

CHRISTMAS TREASURES

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CHAPTER ONE

1. HIS WONDROUS NAME based on Isaiah 9:1-7

Corrie Ten Boom is one of the best known names in the 20th century. But many do not

know that Corrie had more than one name. In 1977 a group of several hundred Christian Indians honored her in Flagstaff, Arizona, by giving her an Indian name. Tom Claus, a Mohawk and president of the group, made this presentation-

I want you to know that we accept you as an Indian; you are our blood sister, and you are our spiritual sister in Jesus Christ.

When we bestow an Indian name, it is the highest honor we can give. When your name was nominated to our CHIEF committee thought that we would like to pick a name that is really meaningful to you, Corrie.

We realize that in the past you have identified with the Jews in their suffering-now you have identified with American Indians in our plight. Even though you have been on the front line of battle and have seen bloodshed and war, you have always been a demonstration of God's love. That is why we give you the name Loma-Si, which is Hopi for "beautiful flower," because you are one of God's beautiful flowers. We do thank God for you

Like many of the people of the Bible she received a new name of honor. Because names have always been important to Indians they have left their mark on our culture. Over 20 states have Indian names. The great rivers like the Mississippi and Missouri and 4 out of 5 of the Great Lakes have Indian names. There are hundreds of cities and lakes and streams all over our nation with Indian names. The poet has rightly said,

Ye say they all have passed away
That noble race and brave
That their light canoes have vanished
From off the crested wave.
That mid the forests where they roamed
Their rings no hunter's shout
But their name is on your waters
Ye may not wash it out.

Names play a major role in our history and our heritage as Americans. In 1507 a German professor in a French college edited a map of the world. As he read up on the discovery of the new world he found that much of it was explored by Americus Vespucci. He said, "I do not see what hinders us from calling it America." He did so name it and the name stuck. Professor David Muzzy in his American History writes, "so it came about that this continent was named by a German professor, in a French college, for an Italian navigator in the service of the King of Portugal."

Names have determined so much in our history and our environment but more important yet they determine our destiny. God is a great lover of names and name giving. The book of Revelation says, we will get new names in heaven. The Bible is full of genealogies which are just lists of names. Many of them mean nothing to us but they were important to God and His people. God gave the first man and woman their names and He gave the second Adam His name as well. This most important child ever born on this planet was named by his true Father in heaven. Gabriel came to Mary and said to her in Luke 1:31, "you will be with

child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.' Later in a dream the same message came to Joseph in Matt.1:21. The angel of the Lord said to him, "she will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sin." Like the spirit of the child, the name of the child also came from heaven. This name was so important to God He made sure both of His earthly parents received a supernatural message as to what they were to name Jesus.

This name is now the most celebrated name in history. Like the vast majority of babies Jesus was born without fanfare or fame. There were no reporters and no headlines for though all heaven rang as the angels sang, on earth there was barely a ripple. Everything is different now,

There's no other name like that of Jesus,
There's none in all the world beside,
For there's no other name can give salvation,
In His love I will abide.

There are more songs on the name of Jesus than any other name-Jesus Is The Sweetest Name I Know; Take The Name Of Jesus With You; There's Something About That Name and His Name Is Wonderful, Just to mention a few that are well known.

The prophet Isaiah predicted that a child would be born in Israel who would acquire a name for himself- a name above every name. If you like to know big names then you will want to get acquainted with this coming child, Isaiah would advise. His name will be the biggest ever. In fact, His name is so big it is a multiple name. There are not enough powerful descriptive adjectives to describe it. Isaiah says He shall be called Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

Wonderful or full of wonder is His name. It inspired Handel's Glorious Messiah with it's Hallelujah Chorus that has brought millions to their feet before the bearer of this name. Napoleon was rightly awestruck by this name. He said, "Is it not amazing that whereas the ambitious dreams of Caesar, Alexander and myself should have vanished into thin air, a Judean peasant should be able to stretch a hand across the centuries and control the destinies of nations and the children of men."

There is no other name like that of Jesus. It is truly a wonder. Emerson said, "His name is not so much written as ploughed into the history of the world."

At one time the Christians celebrated the birth of Jesus on a pagan holiday. Now the pagan world celebrates on a Christian holiday. Everything connected with the name of Jesus is transformed for His name is wonderful and does wonders. There is no greater wonder in the universe than the wonder of Christmas. This marks the day when our planet was invaded by a superior force from another realm. A power opposed to the sin and folly of human nature and yet it did not invade to destroy but to redeem. This is no minor wonder but rather the greatest wonder of all and that is why His name of Wonderful.

He did not come to judge the world,
He did not come to blame,

**He did not come to seek, it was to save He came,
And when we call Him Savior, then we call Him by His name.**

There are so many names of Jesus in the Bible that He is literally all things to all men. He is the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end.

**He is to the artist-THE ONE ALTOGETHER LOVELY
He is to the architect-THE CHIEF CORNERSTONE
He is to the baker-THE LIVING BREAD
He is to the biologist-THE LIFE
He is to the builder-THE SURE FOUNDATION
He is to the carpenter-THE DOOR
He is to the doctor-THE GREAT PHYSICIAN
He is to the educator-THE TRUTH
He is to the farmer-THE LORD OF THE HARVEST
He is to the florist-THE ROSE OF SHARON, THE LILY OF THE VALLEY
He is to the philosopher-THE WISDOM OF GOD
He is to the preacher-THE WORD OF GOD
He is to the statesman-THE DESIRE OF ALL NATIONS**

We could go on almost endlessly as there are several hundred names, titles and symbols of Jesus in the Bible. But the name above all these names is the name that covers all the rest and that name is Jesus, the Savior of His people. This is the most wonderful of all His wondrous names.

This is the name God gave to Mary and Joseph. This is the name that makes Christmas the greatest day of celebration in history. This is the name that opens the gates of heaven. In God's plan it is not what you know but who you know that makes the difference. If you know this name you can get into the very presence of God. Jesus said, "I am the way the truth and the life no one comes to the Father but by me." There is no other name under heaven by which we can be saved. This name is the open sesame to the mind of God.

The New Testament is filled with reference to the power of the name of Jesus. The prayer of the church in Acts 4:30 sums up the whole of the early Christians conviction about the source of their power. Their prayer was, "Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." The early Christians called upon the name of Jesus for their every need. They were baptized in the name of Jesus. They preached and healed in the name of Jesus and they suffered for the name of Jesus.

The purpose of God in choosing Paul was that He might have someone to carry the name of Jesus to the world of the Gentiles. The essence of success in the New Testament is described in Acts 19:17, "And the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor." That is the bottom line, not just for Christmas but for all the year. Do we hold the name of Jesus in high esteem? Do we honor and exalt that name that God has made the name above all names?

