

# Ishtar's Odyssey



**Also by Arnold Ytreeide**

for Advent

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# **Ishtar's Odyssey**

**A Family Story for Advent**

**Arnold Ytreeide**

**Kregel Publications**

*Ishtar's Odyssey: A Family Story for Advent*

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For Shayla.  
For Gemma.  
For Silje.  
For Elaena.  
For all my grandchildren  
not yet born.  
And for all children everywhere.

# Before the Story

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 three-fold celebration of the birth of Jesus, his eventual second coming to earth, and of 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 themselves 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 celebrating the divine revelation of Jesus to the gentile Magi) the people were to fast and pray in preparation. The tradition spread to all of France in 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, Advent 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, it's a few moments to stop, catch your breath, and renew your strength from the only One who can provide true strength.

*Ishtar's Odyssey* 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 during Advent even if your family is just you.

Set aside a few minutes each day, beginning the fourth Sunday before Christmas (see the chart on page XXX) to light the Advent candles, read the Ishtar story and devotional for that day, and pray together. You can also use an Advent calendar (see "Advent Customs," page 9), sing a favorite Christ-centered carol (Frosty's a nice guy, but has no place in Advent), and have a time of family sharing.

Our family set aside fifteen minutes each night before the youngest child went to bed. Our Advent wreath had a traditional place on a table next to the living room reading chair. The children took turns each night lighting the candles and reading the calendar, adding that day's window at the end. By the light of the Advent candles I read the last few lines of the previous day's Ishtar story, then the story and devotion for that day. Afterward Mom led in prayer as we

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all held hands. We closed by singing one verse of a carol. The youngest child then lit her own “bedside” candle from the Advent candles and made her way to bed by candlelight (being old enough to know how to use a candle safely). Even when work or visiting took us out of town, we carried the book and a candle with us and kept our Advent tradition. Sometimes we even shared our tradition with those we were visiting.

Simple, short, spiritual. A wonderful way to keep the shopping and traffic and rehearsals and concerts and parties and 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!

## About the Magi

During the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

Matthew 2:1–2

Who were these Magi? Where did they come from? Why did they come to worship a foreign king? Were there three or seven or twelve magi? When exactly did they arrive? These are questions to which we’ll never know the answers until we get to heaven.

Because of that, *Ishtar's Odyssey* has very little fact, and a lot of fiction, when it comes to the magi themselves. We just don’t know. I’ve chosen to keep the western tradition of three magi, and I’ve chosen to make them from Persia, specifically the Parthian dynasty of Persia. In that sense, the story is fairly historically accurate—the foods, architecture, warriors, politics, social mores, and caravans of the era are depicted accurately with only a bit of literary license.

But details about the magi described in Scripture? We simply don’t have any.

The question is, does it really matter? From a spiritual sense, does it matter if there were three or twelve? Does it matter if they arrived the night of Jesus’ birth or a few months after?

I think what this story tells us is that God provided ways for *all* people to come to Jesus. His birth—and the *celebration* of his birth—is not for any one people or for any one church. He came to earth for all people, and accepts all people wherever they are in their own spiritual journey.

He can draw people to himself no matter where they live.

So it might be important to let your children know that the events and most of the people of *Ishtar's Odyssey* are fictitious. But it’s equally important to let them know that the miracles God worked in lives, and still works in lives today, are very real.

# Making Connections

At JothamsJourney.com you'll find maps, photos, and other documents to help your family connect to the story more directly.

But there's another way you might try to make the story come alive for your children.

*Ishtar's Odyssey* is largely a journey of food. Cuisine. Eating.

Ishtar has been raised in a palace far removed from the common culture, and rich in the finest foods. He's used to having his choice of exotic dishes available on command, and thinks nothing of asking for that which takes a great deal of effort—and money—to prepare.

Until his trek begins.

When Ishtar suddenly finds himself on a smelly, dirty caravan crossing an endless desert, there are no more fine foods or sweet desserts. There is only millet—a bland grain cooked into a thin porridge.

I thought it might be fun—and meaningful—for your children to experience *Ishtar's Odyssey* the way Ishtar largely does: through food. The chart below suggests foods you might use to help enhance the story during some days' readings. Depending on the ages and courage of your children as well as the time and money you want to commit, you might prepare the actual dish, searching the internet for a recipe you like, or you might prepare a similar but more kid-friendly food to simulate the food described in the story.

Use these ideas as meals, accompaniment to meals, a snack before the reading, or a food tasting as part of your Advent devotional time. You could even stop in the middle of the story when a food is described and give it a taste. To be most authentic, spread a blanket or tablecloth on the floor, surround it with pillows and couch cushions, and recline around your meal—utensils optional, with a fingerbowl of warm water for each person.

While experimenting with something new is great for kids, the goal is for this to be a positive and memorable experience for them. The point is to show the important role food played in Ishtar's life, and how he learned from it. If forcing your child to gag down *haleem* will cause him or her to hate Advent, using the more familiar, kid-friendly options might be the better choice.

However you do it, we'd love to hear about your experiences and experiments in the comments section at JothamsJourney.com!

	<b>PERSIAN FOOD</b>	
<b>DAY</b>	<b>AUTHENTIC</b>	<b>SIMILAR</b>
Week 1, Sunday	Polo (rice; many recipes)	Rice pilaf; boxed flavored rice
The first day of the story. Ishtar describes a banquet.	Nan-e barbari (flatbread)	Naan Indian bread; pita bread
	Fresh fruit	
	Mokhalafat	Sliced tomato and cucumber, pickles, olives,

