



WEEKS 3-4

# ADVENT

## *Devotional*

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*An invitation to pause and savor the anticipation of Advent as we wait for our Savior.*

*Each week, worship through a carol, reflect on a Scripture passage, and respond to God in personal prayer.*



AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY



# IN THE BLEAK MIDWINTER

*Christina Rosetti*

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,  
earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;  
snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,  
in the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Our God, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain;  
heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign.

In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed  
the Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

Angels and archangels may have gathered there,  
cherubim and seraphim thronged the air;  
but his mother only, in her maiden bliss,  
worshiped the beloved with a kiss.

What can I give him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;  
if I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;  
yet what I can I give him: give my heart.

## SUNDAY, DECEMBER 16

### Read

Sing and shout for joy, people of Israel!  
Rejoice with all your heart, Jerusalem!  
The LORD has stopped your punishment;  
he has removed all your enemies.  
The LORD, the king of Israel, is with you;  
there is no reason now to be afraid.  
The time is coming when they will say to Jerusalem,  
“Do not be afraid, city of Zion!  
Do not let your hands hang limp!  
The LORD your God is with you;  
his power gives you victory.  
The LORD will take delight in you,  
and in his love he will give you new life.  
He will sing and be joyful over you,  
as joyful as people at a festival.”

ZEPHANIAH 3:14–18A

### Reflect

A photograph of a bombed-out city in modern day Syria could represent the city of Jerusalem in the prophet Zephaniah’s day. Jerusalem’s inhabitants have broken their covenant with God. God created his people to be glorious, noble, good, and true; instead, they’ve corrupted themselves with idol worship.

But after God’s judgment on Israel’s sin, Zephaniah predicts a day of restoration, when God himself will be their king. Jesus identified himself as the king who Zephaniah predicted (John 1:48–50). During Advent, we prepare to celebrate King Jesus with us.

Jesus knew he was the promised King, even if his people didn’t recognize him. He prophesied that both our sins and our ultimate enemy would receive God’s judgment: “Now is the time for this world to be judged; now the ruler of this world will be overthrown” (John 12:31). But this time, God’s judgment on sin didn’t look like Zephaniah’s vision. The religious leaders of Jesus’s day couldn’t see that God was fulfilling Zephaniah’s prophecy of God—their King—actually being *with* them. Standing beneath the cross,

they mocked Jesus: “Isn’t he the king of Israel? If he will come down off the cross now, we will believe in him!” (Matthew 27:42). Jesus’s mangled body hung on a Roman execution device while God’s judgment poured down on him. The King of Israel was with us, and God laid our punishment on him.

Jesus knew that his death would usher in the restored world of Zephaniah’s vision—even though we are still waiting for its complete fulfillment. “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to me” (John 12:32). And just as Zephaniah foresaw, Jesus was *happy* to save us (see Hebrews 12:2).

#### Respond

Reread the passage from Zephaniah. In what ways does Jesus fulfill Zephaniah’s description of the king’s work and presence? List several elements of the passage that cause you to praise God for his salvation.

#### Pray

Mighty God, we have failed to be holy and good. Thank you for saving us from the punishment we deserve. We want to trust you and draw near to you. Let us see the glory of King Jesus so that we can sing and shout for joy.



## MONDAY, DECEMBER 17

### Read

People's hopes began to rise, and they began to wonder whether John perhaps might be the Messiah. So John said to all of them, "I baptize you with water, but someone is coming who is much greater than I am. I am not good enough even to untie his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. He has his winnowing shovel with him, to thresh out all the grain and gather the wheat into his barn; but he will burn the chaff in a fire that never goes out."

In many different ways John preached the Good News to the people and urged them to change their ways.

LUKE 3:15-18

### Reflect

For many of us, the most familiar image of Jesus is the emaciated body of a wounded man, hanging on a cross, near death or already dead. At Christmastime, he is portrayed as an infant, swaddled and insulated by hay against the cold. The Christ we're most familiar with is vulnerable. In the frailty and neediness of a human body, he is like us.

