

BRF ADVENT BOOK

Tanya Marlow

TREASURES

IN

Straw

Exploring the griefs and gifts of
the Christmas story



Devotions from Advent to Epiphany

‘Finally, an Advent book for all of us – for those who weep and mourn as much as for those who anticipate and celebrate. Release your pent-up breath and receive God’s loving balm as you read this treasure.’

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‘Tanya Marlow has written a rare and beautiful book. With theological depth, pastoral wisdom, and remarkable emotional intelligence, Marlow re-enters the Christmas story not through nostalgia, but through the lived realities of ordinary people carrying hidden wounds. She reveals how the incarnation speaks not only to joy, but also to infertility, chronic illness, loneliness, trauma, exclusion, war, poverty, and fear. The result is a devotional work that feels both deeply contemporary and timelessly Christian. This is theology at its most pastoral and pastoral care at its most theological.’

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‘What a gift this book is. Tanya has unearthed riches for us to treasure amid the realities of everyday life. I highly recommend pondering each passage and lingering longer over the reflection that follows.’

Cathy Madavan, author, speaker, and coach

‘*Treasures in Straw* is a kind and wise friend to remind us of the treasure of Jesus’ coming amidst the darkness we face in the world.’

Rachael Newham, theologian and author

Tanya Marlow

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the Christmas story



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Introduction

How do you feel about Christmas? Generally, I love it. For me, Christmas means comforting traditions, little treats and inspirations throughout Advent, and the delight of watching my son opening his presents – spiritual, emotional, and physical nourishment.

For my friend Helen Austin, it is quite different. Issues with grief, mental illness, and chronic physical illness (including having a restricted diet) have made it harder to enjoy the day itself. Being single at Christmas-tide, when everyone is talking about their fun family gatherings, plus being childless (not by choice) at a festival focused on childbirth cruelly accentuates the losses Helen feels in everyday life. In December 2025, Helen confessed on Facebook that for several years she ‘avoided all things Christmas, including church, for the whole month of December, because it was just all so painful’. She is not alone in this.

Emotions and the Christmas phenomenon

Christmas is a megaphone. In the west, particularly the UK, we have established Christmas as the magical bringer of joy, cosiness, and warmth in winter, quality time with a loving family, perfect presents, good food, and, perhaps above all, children filled with wonder. Neuroscience tells us that if we grew up enjoying Christmas, then every ritual and tradition associated with Christmas will reinforce our ‘classic conditioning’ to automatically feel positive with each reminder. Like Pavlov’s dog salivating every time a bell rings, we experience that Christmassy glow every time we put up decorations, sing carols, or, ironically enough, hear bells ringing. If we are happy in life, Christmas-tide has the power to amplify that feeling.

Unfortunately, joy is not the only feeling Christmas can intensify. Because there is so much expectation of Christmassy perfection built upon this one day of the year, if our circumstances prevent us from having a happy Christmas, the grief is so much stronger on this day. Nothing bad is supposed to happen on birthdays, holidays, or Christmas Day, so if it does the sense of betrayal is even more pronounced. Every Christmassy ritual then becomes a mocking reminder of all that is lost.

Kenneth Doka called this experience ‘disenfranchised grief’: grief not validated by society.¹ It is frowned upon to *express* sadness or look for support from others at a time of communal feasting. People will sympathise with you losing your job, but not if you want to process it at a child’s birthday dinner. Society expects us to feel happy at weddings and sad at funerals. It’s only polite. Thanks to Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, we even have an insult for someone who doesn’t feel happy at Christmastime – a Scrooge. If you express the wrong emotion, society will punish you for it.

Disenfranchised grief can also include *feeling* sad. Arlie Hochschild observed that emotions are not just personal and isolated, but heavily influenced by cultural expectations, which she calls ‘feeling rules’.² That pressure is so strong that if we aren’t experiencing the expected communal reaction naturally, we do what Hochschild calls ‘emotion work’. This involves not only concealing our feelings in front of others, so we don’t display the ‘wrong’ emotion in our faces, but also trying to control the emotion itself. The only single person in a roomful of happy couples stifles the feeling of loneliness and tells himself he really is having fun. The teen who asked for an Xbox and got a board game instead desperately tries to quash their disappointment and summon up gratitude. The recently bereaved grandmother spends Christmas Day smiling for the sake of the kids, while trying to numb the chasm of grief.

