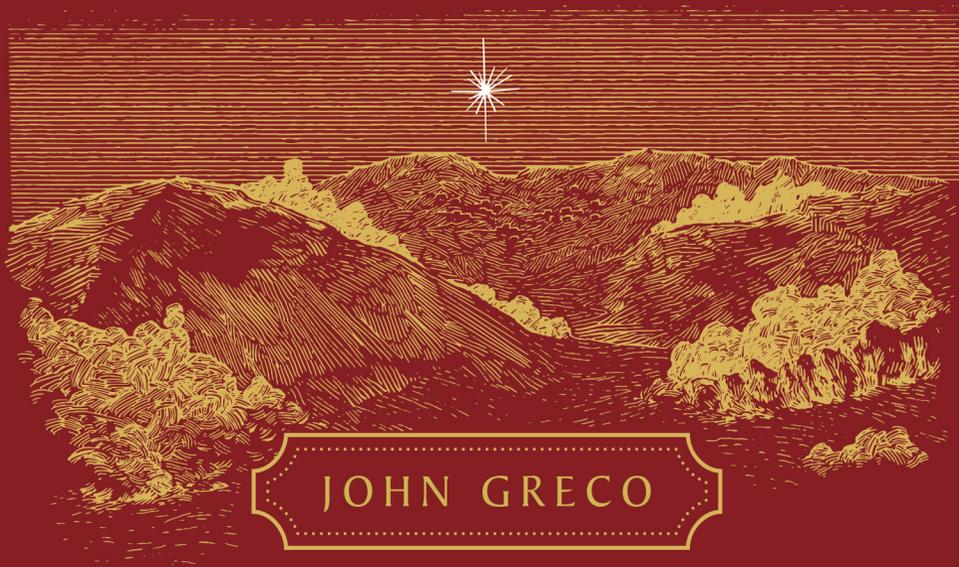


REDISCOVERING *Christmas*

A TWELVE-DAY JOURNEY TO THE MANGER



JOHN GRECO

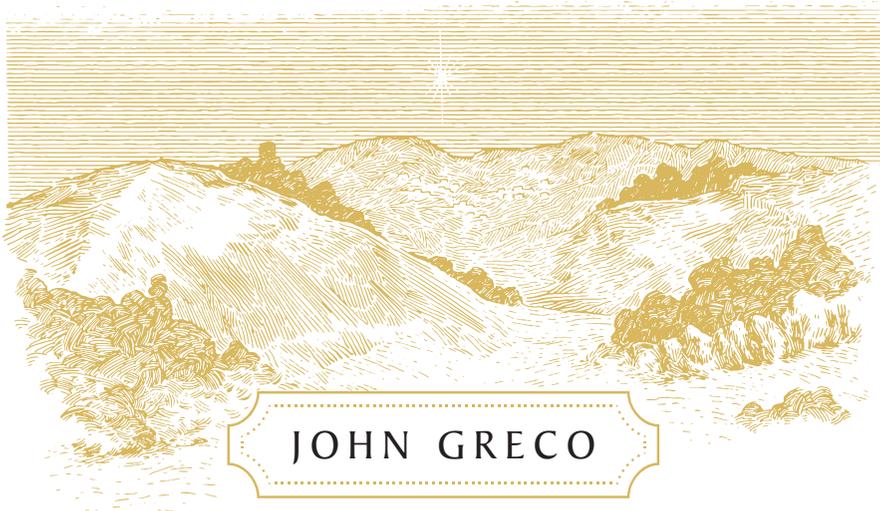


REDISCOVERING
Christmas



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A TWELVE-DAY JOURNEY TO THE MANGER



JOHN GRECO

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For Laurin,
the best present I've ever received from the Lord,
and it was on Christmas Eve too!



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A book like this comes in fits and starts. It's usually written during time that is carved out of everyday life. Sometimes, that means responsibilities must be set aside for the moment. Other times, it means late nights or early mornings get consumed. Though the actual process of writing is as quiet as the muffled clacking of a laptop keyboard, it can disturb an entire household. So, first and foremost, thanks are due to my wife, Laurin, who indulged me talking about Christmas year round and encouraged me every step of the way. I also want to thank my three boys, Jonah, Jude, and Luke, for giving up their playroom from time to time so Daddy had a place to write—and for all the hugs too!

