

“Russ Ramsey has that rare gift—the ability to animate the imagination. May you and yours take up this book, read it, and be renewed.”

Scott Sauls, author of *Jesus Outside the Lines*

“What better way to prepare our hearts for Christmas than to do what Russ has done so well in *The Advent of the Lamb of God*—rehearse the magnificent story that begins centuries before, the magnificent story woven through all of the Bible. The story of how God loves his children and has come to rescue them.”

Sally Lloyd-Jones, author of *The Jesus Storybook Bible*

“So many authors write like they’re on a mission to prove something about their own brilliance. Not Russ Ramsey. He’s doing something entirely different. Even the simple preface is a study in how calming, winsome, and selfless writing can be. Put this book in your hands and feel loved.”

Charlie Peacock, coexecutive director at Art House America, and record producer for Switchfoot and the Civil Wars

“When Andrew Peterson sings ‘Behold the Lamb of God,’ three worlds collide: ours, Abraham’s, and Jesus’. Russ Ramsey’s book opens the doors between those worlds and helps us bring them together.”

Michael Card, singer and songwriter, author of *Inexpressible*

“Russ Ramsey tells a story you’ve heard a hundred times and still haven’t heard enough. With remarkable attention to the facts of the matter—the water dripping from John the Baptist’s beard, the heft of Abraham’s knife, the groans of a girl giving birth on a stable floor—Russ brings to life the story that brings us to life. Here is glory made visible, tangible, audible. Which is to say, here is the Incarnation.”

Jonathan Rogers, author of the Wilderking Trilogy, *The Charlatan’s Boy*, and *The Terrible Speed of Mercy*

“Ramsey deftly retells the story of Jesus with a pastor’s heart and an artist’s touch. In this book, real people sigh and cry, tremble and rejoice. It captured my heart. My family will treasure it for years to come.”

Randall Goodgame, singer and songwriter

“*The Advent of the Lamb of God* offers readers a sterling opportunity to walk through God’s story of redemption. Ideal for personal or family devotions, the stories are told with imagination, verve, and gospel-driven joy.”

Dan Doriani, pastor, professor, and author of *The Sermon on the Mount: The Character of a Disciple*

“Russ Ramsey is that rare kind of writer: both an astute theologian with a comprehensive knowledge of the Holy Scriptures and a masterful storyteller. In beautifully written prose, he takes us on a trip through the history of redemption, bringing to life the true, tall tale of a Divine Lover who comes to rescue his people. As a loving pastor, Russ shepherds this great story as well or better than any writer. Not only is he that skillful, he’s that full of care, which is no small thing.”

Andi Ashworth, coexecutive director of Art House America, and author of *Real Love for Real Life: The Art and Work of Caring*

“This story, and the compelling beauty with which Russ tells it, is what helps us make sense of the big story, which we need to hear all year long, our whole lives long.”

Nancy Guthrie, author of the Seeing Jesus in the Old Testament Bible study series



RETELLING THE STORY SERIES



THE ADVENT
OF THE
LAMB OF GOD

RUSS RAMSEY



IVP Books

An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois

InterVarsity Press
P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426
ivpress.com
email@ivpress.com

©2018 by Russell Brown Ramsey

Originally published as Behold the Lamb of God by Rabbit Room Press in 2011.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from InterVarsity Press.

InterVarsity Press® is the book-publishing division of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA®, a movement of students and faculty active on campus at hundreds of universities, colleges, and schools of nursing in the United States of America, and a member movement of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. For information about local and regional activities, visit intervarsity.org.

Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Published in association with the literary agency of Wolgemuth & Associates.

Cover design and illustration: David Fassett

Interior design: Jeanna Wiggins

ISBN 978-0-8308-4398-5 (print)

ISBN 978-0-8308-8523-7 (digital)

Printed in the United States of America ∞

InterVarsity Press is committed to ecological stewardship and to the conservation of natural resources in all our operations. This book was printed using sustainably sourced paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

P 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
Y 35 34 33 32 31 30 29 28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18

FOR LISA, 

who tells me this story

with beauty and grace

every day.



