flexibility and resilience. Throughout her life, Mary surrendered her own plans and embraced unexpected ones – plans that, in time, revealed themselves to be God's divine design, established before creation. In doing so, she became a heroine in the story of God's redemption.

Mary abandoned a young woman's dream of a joyful wedding celebration surrounded by family, friends, food and dancing. Instead, her wedding had to be rushed and quiet, avoiding attention and gossip after she was found to be pregnant, even though she had not known a man.

Mary abandoned the comfort of having her mother nearby during childbirth. Due to Caesar's census decree, she found herself giving birth for the first time in Bethlehem – far from home, mother and familiar support.

She abandoned her expectation to receive well-reputed relatives and neighbours to celebrate her firstborn son – a son who, being male, brought "double joy" under Jewish law. Instead, her visitors were shepherds – men considered ceremonially unclean by the Law of Moses, arriving directly from the fields in their work clothes. Later, she welcomed Magi – Gentile stargazers from the East who were seen by Jews as suspicious figures according to the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Mary abandoned her desire to raise her son in her Jewish community in Nazareth. Instead, she and Joseph fled as refugees to Egypt, a foreign land with

a pagan culture and unfamiliar language. They obeyed the angel's command to leave though the angel did not say whether the move would be temporary or permanent. They fled amidst the lament and mourning of many parents burying their innocent baby boys.

The Bible calls Mary "blessed" and "highly favoured." For two thousand years, every generation has honoured her – not only because she was chosen to bear the Son of God but also because she continually believed in God's goodness, even when it came wrapped in confusion, fear or pain. The anthem of her life was "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled." Mary, the blessed, submitted to God's will despite the repeated piercing of her soul by sorrow and uncertainty.

It is worth noting that, in Scripture, the sword is not only a symbol of pain. Paul speaks of the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. Each time sorrow pierced Mary's heart, her response was not despair but pondering all these things in her heart. She was anchored in God's Word *in her heart*. How do we know? Because when Mary visited Elizabeth, she burst into a song – just ten verses long yet filled with over thirty references to Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, 2 Samuel and the Song of Hannah. Out of the abundance of her heart, her mouth spoke the Word of God.

God's grace-filled guidance in Mary's life challenges us to examine our own faith in God's good sovereignty that sometimes calls us to abandon our own plans. The question is this: How willing are we to surrender our dreams and plans for God's alternative plans – plans that often lead us down difficult roads but also into the heart of His story of redemption?

Likewise, how deeply do our hearts store and respond to God's Word – the sword of the Spirit? Every time pain pierces our hearts like a sword, God's Word has the power to fill the cracks with treasures, not by our strength but by the mercy of the God who is at work in us.

PROFESSOR AND AUTHOR IN NORTH AFRICA

Details withheld for security reasons



God

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.

— John 1:14



African peoples have always felt a closeness to the divine while also experiencing a sense of distance from God. They sense a connection to the spiritual realm through nature, myths and stories, but these tales often recount how God withdrew from them because of their rebellion. Despite rebelling against God, they searched within creation and in vain for the salvation only He can provide. They filled the relational gap with idols, which offered no real hope of salvation and instead left a deep longing and an unspeakable ache for communion with a Creator who walks among them, defeats death for them, shares their meals, dispels their darkness and heals their wounds. For a long time, Africans have yearned for God to resolve their rebellion and to build His mud-and-wattle hut among them. We've yearned for a God who is near.

Now, I said I am telling a story about Africans. And I am. But Jews also had this longing for a saving God who is close to His people. John's Gospel describes the coming of this God to His people as a fulfilment of Jewish expectations. The context in which John the Evangelist writes is one filled with hope among God's people for the arrival of their God and His Messiah. See, for instance, John 1:19–25. The Jews asked John the Baptist if he was the expected Messiah (*Christ* in Greek), or Elijah (who would prepare the way for their Lord, cf. Malachi 3:1–5), or the Prophet (a Moses-like figure who would save God's people from their bondage, cf. Deuteronomy 18:15–19). The Baptist's response acknowledges this expectation, for he is the voice in the wilderness, charged with preparing the coming Lord's way as foretold in Isaiah 40:3. Israel longed for God to resolve their rebellion and pitch His tent among them. They desired a God who is near.

Every human heart longs for communion with God. We desire His nearness. We all yearn to be fully known and genuinely loved in a world free from sin and sickness, where death and evil hold no sway. We crave a God who is so close that all our struggles are lifted. We long for a salvation that only the God who is near can provide.

John 1 tells us how Jesus embodies and satisfies our longing. He is the God we long for, a God who understands our deep desires because He is human like us. John insists that the Word that was with God shares God's identity as one who created all things (1:1–3). He is the light that dispels human darkness and ignorance of Him (1:4, 9), despite being rejected by the very people He made (1:10–11). This Word, Jesus, resolved our rebellion by becoming human and dying our death as a sacrificial lamb (1:29) while pitching His tent among us (1:14). In Jesus, God dwells with His people.

Christmas tells the story of how God has lived among us as one of us, our guest and friend. Christmas is God's story, written on the canvas of our history, recounting how the supreme Creator became one of His people, humble and walking among them on foot, sharing their meals, dispelling their darkness and healing their hurts. Christmas is a scandal of significant proportions that sings a strangely comforting tune of the God who has made His home among those who rebelliously rejected His presence.

The yearning Africans and Jews have for a God who "dwells with" and saves is a universal need answered for all in the story of Christmas. As we share meals with family and friends during the Advent season, let us reflect on how Jesus's coming satisfies our longings for death's defeat, moral darkness to be dispelled, healing of our brokenness and fellowship with God.

We have a God who is near.