Our text is the only place I am aware of where the Christ child of Christmas is given a series of names that make Him the greatest being ever born. He is called-

I. WONDERFUL COUNSELOR.

There is debate as to whether there should be a coma between these two words or not. Should it be Wonderful, Counselor as in two different ideas, or just one as in Wonderful Counselor? The NIV leaves the coma out but the Berkley puts it in. Obviously scholars are not absolutely sure which way Isaiah intended us to take it. It really does not make any difference if you realize the point is these names are to exalt Jesus. They lift Him to the heights of adoration. So you simply need to reason, if He is wonderful and a counselor it follows that He is a wonderful counselor. In this context of being the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace, it follows that He is wonderful as everything that He is.

A WONDERFUL SHEPHERD

A WONDERFUL SAVIOR

A WONDERFUL SON

A WONDERFUL SERVANT

A WONDERFUL STAR

And on and on we could go from alpha to omega. There is no point in trying to figure out if the coma is needed or not. Take it both ways and any other way you can imagine, for the point is He is wonderful in every way that can be imagined. You never have to fear lest you exalt the name of Jesus in some way that is not so.

He was the wonder baby of all time. He was the only baby of all time that was older than His mother. He made the ground on which she laid to give Him birth. He made the air that she breathed and the stars that she gazed up at in her labor. Without Him was not anything made that was made.

There was no room in the inn for this wonder baby but the wonder is He grew up with a heart so big He took in the whole world. He died for the sins of the whole world and thus this wondrous gift was the only gift ever given to meet the deepest need of all mankind. No wonder people all over the world sing-

**Wonderful, wonderful, Jesus is to me
Prince of Peace, Counselor, Mighty God is He
Saving me, Keeping me from all sin and shame
He is my redeemer, praise His name!**

II. MIGHTY GOD

When a Jewish writer tells us a baby is going to be called Mighty God, he has either gone insane or he is revealing the mystery of the Incarnation. The latter is what Isaiah is doing here. He is saying a human baby will be called a name that no one would call anyone but Jehovah. Here is the God-Man in prophesy as clear as you can get it.

The Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah because they were strict monotheists. What

they failed to realize is that Jesus did not change that. There is only one God and He is the One. The Jesus of the New Testament is the Jehovah of the Old Testament. Everything we know about God is known through the Word of God and Jesus is the Word. Jesus said, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." Jesus is the Mighty God, the God of all gods.

If Jesus was not this we would have to agree with Judaism that it would be idolatry to worship Jesus. But at His birth this baby was worshiped by angels, shepherds and wise men. He was, is, and every will be Mighty God. Jesus said, "All power in heaven and on earth is given unto me." This was His clear claim to be the one Isaiah pointed to. Nobody else has ever claimed such power. Christmas is the celebration that it is because it is the birthday of the Mighty God in the flesh.

**This infant is the Mighty God
Come to be suckled and adored
The Eternal Father, Prince of Peace
The Son of David and His Lord.**

III. EVERLASTING FATHER

Isaiah is saying this baby is the father of eternity. He who was born gave birth to all that is. He is the father of all. Jesus said He and the Father are one and so He takes on the very name of the Father. He is Immanuel, God with us; not anyone else with us, but God with us. You cannot separate the Father and the Son for they are one.

Isaiah anticipates John's saying, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." The Old Testament and the New Testament are united in this, the Messiah who would be born as a baby was God for all eternity. The pre-existence of Jesus is clearly revealed in both testaments.

Jesus is the Father of eternity in the sense that everything that will last forever is His doing. So much of reality is only temporary and it will pass away. But that which Jesus creates will be forever for He is the Father of foreverness. If there is eternal life it is because He fathered it. If there is eternal song and joy it is because he fathered it. He only stayed a baby for months but He is a father forever. His birthday and childhood are only celebrated because of what he fathered. Adam is the father of the fallen race of men but Jesus is the father of the risen race of men. Jesus never had a child in His manhood but He has fathered the one and only race of men who will live forever. He is the Everlasting Father.

IV. PRINCE OF PEACE

Many Christians hate the war-torn pages of the Old Testament. God's people were constantly in battle and death was ever lurking near even if they won. Well, they hated it too and longed for one who would bring a lasting peace and set them free from a life of strife. This was the messianic hope. G.Cambell Morgan, the prince of expositors, writes, "If I could write one word across the prophecy of Isaiah, a word that catches the underline motive, what would it be? Peace, God's great purpose of peace. He is the Prince of Peace."

There can be no greater kingdom than a kingdom where there is perpetual peace. This will be the ultimate goal of the Messiah. Even now this is the goal for the inner life for the believer Paul writes in II Thess. 3:16, "Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace at all times and in every way." This is a prayer for peace to the Prince of Peace because even in this battle scared world the goal is to have peace and live peaceably with all men.

Jesus had such a complex name that it would be terrible if He had to sign His name as we often do today. An Indian petitioned a judge of an Arizona court to give him a shorter name. His name was Chief Switching Train Whistle. What do you wish to change you name to? The judge asked. The Indian folded his arms and said, "Toot." This reveals that a short name can convey what is involved in a long one.

Jesus is the simple name that conveys all that is involved in His many other names. Frans Delitzsch, the Old Testament scholar wrote, "The name Jesus is the combination of all the Old Testament titles used to designate the coming one according to His nature and His works." It is not only the goal of Christmas but the very goal of life to know God by His first name-JESUS.

CHAPTER TWO

2. WAITING FOR CHRISTMAS based on Haggai 2:1-9

In 563 BC, a son was born to a ruler in India. The local astrologers predicted he would either be a great ruler or a world renowned ascetic. His father wanted to prevent that, so he sheltered his child from all contact with suffering of any kind. The little prince was to never see life's sorrows. But as he grew up he defied his father and slipped out of the palace to see life on the outside. What he saw was a shock. People were poor and sick and old and there was hardship and suffering everywhere. He began to search for why this was and the conclusion he came to has influence millions. This prince was Buddha the founder of Buddhism.

He concluded that the whole problem with human beings was there desire. They set their hearts on to many things and expect the future to fulfill their hopes. This leads to inevitable disappointment and misery. The solution is quite simple, just eliminate desire. If you aim for nothing that is likely what you will get. But you won't be disappointed because that is just what you expected-nothing.

Buddhism is a negative religion where the goal is Nirvana, which means extinction. It is the elimination of all desire, hope and anticipation. The closer you can come to this in life, the greater saint you are. To be detached from all things and people so that you no longer care if they are destroyed or die, the better off you are. You can't be disappointed if you desire nothing. This sounds awful and depressing to us maybe, but we have to face this reality, there

is a measure of truth in it. Desire to be like God led Adam and Eve to fall and much of the sin and folly in the Bible is due to illegitimate desires.

Ruel Howe in his book, *The Creative Years*, tells of the bright outgoing young woman who collapsed on the eve of her wedding day. She got more and more depressed and tried to take her own life. She had to be put in a mental hospital where she continued to deteriorate. She sat in a corner and refused to respond in any way. This went on for weeks and months and all she did was sit crumpled in a corner, a symbol of living death.