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Fix a dinner with as many of these as your stamina and stomach can tolerate. Great way to start Advent!	(accompaniments)	chopped herbs, hard boiled eggs
	Koofteh berenji	Meatballs (especially mixed with rice)
	Mahi sefeed	Pan-fried whitefish; fish sticks or fillets
	Torshi bademjan	Stuffed eggplant; stuffed dill pickles; any pickled vegetable
	Nogha	Nougat; favorite chewy candy bar
	Chai	Spiced or herbal tea
Week One - Monday	Nan-e barbari	Naan Indian bread; pita bread
	Haleem (with lamb)	Thick lentil, pea, or bean soup; hash
	Dates, pomegranates, peaches, apricots	Any dried fruit
	Kebab	Any type of meat on a skewer with fruits or vegetables
	Falafel	Falafel; hummus
	Goat milk	Any milk
	Chai	Spiced or herbal tea
Week One - Wednesday	Zulbia	Doughboys, funnel cakes, or cinnamon elephant ears (with honey for dipping)
Week One - Thursday	Nan-e barbari	Naan Indian bread; pita bread
	Pomegranate jam	Any favorite jam
	Reshteh khoshkar	Any cookies with spices and/or nuts, such as snickerdoodles or snowballs
	Chai	Spiced or herbal tea
Week One - Saturday	Millet porridge	Any seed or grain, such as quinoa, made into a porridge; hot instant wheat cereal
Week Two - Sunday		
Week Two - Monday	Meat & Cheese	Beef jerky and string cheese; summer sausage and cheese curds
Week Two - Tuesday	Millet porridge	Any seed or grain, such as quinoa, made into a porridge; hot instant wheat cereal
	Roasted locusts	Gummy bugs; unsalted popcorn
	Pomegranate & pomegranate Juice	Favorite fruit & juice
Week Two - Wednesday	9 triangles of Nan-e barbari	9 triangles of Naan Indian bread, pita bread, or toast
	3 small pieces grilled meat	
Week Two - Thursday	Baklava	Any pastry made with philo dough; toaster pastry; cupcake
	Gaz	Nougat; favorite chewy candy bar
Week Two - Saturday	Baklava	Any pastry made with philo dough; toaster pastry; cupcake
Week Three - Sunday	Grapes	
	Khorakeh Goosht	Beef pot roast with vegetables or beef stew
	Almonds	Any nuts
	Peaches	
Week Three -	Musht ("St. Peter's Fish")	Roasted or pan-fried tilapia; fish sticks or

Monday		fillets
	Laks (Lox)	Smoked salmon or any smoked fish; tuna
Week Three - Wednesday	Meat & Cheese	Beef jerky and string cheese; summer sausage and cheese curds
Week Three - Friday	Coconut	
	Dates	Raisins
Week Three - Saturday	Baklava	Any pastry made with philo dough; toaster pastry; cupcake
Christmas Day	Baklava	Any favorite Christmas cookie
	Zulbia	Any favorite Christmas pastry
	Gaz	Indian Julebi; traditional family favorite sweet

## 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. Five are used in all, one for each week of Advent and the 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 in the 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.

Another candle tradition uses one candle for each day of Advent. Any color of candle can be used, but the Sunday candles are usually of a special design and color. The candles can either be placed along a mantel, or in holes drilled in a log. Each night during devotions one more candle is lit. By Christmas Day, the candles give bright testimony to and reminder of the evenings of devotion you've spent together as a family.

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 by opening the window for that day.



**A Note to Parents:** Jesus was not born in an amusement park or religious retreat. He was born into a world of sin, darkness, and death. Indeed, his own birth caused the death of many male children as Herod sought to kill the new King. So it is not the intent of *Ishtar's Odyssey* to present a heaven-like world where everyone lives in purity and harmony. While the story is fun and adventurous, and has the most happy of endings, it does take place in the real world: there is greed, there is cruelty, there is sin. The point is not to cover up the dark side of life, but rather to show how the love of God and his son Jesus Christ are the *light* of our lives.

Most children over the age of seven have been exposed to far worse violence in movies, TV, and cartoons than you'll find in this story. However, if your children are younger, or are particularly sensitive, I suggest you preview each day's reading so that you might skip or summarize the few more tragic parts. You may also want to talk with your children about the events in the story, to help them understand that sometimes bad things happen to people, but that you and God are there to love them and protect them.

In any event, it's my sincere hope and prayer that you and God together can use this story to teach your children just how much God loves them and how close he is to us, even in times of tragedy.

*Especially* in times of tragedy.

May God richly bless your Advent time together!



**Pronunciation Guide:** Foreign names can sometimes be difficult to pronounce. If you grew up in a Western culture, your mouth may not even be *capable* of pronouncing these names correctly. But for those who would like to conform to at least a pretense of a guide (admittedly inaccurate), these are some of the names you'll encounter in *Ishtar's Odyssey*:

Ishtar = ISH-tar

Salamar = SAL-uh-mar

Kazeem = kuh-ZEEM

Varta = VAHR-tuh

Jodhpur = JAWD-purr

Bozan -boe-ZAWN

Rasad = ruh-SAWD

Faraj = far-AWJ

Jotham = JAW-thum

Decha = DECK-uh

Konarak = KAHN-uh-rack

Amaranth = AM-uh-ranth

Zelzele = zell-ZEAL

Seleucia = sell-OO-see-uh

Tericheae = TARE-i-kigh

WEEK ONE ☞ Fourth Sunday Before Christmas

## A Rich Diet

*Light the first violet candle.*

Ishtar sat on his golden throne, dressed in royal robes with a crown of jewels on his head. He looked across the throne room, filled from wall to wall with his subjects shouting his name in admiration. “Ishtar! Ishtar!” They sang his praises not out of force or duty, but because they loved him. King Ishtar, King of Kings, ruler of all Persia, only ten years old but already the protector, provider, and savior of all his people. Never had there been a king so . . .

“Ishtar!”

At the sharp sound of his name Ishtar flinched, which caused his head to go under and water to go up his nose. He kicked and splashed until finally his feet found the bottom of the pool. He stood coughing and sputtering, wiping the water from his eyes. That’s when he saw his bodyguard, Kazeem, standing over him on the side of the pool.

“Many apologies,” Kazeem said. “I did not mean to startle you, but I called your name three times before you heard me. Were you daydreaming of power and wealth?”

“Uh, no, of course not,” Ishtar sputtered. “I . . . I was preparing my mind for my history lesson.”

Kazeem just smiled, an odd smile that Ishtar suspected meant Kazeem suspected that Ishtar was not telling the entire truth. Kazeem was big for a Persian. So tall was the man that the long, curved sword hanging from his belt didn’t come near to reaching the floor. His arms, resting on his hips, seemed to be the size of an elephant’s legs

“In any case,” Kazeem said, “you are correct that it is time for your history lesson.”

Ishtar didn’t argue, mostly because it would have done no good. While Kazeem was technically Ishtar’s servant, it wasn’t the same as the slaves and masters he saw from other countries. Kazeem was more of a paid worker, who could choose to quit at any time, and there were laws against mistreating servants. Besides, Kazeem had been at his side since the day he was born, and Ishtar thought of him as a friend.

Ishtar sloshed his way out of the long, rectangular pool that filled the center of his home. He lived with his father and servants on the uppermost floor of the Palace of Amaranth, where lived Sheik Konarak and all his advisors. Ishtar’s father, Salamar, was the *mogan-andarzbud*, the highest ranking advisor, and chief of all the magi.

Surrounding the pool were sleeping chambers, study rooms, and a large banquet hall where Salamar, with Ishtar at his side, would often entertain exotic guests. Amaranth was a seaport on the Arabian coast, a city that saw many merchants and traders pass through her gates. In fact it was the “magical” and nutritious seeds of the amaranth plant—brought here by Greek traders long before—that had given the city its name. Lounging on pillows through hundreds of banquets, Ishtar had learned many facts like this, and the ways of many different cultures from both east and west.

