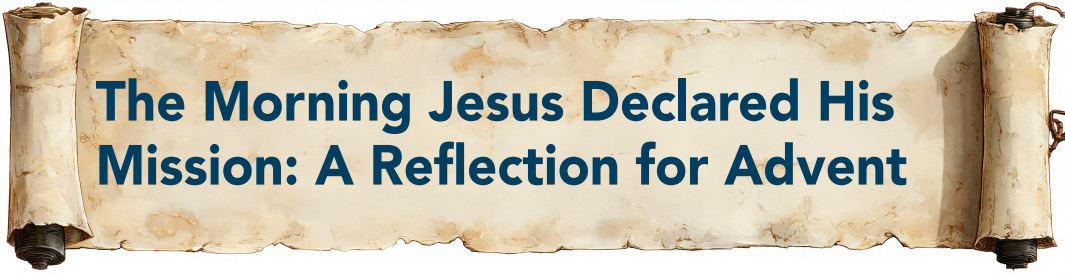



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newsletter

"Let him who is without sin cast the First Stone"
And Jesus also said, "Go and sin no more." – **John 8**

MINISTRIES



The Morning Jesus Declared His Mission: A Reflection for Advent



Laura Leigh Stanlake,
Ministry Director

Jesus woke early, washed, and spoke with His Father over a simple meal. He loved these pre-dawn hours on Shabbat. He lingered with His Father, listening, as the first pale light came through the doorway. He became aware of the townspeople waking—a pot clattering, low voices beginning to stir in the street. Then He went to the synagogue in His hometown of Nazareth.

The synagogue was simple and spacious, familiar in every way. Dust hung in the sunlight streaming through the windows. Jesus took His place and watched people enter. He had known most since childhood. Here He'd learned Scripture and worshiped beside His neighbors. As they filed in, He felt His Father's heart for them and prayed for them.

Nothing about this Sabbath suggested it would be different. It was simply Jesus' turn to read.

The conversations quieted as they stood together, robes rustling, to recite the Shema: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.' Their voices rose in prayer, carrying words they knew by heart, words of thanks, petitions for mercy, and remembrance of God's promises.

Next came the Torah. A man Jesus visited often stood and cleared his throat to read the portion assigned for this Sabbath.

Then came the reading from the Prophets. The attendant brought out the large scroll of Isaiah from the cabinet and placed it in Jesus' hands. He unrolled the crackling parchment carefully, knowing where to find the passage He intended to read—Isaiah 61.

He read aloud: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me ..."

Ah, yes. These words. They loved Isaiah and hearing the promise of their coming restoration. Someone would be raised up by God. Perhaps another judge, a king,

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When Holidays Hurt: Dr. Townsend on Grieving Well



Bronwyn Welch,
Women's
Minister

No one likes to grieve. It is difficult, hard work, and it requires a lot of time, energy, and emotional strength. Grieving is not only about death; it is also about loss of any kind. Dr. John Townsend, in his book *Beyond Boundaries*, dedicates a whole chapter to the topic of grief. His insights are excellent, and I will attempt to summarize his thoughts on this important topic.

What is Grief?

Townsend defines grief this way:

Grief helps us process the reality of loss. Simply put, grief is letting go of what you cannot keep. Grief requires accepting, both mentally and emotionally, that something or someone you loved and valued is no more...And grief converts a wound into a memory. That is, when you learn the process of letting go, the pain you feel in the present moves down your neurological pathways physically [literally] into your memory banks, where the past resides. In the memory banks, you can review the past, understand the past, and learn from the past...Without grief, the wound never becomes a memory. You remain stuck in reexperiencing the hurt and hard times over and over again (pp. 90-91).

Components for Grieving a Loss

1. Acknowledge the Attachment

Townsend says it best:

"Without an emotional attachment, there is nothing to grieve...The greater the grief you feel, the greater the love you have for the person [or object] you lost. And you can't instantly undo the attachment...The pain you feel is a good thing; it is a sign that you are alive inside" (p. 92).