And artist working on a portrait of the superintendent heard about her and asked to see her. He took a piece of moist clay and began to work with it in front of her. He did this for weeks and finally one day she reached out for the clay. Some weeks later she began to try to mold it. She became frustrated that she could not do it and in anger hurled the clay against the wall. She then looked in terror at the artist to see his reaction. He just picked it up and brought it back to her and said, "It's all right, I still like you." Then she spoke her first words in many months-"You still like me!" That was the turning point, and from then on she made rapid progress in her recovery.

They were finally able to figure out what had gone wrong. It was a simple case of excessive expectation. She was bright and talented and her parents wanted her to be popular and to succeed in every endeavor. She worked her heart out and became cheerleader, homecoming queen and valedictorian. When she faced the expectations of marriage and the added demands of a husband, it was an overload on her spirit. She broke and retreat into sickness in order to escape.

Buddha was right, all of this misery was due to hopes and desires. By expecting less everyone involved in this true story could have experienced more joy and less sorrow. Those who expect too much and who desire perfection are doomed to disappointment in a fallen world. Buddha had a point but he took it too far. To anticipate an expect nothing would have been to waste the gifts of this girl and rob her of the potential of being what she could be. Somewhere between expect everything and expect nothing there is a place for expect something.

About the same time that Buddha was teaching his desire nothing philosophy, there was a prophet called of God to take a message to his people. Haggai was his name and encouragement was his game. The people had come back from Babylon to rebuild the temple with high expectations. But their enthusiasm was soon shattered. The Samaritans so hindered the work that the project was abandoned. The cities were in ruins and the land was a mess and their neighbors were hostile. They came back with high hopes of peace and prosperity, and this is what they find. Maybe Buddha was right. Their misery was because they expected too much.

Then Haggai came on the scene and he urges them to get back to their dreams and rebuild the temple. God never promised you a rose garden. Sure it is hard and there are obstacles to overcome, but let me tell you a little about the future. The best is yet to be. God's glory to going to fill this temple and there will be a peace come upon you as never before. The Desired of all the nations is going to come to this temple that God wants you to build. Haggai

is saying we haven't seen anything yet. The best that God has for this world is still ahead-the desire of all the nations.

Haggai is saying that desire is good. It is a God given emotion and it is universal. All nations have it. You can try and follow Buddha and suppress it but that is not God's way. He wants you to desire His best. The Old Testament rejects the Buddhist idea of eliminating desire. Instead, it builds up hope, expands expectation, and delights in desire. Psalm 37:4 says, "Delight yourself in the Lord and He shall give you the desires of your heart." There are dozens of texts that make desire a desirable thing. In the New Testament we are urged to desire the sincere milk of the word and to desire the best gifts. Desire is good and the best desire of all is the desired one that God promised to send for all the world.

People of every nation have always desired a deliverer. Someone who can come and show away to overcome the sinful nature and all of the negative consequences of sin. Haggai says this is not just the desire of God's people but all the peoples of the world have such a desire. That is why one of the names of the Messiah is Desire Of All Nations.

The wise men from the East were waiting for the birth of a deliverer. Virgil, the Latin poet, who lived in Rome a few years before the birth of Christ, wrote of his hope of a celestial seed who would come and bring peace. Plato wrote, "We must wait patiently until someone, either a God or an inspired man, teach us our religious duties and remove the darkness from our eyes." The Roman historian, Suetonius, wrote that it was an age old belief that a world ruler would come out of Judea.

Men of every nation have desired a God they could see. Most all of the mythology of the ancients was about just such a theme. It was the fantasy of all peoples that God would come into the world and be like them. This fantasy of all the world became a reality on the first Christmas. God became incarnated in flesh, visible to the eyes of humanity. What men had waited for from the beginning of time, had come. The desire of all nations had been fulfilled and that is why Christmas is the greatest celebration of the year.

Before Christmas God was wholly other than man. He was the infinite, exalted inaccessible and invisible God. At Christmas all of this changed for God came down to man's level, all the way to an infant. He came to a level of the visible and could be touched. He entered into a world where he had to grow and learn and where he could feel pain and sorrow and all the affects of a fallen world-even death. This is just what men of every nation had always wanted, a God who would show He really cared by coming to share their life in this fallen world. God satisfied the universal longing of the human heart that first Christmas. The world did not even know it but they got just what they were waiting for on that day. The desire of all nations had come.

It is always hard to believe when the Christmas season is here again and sometimes we complain that the merchants start so early just to make more money. This is no doubt true, but the fact is you cannot anticipate this event too early. Christmas was waited for, for many centuries. Now that it is an historical reality, we should be ever ready to anticipate the celebration of this wondrous good news.

Plants and animals cannot do what we can do by looking into the future and anticipating a coming event. We can multiply our enjoyment of a coming event by our ability to anticipate it. We can begin to enjoy it long before it is here. Much of the enjoyment of Christmas comes before Christmas. The day itself may be very ordinary. It is not wise to put all your eggs in the one basket of Christmas day. The day is not sacred but the event it celebrates is what is precious and this can be enjoyed anytime and all the time. Christmas is more than a day, it is a season and that season can be as long as you choose to make it. By spreading your celebration out over a 4 to 6 week period you can be sure you will have pleasure in waiting and seeing desires fulfilled.

Everybody is waiting for something at Christmas. Some are just waiting for it to be over so they can stop waiting for it. Some are waiting for special gifts. Some are waiting for special events. Some are waiting for special foods or special relationships they only renew once a year. People have different values that make waiting a pain and another kind a pleasure. S.Omar Barker wrote,

Waiting for a phone call frets him.
Waiting for his wife upsets him.
Almost any kind of waiting
Starts his temper activating.
He's the guy who finds delight
Waiting for the fish to bite!

The point if waiting itself can be part of the pleasure if you have pleasure in what you are waiting for. Waiting in line at the super market is not enjoyable but the reason you endure it is because the food you are going to take home is enjoyable. You will wait for any goal where you can anticipate that the pleasure is greater than the pain.

In the New Testament there was an old man who was feeble and ready to die, but he could not do so because he was waiting for God to do what the world had always desired him to do—come into the world and reveal Himself. God had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. We read in Luke 2:25, "Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel." Simeon was a God-ordained waiter. That is all we know about him. He was waiting for the Christ child and when Jesus was brought to the temple he was there to take the babe in his arms and praise God.

We don't know just how long he had been waiting but he was the only man outside the immediate family who lived in intense anticipation of the first Christmas. All the nations desired God to come but Simeon knew He was coming in his lifetime. That was truly privilege information. But note what he was anticipating—the consolation of Israel. That is another name for the Messiah. He is the Desire of all nations but also the Consolation of Israel.

Israel had a hard history. They had suffered much, but their consolation would be, they would be the nation that gave the whole world the Savior of the world. It was a comfort to know that all their suffering would not be in vain, and that through them, God would fulfill His promise to Abraham to bless the whole world through his seed. You can put up with a lot

of negatives in life if you know you are being used of God to achieve His positive purpose.

