

Stepping through Christ into a new reality made possible through Christmas

A Five Week Advent Devotional on the Heart of Christ

An Advent calendar is famous for its doors. Every day we approach one, full of curiosity, wondering what is hidden on the other side. But in the spiritual life, a door is more than a countdown — it's a threshold to a new life…

Think of C.S. Lewis's famous wardrobe: a confined, dusty space that suddenly opens into a vast new world where the cold winter of life is melting away and green shoots of hope are emerging. To stand before a closed door is to live in expectancy. We wait, we listen for a key in the lock, and we watch for the sliver of light underneath. This Christmas what doorsteps are we waiting on? What knocks are we listening out for? Have we got our shoes on? Are we ready to go on an adventure into new life with God?

Are we ready to step through…?

We often think of Jesus knocking on our door simply so we can invite him in, bringing him into our small confined spaces. But the true heart of Christmas is the reverse: Jesus knocks at our door so that we might go out, that we might walk *through Him*— into His heart, His life, and His understanding. Through Christ the great adventure of life is possible. Every Christmas we remember once again how Jesus makes a way for us.

This Advent, let's keep the doors open! Let's examine the doors of our hearts, the doors to our histories, and to our futures. Let's step out of the darkness and into a brand-new reality, made possible through Christmas!

There's a knock at the door! Let's go!

Week 1 The Doorstep, Preparing the Threshold

This week, we explore what it means to wait at the entrance of Christmas, to clear the spiritual clutter, and prepare our lives for a holy arrival. Advent is an ancient tradition that uses the Bible to examine our lives, both as individuals and as communities, so that we may be prepared for the future God is unlocking. What are we expecting from this Advent? What doorways are we preparing to go through?

1. Prepare the Way -- Isaiah 40: 1-5

- Theme: We stand once again at the doorway of Advent. This year we don't want to be simply stepping 'into' Christmas but rather 'through' Christmas to the open road of adventure that is waiting for us on the other side!

- Context: This reading of anticipation and renewal has been heard at the start of Advent by millions of Christians over the last two thousand years. Verse 3 links directly with Mark 1: 1-8 as John the Baptist, like us each Advent, anticipates the coming of Jesus.

- Discussion Questions:

    - What words or phrases stand out to you in this reading? What could God be calling you to notice or observe in the text?

    - As we stand on the threshold of Advent, what are the distractions, mess and clutter (and even commitments and responsibilities!) that we need to clear out of the way to clear a path so we can step into this time with God?

- Personal Reflection: Standing on the threshold of the season, what are you expecting from this time?

2. Waiting at the Posts -- Proverbs 8: 32-36 (we will focus on these verses but feel free to read all of chapter 8!)

- Theme: The daily practice of watching and waiting at Wisdom's doorway, learning to abide in Christ (*see John 15:4).*

- Context: The Book of Proverbs fits into the genre of 'wisdom literature' and is a collection of ancient sayings and meditations about morality, values and living wisely and well. Notably in Proverbs 'Wisdom' is often personified as a person – therefore becoming not simply something we learn, but someone we get to know.

- Discussion Questions:

    - 'Wisdom' here is personified as a woman welcoming us to her door. Where do we see doorways to wisdom in our world today and are we paying attention to them? Are our church doors open doors to wisdom? What about the doors of our homes?

Or our schools and colleges and universities? What about the doors to the corridors of power?

    - Where do we see wisdom in public life and wider society? And where do we *long* to see wisdom?

- **Personal Reflection:** What does the phrase 'A wise Christmas' mean to you?

3. The Judge at the Door -- James 5: 7-9

- **Theme:** Christmas isn't all cosiness, it opens the door to a vivid new reality as heaven touches earth!

- **Context** In this text we recognize that God's presence is incredibly close, right on the threshold of our reality (see Matthew 1: 21-23). We are often grateful for God's grace, mindful of his mercy, but jumpy about his justice, preferring not to think about it too much! But while Jesus loves the world unconditionally he is also deeply invested in it and longs for justice and fairness.