“Quickly now,” Kazeem scolded. “You must not keep Hormoz waiting.”

Hormoz. An expert in history, and one of Ishtar's several tutors. While he was allowed a swim in the pool in the heat of the afternoon, the rest of his day was spent with one tutor or another. Mathematics, science, language—it never seemed to end.

"I think if I learn much more my head may overflow and all my knowledge spill onto the floor."

"You are ten years old," Kazeem said as he escorted Ishtar to the other side of the pool. "If you live to be my age, you will discover there are always new things to be learned, and they all remain neatly stored within your head."

Kazeem stood just outside the study room as Hormoz began the lesson. It always took Hormoz a minute or two before he turned over the time marker—an invention of glass that allowed sand to fall from one chamber to another, thus marking time. Ishtar had often thought that if he could just open up the time marker and enlarge the hole through which the sand flowed, his lessons would be much shorter.

"And so we begin with a recital of the royal ancestors." Hormoz started every lesson exactly this way, and Ishtar sighed.

An hour later Ishtar was leaving his history tutor and heading for his tutor of mathematics when Salamar met him near the pool. "Father!" he exclaimed, and hugged Salamar's legs.

"*Zor bekhayr*, Ishtar," Salamar said, returning the hug. Then he took his son by the shoulders and stood him up straight. "And what did you learn in history lessons today?"

Ishtar shrugged. "Nothing."

Salamar frowned. "Then I must have Hormoz severely punished for failing to teach you."

"Oh no, no Father," Ishtar said quickly. "It is just that I already knew everything he taught today!"

Salamar's face melted into a grin and Ishtar realized his father had just been joking. Which he should have known, now that he thought about it. Out loud he said, "It's just so boring, going over the same things every day."

"It is by repeating a thing that you learn it well," Salamar said. "But for now, you will not be taking your lessons in mathematics or science. Your aunt has invited you over to play with your cousins."

Ishtar's face lit up. Only the children in the line of succession were permitted to live in the palace, and Sheik Konarak had no children of his own. The total number of children living in the palace was . . . one. The only time Ishtar got to play with others was when he visited relatives. Obviously, as part of the royal household, he could not simply go outside and play with the children in the streets.

"May my cousins come to the palace instead?" Ishtar asked. Although he was often lonely, he hated leaving the palace, even to go see his cousins. As beautiful as the city was, it was still dirty, and full of strange people. "You have nothing to fear," his father had once told him. "Then why do I need a bodyguard?" Ishtar had asked. Salamar had no answer.

But now Salamar said, "The invitation was for you to come to their home, and thus you shall."

Ishtar sighed and took his lesson parchments to his sleeping chamber.

Kazeem informed the tutors of mathematics and science that they wouldn't be needed today, then called for the bearers and led Ishtar down four flights of stairs to the courtyard. The palace was built of a reddish stone, and every door and window was topped with an ornate arch. Green

trees and bushes filled the courtyard, which was decorated with colorful mosaics. A fountain in the center of the courtyard gave off a cool mist in the afternoon heat.

Ishtar climbed into his *tahtirevan*, a tall box with a seat inside and poles jutting out the front and back. Four bearers immediately lifted the poles. The metal gate—taller than four men standing on each other's shoulders—was raised, and the bearers carried Ishtar in his *tahtirevan* out into the streets, with Kazeem walking behind.

Ishtar watched the city go by through his open windows. The streets were wide and paved with stone, but very stinky from all the animals that traveled it. Along the sides were sellers of anything a Persian or visitor could possibly want—roasted meats, sharp cheeses, sweet delicacies, clothes of every color and material. As they moved along the main avenue he saw games and weapons and jewelry for sale. For a price, you could even get your future told, though Ishtar's father had warned him many times that such fortunetellers were frauds.

Being a seaport directly on the trade routes, Amaranth was full of all kinds of people: Greeks, Asians, Africans, even Romans, though the Persian Empire and the Roman Empire were always on the verge of war.

The shadows hadn't moved very far by the time Ishtar reached the home of his cousins. They spent the afternoon playing King's Ransom—one of many games Salamar had brought home with him from his travels. The sun was getting low in the sky when Kazeem said it was time to return to the palace. Many of the sellers' stalls were closing, and children played in the mostly empty streets. As they passed one group of boys about Ishtar's age he heard them talking.

"There goes that fancy boy Ishtar," one boy said.

"He even has a girl's name!" another added.

Then they chanted his name in a mocking way—"Ishtar, Ishtar, Ishtar."

Back at the palace, Ishtar was silent as he put on a clean coat for dinner.

"You are quiet tonight."

Ishtar jumped at the sound of his father's voice behind him.

"Usually I can hear you babbling to Kazeem from the other side of the palace."

"I . . . I was thinking about something," Ishtar said.

"And what great thoughts so occupy the mind of my son that he has no room for talk?"

Ishtar looked away. Part of him was embarrassed to answer the question, but part of him really wanted to. Finally the second part won.

"Is . . . is my name a girl's name?"

Salamar sighed deeply, then sat on his son's bed. "Names can behave strangely," he said after a long pause. "In one country they can be one thing, in another country they can be just the opposite."

"But is *Ishtar* a girl's name?"

Salamar gave his answer much thought while Ishtar pulled the belt around his green silk jacket. "In some countries, the name Ishtar is given to a goddess of love," Salamar said finally. "In other countries, it's the name of a god of war. But long before you were born your mother and I decided our first son would be named *Ishtar*."

At the mention of his mother, a rare occurrence, Ishtar just looked at his father

"It was your grandfather's name," Salamar said. "We gave you that name in honor of your grandfather."

Now it was Ishtar's turn to think a long thought. "Then I shall wear the name with pride," he said finally.

Salamar stood to leave. "Good. It is not wise to worry what others might think of you, except as it may affect your relationship with them. Come now. We have guests for dinner. Merchants from several lands." *So what else is new?* Ishtar thought.

The feast that night was quite ordinary: lamb, duck, whitefish, eggplant, olives, boiled eggs, several kinds of flatbread, and lots of sauces. Everyone lounged on pillows on the floor around the food, and each had a small bowl of water beside their plate, for washing their fingers between courses. There were no actors performing Greek plays as there often were, but five musicians did play quietly in the corner. Ishtar helped himself to some more *koofteh*, scooping a meatball up with his bread. As the men ate the fine foods and drank their tea, they talked. Boring talk, Ishtar thought. And it went on forever because, as happened at so many of these dinners, the guests didn't know it was impolite to stay late into the night.

Ishtar's favorite dishes were the desserts. At least three at every meal—including *nogha*, made from the sweet sap of a rare plant, mixed with ground nuts, and spread between two crisp wafers. It was chewy and nutty.