Christmas fulfilled the general hopes of all mankind and the specific hopes of God's people. Christmas was the most fulfilling event in all of history. It satisfied the hopes and dreams of all the peoples of the ancient world-both Jews and Gentiles. There is no other event that can stand in the same category with it. Christmas stands alone as the focus and fulfillment of all that men could anticipate from God. That is why it is so appropriate that we sing Joy to the World. It is not just good news for some-Christmas is good news for all the world.

We need to keep perspective to avoid disappointment. If we focus on what Christmas will bring to us we maybe let down. We need to remember, Christmas is a celebration, not of what might be or of what we hope to see happen, it is a celebration of a sure thing that has already happened. God has come down to man to dwell with him. John begins his first epistle, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched-this we proclaimed concerning the Word of life." The Desire of all nations has come. The Consolation of Israel has come. We celebrate a certainty, not a hope. In I John 5:11-12 we read, "God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life." The best God can give He has already given. We may not get many things that we hope for but we never be disappointed in Christmas if we see that it is a celebration of what we have already received. So what we wait for is a renewed awareness of what is already ours. We are to anticipate that Christmas will awaken in us anew, the reality of what God has given us in the Gift of His Son.

Dr. Oliver Sacks, a British Neurologist, wrote a book in 1973 called, Awakenings. A movie was made of the book by the same name because it was so spectacular. It is about the victims of a rare sleeping sickness that affected some 5 million people world wide during World War I. The disease turned people into frozen statues as motionless as stones. They were still alive but they could not enter the world of the living.

In 1967 a new drug called L-dopa was developed and Dr. Sacks tried it on his patients. It was like a resurrection. These people burst forth with joy and laughter. Some had been motionless for almost 5 decades and now they were walking and talking and able to feel and to think. They had been reawakened to what was already theirs-the gift of life. It lay dormant and unused but now they could pick it up and use it with enthusiasm. They had found anew what was already theirs.

That is what we should anticipate in the Christmas season-that all of it's color, music and special focus on Christ will awaken us to enjoy the life that is already ours in Him. Someone wrote,

It's time to light the candles once again,
and to begin those other things that let us know
that Christmas day is on the way:
soon the decorations will come out,
cards will be sent and others will arrive;
soon the baking must take place,

and the shopping and the wrapping
and the wishing, and the waiting.
waiting is the hardest part, O Lord. I wish the day
could just be here without a month to wait!
But even waiting, getting ready, can be fun-
can be exciting too-because I know,
with all these other things I do,
what I am really waiting for-
what I am getting ready for-is You!
Oh, make me patient, Lord, and help me wait:
but while I'm waiting, let me be excited too.
Each day of Advent help me celebrate the joy
I wait for: looking in the manger to see You!

Let us pray that will be the dominate desire of our lives this Christmas season. Many other desires will also be satisfied-for food, fun, and fellowship, all of which are legitimate and acceptable to God. But our priority desire should always be our celebration of having received God's best-the desire of all nations. Let this be your desire in waiting for Christmas.

CHAPTER THREE

3. CHRISTMAS SECRETS based on Matt. 1:18-2:12

C.S. Lewis is one of the most read and most quoted Christian scholars of the 20th century, but he had to endure the burden of a very heavy secret in his life. He fell in love with a divorced woman and his church, the church of England, forbid marriage to one who was divorced. Joy Davidman, the woman he loved, was an American and she would soon have to leave England if she did not marry a British citizen. Lewis was in a terrible bind. He wanted to obey his church but he did not want to lose the woman he loved. So he slipped away with her and on April 23, 1956, they were secretly married in a civil service. This kept her in England, but what a pain it was to keep it a secret. They lived in separate houses and it was not long before the gossip was growing because of his frequent visits and late night stops at her house.

When Joy took a fall and ended up in the hospital she was told she had cancer. That is when they decided it was time to tell their secret to the world. When it was learned that she would never recover, the church leaders had compassion and allowed this 42 year old divorcee to be officially married in the hospital before she died.

Joseph and Mary had a problem like this as well. They had a heavy secret to bear and at first they had to bear it alone. Mary did not have the nerve to tell Joseph she was with child.

How do you explain to man you love that you have been secretly visited by an angel who has told you that you will conceive a child by the Holy Spirit and give birth to the Messiah? No wonder she left town and headed for the hill country to stay with

Elizabeth. Gabriel had told Mary the secret of Elizabeth, that she too was with child in her old age. As soon as Mary stepped in the door and greeted Elizabeth, her secret was out and Elizabeth exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear." Here are two women who haven't said more than hello to each other and they both already know each others secret-they are going to have babies.

Three months later when Mary came back to Nazareth poor Joseph did not need an angel to tell him what Mary had been hiding. Her body language exposed her secret and poor Joseph was plunged into a secret civil war. How would you feel if your bride-to-be took off for three months and then came back pregnant? Joseph was caught in a terrible bind. Do I expose her to public disgrace and let her be the victim of the law, which could lead to he being stoned, or do I just divorce her and let her go quietly? He loved her even though he was deeply hurt and so he was leaning toward divorce. Then the angel came and let him know in a dream the secret that Mary was to give birth to the Messiah.

When he woke up he was a partner in the secret and he took Mary to be his wife and the bore the secret together. Nobody in Nazareth ever knew that Joseph was not the father of Jesus. The virgin birth was a secret that became a Christian doctrine only after Jesus died and rose again. Let's look for a few moments at-

I. THE SECRET OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH.

This was not a secret Mary was urged to proclaim from the house tops. She never even told Joseph. The angel had to reveal this secret to him. This was their family secret and not a matter of public information. There is not a hint that anybody outside of their family ever dreamed Jesus was virgin born. The references to Joseph and Mary and Jesus make them seem like normal family with nothing unusual about them. Doctor Luke in Luke 2:27 says, "When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the law required...." Joseph is called the parent of Jesus. In verse 41 Luke refers to them both again as the parents of Jesus. In verse 33 he writes, 'The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him.'

There is no doubt about the reality of the virgin birth. Joseph was not the literal father of Jesus, but the fact is, it was kept a secret. As far as the people were concerned, Jesus was the son of Joseph. The virgin birth was not known until after the death and resurrection of Christ. In His lifetime He was known only as the son of Joseph. John 1:45 says, "Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." People who say they interpret everything in the Bible literally do not realize that would force them to reject the virgin birth.

Secrets are legitimate, for information known before it can be understood can do more harm than good. There is an appropriate time for truth to be revealed. Jesus said He had a lot of things to tell His disciples but they were yet not ready. A secret can simply be knowledge kept hidden until it can make sense to those who hear it. The virgin birth would

have been a total hindrance to the plan of God had it been revealed in the early life of Jesus. He was to be a normal child and raised in a quiet obscure way; not as the Son of God drawing the attention of the world. The truth of the virgin birth had no value until after Jesus proved that He was indeed the Son of God by His resurrection. Then it made sense.