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Merry Christmas, one and all!

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INTRODUCTION

It's one of the most revered and rehearsed stories of all time, and it's all the more powerful because every word of it is true. The Son of God stepped out of heaven and took up residence in the womb of a teenage girl. He was then born in the small village of Bethlehem, greeted by shepherds, heralded by angels, and later worshipped by wise men from a distant country.

Jesus's birth was the turning point of history, for his earthly life, measured out in a few short decades, culminated with the cross and the empty tomb. But without Christmas, there would be no Easter, and so we mark the occasion every December with songs and celebrations, all to remember the story of our Savior's birth.

But how well do we really know the story as the Bible tells it? With some bits in Matthew and others in Luke, prophecies scattered throughout the Old Testament, and Israel's own history forming the backdrop to Bethlehem, we can easily get lost. The book you are holding in your hands represents a new way to read the Christmas story. Presented as one connected narrative drawn primarily from the Gospels, *Rediscovering Christmas* is a new paraphrase of the biblical account of Jesus's birth.

Since our goal is to get closer to, and go deeper with, the story of the first Christmas as recorded in Scripture, you may be wondering, *Why a paraphrase?* While the intention of most paraphrases is to present the Bible in modern language so today's readers may more

easily comprehend it, the goal here is somewhat different. My hope is that as you read the familiar Christmas story anew, it will catch you a bit off guard, not unlike the air when you first step outside on a cold December morning. That's because this paraphrase is more than a mere retelling.

At times, I have gone beyond the conventional confines of a paraphrase. In some instances, I have expanded a word or phrase to provide a fuller sense of the original Greek or Hebrew text; in others, I have done so to draw connections to other portions of God's Word. The early church, steeped in the Hebrew Bible, would have made these connections automatically and even unconsciously, but these links across Scripture are often missed by modern Bible readers. By bringing them to the foreground, my hope is to restore what has been lost.

In addition, there are places where I have added something like "connective tissue" to the narrative. Anyone who's read the Gospels knows that the authors were often sparse in their accounts, leaving readers to draw their own conclusions as to the *why?* or *how?* of a matter. I have sought to incorporate the best of biblical scholarship to fill in some of these gaps.

Interspersed throughout this volume are short articles that offer insights into the cultural background of the biblical Christmas story. In a way, we'll be digging up long-lost artifacts. But the goal is not only to add to our knowledge; it is also to gain a better look at the heart of God. Make no mistake: his heart is there in every verse of Scripture, prodding us toward the Son and calling us back home. And there's no better time than Christmas to come home.

—John Greco

PROLOGUE

THE WORD BECAME FLESH

(John 1:1–14)



A PARAPHRASED RETELLING OF
JOHN 1:1–14

BEFORE THERE WAS TIME, there was the Word of God. And the Word was with God and was God. He was there with God at the beginning of all things. He was the Word spoken at creation, without whom nothing would exist. Within him was life, and that life became the light of true humanity. The light shines on and on. No matter how dark things get, the darkness cannot snuff it out.

There was a man who was given a mission from God. His name was John. His assignment was to tell people about the light so that everyone might believe. Of course, John was not the light; he was merely a man chosen by God to point others to the light. The true and perfect light that shines upon all people was coming into the world.

He was in the world—the world he was instrumental in creating—and yet no one recognized who he was. He came to a people he had claimed as his own centuries earlier, and yet they refused to claim him. But to those who did claim him, to those who recognized who he was and put their faith in him, he granted the power to become God’s children. These were not children born of natural mean, but children born of God.

The Word of God became flesh and bone and made himself at home in the midst of our camp. We saw his glory and felt its weight—the glory of the one and only Son, sent by the Father, brimming with grace and truth. ♦



The God Who Draws Near

Christmas is the answer to the deepest longings of our hearts, longings that have been carried since Eden.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We observed his glory, the glory as the one and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

In the beginning, God created a good, good world. There was no pain or grief, no hardship or poverty, no loss or heartache. Even better, our first parents, Adam and Eve, enjoyed unbroken fellowship with their heavenly Father. But almost as quickly as the story began, it took a dark turn. In the shade of Eden, Adam and Eve doubted God's good heart, and with the crunch of forbidden fruit, all of creation began to unravel.