Then, if we are Christians, we add the extra expectation of being obliged to rejoice at Christmas because Jesus was born. The cultural obligation of feeling happy now extends to sacred spaces and religious communities, where we really *ought* to be happy – because ‘Jesus’. Our emotions

become a measure of our devotion. Yet even if we do feel happy, our motivation must be scrutinised. I remember feeling guilty as a child because I knew I should feel most happy about Jesus being born for us, but I was honestly more excited about getting roller skates.

It is exhausting, and it is no wonder that so many people avoid Christmas altogether. The jarring juxtaposition of the world's merriment and our pain is just too much to bear.

Christmas versus nativity

The reason I wrote this book was because I saw such a difference between Christmas as we mark it today versus the original story of the nativity. Then, there was joy, yes, and gifts, but there was also sorrow and sacrifice. Mary had a baby, the saviour of the whole world, but not everyone was happy about it, most notably Herod. The images on Christmas cards are of holy mother, father, baby, all perfect and respectable, but the nativity had a non-typical family structure, with Joseph as stepfather and Mary probably suspected of sexual impropriety.

Christmas today is obsessed with children's happiness, though this wasn't always the case. For centuries in Britain, Christmas was a lengthy, communal, mainly adult festival for several days, intended for resting after the harvesting (with rowdy and alcoholic revelry). The Victorians, desiring societal control, shifted Christmas to one day only: nuclear families with their well-behaved, innocent children, quietly, privately, celebrating around their fir trees at home. Then it was back to the factory the next day. Materialism and greed then spawned the modern, jolly, gift-giving, cola-bringing Santa in the 20th century.

Yet the good news of Christ was not aimed at individuals or even families but marginalised communities and forgotten peoples. The 'perfect' Christmas today is easier to achieve if you're rich; yet Christ was born into poverty, and Mary sang triumphantly about the rich being sent away.

As I looked again through the original Christmas story, I saw that loss and sacrifice were everywhere. Against that dark backdrop, the gift of God-with-us shone more brightly. The losses within the nativity were temporal, relational, or material, but the gains were spiritual and eternal. It was less about cosy stables and more about upending unjust societies. It was less about individual gifts and more about communal equality.

The costs were often great, but the reward of Jesus was greater. The griefs were deep, but the joys lasted longer. They had a taste of God's kingdom in Christ's first coming, and the promise of fulfilment in Christ's second coming.

They and then is also us and now. Life is good and glorious but also hard and painful. We celebrate and rejoice that Jesus came, and we also long for Jesus' coming. We love our world but also grieve for it and crave its restoration. We are thankful for our personal blessings and torn apart by our personal sufferings.

How to read this book

This book is designed to be a journey from 1 December to 6 January, from Advent to Epiphany, in six sections. We start with older prophecies, walk through the Christmas story in roughly chronological order, then begin the new year with themes of loss and gain in Paul's writings.

- **Kingdom reversals** asks what are God's promises to people who live without hope?
- **Honour and favour** digs into Jesus' cultural context. How does God restore people shamed by society?
- **Songs after silence** considers silence and waiting as preparation for God's gifts, and asks is it possible to sing songs of joy after disaster has come?
- **Giving up** looks at sacrifice and surrender. When should we give things up, give things away, or give our worries upwards (to God)?

- **Pierced hearts** comes after Christmas, exploring grief and trauma. How can the wisdom, lament, and empathy in the Christmas stories help us heal?
- **Living as losers** looks forward to the new year and to our ultimate future. When we add up the costs and rewards of the Christian life, is it all worth it?

Each devotion includes a reading from the NIV, a reflection, questions to consider, and a chance to spend time in prayer. Running throughout, I have included inspiring stories of Christians today who have lived through these issues, just like the original Bible characters.

Christmas devotionals are notorious for being abandoned halfway through as the season gets busier, so do give yourself permission to start early or catch up and speed-read when you've missed a few days. Or wait for a quieter moment and read it in weekly sections rather than day by day. The book has a flow, arc, and transformational purpose, and the full journey is worth undertaking, I promise.

Grief and gift

Nowadays Christmas feels like either grief or gift; the nativity is both grief and gift together.

God has entered our world and experienced it fully, the good and the bad. At his second coming, Jesus will entirely restore the world. One day, it will be all gift; until then, we live with both.

Christmas can sometimes feel superficial or smug, but the nativity was not saccharine, tinselled jollity, isolated from the world's problems. The nativity was mess and order, peace and disruption, joy and sorrow, darkness and light, disgrace and honour, danger and protection, poverty and provision, uncertainty and hope, temptation and tyranny, grief and celebration. All of life is there, raw and true. And all are invited in.