But the Jews of Jesus's day expected someone quite different. God's Anointed, the Son of David, would be powerful. He would be God's righteous representative. He would be the Savior of the righteous, and a terror to those who are evil.

This is the Christ John the Baptist expected. When Jesus began his ministry, John didn't recognize him (see Matthew 11:2-3). It is likely that when John preached a message of repentance by the river Jordan, he had the Christ of Psalm 2 in mind. God's Anointed would be a judge, bringing perfect justice.

But Jesus surprised everyone, even his closest friends. *He* was judged. In Michelangelo's famous painting in the Sistine Chapel, the mighty Jesus reigns with scars in his hands, feet, and side. Psalm 2 captured it exactly—the same king who would judge would also save. In fact, the king himself would be the salvation from just punishment: "Happy are all who go to him for protection" (Psalm 2:11). And this message, Luke calls "Good News" (3:18).

The good news is that the Messiah would take God's judgment in his own body and would pour out his Holy Spirit on his followers. Jesus knew why he had been born. He preached about God's judgment, and God's grace. He urged his disciples to receive the grace he



was offering: “Abide in me” (John 15:4 ESV). And when we do that, the good news is that Jesus’s own Spirit abides in us.

#### Respond

We can become uncomfortable with Jesus’s message about judgement on evil, especially when we realize that we’re implicated. But Luke calls it good news for a reason. Even when we have trusted in Jesus for a long time, God still has more grace to pour out in our lives. Ask him for that grace.

#### Pray

Lord Jesus, we come to you for protection. We have failed to be righteous. Abide in us and renew us with your Spirit.

## TUESDAY, DECEMBER 18

### Read

The LORD says, “The time is coming when I will choose as king a righteous descendant of David. That king will rule wisely and do what is right and just throughout the land. When he is king, the people of Judah will be safe, and the people of Israel will live in peace. He will be called ‘The LORD Our Salvation.’”

JEREMIAH 23:5-6

### Reflect

When the prophet Jeremiah predicted God’s new king, he was also looking back to the best king Israel had known: David. Centuries before Jeremiah, God had instructed the prophet Samuel to go to the town of Bethlehem to identify and anoint Israel’s new king. It was a strange process. Samuel had never heard of David, the youngest son of an obscure family from the back end of nowhere. When he got to Bethlehem, Samuel had to wait for David to come home from his shepherding job. When David appeared, God told Samuel, “This is the one—anoint him!” (1 Samuel 16:12).

One thousand years later, a group of wise men came to Jerusalem from the east looking for the promised king of the Jews. Jewish scholars had studied Israel’s prophecies of a mighty king who would appear in Bethlehem. They may have studied the scroll of Samuel that said this king would come from David’s line. Maybe they read Jeremiah, who reiterated that the savior of Israel would be a descendent of David. The new king would act as a shepherd to his people, caring for them tenderly and mightily. He would be, in the words of one hymnwriter, “Great David’s greater Son.”

The scholars knew enough to point the foreigners in the direction of Bethlehem. When the wise men realized they were getting close, “how happy were they, what joy was theirs!” (Matthew 2:10). When they found him, “they knelt down and worshipped him” (Matthew 2:11).

### Respond

The sight of wealthy foreign men kneeling to her infant son must have astonished Jesus’s mother. But, though they may not have realized it, kneeling was the right gesture for meeting God’s Anointed. If the prophecies about this baby were true, then the whole



world would someday kneel before him and worship. Bow your heart before God in worship. He is the mighty, good king who keeps us perfectly safe. Let's worship him!

**Pray**

Christ our King, we proclaim your greatness. We thank you for saving us and reigning over us. Let your kingdom come, Lord.



## WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 19

### Read

The Israelites sinned against the LORD again, and he let the Philistines rule them for forty years.

At that time there was a man named Manoah from the town of Zorah. He was a member of the tribe of Dan. His wife had never been able to have children. The LORD's angel appeared to her and said, "You have never been able to have children, but you will soon be pregnant and have a son. Be sure not to drink any wine or beer, or eat any forbidden food; and after your son is born, you must never cut his hair, because from the day of his birth he will be dedicated to God as a Nazirite. He will begin the work of rescuing Israel from the Philistines."