The very first reference we have to the Virgin Birth outside the New Testament goes back to around 125 A.D. Ignatius wrote a letter to the Ephesians and said, "Hidden from the princes of the world were the virginity of Mary and her child bearing." It was a part of the plan of God that the Virgin Birth be a secret to all but those who had to know. It was a secret until the time was right for all to know it.

God has His secrets and it is fascinating to see how secretly He worked in developing the whole Christmas story. We do the same thing by keeping our Christmas gifts a secret until Christmas day. We hide them and wrap them to assure they will stay a secret until the time is right. Secrecy is the name of the game. If you know what you are getting what is the point of wrapping it up? It is the secrecy and the mystery that make you anticipate. It drives children crazy of course and they shake the packages trying to hear some tell-tale sound that will reveal the nature of the gift. There is wonder and excitement all because there are secrets. This is certainly a legitimate form of fun for God plays this game Himself. Look for example at-

II. THE SECRET OF THE STAR.

All through history there have been spectacular events in the heavens that grab men's attention and scare the wits out of them. In 1833 and again in 1866, as many as two hundred thousand meteors could be seen flashing across the sky. People panicked and thought it was the end of the world. But God did not start a panic with the Star of Bethlehem. It was so secret that only the Magi in a land far away could see it. The people in Israel saw nothing and Herod and his scholars knew nothing of it until the wise men told them of its appearance.

God could have pulled off a supernova that would have burned the eyeballs of every being in the land, but he chose to go the way of the secret star. It may have been spectacular to those few sky watchers but for all others it was hidden.

God did not even need the star, for He later warned these wise men by means of a dream. He could have gotten them to the Christ child by means of a dream also. But God wanted the star in the story of His Son's birth because it was an important symbol for the fulfilling of prophesy. Numbers 24:17 says, "A star will come out of Jacob." But the secret of the star is also based on the fact that the more precious the gift the greater the secrecy connected with it. A precious gift is meant to be a surprise and so it is kept secret. I remember keeping the wedding ring I gave to Lavonne, an other items of jewelry also. But I don't ever remember hiding the fact that I picked her up a can a spam or a box of toothpicks. A secret has to do with something of great value.

It may be unknown but it is no secret that I got my mail yesterday. It would be a secret if I got a fortune in the mail that my uncle left me in his estate. There is an endless number of facts about life that are unknown, but they are not secrets until they become events of value. Secrets are about what is weighty in life-things that can greatly hurt or help. The secret Star

of Bethlehem is a symbol that heaven is involved in the birth of this Christmas baby as it has never been involved before. This is the only baby in history, so precious, that God created a special star to announce His birth. Next look at-

III. THE SECRET OF THE SHEPHERDS.

They had no secret very long, for as soon as they learned of the secret birth of the Messiah, they ran to be eye-witnesses of the child in a manger. They were recipients of the secret but they did not keep it a secret. They immediately began to spread the news. Luke 2:17-18 says, "When they had seen Him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them."

We have no idea how many people were told, but a lot of people got in on this secret. Why didn't the angels just appear over Bethlehem and let everybody in on it at once, instead of appearing to small group of shepherds secretly? We don't know all of the reasons for why God works secretly with small groups, we just know that He does. Only a small group saw the star and not thousands of people. Only a few shepherds saw the angels and not the masses. The Christmas secret was revealed slowly, beginning with small groups and then spreading to larger groups. This is no accident, but a clear method by which God works in the world and in history. Jesus chose a small group of men to be His disciples. He taught them the secrets of the Kingdom of God. His goal was then to get these secrets into all the world by means of this small group. Christianity operates much like science. The great ideas and discoveries are made by one or two, or a very small group. They then reveal the secrets to the world. So Jesus said to His disciples in Mark 4:11, "The secret of the Kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables."

Jesus starts with the inner circle and reveals the secrets of the Kingdom. Then they are commanded to go into all the world and make these secrets known. This method of God is itself one of God's secrets. His plan is to use men to spread His secret. He could have used the star or the angels to tell the whole world. All kinds of amazing things can be conceived that God might have done. But He did not do them, but chose instead, not to use miracles, but to use men to achieve His purpose. The spectacular events of the star and the angels were for the few only-the masses were reached by means of the commonplace method of word of mouth.

The great commission is the command to spread the secret to all the world. Secret spreading is the ministry of every member of the church. I've Got A Secret, was once a popular T.V. program. People with very strange jobs would try to stump a panel as to their mysterious secret. I remember one program in which the secret of the twelve people there was, they were named after every month of the year. Some months sounded just fine such as, Fanny Mae and Sally April or Bill June. But John October, Ed December and Fred February sounded a little strange. Their names no doubt got them into a lot of conversations.

As Christians, we take on the name of the one who was born at Christmas. Bearing this name carries with it the responsibility to get into conversation about the name of Christ. This name is not only the heart of Christmas, but of all that Christianity stands for. The secret of Christmas is still a secret to masses of people and that is not God's plan. He wants the secret

spread so everyone knows how to become a child a God through faith in Christ-His Christmas Gift. If we are not in some way spreading the secret of Christmas we are not fulfilling God's plan.

Two men rode into New York City on the same morning train for twenty years. They became close and intimate friends. One day the one man missed the other, He missed him the next day, and on enquiry learned that his friend had suddenly passed away. The man attended his friend's funeral, and discovered to his utter amazement that all through those twenty years his friend had been an officer in a Protestant Church. The survivor said: "I cannot understand it; through all the fellowship of those years he never once mentioned the name of his Master, nor did he once make any allusion to personal religion, or show the slightest interest in my religious standing. If he had only spoken a word on these matters he would have found me anxious to be led to his faith ! Think of it! Twenty years of silence on the vital themes of religion. He was keeping that a secret which God intended for him to share.

God does not expect you to change the world at Christmas. He didn't even do that. He just let a few people in on the wondrous secret and let it spread. So all you have to do is one on one or small group sharing and let the secret spread. It was not what was in the headlines that most mattered that first Christmas, but what was done in secret. This is still true today. Life changing events are going on everywhere as individuals hear about Jesus and trust Him as their Savior. They quietly enter into the secret of Christmas as they receive God's Gift.

There are some secrets that have to be told or the end result is tragedy. Anne Davis tells of her first experience of spending the night with her little girl friend. She was amazed when her friends mother came in and tucked her into bed, kissed her and told her good night. In Anne's family this was never done. Overt affection was just not shown. But seeing it made her hunger for it. So the next night at home she put her cheek up to her mother at bedtime, but nothing happened. Her mother just went through the usual ritual of laying out clean clothes for school the next day. Anne cried herself to sleep that night and concluded her mother did not love her as her friends mother loved.

That disappointment sank deep into her and festered for years. It was only as an adult that she finally confronted her mother and asked why she had not shown more physical affection. The mother's eyes were filled with tears as she said, "my mother died when I was five and there was never anyone to tuck me in and say good night. There was no one to wash out my clothes and often I had to go to school with a dirty dress. I made up my mind, then and there, that if I ever had children of my own, they would always have clean clothes every morning. This is the way I tried to show my affection and love." Both of them were crying and Anne said to her mother, "You never told me that. It always use to irritate me that you were so fussy about my clothes. I wanted you to spend your time doing something else." Here was a tragedy because of secrets never told..