2. Accept That You Can't Control the Loss

Townsend explains:

"Grief requires that you give up control of the other person's decision and admit that you do not have the power to make him or her love you or move toward you. You are accepting a type of helplessness...But in the end, you must accept that the other person is in the driver's seat of his or her own life and path, toward you or away from you...This is a difficult area for most of us. No one wants to feel helpless...We resist helplessness when we don't want to lose love [or an object, experience, etc.]. However, the sooner you can allow yourself to experience



helplessness—to admit that you have no control over the other person's decisions—the better off you will be" (pp. 92-93).

3. Name What You Valued

We affirm the importance of someone or something when we name what we valued. You cannot walk away from a relationship, especially without saying goodbye to both the bad and the good. A half-grief is never a healing grief.

Townsend notes:

"The ungrieved 'good parts' stay inside her [your] mind and heart and haunt her [you]" (p. 95).

He continues:

"It is better to help your friend [or yourself] to say things like, 'I know he was controlling, but I do miss the good times.' In that way, she is able to begin letting go of the whole person" (p. 95).

4. Surround Yourself with People Who Are Comforting

Townsend insightfully observes:

"Grief is letting go of something we can't keep, but nature abhors a vacuum. It is hard to let go of a relationship [especially] by yourself, because there is a vacuum inside where the person used to be...You will continue reaching out and desiring the other person even though you know the relationship is over. Having people around you who have the capacity to comfort can help to fill the vacuum... Allowing yourself to be comforted by others not only

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Faltering Faith—The Ongoing Call to Follow God



**Jim
Farrington,
Men's
Minister**

For the past two years, I've been in a YouVersion Bible study with men from all over the U.S. These guys really love the Lord, and honestly, being with them has been good for my soul. Studying Genesis together has opened up the Word in ways I wasn't expecting. Sometimes someone shares something so deep that I think, this must be what it felt like to sit with C.S. Lewis or Charles Spurgeon. Then I remember who I am, smile, and thank God that He lets me be part of this group at all. Their humility is the real treasure. I feel incredibly blessed, and it has pushed me to study the Bible with fresh hunger.

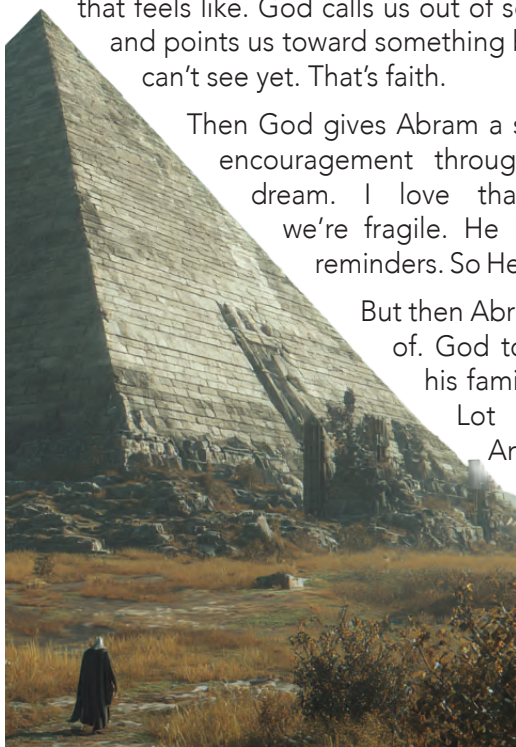
Recently, we were reading about Abram, and I was gobsmacked again at how personal Scripture can get. His story stirred something in me because I see it in so many lives around us — parents crying out for reconciliation with their kids, and men and women who are fighting like crazy to walk in freedom from temptations that never seem to quit. And with Christmas coming, the season of promises finally fulfilled, this hit me even harder. A lot of us are still waiting, still knocking, still hoping for God to move and bring home what feels lost.

Reflection 1: The Pattern of Promise and Partial Obedience

Abram's story starts with God calling him out of Haran — a place whose name is often connected with dryness or barrenness. And honestly, many of us know exactly what that feels like. God calls us out of something empty and points us toward something beautiful that we can't see yet. That's faith.

Then God gives Abram a second round of encouragement through a confirming dream. I love that. God knows we're fragile. He knows we need reminders. So He reminds Abram.

