

Jotham's Journey



A Storybook for Advent

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Jotham's Journey: A Storybook for Advent

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A Story for Advent

Stir us up, O Lord, to make ready for your only-begotten Son. May we be able to serve you with purity of soul through the coming of him who lives and reigns.

Advent Prayer



Advent. *Adventus. Ecce advenit Dominator Dominus.* Behold, the Lord, the Ruler, is come. Reaching back two millennia to the birth of the Christ child and forward to his reign on earth, the tradition of Advent is a threefold celebration of the birth of Jesus, his eventual second coming to earth, and his continued presence in our lives here and now. God in our past, God in our future, God in our present.

Advent.

It started with people going hungry to purify and prepare themselves for holy living. A *fast*, we call it, and such a fast was ordered by the Council of Saragossa in A.D. 381. For three weeks before Epiphany (a feast in January that commemorates the divine revelation of Jesus to the gentile Magi), the people were to prepare themselves by fasting and prayer. The tradition spread to France in A.D. 581 by decree of the Council of Macon, and to Rome and beyond thereafter. Gregory the First refined the season to its present form in about 600 when he declared that it should start the fourth Sunday before Christmas.

Fasting is no longer a part of Advent in most homes and churches (though it wouldn't be a bad idea). For us it means taking a few minutes each day, for the three or four weeks before Christmas, to center our thoughts on Truth Incarnate lying in a feeding trough in Bethlehem.

It's a time of worship, a time of reflection, a time of focus, and a time of family communion. In the midst of December's commotion and stress, Advent is a few moments to stop, catch your breath, and renew your strength from the only One who can provide true strength.

Jotham's Journey is one tool you can use to implement a time of Advent in your family—whether yours is a traditional family structure, or one of the many combinations of fathers and mothers, stepparents and grandparents and guardians and children that make up today's families. You can use this story to implement Advent even if your family is just you.

Set aside a few minutes each day, beginning the fourth Sunday before Christmas (see the chart in the back of the book) to light the Advent candles, read the Jotham story and devotional for that day, and pray together. You can also use an Advent calendar (see "Advent Customs"), sing a favorite Christ-centered carol (Frosty's a nice guy, but has no place in Advent), and have a time of family sharing.

In our family, we set aside fifteen minutes each night before the youngest child goes to bed. Our Advent wreath has a traditional place on a table next to the living room reading chair. The children take turns lighting the candles and reading all the windows of the Advent calendar, and then adding that day's reading at the end. By the light of the Advent candles I read the last few lines of the previous day's Jotham story, then go on to today's story and devotion. Afterward my wife leads in prayer as we all hold hands. We close by singing one verse of a carol. Then the youngest child lights her own "bedside" candle from the Advent candles and makes her way to bed by candlelight. (This is only for children who are old enough to know how to use a candle safely.) Even when work or visiting takes us out of town, we carry *Jotham's Journey* and a candle with us to keep our Advent tradition. Sometimes we even get to share our tradition with those we are visiting.

Simple, short, spiritual. A wonderful way to keep the shopping, traffic, rehearsals, concerts, parties, and all the other preparations of December in balance with the reality of God in our lives—past, present, and future.

Advent. *Adventus. Ecce advenit Dominator Dominus.* Behold, the Lord, the Ruler, is come. May God richly bless you and your family as you prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ!

Advent Customs

Advent itself is simply any time set apart for spiritual preparation. But most people associate the word Advent with various traditions and customs that have grown up around Christmas in many of the world's cultures. Early in history these customs took the forms of fasts and feasts. Today, they most often take the forms of candles, wreaths, and calendars.

Most churches and families use Advent candles to celebrate the season. One candle is used for each week of Advent and a fifth for Christmas Day. The first, second, and fourth candles are violet, symbolizing penitence. The third is pink, symbolizing joy, and the Christmas Day candle is white, symbolizing the purity of Christ.