CONTENTS

Author's Note 1

Preface: Telling a True Tall Tale. 3

PART 1: AWAITING THE MESSIAH

1 Behold, the Lamb of God 11

2 Hear 17

3 Redemption Amidst the Wreckage. 22

4 Number the Stars of Heaven 28

5 God Will Provide a Lamb. 34

6 Jacob and Two Women. 42

7 Walking with a Limp 47

8 Four Hundred Years 52

9 Blood on the Doorpost 59

10 The War Within. 66

11 The Days of the Judges 72

12 King Saul 78

13 The Boy-King of Bethlehem. 84

14 Cast Me Not Away 91

15 The Edge of Ruin 97

16 I Have Loved You 103



PART 2: THE SAVIOR HAS COME

17	Herod the Great, King of the Jews	111
18	The Silence of the Priest	118
19	The Ordinary Overshadowed.	124
20	When Joseph Woke from His Dream	129
21	The Birth of Jesus	134
22	Where the Lambs Are Kept	139
23	One Star Lit for Them	145
24	The Hearts of Many Revealed.	150
25	Son of God, Son of Man	156
	Acknowledgments	163
	Notes	165

AUTHOR'S NOTE



IN 2011, I RELEASED A version of *The Advent of the Lamb of God* under the name *Behold the Lamb of God: An Advent Narrative*. That edition was a kind of companion piece to Andrew Peterson's beautiful Christmas record, *Behold the Lamb of God: The True Tall Tale of the Coming of Christ*. This book would not exist without that record or my friendship with Andrew. He has encouraged me to write and has helped me grow as a writer. This has been a hallmark of our friendship since the day he invited me to become a regular contributor to The Rabbit Room, a Christ-centered online community he started that fosters spiritual formation through music, story, and art.

Every Christmas season, Andrew and his band of amazing musicians take that record on the road. If you have the opportunity to see Andrew's *Behold the Lamb of God* concert, I suggest you do so. Either way, get the record. It is a beautiful work of art.

Preface

TELLING A TRUE TALL TALE



*B*ACK BEFORE FATHER ABRAHAM HAD ANY SONS, the God of the universe made him a promise. He would be the father of a great nation, and through him all the people of the earth would be blessed. One night God brought him outside his tent in the desert and said, “Look toward heaven. Count the stars if you’re able. So shall your offspring be.”

I grew up hearing stories like this. But something came alive for me one night in college when I found myself in the Middle East, not too far from Abraham’s desert, lying on my back, staring up at that same starry sky. In the desert, the night is a magnificent thing to behold. The Lord silenced me with his glory.

I thought about this oath God made to Abraham. Here was a man who, for his entire life, had been unable to have children with his wife, though God’s promise to him was all about descendants. I thought about how hard this would have been to accept, how

improbable was the math. And then I pictured Abraham stepping out beneath the brilliant canopy of stars flung across the heavens, and I imagined the Lord silencing his doubt with the same glory he was now using to silence me.

What a mercy that must have been to Abraham, for God to meet him in his doubt with this display of glory. Though Abraham couldn't begin to count the stars above, his life was in the hands of the one who made them.

Every story God tells is filled with glory. Like Abraham beneath the stars, I want to see it. I want to be captured by the wonder of impossible promises coming true. I want to read the pages of Scripture with my eyes open to the beauty of mercy and grace.

I want this for you as well.

One of my highest hopes for this book is that it will deepen your understanding of the wonder and glory of the story of the Bible. Biblical literacy is one of the most important goals of my work as a pastor. I want people to know what the Bible says.

The challenge this book presented was this: How do I tell the story of God's redemptive purpose in sending his Son in a way that's faithful to the text of Scripture, knowing I must abridge or omit many wonderful and important moments? This puzzle took me through the process of embracing what this book is and what it is not.

First, this book is not complete. My focus in this volume of the *Retelling the Story* series is specifically to tell the story of the need for and the coming of Christ, so I've left a lot of Scripture untouched. For example, though I draw much from the teachings and language of Paul's Epistles, the scope of *The Advent of the Lamb of God* ends before Paul comes on the scene, so here I make no mention of this man the Lord used to write half of the

New Testament. Paul's story is told in the third volume in this series, *The Mission of the Body of Christ*.

Also, this book is not a substitute for the Bible itself. In Deuteronomy, the Lord instructs his people to tell their children about him continually—when they're tucking them in at night, when they're walking down the road, when they're sitting down to eat. They were to have the stories of Scripture posted everywhere—on their doorposts, wrapped around their arms, emblazoned on their foreheads, woven into their conversations. There was the text of Scripture—the Law of Moses—and then there were the stories people told about it, those “have you read the one about” moments. This book is a collection of those moments.

Last, this book is not exclusively a Christmas book. We haven't told the Christmas story well if we've limited its relevance to one month of the year. This book is designed to guide you through a contemplative season of Advent if you like—twenty-five chapters, one for each day of December up until Christmas Day. But I hope taking twenty-five days in June to read it will be just as meaningful.