But then Abram obeys... kind of. God told him to leave his family, but he brings Lot along anyway. And I thought, Yep. There it is. Human nature. We hear God clearly, but we only halfway obey because we



want to keep something familiar, something comfortable, something we think we need. I've done that more times than I want to admit.

A lot of believers I know truly love God, but they feel this same tug-of-war inside. Hope and fear, faith and grief, longing and uncertainty are all tangled together. Abram's story gets right into that tension, the place where we're trying to trust God and still wrestling with our own humanity at the same time.

Abram settles for a time in Shechem. Later in Scripture, this same region is where Jesus meets the woman at the well. I can't get over that. The promise God begins in Genesis connects all the way to the Messiah ministering to a broken woman whose testimony changed her whole community.

Then Abram sets up camp with Bethel ("house of God") on one side and Ai ("desolate place") on the other, and right between them he builds an altar. That picture gets me every time. Life often puts us between God's presence and desolation. The altar — the place of worship and surrender — stands right there in the middle.

Then the famine hits. And this is where the story turns hard.

Reflection 2: The Temptation to Run to Egypt Instead of Returning to the Altar

When the famine comes, Abram doesn't go back to the altar he built. He doesn't stop to pray. He doesn't ask God what to do. He heads straight for Egypt. He just packs up and goes. No conversation, no consultation. I read that and thought, Abram, my man... what are you doing?

But the Holy Spirit reminds me that I've done the same thing many times.

When life gets complicated, painful, or overwhelming, most of us don't slow down and seek the Lord. We panic. We pull away. We scramble for solutions. Egypt becomes the place we run to when faith feels too risky.

When Abram arrives in Egypt, fear overtakes him. He asks Sarai to lie, saying she is his sister, because he believes the Egyptians will kill him for her beauty. And I almost said out loud, What?! Come on, Abram! But again, fear makes fools out of the best of us. I've made decisions that made just as little sense when I was scared or exhausted.

Pharaoh takes Sarai into his household. Plagues hit Pharaoh and his people. Something exposes the truth — Scripture doesn't say how — and Pharaoh rebukes Abram and sends him away with Sarai and everything he has. And here's the wild part: Abram leaves Egypt with more than he brought —but not all of it was good (*perhaps even Hagar*). Even

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salves your grief, it also greatly reduces the power of the vacuum" (p. 96).

He offers this wise, practical guidance:

"How do you know if someone has the capacity to comfort? By the degree to which they remain present with you when you grieve. Being present means they don't try to give you advice, cheer you up, or change the topic...It is important, however, to be intentional about grief and not skip over it" (p. 96).

5. Allow the Sadness

Sadness includes both longing and mourning. Your heart feels downcast. Townsend recommends allowing yourself to set aside doing and enter a feeling mode. Some suggestions include:

- Recalling both the good and the bad aspects of the relationship
- Meeting with a friend or a counselor to talk about the experiences you had
- Role-play what was said, what needs to be said, or what you wish you could say

Townsend points out:

"By welcoming your sadness, you allow your feelings to simply catch up with and ally with your thoughts about the reality of the loss" (p. 97).

Also, tell God honestly how you feel. He understands. After all, He watched His Son be tortured and die on that wretched Cross. The difficulty was so great that He had to turn away.

6. Give Yourself the Gift of Time

Townsend concludes:

"Remember that grief has its own pace. One part may take more or less time than you expected. Don't attempt to force or control your grief process. Give yourself margin within the components" (p. 99).

If this season feels lonely or heavy, may you know the quiet nearness of the Lord who sees you, hears you, and walks with you through every step of your grief.

Bronwyn Welch gleans and reflects on Chapter 8 from John Townsend's book, *Beyond Boundaries*.

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a deliverer who would finally bring comfort to their shared pain. Yes, they loved the hope of Isaiah.

Jesus continued: "...to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor..."

Then Jesus rolled up the scroll with a soft crackle and returned it to the attendant. He sat down, and every eye in the synagogue settled on Him, waiting for the teaching to come.

