

PART 1

PREPARING FOR CHRISTMAS



DAY 1: EARTH STOOD HARD AS IRON

JESUS: SPRING IN OUR WINTER

Read: Ephesians 2:1-10

If I had a penny for every time my former self rolled her eyes at poor Christina Rossetti over this carol, I would be able to make a lifetime's supply of figgy pudding. 'Oh, snow had fallen snow on snow, had it?' I'd cry, 'Yuletide in Bethlehem, was it!? Frosty wind made moan, did it? Mary and Joseph warmed themselves with pumpkin lattes, did they?!' I think a little differently now.

Just to be clear, I don't think Mary and Joseph were middle-class Westerners on the way to a frosty scene in Bethlehem, Yorkshire. But my older self is willing to give Tina the benefit of the doubt. Maybe it's because I like to consider her a writer pal, but I am willing to allow for the possibility that she is writing in metaphor. I've heard that writers enjoy that kind of thing.

When Isaiah says, 'And they will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish. And they will be thrust into thick darkness' (Isa. 8:22), he's speaking metaphorically. The land of Judah is not prone to

bouts of thick darkness any more than it is inclined to lie beneath eighteen layers of snow, but both metaphors are ways of describing the state of things before Jesus arrives.

I love Rossetti's imagery because it reminds me that Jesus came to a world that was hard and cold and impenetrable, and bleak and bleak and bleak. But in the same way He brought light to darkness, He brought warmth to coldness. It reminds me that, even now, He comes to situations and lives and hearts that are as hard as iron, and that His eyes are like flames of fire that melt and refine and warm and revive.

And it reminds me of the work He did in my heart. I had heard the gospel several hundred times before I *heard* the gospel. My heart stood hard as iron; my spirit was like a stone. I wanted to love God but didn't – and couldn't. In Paul's words, I was dead in my sin. In Wesley's words, 'Long my imprisoned spirit lay.' In Rossetti's words, 'Snow had fallen – snow on snow, snow on snow.'

I was buried in winter. And it was nothing in me that brought about spring. God made His light shine in my spirit and made His sun rise in my mind and the flames of joy blaze in a heart that had been solid ice.

I had grown up in a Christian home and had gone to church and to youth groups and even read my Bible (angrily) – but none of that made it click. God still felt distant, unknowable; my heart still felt cold, dead. Why was it the 100th time I heard the gospel that I loved it, clung to it, heard Jesus calling my name in it? Why not the 1st, or the 99th, or the 555th!? I don't know – but I know that one time, in the bleak midwinter, the sun came up. And it wasn't

my doing. I'd sooner be able to dig myself out from under eighteen layers of snow. I was dead in my sin, but God made me alive with Christ. God did it!

This is what Rosetti celebrates: in the bleak midwinter, where we are powerless, helpless, desperate, and dead, Jesus comes. God does it!

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them light has
shined. (Isa. 9:2)*

**Jesus, Spring in our Winter: as You have before,
once again, bring new life where there's death,
beauty where there is brokenness, and warmth
to our cold hearts.**

DAY 2: FAR AS THE CURSE IS FOUND

JESUS: THE GARDENER

Read: Psalm 24

*No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.*

The birth of Jesus isn't only a story about a remarkable man who grew up and saved his people. It is that. But at Christmas, Christians celebrate something far more all-encompassing. Christmas is a celebration that when Jesus was born, a redeemer was born. The Lord of glory entered a world burdened by a curse so He could redeem it. All of it!

The first man, Adam, made choices that brought a curse: his sin led to death and suffering and conflict. Every human since has made choices that have brought the same: destruction, frustration, isolation, toil, brokenness. All of nature groans under the brutal rule of a humanity whose kingdom is a kingdom of death.

But Jesus is born as the new first man: He is born of a woman to redeem those born of women, and to redeem creation that yearns for a better gardener to tend it! Jesus' birth bears witness: so far, humanity has failed. But it also says: there is new hope! God with us. God born a man. God of God, God's Son: Jesus.