Now I want to tell you what this book is.

This book is meant to be a servant of the Bible. I've packed this book with hundreds of Scripture references. Let me explain how I use them. Throughout this book I paraphrase pretty freely in order to maintain a unified voice. Rarely do I quote Scripture directly or at length. This applies to character dialogue as well. If a character says something and there's a Scripture reference linked to it in the notes section, that doesn't necessarily mean I'm quoting the original text. I'm probably not. More than likely I'm paraphrasing and distilling a larger moment in Scripture to work within the limits of this book. That said, those references are there to lead you to the truer, taller tale Scripture unfolds with perfect sufficiency.

While I'm on this point I should note that I engage in some speculation in this book, imagining how certain conversations happened, how particular characters felt, and what various scenes looked like. I have tried to limit my speculations to reasonable inferences that wouldn't redirect the Bible's narrative arc. I've avoided inventing characters or manufacturing extrabiblical encounters. I've tried to keep my speculative input scarce. I've also worked to keep it within the natural and plausible lines of human nature.

For example, Scripture tells us nothing about how Joseph felt that night in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. But as a father of four, I imagine he must have felt some of what I experienced when my children were born—helplessness, joy, worry, awe. I've attributed some of these feelings to Joseph on the basis that any young man helping his wife give birth to their first child would certainly be enveloped in a flurry of emotions like these. My hope is that this journey through the pages of Scripture will capture your imagination in ways that will serve your lifelong study of the Bible.

Along with being a servant of the Bible, this book is also my story. Every picture of brokenness reflected in these pages is in some measure the story of my brokenness. Every need that rises to the surface is in some way a need of my own. Every tendency toward rebellion, every cry of desperation, every prayer for forgiveness, and every hope of redemption rings true in me. In these pages, I'm telling the story of how God loved and rescued me. I believe Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away my sin.



*For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

ISAIAH 9:6-7



PART 1

AWAITING THE
MESSIAH



1

BEHOLD, THE LAMB OF GOD

John 1:29-34

H*E DID NOT HAVE A HOME.*

People said he survived on little more than wild honey and locusts, and by the look of him, it couldn't have been much more. He wore a coat of camel hair he cinched together with a leather belt, just like the prophet Elijah had done.

Normally he was the one people stopped to behold, but at this particular moment, as he stood waist-deep in the Jordan, anyone looking at him saw that his attention was fixed on the man from Galilee headed his way. His face wore a mix of astonishment and joy as the man approached.

“Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!” His voice trembled as water dripped from his outstretched finger and scraggly beard into the river where he stood.

People might have dismissed this wild man as they would have any other tortured soul driven to live in the caves and wadis of the Judean wilderness—were it not for the fact that people knew his story. Or rather, they knew his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth.

These were honorable people. Zechariah had served many years as a priest in the temple, Elizabeth faithfully at his side in spite of the fact that, well into their old age, they had been unable to conceive any children.

Being a priest, Zechariah knew the old stories of the barren women God had worked through to deliver impossible promises to an unbelieving people—to their people. When Zechariah and his wife were young, these tales gave them hope. God could break through her barrenness if he wanted. He had done it before. But that was a long time ago, and the stories were about people whose lives were central to Israel's identity. Zechariah and his wife hardly regarded themselves as that important.

Eventually they accepted that they would be childless, though they wondered why the God they loved and served had determined, in his infinite wisdom, that they wouldn't know the blessing of children.

Then one day the Lord sent his angel down with a message. The Author of Life was going to open Elizabeth's womb and give Zechariah a son. But this son wasn't given merely for his father's legacy. This boy would have a specific function in the unfolding story the people of Israel had been living and telling as far back as anyone could remember.

The angel told them, "He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just. He will make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

And they were to give him the name John.

As a boy, John grew and became strong in the Spirit. His little mind was filled with wonder as he turned over the stories his parents told him about his birth. Angels were involved, and miracles. He was their miracle, a gift given by God himself not only to his grateful parents, but to the world. Everyone knew John as the boy with an intensity beyond his years—as though his entire boyhood was a time of preparation and he knew it.

Not long after the boy became a man, he moved out into the wilderness of Judea. It was an inhospitable place—windy, craggy, and hot. It was also the sort of place where God had dwelt with his ancestors during the exodus. There, without the simplest of creature comforts, John was left to find solace and companionship in God alone.