"Today," He began, "this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

They marveled at His gracious words, recognizing the beauty and authority with which He spoke. In their wonder, they saw only what they had always seen—Joseph's son, a local man—but His words pressed beyond their expectations. He was declaring something, and they felt the weight of it. Was restoration here? Our promises, fulfilled? Was He saying He was the fulfillment?

This moment in Nazareth reveals to us how easily we, too, can miss the nearness of God when it comes in familiar places. It calls us to look again, to listen again, and to open our hearts to the Messiah who still speaks and fulfills His promises in ways we do not expect.

Through Advent, we pause to reflect on moments like this, allowing Jesus to draw our attention elsewhere. In that synagogue, He declared His mission through Isaiah, giving us a truer focus for Christmas.

This is the mission He claimed that day. He came in the fullness of the Holy Spirit to bring good news, to bind up wounded hearts, to proclaim freedom, and to open doors long closed. This is the mission He entrusts to His people. His disciples carried it, and those after them did as well. At First Stone Ministries, we glimpse this restoration every day.

We sit with those who carry sorrow or confusion and watch the Lord bring comfort. We walk with individuals longing for freedom and witness Christ open what has been shut for years. We do not heal or rescue, but He does. We join Him as He brings hope, dignity, and restoration to those who turn toward Him.



Those who serve in this work often find Isaiah's words resonating in their own lives. We are not distant helpers but fellow travelers who have known God's comfort, His freedom, and His restoring grace. The mission Jesus proclaimed in Nazareth shapes us as we extend it to others.

As we near fifty years of ministry, our hearts are full of gratitude and expectation. Isaiah 61 has set our course, reminding us that Jesus restores what is broken, rebuilds what has fallen, and renews what has grown weary. We've watched Him do this in many lives, and we trust His restoring work isn't finished.

We are seeking the Lord for His vision for this next season. We want to be shaped, strengthened, and led by Him.

Our confidence is not in ourselves but in His Spirit, who is still at work. His heart remains for the brokenhearted, the captive, and the one longing for hope.

This Advent, may our hearts turn again to Jesus, who fulfills every promise. And as we enter our fiftieth year, may we follow Him with faith, humility, and expectation, trusting that the same Jesus who spoke in the synagogue at Nazareth is the One who leads us now.

May the hope of Christ fill you this Advent, and may His restoring work continue in your life and in our ministry in the year ahead.

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when Abram fails, God protects. God intervenes. God covers.

Then Abram returns to the place where he first called on the Lord. After all the fear, all the bad decisions, all the running, Abram remembers where he belongs.

Back at the altar.

That's the heart of the story for me. God gives promises. We believe. Then trouble comes, and instead of going to the altar — the place of prayer, surrender, and meeting — we sprint to Egypt. We try to fix everything ourselves. We forget God's faithfulness. We forget His voice. We forget His promise. We forget that it's not all about us.

Is faith hard? Yes.

Does God always do what we expect? No.

Does that make Him unkind? Not even a little.

His ways are higher. His thoughts are higher. He sees the entire battlefield when we only see a few feet ahead.

Our world often says God isn't good because evil exists. But Jeremiah says the human heart is deceitful above all things. If God blessed everything people desired, the world would tear itself apart. His restraint is mercy, even when we don't understand it.

I've known people who walked away from God because He didn't give them what they demanded. And it breaks my heart every time. Jesus died on the cross to give us everything we truly need, and still some people turn aside. Even when Jesus walked the earth, people walked away from Him.

And then I think of Corrie ten Boom. Arrested. Beaten. Sent to Ravensbrück. Losing her father and sister. And she came out saying, "There is no pit so deep that Jesus is not

deeper still." That is faith that has been to Egypt and back — faith that went straight to the altar afterward.

Conclusion: Christmas and the Promise Kept

This Christmas season, I hope we remember that God always keeps His promises, even when the waiting feels endless. He kept His promise in Bethlehem. He keeps His promises now. He calls us out of barren places. He meets us at the altar. And He invites us to trust Him when we cannot see the path.

Will He accomplish His will and not ours?

Yes. A million times yes.

I leave you with 1 Peter 1:3–9, a reminder of our living hope:

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,

4 to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you,

5 who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

6 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials,

7 that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ,

8 whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory,

9 receiving the end of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

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