- **Discussion Questions:**

    - Why do you think 'grumbling' against one another is singled out as such an issue here?

    - What are some of the grumbles we have about Christmas that we need to let go of in order to make mental space for the things that matter this Advent?

- **Personal Reflection:** Is there a grumble you're struggling to let go of? Ask God to take your grumbles and complaints for a while so as to spare your friends and family!

Week 2 The Knock — Responding to the Invitation

This week focuses on the sound of the knock, the vulnerability of God asking to enter, and our personal response. God doesn't operate through coercion but instead invites us into freedom through unconditional love — moving out of isolation and into fellowship and communion.

1. An Unexpected Visitor -- Luke 1: 26-38

- **Theme:** Christmas can be full of festive invitations to events and shopping sprees. But are we keeping our ears open for the knock at the door to the last-minute adventures God could be calling us to?

- **Context:** An angel appears with an invitation to adventure and wonder, compassion and glory. Mary is caught off guard, but she listens and responds with all her heart.

- **Group Discussion Questions:**

- Mary's initial response to the angel is not an acceptance, it's a question. Just because she is openhearted, doesn't mean she isn't still openminded. What would have happened if Mary had an open heart but a more closed, unquestioning mind? Or how about if Mary had that open mind, but a closed heart?

- How can we learn from Mary's thoughtful openness to God? How do we pair an emotional openness to God with a critical, engaged mind, willing to learn and grow as we go?

- Personal Reflection: What invitations and opportunities have you let go by you? Perhaps because you have been preoccupied with the past or the future. Ask for God's help to enter this present moment and embrace the invitations that come your way.

2. The Midnight Knocker -- Luke 11: 5-10

- Theme: The power of bold, persistence in prayer and the promise that the door will open.

- Context: This reading is Jesus responding to a disciple's openhearted question about how to pray and immediately follows a version of 'The Lord's Prayer'.

- Discussion Questions:

  - Do we sometimes focus too much on the 'content' of our prayers and not place enough value on their simple regular repetition?

  - As a Connect group, is there an issue you could agree to all pray about regularly over this season?

- Personal Reflection: What are you persistently taking to God's door this Christmas?

3. The Feet on the Doorstep — Romans 10: 12-15

- Theme: The importance of sharing the good news.

- Context: Paull is telling us here it's hard to knock on the door if you don't have an address! Therefore he urges us to 'geotag' Jesus, to share our location, to point the way, type the postcode in the satnav, so that people can come to Jesus' doorway themselves.

- Group Discussion Questions:

  - When people tell their stories of coming to faith, they overwhelmingly focus on the important relationships that played a part in the process. What does a welcoming community need to have in place – in order to be able to offer these life-changing relationships at the right time and the right place?

  - As a Connect Group what could we do to share the Good News of Jesus this week?

- **Personal Reflection:** When people look at me does my life quietly speak of Christ's love for me?

Week 3 Jesus is the Door, The "I Am" Dimension

This week reveals **the great Christmas twist:** Jesus doesn't just walk through the doorway — He himself IS the doorway – he is the entryway to new life with God. Thinking back to hte wardrobe door to Narnia, Jesus is the doorway leading from a cold, confined survival space into a vast new vibrant world.

1. Step On Through -- Matthew 1: 18-25

- **Theme:** How God helps us to face obstacles.

- **Context:** This reading gives us a compelling glimpse of Joseph's inner psyche. He is full of complex emotions and thinks he is facing a brick wall. There's no way through. Then an angel comes to him in a dream and shows him how to find a door – a way through -- there is life and wonder on the other side, he can trust, he can take that step.

- **Group Discussion Questions:**

    - What would have happened if Joseph had turned away from this obstacle and quietly divorced Mary?