"Ishtar, no more *nogha*," his father whispered after Ishtar's third helping.

Three of the guests were Jewish merchants from Palestine. Every time someone would mention the gods, one of them would say, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one."

The third time the merchant said this a trader from Kashgar said, "You Jews say there is but one god, yet he has abandoned you. Would it not be wise to turn to another? Samantabhadra, perhaps. Or the Persian god Ameretat."

"The Lord is our God, the Lord is one," the Jewish merchant said again. "He has not abandoned us. He has promised us a Messiah, one who will save us some day."

"Someday soon, perhaps?"

The merchant scoffed. "Oh no, the prophecy of the Messiah shall not be fulfilled for many centuries."

Ishtar was almost glad when Kazeem finally fetched him for his astronomy lesson. He followed his bodyguard to the other side of the pool and up a spiral stairway made of stone, to the roof of the palace. Ishtar looked out across the city, lit only by starlight and a sliver of moon just peeking over the horizon, such that all the tall buildings were outlined in silver. Beyond that he saw the Akhzar Sea, its waves lapping against the shore.

Since astronomy was the study of the stars, and since stars only appear at night, astronomy lessons were almost always taught at night. Ishtar's tutor for these lessons was a rickety old man that Ishtar was sure must have been born ages *before* the stars. Alim was his name, and his lessons were always the same. He sat in a chair and read a book by lamplight while making Ishtar identify star after star.

"You're late," Alim snapped.

"We had guests for dinner," Ishtar replied, thinking as always that Alim was his servant and should treat him with more respect. But Ishtar wasn't about to tell him that.

"We must begin immediately, before the moon fully takes over the sky and there is nothing to see." With that he began giving Ishtar a string of stars to identify, not once looking up from his book.

"There are three stars above the eye of *Karzang*," Alim droned on. "They are . . . ?"

Ishtar sighed. “*Al-Waqi*, *Wasat as-Sama*’, and *Az-Zubana*.”

“And above that, the two stars to the right of *Nemasp*’s ear?”

“*An-Nihal* and *Kalb ar-Rai*.” Would this lesson never end?

“And the crown on the head of *Sagr* is made of three stars. What are they, please?”

Alim turned a page in his book. Ishtar stared at the sky. He knew these stars as well as his tutor—though not quite as well as his father. He knew the face of *Sagr* like he knew his own. But something was wrong . . .

“Ishtar, an answer please.”

Ishtar shook his head, then picked up one of his father’s seeing devices—a lens made of crystal rock in a leather tube, given to him by a man from China. The lens magnified the head of *Sagr*, but that only made Ishtar more confused.

“Ishtar! There are three stars that make up the crown of *Sagr*!”

Ishtar lowered the lens and slumped back into his chair. “No,” he said, shaking his head slowly, “there are not. Tonight . . . there are *four*.”

Alim set his book aside with a sigh. “Child, I had thought this a simple review, but now I see I must teach—” He had been looking at Ishtar, who was staring at the sky, but then followed Ishtar’s gaze up to the constellation of *Sagr*. When his eyes landed on the fourth star now forming the crown, he stopped in mid-sentence.

Alim stared . . . and stared . . . and stared, then turned with a rush and ran back down the spiral staircase with the speed of a much younger man, yelling behind him, “Wait right there!”

Moments later Alim returned. Behind him followed Ishtar’s father, his father’s two brothers, and all the guests from the banquet dressed in their colorful robes. Salamar took up the looking device and aimed it where Alim pointed. Salamar gasped, then passed the device to his two brothers, who were also shocked. They began to talk quickly with one other, using words that Ishtar couldn’t even understand. Finally Ishtar tugged at Salamar’s trousers.

“Father! What is it? What’s happening?”

Salamar looked at his son with a look Ishtar had seen only once before, the first time Ishtar had beaten him at King’s Ransom, and said, “Ishtar, it seems you have discovered a star that even yesterday did not exist!”



Matthew’s story of the magi who visited the baby Jesus has led to much speculation. So little is known about who they were, where exactly they came from, how many there were, or when and where they arrived, that most of what we believe about the story has been invented over the centuries. We don’t even know how they “followed” the star.

But one thing we know, and the most important thing we know, is that God, in some mysterious way, led a group of Gentiles across vast spaces to bow down to Jesus, and present him with gifts.

During the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

MATTHEW 2:1–2

Tonight we start an adventure that will take us right up to Christmas day. Like Ishtar, along the way we'll meet many people, cross a lot of ground, and learn many lessons. Ishtar has no idea what's about to happen to him, and neither do we.

But if we'll keep our hearts and minds open, listen closely for the whispers of God, and follow whatever "star" he puts before us, maybe we, too, will have some very special gifts to offer Jesus on Christmas morning.

WEEK ONE ☞ Monday

## The Star

*Light the first violet candle.*

Ishtar sat on his golden throne, dressed in royal robes with a crown of jewels on his head. He looked across the throne room, filled from wall to wall with his subjects, shouting his name in admiration. "Ishtar! Ishtar!" They sang his praises not out of force or duty, but . . .

"No!"

The single word, shouted by one of his uncles, woke Ishtar from his dream. He blinked several times in the bright morning sun and finally realized he was on the roof of the palace. Sometime in the night he had fallen asleep as his father, uncles, and a dozen other advisors talked their nonsensical talk about the star Ishtar had seen. Now they had charts of the night sky and many texts and scrolls spread out across several low tables, and they were still talking. Someone had covered him with a blanket. Probably Kazeem, he decided.

Ishtar stretched and sat up. His uncle Bozan was speaking quickly at Salamar in a language Ishtar did not understand. Obviously there was a disagreement.

At age ten Ishtar could already speak and understand several languages including Latin, Aramaic, Old Umbrian, Hebrew, and Greek, besides his own Persian. "Why do I have to learn Old Umbrian?" Ishtar often complained. "*No one* speaks it anymore!"

"Well then," his language tutor always replied, "you shall have an advantage when you and your enemy happen upon a road sign written only in Old Umbrian!"

Not only did Ishtar have tutors in all these tongues, but the many guests his father brought home for dinner came with their own native dialect. As a child, Ishtar had learned to talk using words from over twenty different languages before he ever realized it. He loved it when the guests would assume he couldn't understand them, and made some comment about the meal, or the city, or politics. More than once he was able to warn his father of a deceit being planned.

But the words his father and uncles spoke now were foreign even to Ishtar, except for that one word, “No!” Finally they switched back to Persian as Ishtar stood and wandered over to the group. That’s when he noticed his clothes and brushed them in disgust. They were still clean, but completely wrinkled.

“It is madness to risk such a venture!” Uncle Bozan was saying. “For all we know this new king might seize the entire caravan and make slaves of us!”