My invitation to you this season is to look afresh at the original Christmas story, with the freedom to be honest in lament, exuberant in praise, or both together. Whether you love Christmas or dread it, this is a chance to treasure those forgotten spiritual blessings that do not perish or fade, and rediscover genuine delight in Jesus, our greatest gift.

1

Kingdom reversals



1 December

Those in darkness are given light

Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria came and took... Gilead and Galilee, including all the land of Naphtali, and deported the people to Assyria.

2 KINGS 15:29

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honour Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan –

**The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.**

ISAIAH 9:1–2



Lucy remembers December 2022 as the year the lights went out. Too unwell to work, surviving on benefits alone, she was alarmed to see there was an erroneous charge on her gas and electric account. When she rang, the power company acknowledged the mistake, but it would take time to fix. Lucy kept feeding the meter at home, but a glitch meant she was only getting pennies' worth from £10.

She ran out of money (and therefore power) just as temperatures plummeted. When she rang customer service, a snowstorm disrupted their

phone lines. When she rang the council, they promised to investigate, but her phone ran out of charge, and they never visited. She refused friends' offers of a loan, fearing she couldn't repay them. In the dark and cold, she became ill.

Finally, mini-miracles occurred, in the shape of human kindness. A neighbour kept her stocked in hot-water bottles and charged her phone. A mystery giver put an envelope of cash through her door. A sympathetic power company employee gave her a code to add £100 to her account. Lucy trudged through the snow, still unwell, for two days, looking for a post office willing to give her an electric card for free so she could add the code. Finally, one did. And there was light.

'That was the year I believed the Christmas story could possibly be real,' Lucy said. As an atheist, she still wasn't convinced of God's existence, but now she could just about believe there once was an innkeeper generous enough to offer help to people in need. 'My Christmas was saved by people giving what they could and not expecting anything back. The anonymous gift made me able, emotionally, to claim the help I needed and not feel guilty about it. It made me believe that it's not just me: other people will go out of their way to help too.'

Lucy's story moves me for many reasons: the precariousness of poverty; how unreliable society's safety nets are; how hard it is to ask for help when you have little to give back; how anonymous cash handouts without strings attached are often exactly what is needed – but most of all, how the kindness of strangers had seemed as much a fairytale to her as God being born on earth. When you have lived in darkness, literally and metaphorically, it takes its toll.

Isaiah's original audience had plenty of reasons for 'distress' and 'gloom' (Isaiah 9:1). In c. 733BC, Galilee was the first area to be razed to the ground by the notorious Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III (2 Kings 15:29).

Galilee was ruined and never really recovered. Meanwhile, the regions lucky enough to survive Assyria's assaults, like Jerusalem, grew proud.

Even in Jesus' day, hundreds of years later, the Jerusalemites looked down on the Galileans.

The Galileans were a devastated people struggling to survive. Through Isaiah, God speaks to a 'humbled' people and promises to 'honour' them (Isaiah 9:1). At their lowest point, God doesn't forget them. There is hope. Although they are in darkness now, light will come, and it will be a 'great light' (Isaiah 9:2). There is hope for us, too. Darkness is not only a place of terror; it can also be the warm womb where the Spirit of God broods. Darkness can be the nurturing precursor to new life.

God has a habit of doing this. Back in Genesis, all was dark, yet 'the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters' (Genesis 1:2-3), and God spoke light into the world. When the Israelites wandered in the desert, they were led by a pillar of fire by night to show that God was with them (Exodus 13:21). The psalmist called God's law 'a light on my path' (Psalm 119:105), and when David was protected from Saul's attacks, he declared: 'My God turns my darkness into light' (Psalm 18:28).

Light therefore signifies creation, new life, hope, and God's presence, protection, and guidance. Then Jesus comes and declares that he is all of these: 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness' (John 8:12).

The 'people walking in darkness' become those who 'will never walk in darkness'. Jesus is good news for forgotten peoples, dismissed minority groups, and those in pain whose cries are ignored. If you feel surrounded by darkness right now, remember our future – an eternity when 'there will be no night' (Revelation 21:25). Meanwhile, in our current dark places, Jesus is our light, and his presence is our hope, however dim it may seem sometimes.

On a dark December day, I light a candle.

Reflect

- What areas of your life feel dark and in need of God's light?
- What areas of the world seem gloomy and despairing? How might you pray for them?