    - We humans are good at holding lots of hypotheticals in our heads. Joseph can picture what can happen if he stays with Mary and what could happen if he leaves her. But we're often bad at stepping outside of our own experience to view it from the outside. How does God use dreams, prayers, conversations, art and the natural world to help us step outside our problems and see them from the outside, not with cold detachment but with compassion? Do you have any experiences of suddenly getting a new insight on a situation when you've seen it from the perspective of a compassionate outsider rather than a self-critical insider?

- **Personal Reflection:** Where are the impassable walls you are facing in your life that you could bring to God in prayer?

2. The Narrow Gate -- Matthew 7: 13-14

- **Theme:** Choosing the small, unpretentious door of Christ over the wide, crowded entrances of everything else competing for our attention.

- **Context:** Here Jesus touches on the philosophical issue of 'free will. We are not forced to follow him, rather we are free to make the choice to do so. Christianity is not so much a set

of rules as it is a relationship. And we all know relationships require investment and perseverance!

- Discussion Questions:
    - What is Jesus driving at when he describes 'the narrow gate'? Why is it narrow, what makes it so? Why is following Jesus not a wide escalator or even a flume that sends us shooting down with no friction? As a group explore what the analogy means and how you interpret it.
    - At Christmas there are a lot of wide-open gates and broad roads urging us on to drive on in, park up, and promptly empty our wallets. What are the wide-open gates we should be way of this season? They might be literal doors or simply paths we just don't want to go down.
- Personal Reflection: What are the important relationships and connections you are wanting to make this Christmas – who do you want to contact, remember, meet up with?

3. The Door of Faith -- Acts 14: 21-28

- Theme: Celebrating how God opened a door of faith to the entire world.
- Context: Acts of the Apostles came together as a sequel to the Gospel of Luke, sharing the same authorship, and recounts how the Jesus movement rapidly spread across borders and boundaries reshaping entire communities.
- Group Discussion Questions:
    - The apostles' account depicts how geography and demographics are no limitation on faith. This story started *somewhere* but it is for everyone *everywhere*. How confident are we in our local communities and churches that we have a story that started 'somewhere' but is for 'everywhere'?
    - What are our stories of doors opening this Christmas? Where have we seen doors and hearts opening to Jesus?
- Personal Reflection: What are our prayers for clarity and openness about our faith this Christmas?

Week 4 Stepping Through — Leaving the Darkness Behind

This week we step across the threshold and into new life with Christ. The frost of our old life is melting and new green shoots are emerging. When we step *through* Christmas we step past the cold shadows of the past and into a changed heart and new life – like the cupboard door to Narnia opening us up to a whole new reality!

1. The Great Light -- Isaiah 9: 2-7

- Theme: Leaving the darkness behind and stepping into the light!

- Context: This is the definitive Christmas prophecy of a people walking out of deep shadows into brilliant light. Imagine going through C.S. Lewis' dark wardrobe and stepping into the bright light of Narnia.

- Group Discussion Questions:

    - Which of these names are you most drawn to this Advent: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace?

    - What doors are shut in our world, blocking out the great light, that we need to fling open!?

- Personal Reflection: What does this great light mean to our individual lives this Christmas, where do we want to feel its warmth and illumination?

2. Gates Open Continually -- Isaiah 60: 1-11

- Theme: A timeless vision of a future where rather than doors locked in fear, doors are flung open to abundance.

- Context: These words of hope and renewal were given to, and emerged out of, a suffering, traumatised people hoping to rebuild their lives. We often read the Bible individually and focus on what it might be saying to us individually, but for most of the Bible's history it was read in and seen as being *for* community, not just private individuals. And these words are not those of a triumphant empire lording it over their neighbours. They are the radical and subversive words given to a marginalised people daring to use the language of empire to articulate God's prophecy to them of reversal and reclamation.

- Discussion Questions:

    - Where do we long to see a reversal of fortune in our society? Who has suffered and been marginalised for far too long. Who needs to be blessed with abundance?