Salamar slowly shook his head. “Bozan, was it you or was it I who spent seven years of his youth living amongst the Jews? Was it you or was it I who learned their ways, and their hearts?”

Ishtar’s Uncle Jodhpur stepped into the conversation with a soft voice. “Bozan, Salamar is right. His knowledge and experience of this people is superior to ours. If the star were leading us to Loulan or Janjing we would surely listen to *your* counsel.”

The argument continued for several more minutes until Salamar finally noticed his son. “Ah, Ishtar!” he said with a hug. “Did you dream of being a king as you slept?”

*How did everyone seem to know what he was dreaming?* Ishtar wondered.

Without waiting for an answer, Salamar continued. “Kazeem will take you down for the morning meal, then you must get ready. We have a busy day ahead of us.”

Ishtar nodded and yawned, then followed Kazeem down the spiral stairs. They passed his sleeping chamber and Ishtar wished he could climb back into bed and dream some more. The banquet dishes had been cleared away in the dining hall, and in their place was a breakfast banquet for one—Ishtar alone. He sat at the edge of the *sofreh*—a tablecloth spread over a rug—and used a piece of flatbread to scoop up some *haleem*—a mixture of ground meat and sweetened oatmeal. As he picked at the dates and pomegranates, peaches and apricots, he planned his day. There were always lessons, of course, and he had no control over those. But between lessons, and afterward, he could do as he pleased.

Today, he decided, it would please him to play King’s Ransom with Kazeem after the lesson on engineering and before the lesson in logic, then have a snack of falafel before the lesson on politics. The lesson on politics was exceedingly boring, and required a good snack if Ishtar was to stay awake.

After his politics lesson would be lunch, of course, and Ishtar decided he’d order a kebab from the kitchen. Which is exactly what he decided every day.

Next would come his etiquette lesson, language lesson, and afternoon swim. Before dinner would be history, mathematics, science, and a game of Pasoor, played with fifty-two wooden markers, until dinner. He’d sit at the banquet for a time, then head to his astronomy lesson.

Ishtar finished planning his day about the same time he finished eating his dates and drinking his goat’s milk. Of course, he had planned his day exactly the same as every other day.

“Ishtar! Stop your daydreaming!” It was Varta, the old woman in charge of meals and the household. She had an entire staff of cooks, cleaners, and servants, but when it came to Ishtar she insisted on taking care of things personally. She’d been around as long as Ishtar could remember, and almost as long as Kazeem. “Malek is waiting,” she scolded. “Now get to your lessons!”

“Yes, Varta,” Ishtar said, and jumped up. He would never dare talk back to or disobey her.

As he scurried around the pool to his classroom, Ishtar saw his father, uncles, and a long line of other men rushing down the spiral staircase toward the main entrance of the apartment. The men were carrying the scrolls and manuscripts he’d seen earlier, and Ishtar wanted to ask what

was going on. But the look on Salamar's face told him this was not the time to interrupt. In moments they were out the door and down the grand hall, and he went to his lesson.

Two hours later Ishtar had finished his logic lesson and was in the middle of studying politics. "And so the King of Kings governs all of Persia," his tutor, Shamal, was saying, "but each region has its own king, such as our Sheik Konarak. Each king has great authority, and freedom to rule as he sees best within his region."

Ishtar rested his head on one hand while with the other he drew camels on his wax tablet. He'd never actually touched a camel—they were disgusting beasts that smelled horrible—but they were fun to draw.

Under his breath Ishtar complained, "I *know* all this . . ."

Shamal stopped for a moment, then dropped to one knee and put his face inches from Ishtar's, which drew the attention of Kazeem standing guard at the door.

"Yes, you may know all this," Shamal whispered, "but I have a secret you do not know!"

Ishtar looked up in surprise. A gust of wind blew through the many open windows of the room, scattering parchments, and for a moment Ishtar suspected his tutor had caused it.

A cool breeze was one of the benefits of living at the top of the palace, along with an absence of bad smells and very few insects. But when a *shamal* hit, the top floor was about the worst place to be. Besides being a man's first name, *shamal* was the name of a strong wind that blew in a huge dust storm once or twice a year, a storm that lasted three or four days. Everything would be normal, with Ishtar learning a lesson or playing a game or swimming in the pool, when suddenly all the servants in the palace would rush in and cover the windows just as the storm hit. Even then much dust made its way into the palace and it took the servants days to clean up.

Ishtar sometimes suspected his tutor could actually conjure up a shamal wind, but today, the only thing on the wind was the secret of Shamal the tutor.

"What?" said Ishtar. "What is your secret?"

Shamal looked around to make sure no one could hear him. "Our current King of Kings is just a bit . . ." Shamal searched for a kind word. "Eccentric," he finally said.

Ishtar's face scrunched into a "huh?" look, but then a moment later took on a look of surprise as he understood. "You mean he's crazy, like Nebuchadnezzar?" he said more loudly than Shamal would have liked.

Shamal nodded his head, then added, "And so all the sub-kings, such as Sheik Konarak, are ignoring him and have almost unlimited power."

Ishtar tried to process this, but a commotion at the door distracted him. Varta ran in pulling Kazeem by the sleeve, and shouted, "Ishtar! You must get ready immediately! Your father has summoned you!"

"For *what*?" Ishtar asked, looking from Varta to Kazeem to Shamal and back again.

"I do not know," Varta said as she pulled Ishtar to his feet. "All I know is you are to be bathed, and dressed in your finest clothes by the fifth bell." The passing of each day was marked by a bell that rang in a tall tower. Some people in the city used it to mark times of prayer. "And you are to see to it!" Varta said to Kazeem.

Twenty minutes later Ishtar had finished the shortest bath he'd ever had and Kazeem saw to it he was dressed in purple silk trousers with gold braiding, a matching purple tunic tied with a gold belt, and a fine wool coat that flowed almost to the floor. Varta then combed his wet hair, which Ishtar insisted he could do himself.

“Ow!” he said as she combed.

“Oh that didn’t hurt,” Varta scolded, and Ishtar wondered how she knew that, though he still pretended to be wounded. As the fifth bell rang out across the city, Kazeem pushed open the towering doors of the throne room, and then propelled Ishtar inside. Ishtar’s eyes almost popped out of his head as he stared at the room full of the highest nobles, advisors, and teachers of the kingdom, all staring at *him*. Then he saw King Konarak himself, seated on his throne atop a platform at the far end of the room, wearing the royal robes and royal crown of gold. The king stood and moved to the edge of the platform, then shouted for all to hear, “Behold, Prince Ishtar, blessed by the gods, friend to the heavens, counselor and magi to Persia!”

All the nobles, advisors, teachers, and Ishtar’s father and uncles, and even the king himself started applauding so loudly Ishtar thought the walls might fall down. Some of the men began to cheer, and others bowed low.