Advent candles are usually part of an Advent wreath. While some traditions hang the wreath, it is most commonly used flat, on a table. The circle of the wreath represents the hope of eternal life we have through Christ. The circle itself is made of evergreen branches, symbolizing the abundant life Jesus promised us here and now. The first four candles are positioned along the outside ring of the wreath and the fifth is placed in the center.

Some traditions use a slanted board instead of a wreath to hold the candles. The board is about four inches by twelve, and raised six inches on one end. Four holes are drilled along the length of the board for the first four candles, and the fifth candle is placed at the top.

Advent calendars are popular with children and teach them the Christmas story in an active way. Also called an "Advent house," the calendar is shaped like a house, with a window for each day of Advent. Behind each window is a small portion of the Christmas story (usually from the Book of Luke). Each night the family reads the story from these windows, ending with the window for that day.



Darkness

Light the first violet candle.



Jotham pulled the scratchy grey blanket more tightly around his shoulders, but the wind still slithered down his neck. It was colder now that the sun had dropped below the bare hilltops behind him. Far off to his right was the salty sea where nothing lived. And just over that ridge in front of him—the one that formed the other side of the valley he was in—his family camped. They would be asleep now, warm and safe inside the finest goatskin tents ever made. *I would be, too*, Jotham thought. *If only Father weren't so stubborn!*

A devil's howl came from somewhere in the distance and echoed off the valley walls. A jackal, Jotham knew instantly. A wild dog. Far enough away as not to be a danger to his little herd of lambs, though on this particular night he had no lambs to worry about. Still, the sound stabbed at Jotham's heart like a knife. He sat perfectly still for several minutes, careful not to make even a breath of noise. One couldn't lie too cautious when jackals were about.

The jackal howled again. *Closer this time*, Jotham judged. The thought sent tingles spreading out from his spine, like a million ants biting his skin. Not that he was afraid, of course. He was Jotham of Jericho, after all! Ready to fight jackals or snakes or bears to defend his flock!

But, still, a ten-year-old boy, alone, with only his tunic, his staff, and a little wool blanket, could be a very tempting meal for a hungry jackal. Jotham wedged himself a little deeper into the craggy rock. He didn't really like the thought of spending another night in the cold, but it was worth it, wasn't it? Jotham wasn't quite so sure anymore.

Everything had been fine until yesterday. Each morning Jotham would gather his lambs,

lead them to the drinking hole, and then to a small field of green grass where they could eat and play all day. In the evening he'd bring them back to camp again, to rejoin the rest of the flock. His older brothers would do the same with the bigger sheep, only his *brothers* got to go to the fields that were bigger and farther away. Sometimes they even got to spend a whole night out with their flock, sleeping under the stars on goatskin mats Mother had made for them. They even got to take their meals with them, carrying them in special baskets that stacked on top of each other and tied together with a leather thong. All *Jotham* ever got was a piece of bread and a chunk of dried meat, carried in a bag made from the stomach of a goat. A bag that was now empty, Jotham remembered, and his stomach let out a growl so loud he was afraid the jackal would hear.

But then yesterday everything had changed. Jotham had just picked up his lunch bag and hugged his mother when he heard his father talking to Jethro, Ephraim, and Eleazar, his older brothers. "Take your flocks to the Valley of Hebron," his father was saying. "You will find there a man named Zadok of Kadesh. Sell him the better tenth of your sheep. He will give you a fair price."

At those words Jotham's heart began to ache. The Valley of Hebron! That was right next to the *city* of Hebron! His brothers were going to a city with thousands of people, a marketplace full of exotic foods and magical toys, a city with deep wells and brightly colored flags and music that played all day and all night. Hebron! Oh how Jotham longed to go with his brothers, to see the sights and to smell the smells of a city of wonders. In fact he could almost taste . . .

"I'm going with them!"

The sound of Jotham's voice had shocked even himself. At his words everyone stopped, then turned and stared at him. Finally, his father spoke.

"This task is for your brothers, Jotham. You are not yet ready to leave your mother's side."