The world is filled with suffering because of secrets that are unrevealed. There are so many different love styles. People show love in so many different ways and the ones they love do not feel their love because they do not understand what love means to them. Like ships

passing in the night they miss each other because of unshared secrets. People have strange ways of saying I love you based on their unique background and personality. We need to know their secret to feel their love. Lets face it, the only reason the Christmas story does not seem strange to us is because we know the secret of what God was doing. But try to imagine what it seems like to one who does not.

The world is a mess and lost in darkness and what does God do?-He sends the world a baby. This is not exactly a logical gift to make anybody in a mess feel more secure. Nobody was saying what we really need in this world is another baby. It was not good news that another baby was born. You have to be in on the secret before it is good news.

It is no secret what God can do
But it is often a mystery why.
Why would He begin anew
With a little baby's cry?
He was the Lord before all time,
Now in a secret guise he lays.
No longer the Lord in His prime,
Yet, the angels sing His praise.
What wondrous things God will do
To show the world His grace.
Revealing that His love is true,
Through the smiling Christ-child's face.
God opened up the secret of His eternal plan,
When He sent His only Son to be a real man.
It's now an open secret that He's the only way,
And that is why we celebrate this joyous Christmas day!
That day God came in secret, known only to a few,
But now the secrets out-God loves the whole world too.
It is no longer a secret what God can do,
But the spreading of this secret is still up to me and you.

May God help us to be sharers of the Christmas Secrets.

CHAPTER FOUR

4. HIS WONDERFUL NAME based on Matt.1:18-25

Some people are born risk-takers. Such was the case with Dr. John Haldane who was born in Scotland in 1860. His professional life was spent in seeing how close he could come to dying without actually ending up dead. He wanted to learn why it is that carbon monoxide kills people. So he got himself a partner and they both sat in a lab breathing carbon

monoxide. In about half an hour his partner suddenly flipped over on his back and Haldane realized it was time to flee. He ran up the stairs and out into fresh air. He was dizzy and could not see right, but after awhile he returned to normal. His partner was dead, of course, but that was the plan. His partner was a mouse and mice breathe faster than men and so he died faster. This was how Haldane knew when he still had a chance to escape. He later learned that small birds breathe even faster than mice and so he did not have to cut it so close in his experiments with poisonous gas.

Haldane did this experiment with every gas that was discovered in the mines. He risked his life over and over again, but in so doing he learned the effects of gas on miner's and thus developed ways whereby the lives of many miner's were spared. His studies also led to improved ventilation in mines and he developed the salt tablet to replace lost salt due to severe sweating in the mines. He led the way to the therapeutic use of oxygen which has been a life saver to so many. By the grace of God, Haldane lived to be 76 years old and died in 1936. He made a name for himself by almost dying time and time again.

The prophets of the Old Testament told of the coming Prince of Peace who would make a name for himself by not, almost dying, but by literally dying for his people. His dying would not just save them from earthly dangers but from the everlasting dangers of eternal death.

There has never been a person like this in history, and so the prophet Isaiah makes a special emphasis on the unique names to be given to this promised Messiah. In Isaiah 7:14 we read, "Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a Son and will call Him Immanuel." Then in Isaiah 9:6 we read, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders, and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

When we come to the New Testament we see the angel Gabriel telling Mary in Luke 1:31, "You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus." Later in Matt. 1:21 he gave this same message to Joseph, "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

Mary and Joseph did not need to struggle with a name and try out a few to hear how they sound. Their baby came with a name already attached. The name of this baby was so important to God that God himself selected it. He chose the name that He would honor above all names. God left most naming of people, creatures and things to man but He wanted to name this special child Himself.

You would not believe the complexity of life that astronomers have to struggle with. They have to name everything they discover and as they discover more and more they have to come up with names galore. It used to be a one man job. In 1647 Hevelius made a map of the moon and considered naming the mountains and valleys after Bible characters. But he chose instead to name them after earthly mountains and valleys and these have stuck. Galileo named the flat areas after seas and bays and even though there's no water there, these too have stuck.

But life became more complex. When William Herschel discovered the seventh planet, he

wanted to name it George after George III. But others said it should be called Uranus to be consistent with the other planets which are named after Roman gods. George almost became a name exalted to the heavens, but some committee shut it down.

Today we have international planetary nomenclature committees. Space exploration is making this a massive job. They now need too many names to be limited to astronomers and other scientists. They are now naming things after poets, composers, painters, historians, playwrights, mathematicians, sculptors, doctors, psychologists, biologists, novelists, engineers, and linguists. God gave Adam the task of naming all the animals and now man is given the task of naming all of the billions of things that God has created in universe. But when it came to the naming of His Son, God stepped in and took over and said His name will be Jesus. Not his earthly parents; not a committee; not a government agency, no one but God Himself was permitted to give the Christmas Baby His name. It was not a suggestion or a request, it was a command that His name be called Jesus. God is very open-minded as to what man will name all the rest of what He has made, but when it comes to this child conceived by the Holy Spirit, there is only one name that will do, and that is Jesus.

Jesus was a nobody in the world of his day. The really big name was that of the Emperor, Augustus Caesar. He fought the famous Brutus, who betrayed Julius Caesar. He fought and defeated the famous Mark Anthony and Cleopatra. He became the name above all names in the known world and he reigned for 44 years. He was greatly loved and was clearly the most famous name on the planet. Now he is only known because of the decree that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. It is the name of their baby that is now the name known and honored all over the known world and praised as well in all of heaven. His name is the name above all names and will be for all eternity.

Even the Moslems with their seven prophets-Mohammed being the last- consider Jesus to be the only perfect prophet and superior to all the rest. There is no other name like that of Jesus. The genealogy of Matt. 1, is a list of names that sums up the whole Old Testament. These were the people God used to make history and to fulfill His plan to bring His Son into history. All of these names are leading to one last and final name. Jesus had no children and so the list ends with Him and goes no further. His is the last name in God's plan because He fulfilled it completely and there is nothing anyone else can do to add to it. His name crowns the biggest project in the universe, the project of saving lost men for eternity. That is why God insisted that He be called Jesus, for it means Savior and He was and is the only Savior of man.

There are a lot of names that just fit the people who receive them. For example: the horticulturist named Mr Bloom; the gynecologist named Dr. Ovary; the Undertaker named Mr. Digger; the Ice Maker named I. C. Shivers and the Dentist named Dr. Boring. But no name in history is more fitting for the Son of God than the name of Jesus. It is the name by which we approach the throne of God; the name by which we offer our petitions; the name by which we send the devil fleeing. The poet has written,

Nothing can vex the devil more
Than the name of Him whom we adore.
Therefore doth it delight me best

To stand in the choir among the rest,
With the great organ trumpeting,
Through its metallic notes, and sing:
The Word has become flesh!
These words the devil can not endure
For he knoweth their meaning well!
Him they trouble and repel
Us they comfort and allure;
And happy it were if our delight
Were as great as his afright!