    - What doors in our society have been long shut to keep people out, that could be opened this Christmas to let people in? Consider the shepherds who were professional outsiders (Luke 2: 8) brought into the heart of the nativity.

- Personal Reflection: Take time to immerse yourself in this scene. Imagine you were there in the vision. What do you see, what do you notice?

3. Stepping Through Together -- Luke 1: 38-59

- Theme: Listening to one another.

- Context: Mary and Elizabeth are stepping into new chapters of their lives together. Elizabeth hears Mary with the ears of the Holy Spirit. She and her unborn baby recognise whom it is they are welcoming – with whom they are adventuring!

- Group Discussion Questions:

    - What can we learn from Elizabeth's attentiveness and openness?

    - What can we learn from Mary's sincerity and passion?

- Personal Reflection: Who do you need to listen to closely this Christmas season? With the ears of the Holy Spirit?

Week 5 The New Creation Reality — Heaven Coming to Earth

Using the insights of Tom Wright, this final week shifts the focus from "escaping to heaven" to God's grand design of New Creation. "Jesus's resurrection is the beginning of God's new project not to snatch people away from earth to heaven but to colonize earth with the life of heaven. That, after all, is what the Lord's Prayer is about." (Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope*) Eternal life and resurrection life start right now when the Spirit awakens our hearts. Our ultimate home is a renewed universe where God dwells with us. The adventure of new life with Christ doesn't start in heaven – it starts right now on earth!

1. Encountering Heaven, a New Adventure -- Matthew 2: 1-12

- Theme: Encountering heaven changes our lives forever.

- Context: When the Magi encounter Jesus their life is transformed. Their adventure doesn't end, it's just getting started!

- Group Discussion Questions:

    - Where the wisemen see wonder, Herod sees a threat. How can we, like the wisemen, show solidarity with Christians facing oppression from powerful forces?

    - When the Magi travel home they travel literally and metaphorically on 'another road'. This year what are the new roads we are travelling with Jesus, both literally and metaphorically?

- Personal Reflection: Gold, frankincense and myrrh are highly symbolic gifts pointing to Christ's kingship (gold), priesthood (frankincense) and burial (myrrh). As we start a new year how are recognising Christ's leadership, spiritual direction and renewal of our lives?

2. No Longer Strangers — Ephesians 2: 19–22

- Theme: We belong to one another.

- **Context:** Just as stones become more than the sum of their parts we become something greater when we join together — we become a home for God! In our loving relationships we 'house' God!

- **Discussion Questions:**

    - Part of the significance of a cornerstone is not simply that it holds up the walls but that historically it's the first stone placed. What difference would it make when starting a new group or activity to consciously start with Jesus as the first element?

    - How can our transformed relationships with others in this new year bring heaven to earth through the Holy Spirit?

- **Personal Reflection:** How can our transformed relationships with others in this new year bring heaven to earth through the Holy Spirit?

3. The Door Standing Open — Romans 8: 31-39

- **Theme:** No barrier can get between us and God.

- **Context:** We close the year with a vision of a door standing wide open between heaven and earth. Through Christ's resurrection, the barrier is permanently removed, inviting us to live with open access to God's throne room right now!

- **Group Discussion Question:**

    - When we think of Christmas, we often think of a baby born to rescue us from earth so we can eventually go up to heaven. But the scriptural reality — and the true heartbeat of the Incarnation — is that God in Christ came down to **us now**. Resurrection life starts the moment the Spirit opens our hearts. We haven't just been practicing a countdown to a holiday; we are living as 'resurrection people' in a world God is actively redeeming **now**. The door is open. Heaven is meeting earth, not in our future, but **now**! What does it look like for us to live out that new creation reality today? In our own lives but also in the lives of the Connect group and all the communities we are a part of!

- **Personal Reflection:** Sometimes we bring a lot of burdens and obstacles with us that we think must get between us and God. This Hogmanay what are the things we are letting go of, that we realise are no longer holding us back?