"I'm going with them!" Jotham had said again, his voice so loud and high that the sheep nearby began to wail in fright. "It's not fair that they get to go to Hebron and I have to stay here."

Jotham's father took a deep breath, then walked slowly toward him. Jotham tried to keep

the fear he felt from showing on his face. His father was a big man, tall as a tree, it seemed. And strong. Jotham had once seen him wrestle a full-sized camel to the ground when it went mad from disease.

But instead of raising his hand or his voice to Jotham, his father slowly knelt down on one knee to look at him eye-to-eye, and placed his hand gently on Jotham's shoulder. "Jotham," he said evenly, "your time for journeys away from my tent will come soon, but it is not yet here. You will remain with me and tend to your lambs."

Jotham fought to hold back the anger and the tears. He knew the sting of his father's hand, and did not wish to know it again, but this was so unfair!

"I want to go," he said, lips trembling.

"Yes, I know," his father answered. "But you cannot. There are too many dangers, and your brothers have enough responsibilities without looking after you as well."

Jotham wanted to yell at his father, to say awful things that would make his father hurt as much as *he* did. But he dared not. So instead he pushed aside his father's hand and turned and ran away. He ran to the water hole, and then beyond it. He ran over the hills where he grazed his lambs, then over the other side until he could no longer see the tents of his father. And then he kept running. When he finally stopped, he sat down at the base of a gnarled tree and cried out his anger and frustration. "You can't tell *me* what to do," he yelled into the wind. And he decided then and there that he would not go back to his father's tent until his father could treat him like a man!

And so he had sat in the shade, waiting for nothing except time to pass, and thinking angry thoughts about his father and brothers. When the sun was directly overhead, he took out the bread and meat his mother had packed. He ate it all in the time it took for an ant to carry a single crumb to its nest a few feet away. After that he had started to walk among the rocks and cliffs and canyons, places he had never seen before. He practiced throwing rocks with his leather sling, and drew pictures in the dirt with a stick. And slowly, as his anger began to disappear, he became afraid. Not of bears or snakes or scorpions, but afraid of what he had done.

Late in the afternoon he began to hear his brothers and father far off in the distance calling his name. He wanted to answer, but he just couldn't bring himself to apologize. The

voices continued throughout the evening, and each time he heard his name, another measure of guilt was sprinkled on his heart. But he *could not* answer! They would all laugh at him, and tell stories of his foolishness. And so he kept quiet.

Just before the sun had dropped completely behind the cliffs, the voices had stopped. No one called his name any longer. The air became cold and damp, and Jotham longed to return to the fires of his father's tent. But then he thought of his brothers. They were on their way to Hebron by now, and this made Jotham angry all over again. *Let them make their journey*, he decided. *I'll stay here and let Father worry! I'll show him I'm big enough to take care of myself!*

But the night was long and held very little sleep for Jotham. When the sun finally peeked over the ridge to the east and began to calm the shivers that had shaken his body all night, he ached to feel his mother's hug and taste her morning stew. There was no anger in him any longer, only fear. He felt fear of the punishment he was sure to receive.

And so he had devised a plan. He would cross back over the great ridge and move closer to his father's tents, to the field where the lambs graze. His father would be sure to find him there. With a rock, Jotham would scrape his forehead until it bled, making it look as if he'd been attacked by thieves. He'd even throw his lunch bag and staff away to make his story seem true. Then he would lie there and pretend to be unconscious until his father came and found him. His father would have sympathy for Jotham, and maybe punish him a bit less.

Immediately, Jotham jumped to his feet to carry out his plan. It took most of the following morning to find his grazing field—everything looked so strange from this side of the ridge. Once there, he found a hand-size stone. But it was much harder to make the injury than he had imagined. The rough rock hitting his forehead really hurt! He finally managed to draw a little blood. Then he lay down to wait. And wait. And wait.

But nobody ever came.