In some parts of the world the name of Jesus is still used for others but for most of the Christian world this name has been kept exclusive for the Son of God. It therefore did not become a popular name. But all who are connected with Jesus had names that became the most famous ever. Mary for girls and John for boys are the two most popular names because of their connection with the name of Jesus.

Charles Wesley is one of the two great hymn writers of all time-the other being Isaac Watts. Wesley was able to get one of his hymns into the Church of England's Book of Common Prayer. An 18th century printer did not know that the Church of England did not like Wesley. He needed a hymn to fill an empty space and he found a Christmas poem that he thought was just right. It was by Wesley. He included it and it was too late to remove it when it was discovered it was one of Wesley's. It might have been left out of future printings yet, but William Cummings discovered it fit so well with the tune by Felix Mendelssohn. He re-titled it, Hark The Herald Angels Sing, and it became one of the most popular Christmas hymns of all time. It exalts the name of Jesus but it also exalts the names of Wesley and Mendelssohn because they are connected with the name of Jesus.

If you want to make a name for yourself, attach your name to that which exalts the name of Jesus. If you tie your name to this name above all names it will carry your name to the top also. It may not get famous in time but any name linked to His will be written down in glory in the Lambs book of Life and will be known for all eternity. The highest success that can be achieved is to have your name positively linked to the name of Jesus. It is not what, but who you know that ultimately matters. O do you know the wondrous name of Jesus? That is the question of greatest importance. Jesus said so Himself in John17:3, "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

Jesus was either the proudest man to ever live, or he was the Son of God and Savior he claimed to be. No one else would ever dare to make the knowledge of His name the basis for eternal life. Jesus does this and forces every person to choose to accept and exalt that name or to reject it. Paul writes in I Cor. 6:11, "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ..." Those who put their trust in this, the only name under heaven by which we must be saved, will bear that name forever like a brand in the most conspicuous place possible-the forehead. In Rev. 22:4 we read this description of the servants of the Lamb in heaven, "They shall see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads."

This is no trifle, for the eternal destiny of every person revolves around what they will do with the name of Jesus. Will they use it to curse and thus be themselves cursed, or will they bless the name of Jesus and thus be themselves forever blest? The spirit of Christmas is found in blessing and exalting that blessed name. A poet put it-

**O that Thy name may be sounded
Afar, over earth and sea,
Till the dead awaken and praise Thee,
And the dumb lips sing to Thee!
Name of God's tender comfort,
Name of His glorious power,
Name that is song and sweetness,
The strong everlasting tower,
Jesus the Lamb accepted,
Jesus the Priest on His throne--
Jesus the King who is coming--
Jesus Thy Name alone!**

Thy degree to which we have a truly Christian Christmas will be the degree to which we honor and exalt His Wondrous Name.

CHAPTER FIVE

5. ANGELIC HOST based on Luke 2:8-15

Before the turn of the century, a Bishop was paying his annual visit to a church related college. He was the guest of one of the professors, and was stating to his host, that now since man knows all about nature, and all inventions have been discovered, we must be on the verge of the millennium. The professor disagreed. He felt that the next fifty years would lead to many more discoveries and inventions. He suggested that men would probably be flying like the birds. The Bishop said, "Nonsense, flight is reserved for the angels." That Bishop's name was Wright, and little did he ever suspect that his two sons, Orville and Wilbur, would be the ones to prove him wrong by successfully flying in an airplane. Wright was wrong about flight being reserved for the angels. Man has advanced so far in this field, he now even hopes to compete with angels in interplanetary travel.

In whatever angels are successful, man is not far behind. Angels were the first to praise God for the glories of His creation, but devout men, like the Psalmist, soon joined in the universal chorus-the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showth His handiwork. Angels were the first to announce the birth of Christ, and sing of the glorious good news of Christmas. But man too, was soon filled with the music of this miracle. Martin Luther expressed it for millions-

**My heart for very joy doth leap
My lips no more can silence keep,
I too must sing, with joyful tongue,
That sweetest ancient cradle song.
Glory to God in highest heaven,
Who unto man His Son hath given.
While angels sing, with pious mirth,
A glad New Year to all the earth.**

Man cannot refrain from joining the angels in praise to God.

Angels are the intelligent beings that break through the barrier between time and eternity, the visible and invisible, and speak of wonders, and blaze trails for men to follow in God's providence. Angels play a major role in God's plan. Angels are mentioned 15 times in the first two chapters of Luke. Though they are common in Scripture, many people do not take them very seriously. The average Christian would not deny their reality, but it would really make no practical difference to them if such beings did not exist.

The paradox is, the secular world and scientist seem to have more interest in the invisible world than many Christians. Arthur Clarke tells of how radio telescopes are being used to pick up impulses coming from interstellar space. Man hopes to discover intelligent life in the universe. He writes, "We can be certain that these vast instruments will bring us nearer to a true understanding of our universe; and we can hope that, one day, they will tell us we are not alone in its immensity." What a paradox-here is a man of science fascinated by the search for intelligent beings, and here we are as Christians with a record of such beings communicating with man on that first Christmas. If we believe the Word of God, we already know we are not alone in the universe.

Mortimer J. Adler, chairman of the Board of Editors of The Encyclopedia Britannica, wrote the book, The Angels And Us. He also helped edit the Great Books Of The Western World, which is the greatest collection on earth of the 102 great ideas that have shaped the history of our civilization. The first idea dealt with is, angels. Dr. Adler is no theologian, but everywhere he goes to lecture on angels, he draws large crowds. Why would the secular world be so interested in angels? It is because their reality would give man hope that life has meaning and purpose. Man longs to know he is not a freak accident of nature and a product of mere chance. That is what the search for intelligent life in space is all about. Earth is the hottest broadcasting body in the universe. Man is sending out radio and television signals from around the world in hopes that they will be picked up on some other galaxy and bring forth a response. Man longs to know he is not alone in this universe.

Adler argues that angels are a logical necessity. They would complete what is otherwise an incomplete universe. If man goes downward, he encounters the animal world, but if he cannot go upward and encounter the angelic world, something is missing and the universe is incomplete. God has created creatures for every environment below man and it is logical that He would create creatures for every environment above man. There is body without mind. There is body with mind. If there is no mind without body between man and God, God has left a whole conceivable strata of life out of His creation, and thus is an incomplete Creator. But if

God did make angels, then the creation is complete.

Philosophically, angels are a necessity. There must be an unbroken chain of life from the amoeba to the angel. We can see the chain below man but not the one above him. But reason demands that we believe in this invisible chain above man. What Adler says that reason demands, the Christian says, revelation gives. The point is, everything the Bible says about angels is consistent with the logic of reason and philosophy. It is a mistake to ignore them, for they play an important role in the total picture of the universe and of the plan of God.