Though his days in the desert could be lonesome to the point of pain, wilderness life suited him. It was a contemplative way to live but one that strengthened him. He had no basic needs that he could not meet. Many of his days were filled with simple tasks such as finding water, scrounging for food, staying out of the heat of the sun, and gathering wood for fires at night. Living off the land meant he needed to travel light. He needed to be able to go where the resources could be found and move on when they were spent.

But it wasn't just minimalist living that brought John to the desert; it was his call from the Lord to proclaim the message he had been born to tell. John didn't move to the desert to withdraw from his people. He went to prepare for his role among them.

Soon he emerged as a man with a voice and a clear conscience about how to use it. Wild and fearless, looking like he had grown out of the banks on which he stood, he called to all who passed, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" And he did it as one who seemed to possess the authority to demand such a response.

He was, as the prophet Isaiah had said, “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.’”

Prepare for what? A collision of worlds. Like a meteor falling to the earth, heaven was bearing down on the land of John’s forefathers. An old promise, so old that it had become little more than a legend, was about to be fulfilled—and nothing would ever be the same.

The Messiah was coming.

The very fact that so many people considered the Messiah’s coming more of a fairy tale than a future event was, in itself, a cause for repentance. It wasn’t just that God had promised to do it. It was that the reason he promised to do it was like an intimate promise between lovers. God’s promised Messiah was a merciful gift of love to a people who needed both mercy and love. He would come to them in all their pain, brokenness, and struggles and make everything new. They were desperate for this, and the proof of their desperation was perhaps most evident in the fact that they couldn’t bring themselves to live as though this promise was real.

Repent! The kingdom of heaven is at hand!

There was something magnetic about John, something in the way he suspended those he attracted between the poles of preparation and perdition until they understood that without repentance, there they would hover—not necessarily feeling lost, perhaps, but not assured that they were found either. Hope began to rise in the hearts of the hopeless. Even in the call to repent they heard the promise that if they confessed their sins, admitted their doubts, and acknowledged how their hearts had become cynical and jaded, God would hear them. God would hear them.

People came from all over to the Jordan to step into that water with John the Baptizer. They confessed their failures, their lust, their greed, their pride. They admitted to him things they swore they would never tell a soul.

But why? Who was he?

Israel's religious leaders had no answer, so they sent priests to investigate. Did this man think he was the Messiah? Or Elijah come back from his celestial chariot ride?

John was clear in his answer. He was neither Elijah nor the Messiah.

So the priests asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

John told them, "I baptize with water because there is a man, one who stands among you, and the strap of his sandal I'm not worthy to untie. Though you do not know him, he lives among us even now, and he is the Messiah!"

Should they have known him? Or, if nothing else, should they not have been surprised at John's rebuke? These were the priests of Israel, experts in the law and lore of God's chosen people. Israel was a nation with a story, a well-rehearsed narrative these priests were sworn to preserve and pass down. John himself was a part of that tale, and so were they. And yet, like so many of their countrymen, they had begun to forget the story of God's promises to them.

But it was such a beautiful story. It was the story of how their holy God had cut a covenant promise in blood to redeem and restore the children who had rebelled against him. It was the story of how Jacob's line came to be a nation—sometimes mighty, sometimes fragile, but always prone to wander and forget their God.

It was the story of generations of war, infighting, and exile that should have wiped them off the face of the earth. The fact that they survived all this and much more testified to God's fidelity to his promise never to leave them or forsake them. That alone proved God was not through with the story he was writing. And if that was true, it meant he wasn't through with them either.

Even though it was still unfolding, it was already quite a story to tell, and it was the priests' job to tell it. But in order to tell it, they had to know it. And to know it, they had to listen—which was why, since their earliest recorded history, every time the people of Israel gathered before the Lord for worship, the first word spoken to them was a command:

“Hear!”



2

HEAR

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

HEAR, O ISRAEL! The Lord your God is one. Love him. Love him with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

Long before John the Baptizer set foot in the Jordan, even before the days of King David and the building of the temple in Jerusalem, in the days of Moses not long after the Hebrew people’s exodus from Egypt, they began their worship gatherings with this one word: *Hear*.

They were to worship the Lord, and they were to understand why they should. The call to worship wasn’t a detached decree to render affection to an unknown deity—the God who called them was anything but detached. This command was a call to remember. They were to rehearse in their minds and hearts and homes this story—their story—the story of how the Maker of heaven and earth had called their people to himself and bound himself to them as their God.