As the sun began to set again Jotham became angry once more. *They didn't even care enough to come and look for me*, he thought. *Well, I'll show them! I'll just stay out here and let them worry!*

And so here he was now, pulling the scratchy grey blanket more tightly around his shoulders, his stomach grumbling and aching as it never had before, and listening to a jackal

howl in the distance. *Maybe I should just go back*, Jotham thought now. *There's food in my father's tent. All the punishment in the world would be worth it if I could have even a bite of bread.*

The jackal wailed once more, much closer now. *Maybe Father was right*, Jotham thought. *It is dangerous out here. And I could probably never keep up with my brothers on the long trip to Hebron, they're so much bigger and stronger.*

Suddenly Jotham made a decision. He jumped to his feet, pulled the blanket around himself, and headed off across the valley toward his father's tents, watching his step in the moonlight. *I will tell Father I was wrong*, he decided, *and ask his forgiveness. I will take my punishment, and then I will eat. Yes, I will eat!* The thought of his mother's bread and a thick slice of meat made Jotham's mouth water. *I will eat and I will sleep by the fire, and tomorrow I will take my lambs to graze just like always.*

As Jotham neared the watering hole he actually began to smile, glad that his little journey was finally over. But then he came around the last of the hills . . . and stopped dead in his tracks.

His father's tents were gone.

The broad field where they had camped was now bare. The fire pits were cold. The sheep pens were empty.

They left me! Jotham thought. *They didn't even care enough to come and look for me!* He sat in the dirt and began to cry, and he cried for what seemed like most of the night. He cried at the thought of being alone, he cried at the thought of being left behind. But mostly, he cried at the thought that his father didn't love him enough to stay and look for him. He felt as if some rough, giant hand was crushing his heart between its fingers.

Finally, still sobbing, Jotham stood and began to pick through the remains of the camp, hoping to find a corner of bread or a scrap of meat. His stomach ached as much as his heart, and he felt as empty and alone as a newborn lamb that has been separated from its mother.

Finding no food or any trace of his family, Jotham slowly walked back to the watering hole. At least he could fill his stomach with water, he thought. Maybe it would make some of the pain go away. But, just as he knelt to lap up the water, he noticed a pile of stones, just off the path that led to the lambs' grazing field. Curious, he walked over and examined the

pile in the moonlight. The ground around the stones was darker, and a funny smell hung in the air.

It was blood, he suddenly realized. And then he saw it. Blood. Everywhere. And bits of fur and flesh and, leading off into the bushes, scuff marks, as if something had been dragged away.

Then he noticed that there was writing on the top stone in the pile, something scratched into its flat surface. Jotham could not read very much, only a few words that had to do with the keeping of sheep. But there was one word that Jotham *could* read, and he gasped as he saw it now, written on that stone topping the pile.

It was his name.

“Jotham,” it said. What the other words said he did not know, but this one word was clear. And so was its meaning, on top of stones piled like this.

“They think I’m dead!” Jotham wailed out loud. “They think I was killed by some animal and dragged off to be eaten!” And then he began to cry again, not a cry of anger anymore, and not a cry of loneliness. A cry of fear.

“I want my father,” he cried, and fell with his face in the dirt, clutching his little blanket. “I want my father!” he screamed over and over. But there was no one there to hear him. Finally, after a very long time, he realized that his family wouldn’t even be looking for him. It was *he* who would have to find *them*. But where would he look? Which way did they go? How long had they been gone?

Jotham didn’t know, but he knew he must search. He lay there next to the pile of stones that marked the place where his family thought he’d been killed, the scratchy grey blanket pulled tightly around himself, his face buried in the dirt, his crying turned to quick, stabbing sobs. *I must look for my family. I must search until I find them, wherever they are*, he thought.

And somewhere, very close by, a jackal howled.



For centuries, the people of Israel rebelled against God.
He had called them his chosen people. They called *him* cruel and unfair.
He had given them a land flowing with milk and honey. They thanked and worshipped *other* gods.