Then the woman went and told her husband, "A man of God has come to me, and he looked as frightening as the angel of God. I didn't ask him where he came from, and he didn't tell me his name. But he did tell me that I would become pregnant and have a son. He told me not to drink any wine or beer, or eat any forbidden food, because the boy is to be dedicated to God as a Nazirite as long as he lives."

The woman gave birth to a son and named him Samson. The child grew and the LORD blessed him. And the LORD's power began to strengthen him while he was between Zorah and Eshtaol in the Camp of Dan.

JUDGES 13:1-7, 24-25

### Reflect

Samson's birth was announced by an angel, who told his mother that despite her barrenness, she would become pregnant. Her son would be anointed by God to save Israel. The boy would be a Nazirite and he would grow in the Spirit of the Lord, in service to God.

To be a Nazirite was to dedicate yourself to God with a vow, usually for a temporary period. During that time, there were three requirements to your vow: don't drink wine, don't cut your hair, don't go near a dead body (Numbers 6). Nazirites were to be clear-headed and sober. They were not to be defiled by death, the worst of the ritual impurities.

Their long hair was like a priestly crown, a sacred sign of dedication, modeling to everyone around them a lifestyle of repentance, prayer, and the solemn joy of worship.

Before Samson was born, God called him to a lifetime of dedication. God gave Samson remarkable strength and his Spirit to serve his people. But Samson used his strength for himself. He ignored God's Word and broke the rules for Nazirites, and the LORD left him (Judges 16:20). In a final, tragic act, God empowered Samson one last time to destroy the enemies of Israel, though he had to give up his life to do it.

The parallels between the announcement of Samson's birth and the angel's announcement of Jesus's birth are not accidental. But Jesus is different from Samson. Samson's life was marked by his failure to obey God. Jesus's life was one of constant obedience. Samson lived a lifestyle of sin, but Jesus overturned the effects of sin. Samson broke his Nazirite vow by touching the carcass of a dead lion (Judges 14:9). Instead of being made unclean by death, Jesus's touch restored life (Luke 7:14). Samson used his strength to please himself, but Jesus spent his strength for others. Everything he did pleased God. Like Samson, Jesus's death brought victory to God's people; but unlike Samson, Jesus rose victorious over death itself.

#### Respond

When we celebrate Jesus at Christmas, we are rejoicing that he succeeded where Samson failed. Where we have failed. The child announced by Gabriel would die at 33, but to all who believe in him, he gave abundant, everlasting life. Read the story of Samson (Judges 13-16). Take note of the differences between Samson and Jesus. When you do, you will find yourself praising God for the gift of his Son.

#### Pray

Lord Jesus, while we were helpless and wicked, you died for us. We rejoice that you have saved us and made us God's friends! Thank you, Lord.



## THURSDAY, DECEMBER 20

### Read

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy God sent the angel Gabriel to a town in Galilee named Nazareth. He had a message for a young woman promised in marriage to a man named Joseph, who was a descendant of King David. Her name was Mary. The angel came to her and said, "Peace be with you! The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you!"

Mary was deeply troubled by the angel's message, and she wondered what his words meant. The angel said to her, "Don't be afraid, Mary; God has been gracious to you. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king, as his ancestor David was, and he will be the king of the descendants of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end!"

Mary said to the angel, "I am a virgin. How, then, can this be?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and God's power will rest upon you. For this reason the holy child will be called the Son of God. Remember your relative Elizabeth. It is said that she cannot have children, but she herself is now six months pregnant, even though she is very old. For there is nothing that God cannot do."

"I am the Lord's servant," said Mary; "may it happen to me as you have said."

And the angel left her.

LUKE 1:26–38

### Reflect

For the first time since Adam, a human being comes into the world conceived by God apart from natural means. It's preposterous. The reason it matters, though, is not only because it's exceptional. In Gabriel's announcement to Mary, he reveals the deeper significance. Since the child will be conceived by the power of God, he will be *holy*.