Take time to listen to 'The people that walked in darkness' from Handel's *Messiah* and use it as a prayer.

Pray

In the midst of despair, may I know your hope.

In the midst of gloom, may I feel your presence.

In the midst of darkness, may I walk in your light. Amen.

2 December

The battle-weary are given peace

You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice
when dividing the plunder.
For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor.
Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.

ISAIAH 9:3–5



Stas is a minister of a church in Lviv, Ukraine, but from 2022 to 2024 he was also serving in the military, fighting Russia's invasion. 'I can't completely express what I faced,' he confessed. One story he did share was watching another soldier spray-wash the inside of a van that had been used for transporting dead bodies. He opened the van door and out poured a sticky slew of blood and entrails.

'This can break you,' Stas confessed. He is grateful for the support of fellow Christians who carried him through.³

We often think of peace in Christian circles as a *feeling* we experience individually, but in Isaiah, peace primarily means an end to war. Isaiah's prophecy of hope to Galilee continues with a blessing for 'the nation'(v. 3), then hints at something larger still: global peace.

Isaiah prophetically imagines a day of unexpected victory, where the underdogs win against the giant, 'as in the day of Midian's defeat' (v. 4). Centuries before Isaiah's day, God gave Gideon victory over thousands of Midianites with just 300 men (Judges 7). This showed it was God's salvation, not military power, that won the day. In Isaiah, God is reminding Galilee that however big our oppressor, God can defeat them. Today, even as we feel powerless to stop wars, we know that God can still intervene against all odds, and our prayers are valuable.

God promises to shatter 'the yoke that burdens them', rescuing the vulnerable, and break 'the rod of their oppressor', putting an end to dictators' power (v. 4). There is more than this, however. It's not just that God will one day win the battle, it's that the time for war itself will be ended, 'Every warrior's boot used in battle... will be destined for burning' (v. 5).

The king who will come, as Isaiah goes on to say, will be called the 'Prince of Peace' (Isaiah 9:6). African theologian Alfred Sebahene points out that peace is a communal concept, not merely a personal state: 'There will be no peace if it is only experienced by the individual.'⁴

Jesus came to end human fighting and bring peace between God and humanity. In World War II, there were two key moments of victory. The first was D-Day, when the world knew who would win; the second was VE Day, when Hitler was finally defeated and people throughout Europe celebrated on the streets that war was over. Jesus' first coming, at Christmas, is D-Day, the declaration of peace; his second coming, at the end of time, is VE Day, the end to all war. When Jesus' peace comes, joy follows.

If you are feeling battle-weary, literally or metaphorically, perhaps you can take comfort in knowing our certain future. Evil will not win the day. Peace will come. Joy will follow. In between, we wait in hope.

Reflect

- What do you think about the concept of peace not being individually experienced but communal?
- Which areas of the world or people known to you need your prayers for peace?
- How does the image of D-Day versus VE Day help you?
- Take time to listen to 'Rejoice greatly' from Handel's *Messiah* and use it as a prayer.

Pray

Dear Lord, thank you for always being on the side of the oppressed, not the oppressor. Please minister to all those suffering from warfare today. I long for an end to war and pray for your peace in this world. Amen.



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For some, Christmas is a magical time. For others, it can be painful, and the tinselled tellings of Jesus' birth feel saccharine and empty. Yet in that first Christmas, all of life is there – disgrace and honour, uncertainty and hope, temptation and tyranny, sorrow and celebration.

Interweaving theological insight with honest experiences, Marlow traces the themes of loss and gain throughout the nativity. Against a darker backdrop, we see with greater clarity our unshakeable blessings. However you feel about Christmas, *Treasures in Straw* will leave you with fresh wonder, deeper understanding, and genuine joy.

'This is the kind of devotional writing I need.'

Sheridan Voysey, presenter of BBC Radio 2's
Pause for Thought and author of *The Making of Us*

'The perfect way to enter the Advent season.'

The Revd Will Van Der Hart, author of *Mind Fuel*

'What a gift this book is.'

Cathy Madavan, author of *When Less Is More*

'A rare and beautiful book... This is theology at its most pastoral and pastoral care at its most theological.'

The Revd Dr Timothy Goode, Canon of York Minster



Tanya Marlow is a writer, spiritual director, and lecturer in pastoral theology. A popular conference speaker, she has been published by the *Guardian* and *Spectator* and interviewed for BBC TV and radio. Her books include *Those Who Wait* (2017), and she can be found at **TanyaMarlow.com**.

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