Ishtar had no idea what was happening, but of one thing he was certain: this was not a dream.



We all have dreams of being rich, or famous, or admired for our talent. And we think we can imagine what it would be like to achieve those dreams. But the truth is that the biggest dreams we can dream are nothing at all compared to the real gifts God wants to give us. Those gifts might not be money, or fame, or popularity, but when they come from God they are always far better, and far more valuable, than anything we can dream up.

To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. *EPHESIANS 1:27*

The king has given Ishtar a royal reception for reasons Ishtar doesn’t even understand yet. When we put aside our own selfish desires, and allow God to have control of our lives and our works, he can use us in ways we never dreamed possible.

It will feel like a dream come true.

WEEK ONE ☞ Tuesday

## A Mission

*Light the first violet candle.*

Ishtar had seen chariots before, but never had he touched one, let alone ridden in one. But here he was, standing on the back of the king's own chariot, being pulled by the king's horses and driven by his charioteer, through the main streets of Amaranth. In front of him rode two columns of palace guards, dressed in red and yellow uniforms, each waving a banner and riding a horse. Walking behind him were two columns of priests and nobles, all waving long palm branches, a traditional symbol of goodness. And in front of the whole parade rode trumpeters on horseback, and in another chariot, a *praeco*—a town crier. “Behold how the King treats his most honored servants,” the *praeco* shouted to the city. “Ishtar of Amaranth, Prince of all Persia, friend of the heavens and blessed by the gods, is this day proclaimed to be a Preferred Friend and Advisor to the King!”

Ishtar wasn't sure what he was supposed to do—in fact, he thought, he was *supposed* to be in his etiquette lesson right now—so he just stood on the back of the chariot and waved to the cheering crowds in the market. In all the excitement, he'd missed lunch—something that never happened before except when he was ill—but Ishtar felt only confusion, not hunger.

“Behold how the King treats his most honored servants,” the *praeco* repeated. “Ishtar of Amaranth, Prince of all Persia, friend of the heavens and blessed by the gods, is this day proclaimed to be a Preferred Friend and Advisor to the King!”

It had only been an hour earlier that the king had stood in the throne room and said those same words about Ishtar. When at last the applause had died down, the king made an announcement. “Our greatest scientists and trusted officials have examined closely the star that announced itself to Ishtar,” he said. Ishtar knew his father and uncles were the scientists and officials the king spoke of, but he had no idea what the last part meant.

“They have calculated,” the king continued, “that the appearance of the star signals the imminent fulfillment of an ancient prophecy recorded in many books—the birth of a new and mighty king to our Jewish friends to the west.”

This news caught Ishtar by surprise. How could a single star say such a thing?

“I am therefore sending a caravan,” the king continued, “to carry gifts to this child, and to honor him as ruler of a friendly nation.”

At this a great cheer had gone up in the throne room, and then the king ordered a parade in Ishtar's honor, so now here he was, wondering what in all Persia had just happened.

He continued to wave.

As the parade neared the edge of the city they passed the house of Ishtar's cousins, who were playing in the street. At the sound of the trumpets the cousins looked up and were shocked to see the boy they had played with just the day before being honored in a king's procession. They stared and waved slowly, not believing the sight. Ishtar just waved at them and shrugged his shoulders.

The parade turned another corner and headed back toward the palace down the same market street Ishtar had ridden the day before. Everyone stopped and waved, Ishtar saw, but it seemed like they weren't really very excited about it. In fact, he decided, it looked like they were waving because they had to. Then he saw the same group of boys from the day before. They were waving too, but under their breaths they were chanting, "Mama's boy, mama's boy, mama's boy."

Ishtar looked away in anger and ignored them.

Finally the parade arrived back at the palace and Kazeem led Ishtar back up to his apartment. Varta had a late lunch ready for him, and went on and on about how beautiful it had all been, and how she'd cried as she heard the people cheering him.

Ishtar didn't bother telling her that those cheers weren't very sincere.

"So how does it feel to be a special advisor to the king?"

Ishtar looked up and saw Salamar entering the room, his royal robes billowing behind him.

"Father!" he cried, and gave him a huge hug. "What just happened?"

Salamar laughed loudly. "I guess it swept across you like a shamal wind, did it not?"

"And almost blew me away!" Ishtar answered.

"Well my son, it happened like this." They both sat and Ishtar continued his lunch as Salamar spoke. "The star you discovered last night has never before appeared in the skies. To *anyone*. It's place in the heavens, and the timing of its appearance, signal the birth of a new king, as Sheik Konarak announced."

"But *how*? How can a star say such a thing?"

Salamar shook his head slowly. "It is a very complex question, and requires many calculations and much research for an answer. Some day you will understand, but for now it is enough for you to know this: an event which has been prophesied for a thousand years is about to take place, and your star is going to lead us to that place."

"But I didn't *do* anything!" Ishtar argued. "All I did was look up to answer Alim's question."

Salamar took a deep breath, thinking. "Ishtar," he said at last, "it is not the fact that you saw the star that makes you special. It is the fact that the star chose *you* to appear to!"

Ishtar was still frustrated. "But a star cannot choose or not choose," he said. "A star is just a light in the sky."

A slight smile curved up the corners of Salamar's mouth as he said, "Not *this* star."

Ishtar still didn't understand as Salamar stood and slapped his son on the back. "In any event," he said, "it is clear what the star means, and clear what I must do. You understand, don't you, that I will be leading the caravan the king is sending?"

Ishtar nodded his head sadly. His father had been gone from Amaranth several times during Ishtar's life, leading one expedition or another. Ishtar always hated it—his mother had died giving birth to him, and even though Kazeem and Varta were like family, it wasn't the same. But he understood it was part of his father's duties.

"This will be the longest journey yet," Salamar said, "and will require much preparation."

"How long?" Ishtar asked.

Salamar thought. "At least six months there and back," he said. "Maybe eight."

Ishtar's heart sank. Six months without his father! As much as he loved Kazeem and Varta and all the other servants, there was no one he loved more than his father.

"I must go now and see to preparations," Salamar said, and then was gone.

Ishtar moped around the apartment for a while, thinking about his father being gone. He sat at the edge of the pool and dangled his feet in, but didn't really feel like swimming. There would be little water on his father's journey, he knew. Many caravans had passed through Amaranth, and many caravan leaders had dined at the palace, and the one topic that always came up was water.

And then there were the smells. And the work. And the snakes and winds and . . . Ishtar shuddered as he thought about it, and wondered how his father could stand to take such a trip.

Oh well, he thought at last, it's going to happen and I'd better start planning for it.