Jesus was born a human, yet he did not inherit Adam's curse of sin. His closest friends—the men who knew him tired, misunderstood, harassed, and unjustly accused—made a point of emphasizing his holiness. When they declare that he never once sinned, it's as if years after he lived alongside them, they're still surprised by his goodness (1 Peter 2:22, 1 John 3:5). Despite being tempted as every human being is, he obeyed God perfectly (Hebrews 4:15).

When Gabriel announces that God's Son, born of Mary, will be called holy, he is announcing the beginning of a new type of human. The apostle Paul explains: "Sin came into the world through one man, and his sin brought death with it. As a result, death has spread to the whole human race because everyone has sinned" (Romans 5:12). The whole human race, except for the one man, the child born to Mary. Paul goes on: "But God's grace is much greater, and so is his free gift to so many people through the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ. ... And just as all people were made sinners as the result of the disobedience of one man, in the same way they will all be put right with God as the result of the obedience of the one man [Jesus Christ]" (Romans 5:15, 19).

Just as everyone born shared in sin because of Adam, so everyone who trusts in Jesus will share in his perfect holiness.

#### Respond

In the light of Jesus's holiness, Christmas is as much about our new life as it is his. Because of Jesus, change is possible. We can become like him! In which areas of your life do you think you need to grow in holiness? Ask God to begin to work out his good purposes in those areas.

#### Pray

Lord Christ, thank you that your obedience has been counted to us. Thank you that you made it possible for us to change. Help us to see you more clearly so that we can become more like you.



## FRIDAY, DECEMBER 21

### Read

#### The Woman

I hear my lover's voice.  
He comes running over the mountains,  
    racing across the hills to me.  
My lover is like a gazelle,  
    like a young stag.  
There he stands beside the wall.  
He looks in through the window  
    and glances through the lattice.  
My lover speaks to me.

#### The Man

Come then, my love;  
    my darling, come with me.  
The winter is over; the rains have stopped;  
    in the countryside the flowers are in bloom.  
This is the time for singing;  
    the song of doves is heard in the fields.  
Figs are beginning to ripen;  
    the air is fragrant with blossoming vines.  
Come then, my love;  
    my darling, come with me.  
You are like a dove that hides  
    in the crevice of a rock.  
Let me see your lovely face  
    and hear your enchanting voice.

SONG OF SONGS 2:8-14

### Reflect

Snowmen and sleighs aside, Christmas has little to do with winter. In fact, it would be more appropriate to think of Jesus's birth as the beginning of a great thaw. In "Christmas

Green,” the poet Scott Cairns describes Christ’s “stunning visitation” as a “fuse igniting life.” Instead of snow, a better symbol for Christmas might be a blossoming garden.

In the springtime garden of Song of Songs, a man calls gently and eagerly to his beloved. For many centuries, Jewish and Christian Bible scholars have interpreted this poem as allegorical, representing God’s love for his people.

If we view this passage allegorically, we see how Christ’s love melts our barriers and doubts. We are reassured that he loves us and considers us worth wooing. Just as the lover in the garden, Jesus comes cheerfully. He isn’t dissuaded by obstacles, but has his eyes set on his beloved. He considers her lovely and reassures her of her beauty.

The apostle Paul described Christ’s love for his church with the same mysterious symbolism. He writes, “Christ loved the church and gave his life for it. He did this to dedicate the church to God by his word, after making it clean by washing it in water, in order to present the church to himself in all its beauty—pure and faultless, without spot or wrinkle or any other imperfection” (Ephesians 5:25b-27).

Christ bought the church with his blood. He faced that death in a garden, and when he rose from death, he greeted his friend Mary in another garden. Winter is past. Spring has come.

### Respond

One carol describes the setting of Christmas: a bleak midwinter, a moaning earth. “What can I give Him,” the speaker asks? “Give my heart.” Take a moment to marvel at the extravagant love of Christ coming to us and calling us to him. Offer your heart to him in response.

### Pray

Lord Jesus, we enter your presence with joy and gladness. Help us to understand the greatness of your love, and how full of joy you are. Let your joy be in us, and let our joy be complete.