Though it was a story still unfolding, they knew enough to understand that the Lord their God was one in number and in nature, and that the only proper way to respond to his dealings with them was to love him with everything they had and everything they were.

At that time most of the world bowed in worship to a host of gods, believing each had the power to bless or to curse. The entire pagan world had fashioned a tapestry of religious observance, weaving the warp of the moods and demands of the gods with the woof of the tributes and rituals of man, all to win the gods' favor while keeping their fury at bay. Hopefully.

The pagan gods were not there to be known; they were there to be feared. They were not there to be loved; they were there to be placated. They were many, and they were temperamental. The people lived in fear of these forces, which could lavish great prosperity upon their households but could also scorch the earth beneath them.

Israel's God was different. He was definite, and his character was immutably fixed. And they were to love him for it with everything they had.

They were to love him with all their heart. In the seat of their deepest dreams and desires, in the place where they wrestled with their sorrows and clung to flickering hopes, they were to love him.

They were to love him with all their soul. In the place that made each individual unique, in the inner court of the mind where decisions were made, in the forming of the bonds between friends and lovers as well as in the coming together of a community, they were to love him.

They were to love him with all their might. In the outward expressions of the passions and decisions of the heart and soul, in the places where men's thoughts turned to action and resolve turned to progress, they were to love him.

In their creativity and in their learning, in their working and in their resting, in their building up and in their tearing down, they were to love him. They were to love him as whole people, in all their weakness and in all their strength. On their best days and on their worst, in the darkest hours of their loneliest nights and at the tables of their most abundant feasts, they were to love him.

This was the heart of Israel's religion: love. Only divine love made sense of the world. This love went beyond a mere feeling. This love was doctrine. Israel's story was a story of being kept, and the only reasonable response was to love the Keeper.

This was more than the lore of old men spinning yarns. This was history—an actual, unbroken chain of actions and consequences, one following the other like chapters in a book, weaving together an inseparable union of narrative and law. Narrative told the story and law said, “If this is the nature of your God, then love him with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength.”

The people of Israel were to be a people of this law. And they were to post that law everywhere. They were to nail it to the doorposts of their homes and on their gates, that they might remember it in all their comings and goings. They were to bind it to their arms, that it might guide whatever work they set their hands to. They were to lash it to their foreheads, right between their eyes, that it might be the focus of every conversation and every face-to-face relationship they knew.

They were never to depart from this harmony of story and statute. It was to be their life. They were to teach it to their families. They were to recount the wondrous deeds of their almighty God, never stopping until the story was so ingrained in their children that those little ones would understand not only that this story was their story but also that they would tell it when they had children of their own.

This is what they were to tell their children: “Hear, children of Israel! The Lord your God is one. Love him with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” It was a religion of relationship, but this relational response of love to a singular, omnipotent God was so gloriously uncommon in those days that it must have sounded to many like a tall tale.

And it is.

But a true one.

Woven throughout the story are all of humanity’s wrath and greed and lust and gluttony and sloth and envy and pride—together in force with all of their consequences. But through that darkness shine the bright rays of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

It is the story of evil against good, of darkness locked in an epic struggle to snuff out the light forever. Will the darkness prevail in the end, or will the light overcome the darkness?

This, ultimately, is what the story is about. It is a tale filled with people in trouble, all living somewhere between wandering and homecoming, between devastation and restoration, between transgression and grace. Every mortal character in the story needs rescue, but they have all turned aside, and together they have become corrupt. There is no one who does good, not even one.

It’s a textured story. But after clearing away all the levels of intrigue, conflict, and suspense facing mankind, this story is not ultimately about mortals. It is a story of divine love.

The law of the Lord is a love story.

It’s the story of the one true God calling a people his beloved, though they’ve lived in perpetual rebellion against him. They weren’t meant to live this way. Still, they did—forgetful and fickle, stiff-necked and proud.

Nevertheless, though their lives were a ruin of their own making, God swore a covenant oath to redeem them. Everything wrong with the world he would put right. He would remove their hearts of stone and give them hearts of flesh, putting a new spirit within them. And he would never, ever stop loving them. God was pursuing them.

Since the beginning, this story has had an end—a glorious end. God's call on the lives of his people, ultimately, is to himself—though it would come at a greater cost than anyone could have imagined. The story ends with the maker and lover of the souls of men drawing his people to himself—purchasing their redemption through the lifeblood of his own Son. God did not spare his Son but gave him for us all. And if this is true, how will he not also, through his Son, graciously give us all things?

The tale is a tall one, but it's true.

This is that story.