Each time his father left on a trip, Ishtar made plans of his own. With six or eight months to work with, he was pretty sure he could cut his lesson times in half. After all, wasn't he Prince of Persia? And now also Special Advisor to the King? And didn't Kazeem, Varta, and all the tutors work for *him*?

So shorter lessons it would be, and maybe no lessons at all in mathematics. He could already add and subtract numbers, and he knew that a homer was ten ephahs of grain, and a cubit was one-and-a-half lengths of a man's foot. What more was there to know? In fact, he decided, instead of lessons every day maybe he should have them only two or three times a week. Ishtar liked that idea best of all.

And then there was bedtime. He never had time to play after astronomy lessons, and always had to leave banquets in the middle if there were no lessons. After his father was gone he'd make bedtime an hour or two later. And *only* after he'd eaten as much dessert as he liked.

Maybe having his father gone for a while wouldn't be so bad after all.

With lessons apparently cancelled for the rest of the day, Ishtar had time to compile a long list of new rules for himself and his servants. No lessons before the third bell of the day, and none after the fifth bell, he decided. Swim times would be any time he wanted. He'd never have to leave the palace, and his cousins could come to play as often as they liked. All through dinner and late into the evening Ishtar kept making plans.

"What's this?" Salamar's voice booming from the darkness startled Ishtar. "My son is actually doing his lessons?"

Ishtar was lying in bed and quickly covered up the wax tablet on which he'd been writing his new rules. "Uh, yes Father, I am, uh, doing much work about my lessons."

Salamar sat on the end of Ishtar's bed. "Ishtar," he said seriously, "you do understand that this will be a very long and very dangerous journey."

Ishtar hadn't thought about the danger before, and now suddenly grew frightened for his father's safety.

"I have ordered a garrison of soldiers to accompany us," Salamar continued, "but even so, there are many thieves and villains who will want the treasure I have been instructed to take to the new king."

"Yes, Father. I understand."

Salamar hugged his son tightly. "Then you understand that Kazeem and Varta will have to care for you in my place."

"Yes, Father," Ishtar said again. This was just like every other trip his father had taken. Kazeem and Varta always stayed home to watch over him.

"But you may see me whenever you wish, and I will still come and settle you in bed each night," Salamar continued.

Ishtar laughed out loud. “Well that’s ridiculous!” he said. “How will you put me to bed? Will you fly like a bird back to Amaranth?”

Salamar looked surprised. “What do you mean?”

“I mean . . . I mean how could you put me to bed when you’ll be on the caravan and I’ll be here in the palace?”

Salamar stared at his son for a long moment. “Ishtar,” he said slowly, “I do not think you fully understand the situation. You are going on this journey *with* me!”



Once we allow God to have control of our lives, we might be surprised where he asks us to go.

Ishtar enjoyed being honored, even though he couldn’t understand what he did to deserve it. But it never occurred to him that such a reward might come at a price.

God wants to honor us with many gifts, more wondrous than we can imagine. Those gifts are free, and a natural result of following him. But another natural result of following him is that God will give us opportunities and experiences we could never plan for ourselves.

God’s voice thunders in marvelous ways; he does great things beyond our  
understanding. JOB 37:5

All in all, it’s a great, grand adventure of the highest order.

WEEK ONE  Wednesday

## Truant

*Light the first violet candle.*

Worms of fear had gathered in Ishtar’s belly. It had been three days since his father told him he’d be traveling on the caravan across the desert, and for every moment of those three days he’d felt like he was going to throw up. He was scared of the thieves they would meet, scared of the snakes and scorpions that might crawl into his bed, scared of . . . well, scared of everything that wasn’t the same as the palace.

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And now, sitting in one of the windows of his sleeping chamber, watching dozens of men assembling dozens of camels behind the palace, watching them gather bales of hay, bags of water, and bundles of travel and trading goods, the worms of fear in his belly started squirming even more wildly.

He simply *had* to convince his father to let him stay home.

When his father had told him he'd be going on the caravan, it had taken Ishtar a few moments to understand. At first he thought his father meant he'd accompany the caravan to the edge of the city, and that was bad enough. Then he thought his father meant he'd accompany the caravan to the edge of the province a day's journey away, and that was terrifying. But when he realized his father meant the entire journey, he felt like he'd been slammed in the face by one of the huge palace doors. "But, but you just said I was staying home with Kazeem and Varta!" he'd said. "No no," his father answered. "I meant that on the journey I will be very busy, and Kazeem and Varta will care for you."

"Well this is just ridiculous!" he said aloud now as he watched an out-of-control camel nip and kick at its handlers. It took three men to force the beast down on its knees so they could calm it and put a muzzle over its snout. "Father will just have to change his mind."

Ishtar hopped down from the window and marched toward the front door of the apartment. "Ishtar! Where are you going?" Kazeem asked.

"To convince my father to allow me to stay home."

Ishtar didn't see the smile on Kazeem's face. "Very well," Kazeem said, and followed his ward.

Salamar's work chamber was on the same floor as the apartment but at the other end of the palace. Ishtar walked quickly down the grand hallway lined with green plants and mosaic-covered walls. Father will listen to logic, he thought. He turned a corner, went down another corridor, then entered Salamar's work chamber. His father worked at a table, his back to the door.

"We'll need another dozen camels for the gifts," he was saying to a much shorter man. Ishtar thought the man looked like he was mean enough to beat a lion in a fight. "And we'd better hire another dozen guards."

"That will mean yet another dozen camels to carry food and water."

"So be it," Salamar said. Ishtar stepped up to the table next to his father. "Ishtar! A nice surprise indeed, but I am very busy."

"Father, I have a most urgent matter to discuss with you," Ishtar said.

Salamar smiled, then turned to the short man. "I trust you to make all necessary arrangements, Rasad," he said. The other man left and Salamar pulled up two stools for Ishtar and himself. "Now, what is this urgent matter?"

Ishtar cleared his throat, then lined up all his thoughts at the front of his brain.

"Well, I've been thinking that, as much as I'd like to go on this journey, it does not seem wise for me to do so."

"And why is that?"

"Well . . ." Ishtar said again. "I know that all of Sheik Konarak's brothers have been killed in various wars . . ."

"Yes, that is so," Salamar said.

"And I know that he has no sons."

“At least not yet,” Salamar agreed.

“That means if he were to die of a snake bite or some horrible disease, *you* would become king.”

“This is true,” Salamar said.

“And if *you* were to die of a snake bite or some horrible disease, *I* would become king, which is why I carry the title of *prince*.”

“That is probably true,” Salamar said, “but not for certain.”

“Well then,” Ishtar said, gaining confidence, “It seems to be a poor plan for both you and I to travel in the same caravan across treacherous lands filled with thieves and wild animals. If *both* you and I were killed, there would be no one left to rule over the kingdom!”