## SATURDAY, DECEMBER 22

### Read

Mary said,  
“My heart praises the Lord;  
my soul is glad because of God my Savior,  
for he has remembered me, his lowly servant!  
From now on all people will call me happy,  
because of the great things the Mighty God has done for me.  
His name is holy;  
from one generation to another  
he shows mercy to those who honor him.  
He has stretched out his mighty arm  
and scattered the proud with all their plans.  
He has brought down mighty kings from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly.  
He has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away with empty hands.  
He has kept the promise he made to our ancestors,  
and has come to the help of his servant Israel.  
He has remembered to show mercy to Abraham  
and to all his descendants forever!”

LUKE 1:46–55

### Reflect

Though Mary is surprised to be chosen to give birth to the long-awaited Messiah, she recognizes God’s trademark grace. She knows that God is generous. She knows that God upends the earth’s hierarchies. Suddenly, she understands that all of Scripture points towards this great moment of salvation. Perhaps Mary recalls God’s provision of manna in the wilderness: “He has filled the hungry with good things” (verse 53). Maybe she remembers God’s invitation in Isaiah’s prophecy: “Come, everyone who is thirsty—here is water! Come, you that have no money—buy grain and eat! Come! Buy wine and milk—it will cost you nothing! ...Listen to me and do what I say, and you will enjoy the best food of all” (Isaiah 55:1, 2).

Mary knows Scripture, but she can't know the whole story. Not only does Scripture point to a Savior, the Savior is God himself. Her son will represent God's character exactly. In fact, her song about the God of Scripture prophetically describes Jesus. Jesus provided food for crowds of thousands, and he cooked an intimate breakfast for his disciples. He stood up in the temple and cried out an offer of living water. He told his disciples that he was the bread from God, that he himself was the feast (see Matthew 14:13-21; John 6:35, 54; 7:37-39; 21:9-12).

Mary rejoiced to see the fulfillment of God's ancient promises. We rejoice to know the man in whom all of God's promises are yes and amen (2 Corinthians 1:20).

### Respond

Jesus of Nazareth "is the exact likeness of God's own being" (Hebrews 1:3). Read through Mary's song, and try to list examples of how Jesus fulfilled her description of God's salvation. How does Jesus fulfill God's promises in your life?

### Pray

O Lord, you have done wonderful things! You have made known your salvation; you have remembered your steadfast love and your faithfulness to your people. We rejoice in you!



WEEK 4

## BREAK FORTH, O BEAUTEOUS HEAVENLY LIGHT

*Johann von Rist*  
*Translated by John Troutbeck*

Break forth, O beauteous heavenly light,  
and usher in the morning;  
O shepherds, shrink not with affright,  
but hear the angel's warning.  
This Child, now weak in infancy,  
our confidence and joy shall be;  
the power of Satan breaking,  
our peace eternal making.

Break forth, O beauteous heavenly light,  
to herald our salvation;  
He stoops to earth—the God of might,  
our hope and expectation.  
He comes in human flesh to dwell,  
our God with us, Immanuel;  
the night of darkness ending,  
our fallen race befriending.



## SUNDAY, DECEMBER 23

### Read

For this reason, when Christ was about to come into the world, he said to God:

“You do not want sacrifices and offerings,

but you have prepared a body for me.

You are not pleased with animals burned whole on the altar

or with sacrifices to take away sins.

Then I said, ‘Here I am,

to do your will, O God,

just as it is written of me in the book of the Law.”

First he said, “You neither want nor are you pleased with sacrifices and offerings or with animals burned on the altar and the sacrifices to take away sins.” He

said this even though all these sacrifices are offered according to the Law. Then

he said, “Here I am, O God, to do your will.” So God does away with all the old

sacrifices and puts the sacrifice of Christ in their place. Because Jesus Christ did

what God wanted him to do, we are all purified from sin by the offering that he

made of his own body once and for all.

HEBREWS 10:5–10

### Reflect

The wise men’s costly myrrh, a perfume used to anoint corpses, must have seemed a strange gift for a child. Much later, when a woman poured expensive perfume over Jesus, he acknowledged it as preparation for his burial (Matthew 26:12).