DR. JOSEPH BYAMUKAMA *Uganda*

Joseph is a Langham Scholar who serves as the lead pastor at the Fount Church in Kampala, Uganda, and is the founder and team leader of Veracity Fount. He teaches the Gospels at Nairobi Institute of Reformed Theology. Joseph is married to Daphne, and they have two sons.



Wisdom from the Global Church:

Where these devotionals were written



About Langham

Our Vision:

Langham Partnership exists to see Christians in the Majority World maturing in Christ through the ministry of church leaders who faithfully teach God's Word.

Our Mission:

To strengthen the ministry of the Word of God through

1. Langham Scholars

Multiplying biblically faithful theological leaders

2. Langham Literature

Accelerating the creation and distribution of evangelical literature

3. Langham Preaching

Nurturing national movements for training in biblical preaching

The Langham Logic



If God wants His people to grow up, which He does, and if they grow by the Word of God, which they do, and if the Word of God comes to them mainly through preaching, which it does, then the logical question to ask is: what can we do to raise the standard of biblical preaching?

— JOHN STOTT, LANGHAM FOUNDER

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Our approach to walking with the global church reflects the heart of our founder, John Stott.

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We are invited into countries and listen as local leaders identify the most pressing issues in their cultures.

WE EQUIP LOCAL LEADERS

Through help from partners like you, we equip indigenous pastors, publishers and writers, enabling them to multiply disciples in their nations.

WE FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

Together we help churches become deeply rooted in God's Word so they can provide biblical solutions that address local issues.

Where We Work:

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Langham Partnership focusses the resources God provides in contexts where the work of God's Kingdom is characterized by

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Where God's people are under threat – due to religious hostility and violence or from regional conflicts and civil wars.

POTENTIAL

Where God's people are at the tipping point – about to influence surrounding peoples or where strengthening the ministry of God's Word could firmly establish the health, maturity and unity of the emerging church in that region.



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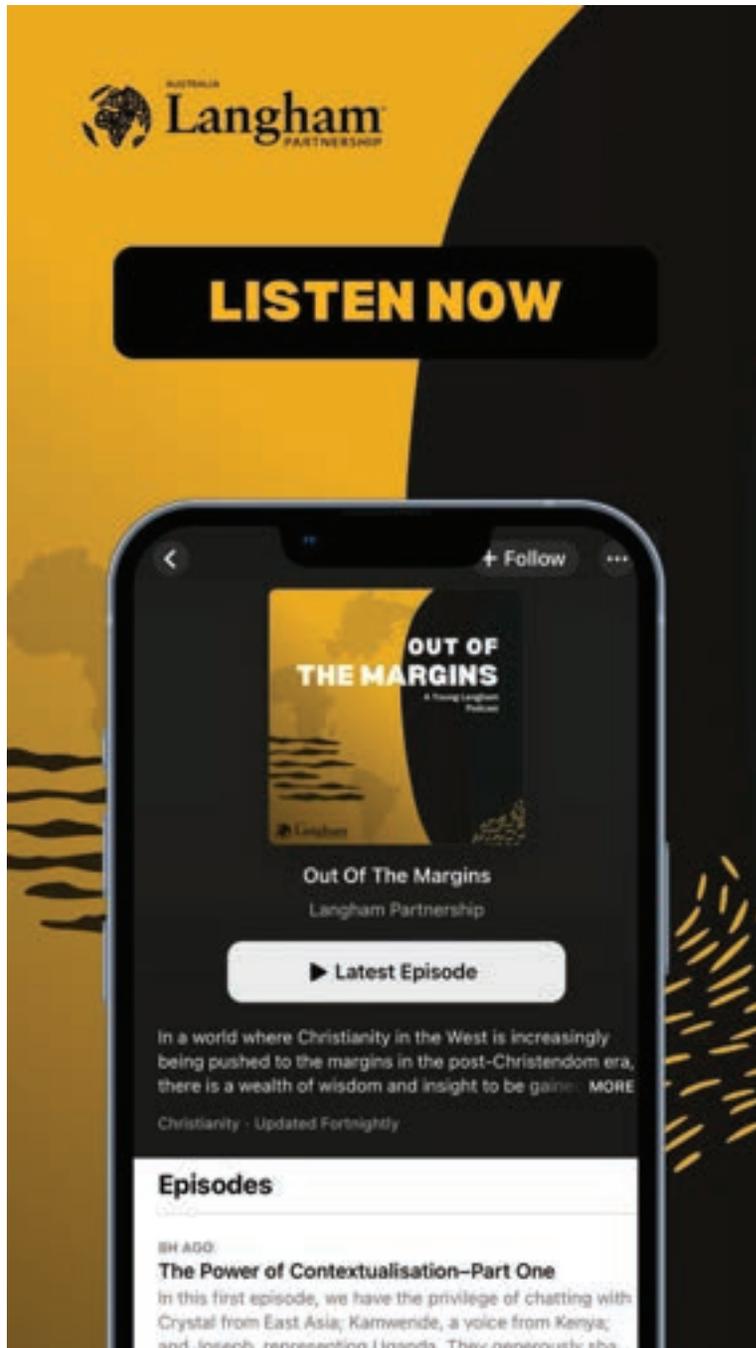
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We must be global Christians with a global vision because our God is a global God.

— JOHN STOTT, LANGHAM FOUNDER

“You won’t understand Jesus,” Matthew begins, “unless you see Him as the climax of this story, the story of God and Israel. This is the story, pinpointed through the names of all these historical people, that makes sense of who Jesus is and why He came.” This – the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Messiah Jesus – is the central act of the great drama of scripture, but we need all that went before to understand it.

— CHRIS WRIGHT, INTERNATIONAL AMBASSADOR
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PO Box 530 Springwood NSW 2777

Email: australia@langham.org

ABN: 73 876 837 131 ACN: 655 246 610