Joyfully, Jesus gets being human right: from His first cry to His last – on a Roman cross – He loves, relies on, and lives for the glory of the God of heaven, just as humanity was made to do. Jesus brings blessing to the world, instead of a curse. Jesus is humanity who can ascend the hill of the Lord, with clean hands and a pure heart, the King of glory, mighty in the battle for righteousness from beginning to end.

He started to redeem humanity when He became humanity: He entered the world He had founded, He embodied what it is to be truly human, and then absorbed the curse to redeem us. Now, He sits at the right hand of the Father: the Son of Man, the Son of God, the Righteous One. He is the Redeemer: He has redeemed humanity, He has redeemed the curse and He is making all things new.

So, whatever seeming irredeemables we are currently facing in our lives, whatever the impenetrable knots of thistles and thorns may be, whatever the crushing millstones of oppression and captivity may be, whatever seems most tightly shrouded in unbreakable darkness – that is where the Redeemer has set His sights. He comes to make His blessings flow. Where? As far as the curse is found.

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written: ‘Cursed is anyone who is hanged on a tree’ – so that the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles... (Gal. 3:13, 14)

Lord Jesus, thank You that there is no part of creation that You will not redeem, no ground too hard for You to bring a harvest from it, no thistles too entangled for You to weed out and replace with beautiful blossom, no seed that has been buried that won't bloom. Help us believe it. Amen.





DAY 3: LET NOTHING YOU DISMAY!

JESUS: SON OF JOSEPH

Read: Matthew 1

When we meet Joseph, part-way through the first chapter of the New Testament, he cannot be having a good time. He has just found out that the woman he promised to marry is pregnant, and that the child is not his. He evidently cares deeply for Mary, because he doesn't want to disgrace her with a big, messy divorce, but, painful as it may be, ending the engagement seems essential.

If anyone is dismayed, surely it's Joseph, searching for a dignified way forward amid weighty disappointment and distress.

When the angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream, the first words spoken are, 'Joseph, son of David.' God speaks to Joseph in his dismay, and says, 'I know who you are.' By this point in Matthew, the reader knows who Joseph is! We've seen that the legal line of Jesus is traced through Joseph, through lines of glory and of suffering; we've seen the shame and the honor in it; we've seen that Jesus will be the son of Abraham, and the son of David. We may have

read the genealogy and feel the writer's excitement, but Joseph hasn't.

But the angel of the Lord says, 'Joseph, son of David.' He reminds Joseph that there is more than what he sees right now. He is a descendent of Israel's greatest King, part of the family line that the promised Messiah would come from. Joseph may be a poor carpenter in some backwater, but he is also in the royal line.

The Lord tells Joseph that Mary's child is conceived of the Holy Spirit, that He will be called Immanuel and named Jesus. I love that Joseph isn't just told 'take Mary as your wife', but he is reassured, 'do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.' Because of course he was afraid!

It's hard to imagine how hard it would have been for Joseph to obey this command. How much cynicism and mockery he might have faced for staying with Mary, how many times he might have had disgrace hurled at him. But here, the Lord speaks comfort to Joseph, and it gives him courage. When the time comes, Joseph 'called his name Jesus.' This sentence is massive; it's Joseph adopting Jesus as his own, giving Him the legal right to the throne of David, and naming Him with the name that declares belief in God's promise: He will save His people from their sins.

Although my life is so different to Joseph's, I'm so thankful that I worship the same Lord, who speaks comfort to us in times we are dismayed. The Lord, who reminds us of who we are, who says, 'don't be afraid to obey,' who gives us courage to walk on by faith and not by sight, because there is so much more to our situations than we see just now.

We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Cor. 4:18)

Father God, please speak to us with words of comfort that will give us courage, so that we too might live not by sight, but by faith in Jesus, who saved His people from their sins. Amen.