Hebrews 10:5 indicates that Jesus left heaven knowing that he would offer his body as a sacrifice to God. In the days leading up to his death, he was acutely aware of the culmination of his ministry and says: “But that is why I came—so that I might go through this hour of suffering” (John 12:27). A few days before his execution, he eats the ritual Passover feast with his disciples. “I have wanted so much to eat this Passover with you before I suffer,” he tells them. Then, breaking and passing the bread, he declares, “This is my body, which is given for you” (Luke 22:15, 19).

The author of Hebrews looks at the astonishing incarnation—God in a human body—and sees the fulfillment of the centuries of sacrifices offered up to God. Jesus “walked the path of obedience all the way to death—his death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8). Jesus’s life on



earth was one of constant obedience. He was continually saying, “Here I am, to do your will, O God” (Hebrews 10:7). When he offered up his body, he was also offering up a life of perfect obedience to God’s will. So Jesus’s sacrifice was accepted, and “we are all purified from sin” (Hebrews 10:10).

The poet Christina Rossetti captures the mystery:

He put his ancient glory by

To live for us,

And then to die.

### Respond

All year, when we eat the Lord’s Supper with other Christians, we remember the Christmas incarnation of Jesus. We recall how much he gave up in order to unite us with him. Reread the last verse of today’s Scripture passage. Write it down in your journal. Try committing it to memory. Feast on these precious words from God.

### Pray

Lord, we praise you for your perfect obedience and your enormous sacrifice. Please help us increasingly to want to do your will.

## MONDAY, DECEMBER 24

### Read

John's father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he spoke God's message:

"Let us praise the Lord, the God of Israel!

He has come to the help of his people and has set them free.

He has provided for us a mighty Savior,

a descendant of his servant David.

He promised through his holy prophets long ago

that he would save us from our enemies,

from the power of all those who hate us.

He said he would show mercy to our ancestors

and remember his sacred covenant.

With a solemn oath to our ancestor Abraham

he promised to rescue us from our enemies

and allow us to serve him without fear,

so that we might be holy and righteous before him

all the days of our life.

"You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High God.

You will go ahead of the Lord

to prepare his road for him,

to tell his people that they will be saved

by having their sins forgiven.

Our God is merciful and tender.

He will cause the bright dawn of salvation to rise on us

and to shine from heaven on all those who live in the dark shadow of death,

to guide our steps into the path of peace."

LUKE 1:67-79

### Reflect

Zechariah preached the good news to his infant son: the mighty Savior was about to arrive. All the prophecies of the Scripture would be fulfilled. The infinitely holy God would save his people and establish a relationship with them. It would be a

personal, intimate relationship. God's people would now be able to "serve him without fear" (verse 74).

*Without fear.*

Zechariah echoed the old prophecy of Zephaniah: "The LORD, the king of Israel, is with you; there is no reason now to be afraid" (Zephaniah 3:15). His words foreshadowed the words of the angel who several months later spoke into the cold night sky: "Fear not." Much later, another angel sat in an empty tomb and said the same thing to a frightened woman.

The book of Hebrews explains that Jesus tasted death for us and delivered "those who were slaves all their lives because of their fear of death" (Hebrews 2:15). The apostle Paul declares that those who are in Jesus need have no fear of God's judgment (Romans 8:1). You can almost hear Paul whisper, with tears in his eyes: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31) There is nothing to fear.

This is the tender mercy of our God. God himself is with us. He is *our* God. He will wipe away all tears from our eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain (Revelation 21:4). Zechariah announced that a new day was dawning. The old things have disappeared. Let us rejoice.

### Respond

In contrast to the bleak shadows of sin and the darkness of death, God's light has dawned in our heart: we know him now in the face of Jesus (2 Corinthians 4:6). This is the God who spoke "Let there be light" and whose presence will light the heavenly city. If you are able, try to praise God with others on this Christmas Eve, whether that's at a church service or over the phone with a friend. In the darkness of the evening, thank God for the bright light of our salvation.

### Pray

Father, Son, and Spirit: We praise you for your great salvation! Shine the light of your presence in our lives. Give us your joy on Christmas Day.

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### 21

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