However, God did not abandon humanity in their sin. Even as he was doling out consequences and judgments, he made Adam and Eve (and all of us) a promise. He told the serpent, later identified as the devil (Rev. 12:9), "I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen. 3:15). With that word of judgment, God announced a Savior would one day be born, and he would deal evil a fatal blow.

And so, down through the centuries, the people watched and waited, looking for the one God had promised. But they were not left to wait in isolation. God spoke, giving his people instructions and making them promises. At one point, he also came to live with his people, taking up

residence in the tabernacle as Israel sojourned in the wilderness and later filling the temple in Jerusalem. But still the people waited for their Savior.

Jesus's arrival was a new chapter in humanity's story, to be sure, but it was also the fulfillment of all the stories the people of Israel had treasured in their hearts. And so, when the apostle John sat down to write his account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, he knew just where to start.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). With that opening line, John ushered his readers back to the book of Genesis. There, God brought creation into being by his spoken word. John will introduce his audience to that Word, but first he wants them to consider that the Word is both God and also distinct from God. It won't do to press them together too tightly, nor will it work to pull them apart. It's just like a word that proceeds from your lips—it is both an extension of you and distinct from you. The Word is Yahweh, and yet the Word is *with* him. He is sent *from* God, and yet he *is* God.

All that brings us to John's use of "the Word" to describe the Son of God. The prophets of Israel and Judah would sometimes describe revelation they received from God as "the word of the LORD." (See, for example, Gen. 15:1; 1 Sam. 15:10; Ezek. 14:2.) As we read these passages, we commonly think God spoke to these Old Testament saints by a powerful impression or perhaps even with an audible voice, but that's as far as we go. The "word of the LORD" in these instances is a message, nothing more.

But perhaps we're wrong.

Consider Jeremiah 1:4–10. There, Jeremiah records, "The word of the LORD came to me" (v. 4). But then, a few verses later, the prophet tells us, "Then the LORD *reached out his hand, touched my mouth*, and told me: I have now filled your mouth with my words" (v. 9, emphasis added). A disembodied voice, no matter how powerful, does not reach out its hand

and touch someone's mouth. This "LORD" conveying divine words to Jeremiah's mouth was God in physical form.

In John's famous prologue, the Word is a message from the Lord. More accurately, he is the ultimate message, for he is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact expression of his nature" (Heb. 1:3). He came to show us what God is like, to silence any doubts about his goodness. That is why Jesus could say, "The one who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). But Jesus is more than a message. He descended to be born one of us. He is the offspring God promised to Eve in the garden, the one he said would crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). He is the God who "camped out" or "tabernacled" with Israel in the wilderness (for that is literally what the Greek word translated "dwelt" in John 1:14 means).

At Christmas, we celebrate the God who draws near, the Savior who came to earth to wipe away our tears, put an end to our grief, and make a way for us to come home. We praise the Word who put on flesh so that he could reach out and touch those he loves. ♦ ♦

Year after year, countless believers immerse themselves in the story of the first Christmas, rehearsing the well-known tale of the baby King who was born into the humblest of circumstances. But for some, the nativity story has become so familiar, it has been robbed of its power. For others, the biblical narrative is more like a puzzle: the pieces are all there, but it's not clear how they all fit together. Luke talks about shepherds and a census, while Matthew deals with wise men and an escape to Egypt. There's a star and a manger and more angels than you can count—it can be hard to keep it all straight!

Rediscovering Christmas is a modern paraphrase of the Christmas story, drawn directly from the Gospels and created to help readers see the Father's heart in details that are all-too-often overlooked. The result is a seamless retelling of Jesus's birth that will fascinate new and mature believers alike. Also included are twelve devotional essays that invite readers to step into the first Christmas story as if they were there, going deeper into cultural contexts that will help them discover the goodness of God in fresh and surprising ways. This beautiful, hardcover volume is perfect for quiet times, group study, or family reading, and is sure to become a favorite holiday tradition.

JOHN GRECO is a Bible geek who has spent the bulk of his career futzing with words in the Christian publishing and ministry worlds. He and his wife, Laurin, live just south of Nashville, where they daily wrangle their three small boys and dream of someday being the ones who get to take all the naps. ♦

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