So finally, 750 years before Jesus was born, God sent the prophet Isaiah to the children of Israel. Through Isaiah, God said to them:

Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the LORD has spoken: “I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. . . .” Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him. ISAIAH 1:2, 4

But God didn’t send Isaiah just to condemn the people of Israel. He also sent him to explain that it didn’t have to be that way. He sent Isaiah to give them a message of hope, if only they would listen:

“Come now, let us reason together,” says the LORD. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.” ISAIAH 1:18–20

And then Isaiah told Israel a great secret, a secret of One who was coming that would save them from the darkness they had created for themselves:

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. . . . For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ISAIAH 9:2, 6

Today we begin the Advent season by lighting the first violet candle. This candle reminds us of God's promise that, though like Israel we have been disobedient children who are lost and alone in the desert, he has sent a Messiah, a shining light, a Savior, to lead us back to God.

Like Jotham, we each have a long journey ahead of us—a journey that unfolds day by day. But, also like Jotham, we can be confident that no matter what we encounter along the way, we can have hope and faith in a God who loves us, and who desires only the best for us.

If only we'll seek him.

First Light



Light the first violet candle.

The jackal bared his teeth and growled low and evil. His eyes glowed red in the fire-light. He stood as tall as Jotham, and his splotchy black fur hung on his bony frame like moss on a dead tree. The beast was starving and had just found food.

Jotham's chest heaved with every terrified beat of his heart. He wanted to scream, but all his screams were caught inside his throat. *Run!* he kept thinking to himself. But his legs refused.

The jackal leaped through the air! Now Jotham turned to run, but it was too late. He had gone only a single step when a red-hot iron clamped around his right leg and knocked him crashing into the ground. Fire exploded in every nerve and finally he screamed.

Claws dug into his bare leg now, and then the jaw clamped down once more. Jotham fought to roll onto his back, then kicked at the bloody face. But the demon was stronger, and pinned Jotham to the ground with three hundred pounds of muscle.

Bared teeth hovered over Jotham's face now, and he saw his own blood dripping from their needle-like points. The stench of breath and fur filled Jotham's nose, but he didn't have time to care. Because now the jackal let out one great, long victory howl, and then plunged his teeth deep into Jotham's throat.

"Ow!"

Jotham sat bolt upright, slapping at the sting on his neck. He blinked rapidly in the harsh sunlight, and his eyes watered in pain. He pulled his hand away from his neck and through blurry eyes saw the smashed remains of a wasp lying in his palm.

It was all a dream, Jotham laughed to himself. His heart was beating fast, he was breathing

in giant gasps, but it had only been a dream. *There was no jackal, no fight with his father, no lost family.*

Still groggy, Jotham pulled himself to his feet and brushed off the dirt. *Why was I lying next to the water hole? he wondered. And why was I asleep in the dirt in the middle of the day?*

Then he saw the pile of stones and in one awful rush of reality, he knew.

It *hadn't* all been a dream. The jackal had never attacked, that was true. But he really was alone. He really was lost. He really was . . . *hungry!*

Jotham wandered through the bare campsite. In the daylight it wasn't nearly as frightening, but it *was* still deserted. He couldn't figure out why his parents had gone. Even if Jotham *had* been killed, that was no reason to move the whole camp. But something in the back of his brain kept gnawing at him. It seemed as if, a couple times in the last few weeks, he had heard his parents talk of moving the camp. He never paid attention to their conversations, of course. Adults talk about such dull things. But it seemed like there was some important thing they were concerned about. Some reason they had to move.

No matter, Jotham sighed. The fact was, they were gone and he was alone. Now *he* had to find *them*, since they didn't know he was alive and wouldn't be looking for him. But which way did they go? The camp had been built close to a main road. Where it came from and where it went Jotham had no idea, but many caravans passed by each month. He studied the tracks on the road for a long time trying to figure out which way his family had gone, but it was impossible. The winter wind had mixed all the tracks together. So now he had to make a decision: go left or go right?