Salamar stood and paced. Ishtar didn't see the raised eyebrow and smile his father flashed at Kazeem. “I see you've given this matter much thought,” he said finally, “and you are using your logic well.”

The worms in Ishtar's belly suddenly vanished and a grin broke out on his face.

“However,” Salamar said, and Ishtar's worms returned, “I believe the gods will protect us on our journey, and at least one of us will return safely home. But even if we don't, there are plenty of others in the line of succession to take our place.”

Ishtar hung his head in sadness. “Yes, Father,” he said. Then he tried a new tactic. “But if I stay home, you won't need as many camels! You won't need camels for my food, for my tents, or my chests of clothing—why, you could probably save a dozen camels right there!”

“Oh, you don't need to worry about that,” Salamar said. “We have plenty of camels. Besides, it provides work for the local camel owners.”

Ishtar hung his head again, and Salamar patted him on the shoulder. “And consider this,” he said softly. “This journey will bring many adventures and many new things to learn, and you and I will get to share them together.”

“I don't like adventures. I like knowing exactly what's going to happen.”

“Yes, I know, and that may be the best reason to *have* a few adventures. You'll meet many new people and make new friends. If we are fortunate, you will even meet my old friend Nathan from my youth. He once did fifty cartwheels in a row!”

*Great*, Ishtar thought, *that's just what I want—to meet all your old friends.*

“Now, I must return to my work,” Salamar said. “There is still much to do.”

“Yes, Father,” Ishtar said, and shuffled his way back to the apartment.

“We must make our own preparations for the journey,” Kazeem said as they entered the apartment. “They will want to test the load on your camel tomorrow.”

Ishtar sat on a Roman-style couch by the pool. “Perhaps *you* could convince Father, Kazeem. A dangerous caravan is no place for a young boy such as myself. And besides, surely *you* don't want to leave all you know and love in Amaranth for such a journey!”

“I serve only you, young master. I go where you go, and I live only to protect you.”

Ishtar had never in his life thought about that before, but it was true. Kazeem had no family of his own, no other home, not even a sleeping chamber of his own. From all appearances he was always standing guard just outside whatever room Ishtar was in.

“Now, I must go and select the clothing you will take on the journey,” Kazeem said.

“Don't forget to pack my gods,” Ishtar said, still pouting. Then he added, “Especially Bes, my protector from snakes!”

All the rest of the day Ishtar pouted. He didn't even feel like eating Varta's zulbia—fried dough dipped in honey and cinnamon. All lessons had been cancelled, so there was nothing else to do but think about the many ways he could be hurt or killed on this silly caravan to visit some baby king in some other country he didn't even care about. But late that night, as he lay in bed, an idea struck Ishtar that he thought was pure genius.

"Ishtar! It is time to arise!" Kazeem called from the curtained entrance to Ishtar's sleeping chamber the next morning.

"Ishtar! Arise!"

Ishtar moaned, but his eyes remained closed. Kazeem took three steps over to the bed and shook Ishtar by the shoulder.

"Ishtar, it is time to wake up!"

But again Ishtar only moaned. That was when Kazeem noticed Ishtar was covered in sweat. He felt the boy's forehead and was shocked. "Child! You burn with fever!" he gasped. "I shall fetch the physician!"

Kazeem ran from the room. The moment he was gone, Ishtar's eyes opened. Sure that he was alone, Ishtar reached down on the far side of his bed where he had hidden an oil lamp heating a wet cloth in a bowl. He quickly dabbed the cloth on his face and over his shoulders and arms. He heard footsteps approaching, dropped the cloth back into the bowl, laid back, and closed his eyes. Half a moment later, Kazeem returned, followed by an old, bald man dressed in robes.

"What did he eat last night?" the old man asked Kazeem.

"Hardly anything. Only a few bites of the same *tabrizi* that I ate."

The physician sat on the bed and examined Ishtar.

"Boy! Open your eyes!" he called, patting Ishtar's face. Ishtar only moaned.

At that moment Salamar ran into the room, out of breath. "What is it?" he gasped. "What's wrong with my son?"

The physician didn't answer for a moment, and instead continued his examination. He raised Ishtar's eyelids one at a time—both eyes were rolled back, a trick Ishtar perfected long ago. He looked in Ishtar's mouth, felt his forehead and cheeks, pressed fingertips to his wrist. Finally he sat up and turned to Salamar.

"Your son is very ill," the physician said, and Salamar's face went white. "It could be the bite of an insect or snake, it could be some bad food he ate, it could even be that some foul enemy has poisoned him. In any case, I fear he is near death."

Ishtar felt his bed jiggle as Salamar, as big and strong as he was, fell to his knees at Ishtar's side. "What can be done?" he asked.

The physician did not answer for several moments. "If I can save him at all, he will require many weeks of bed rest." When the physician said this, Ishtar felt such happiness that he couldn't contain a slight smile but then he quickly straightened his face again. He felt his father's nearness and hoped he hadn't seen.

"Physician," Salamar said slowly, again jiggling the bed as he pulled himself back to his feet, "is there nothing else to be done? Can we not try some leeches? Or perhaps a bit of blood-letting?"

The physician apparently considered that for a moment. Ishtar held his breath. Using leeches to suck the blood from a patient, or even making a small cut in the wrist and allowing it to bleed, were standard medical practices. "Yes, that may indeed be of benefit," the physician said.

“Good,” answered Salamar. “Can we begin the treatment immediately?” Ishtar though his father sounded excited.

“Of course,” the physician said. Ishtar heard the sounds of the physician pulling out his tools and his heart began to pound within his chest.

“Be sure you select a very sharp knife,” Salamar said loudly. “I want the cut to be very clean.”

“Of course,” said the physician, sounding a bit annoyed.

“Will this hurt the boy at all?” Salamar asked.

“Not a bit, since he’s unconscious,” the physician answered. “Of course, if he were awake, it would hurt quite badly.”

“Very well,” said Salamar. “Proceed.”

With that, the physician took Ishtar’s wrist in one hand and Ishtar felt the cold of a blade against his skin.



What would you do if you were Ishtar? Would you try to get out of going on the long journey to a foreign place? Would your fear of the unknown make you want to stay home where it’s safe and comfortable?

Unfortunately, that’s often what we Christians do when God asks us to leave our easy lives and go help others. He has called us to be disciples, to go out into the world and *make* disciples, but we’d rather stay home and do the things that make *us* feel good.

We’re such silly children sometimes.

But I’ll let you in on a secret: if Ishtar gives in to the authority of his father and willingly faces the hard work ahead, his journey will end in the presence of Jesus.

And I’ll let you in on another secret: if *we* give in to the authority of our *heavenly* father, and willingly face the hard work it takes to be a disciple, and to disciple others, our journey will end in exactly the same place.