No matter what he had told his father, Jotham hated making decisions, especially when there was just no way to know the right thing to do. Finally, he decided to go to his right, toward where the sun rose each morning. So after taking a long drink at the watering hole and tying his scratchy little blanket around his waist, he started walking.

Jotham liked walking on roads. Most shepherds liked to stay out in the hills, wandering from this place to that, not really caring where they were. But roads took you from one place to another place, and Jotham liked that. He liked having a specific purpose for his walking.

Of course, Jotham had no idea what specific place *this* road came from or went to. And he had no idea if he was *following* his family or walking *away* from them. He could only hope and pray.

He had only been walking about an hour when the pain in his stomach began to overpower him. *I've got to find some food*, he thought. *But where?* The sides of the road were bare and rocky. A few bushes pushed their way up through the rocks, but they were all brown and bare in the coolness of winter.

Suddenly Jotham forgot all about his aching stomach. He had just climbed a short hill when he saw that the road ahead of him entered a narrow canyon. Sharp rocks stuck out at all angles, creating dozens of places to hide. Jotham knew his father worried at places like this and would always make the caravan move in close together. These were the kinds of places where robbers hid. Usually they'd leave a large caravan alone, but Jotham remembered one time when three men had attacked one of his uncles, stolen his purse, and vanished into the hills before anyone else could help.

So what chance does a ten-year-old boy have? Jotham thought.

By now the hunger had made Jotham's head feel like it was floating. The empty feeling went clear from the bottom of his feet to the top of his head, and there was an awful buzzing sound in his ears. As he got closer to the canyon his heart began to pound in his chest. He tried to look between the rocks ahead, searching for any sign of robbers, but couldn't quite get his eyes to focus. He passed from the sunlight into the shadows of the canyon, and the walls themselves seemed to be alive. It felt as if they were moving in closer with every step he took, moving in to crush him between their craggy fingers. Sounds seemed to echo off the walls: strange sounds, awful sounds, scary sounds.

Jotham tried to follow the sounds with his eyes, tried to look at every rock and crevice at once. He spun this way and that, imagining at every turn a thief jumping at him with knife drawn and a sneer on his lips.

"Jehovah, save me!" Jotham screamed, and his scream scared a flock of birds out of their hiding place. They flew past Jotham's head, and he swatted at them and screamed again. Then he turned toward the other end of the canyon and started running. He ran from the birds and from the robbers he'd imagined and from the evil canyon walls. He ran and he

cried and he screamed. But just as he thought he was about to safety, when the end of the canyon was steps away, a man with a long black beard jumped out from behind the rocks and landed right in front of Jotham. Jotham screamed and tried to jump to the side, but he tripped and fell and struck his head on a rock. And everything went black.

Jotham moaned and gently rubbed his head. His eyes fluttered open, and all he could see was the face of the man with the long black beard. Jotham tried to pull away, but the man held his arm tightly.

“There, there, little one. Be at peace,” he said softly. Seeing the smile on the man’s face, Jotham calmed a little and stopped struggling. There was a bright glow around the man’s head, and his face beamed with kindness.

“I heard you calling the name of Jehovah,” he said gently. “And so I came.”



Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I. For you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the foe. I long to dwell in your tent forever and take refuge in the shelter of your wings. PSALM 61:1–4

This was the prayer of the Israelites as they searched for God. They were tired of sinning, tired of being afraid. So finally they called on Jehovah to rescue them. He answered them through the prophet Isaiah:

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. . . . For I am the LORD, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you. ISAIAH 41:10, 13

Sometimes the fears we have are imagined, and sometimes they are real. Sometimes we are caught in situations over which we have no control, and sometimes we cause those situations ourselves. But God's word to Israel and to us is always the same: "Do not fear; I will help you."

Jotham still has a long journey ahead of him. But when he saw the situation he was in and called to God for help, God answered. "I will help you," he said.

I will help you.

That promise is the hope we hold on to as we look toward Christmas.