Christians are still deeply influenced by the old scientific mentality, which sought to eliminate the supernatural. If it could not be made available to the senses, it was not real. Materialism became a dominant world view that made even Christians blind to the mysteries of the unseen world. We need to study the world of angels more seriously so that our appetite for the unseen world can be enhanced. Christmas is an ideal time to do this, and so let's look at angels and first of all consider-

I. THEIR NATURE.

There are more misconceptions on this than almost any other aspect of Biblical revelation. Poets and artists are guilty for this. One year there was a great deal of controversy over the Christmas stamp because it was obviously female. Artists have confused the romantic use of the word angel, with the Biblical use. The result is, Biblical angels are usually pictured as female, even though the Bible consistently portrays them as male. At the tomb of Christ they are even called young men. Peter Marshall preferred Biblical scenes on Christmas cards, rather than sail boats, bells, cats and dogs, or Santa. He said, "Angels there must be, but they need not be modernistic angels in evening dress with peroxide permanents." But the fact is, this is what you will usually see when angels are portrayed by the modern artist. Once in a while, however, the term angel is applied to males. Like the case of the man who suddenly found himself standing before the gate of heaven, and he was shocked. "How did I get here?" he asked. Peter replied, "Don't you remember when your wife said, be an angel and let me drive?"

The problem with humorous stories is that people take them as a reliable source of information. They do not read the Bible and so all they know is what they hear in stories that circulate. I heard a man in the Civil Air Patrol say that he almost got his wings. He was referring to the fact that he almost collided with a jet when he was in his small plane. He was expressing the popular idea that when a man dies he becomes like an angel with wings. What is pathetic is that Christians often go right along with popular misconceptions. Children used to sing in Sunday School,

**I want to be an angel
and with the angels stand,
A crown upon my forehead
a harp within my hand.**

The Bible makes a clear distinction between man and angel. Men will never become angels. Their natures are radically different. Angels have neither bodies nor souls. Angels are pure

spirits. They can take on the bodies of men, but this is not their nature. In Hebrews 1:14, angels are called ministering spirits. Man, because of his body, cannot be called a spirit. In eternity men will have a resurrected body, which will make them forever different from angels. Men are sometimes referred to as souls. A professor giving the population of his home town said, "There are several hundred souls and a few heels." Men can be called souls, but they are always souls linked to a body, and are never pure spirits, as are the angels.

Angels have some advantage over men by being pure spirits. They can communicate by an act of the will. They can travel like thought across infinite space without passing through the intervening space. Pure spirit does not even have the limitation of light. It is the fastest aspect of visible reality, but it still must pass through space. Angels are marvelous creatures, but they are still finite, for they were created.. In Psalm 148:2-5, angels are in the same category as all of the rest of creation-"Praise Him, all his angels....for He commanded and they were created." In Col. 1:16 we read, "For in Him were all things created....whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers." God alone is uncreated and eternal.

Angels have superior intelligence. Jesus implied this in Matt. 24:36, where referring to His coming again He says, "of that day and hour knowth no one, not even the angels of heaven." In other words, there are some things God does not even share with those beings closest to Him, who know most everything else. Angels have a superior nature now, but ultimately, man will be the masterpiece of God's creation, when they are made completely Christlike. Next, let's look at-

II. THEIR NUMBER.

In verse 13 of our text, we read that suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host. It would be safe to say there are no small choirs in heaven. Angels are pictured in the Bible as being a vast multitude. They are often compared to the stars in number. It was widely believed among the early church fathers that the ratio between the number of angels to that of men was 99 to 1. They arrived at this conclusion by what we would consider a doubtful interpretation. They said the one lost sheep represented humanity, while the 99 in the fold represented the good angels. Jesus left the 99, as the Good Shepherd, to go find the one lost sheep of humanity. It is unnecessary to use such an interpretation to establish that angels are numerous. The Bible speaks clearly on this issue. Duet. 33:2, speaks of ten thousands of holy ones. Dan. 7:10 says, "Thousands of thousands ministered unto him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him." Rev. 5:11 says, "I heard a voice of many angels....and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands." The idea being conveyed is that they are beyond accurate human calculation. In our day these figures are not so vast, but in Bible times they represent numbers which are unimaginable. Milton was not just speculating when he wrote,

Nor think...though men were none,
That Heaven would want spectators, God want praise!
Millions of spiritual creatures walk the earth
Unseen, both when we wake and when we sleep.
All these with ceaseless praise his works behold
Both day and night.

Jesus in Matt. 12:53, told Peter to put away his sword. He said if He needed any defense, more than 12 legions of angels stood ready. The reality of innumerable angels is not an irrelevant fact, like the number of eggs a salmon can lay. It has very practical value in the psychology of Christian living. It is the basis of optimism in a world where numbers do not always support the truth of the Gospel. The prophet Elisha said in II Kings 6:16, "Fear not: for they that are with us are more than they that be with them." The point being, that because of the angels, the godly are always in the majority. The majority of intelligent beings in this universe are always on the side of truth and light. Without this confidence, Satan can easily lead us into discouragement, when we feel like we are alone.

The angels are man's allies in the battle against the forces of evil and unbelief. E. C. Burne-Jones said to Oscar Wilde, "The more materialistic science becomes, the more angels shall I paint, there wings are my protest in favor of the immortality of the soul." When the study of angels becomes an end in itself, it leads to some sort of heresy, but when it leads you to focus on Jesus Christ and His eternal kingdom, then it is a blessed Biblical doctrine. Their focus is always on their Creator and Lord, and if we join them in that focus, they become our allies.

**Come, let us join our cheerful songs
With angels round the throne.
Ten thousand thousand are their tongues
But all their joys are one.**

The purpose of the angels on the first Christmas was to get men to go and worship and adore the Christ-child. That is still their main function in our lives today, and especially in this Christmas season. The angels played a conspicuous role in that first Christmas.

1. An angel announced the birth of the forerunner of Christ-John the Baptist.
2. An angel came to Mary to announce the birth of the Messiah, and to tell her what name He was to bear.
3. An angel came to Joseph in a dream to assure him the Christ-child was conceived by the Holy Spirit.
4. An angel came to Joseph again to warn him to flee to Egypt.
5. An angel came to Joseph in Egypt to tell him to return to Israel.
6. Angels were the first to announce the birth of Christ to the shepherds.

Angels were the primary messengers of that first Christmas. The Star of Bethlehem was their only competitor, and it reached only the wise men. All others were reached by angels. The question is, what did Christmas mean to the angels? Were they just innocent bystanders who happened to take an interest in the Incarnation? Not so-they were directly affected by this event. It was good news to them as well as to the world, for it meant their job would be more effective.

Origen, the church father said, "The coming of Christ into the world was a great joy for those to whom the care of men and nature had been entrusted." He is referring to the angels. Why should it make any difference to them? Why are they rejoicing before the shepherds? It is because they too are shepherds. They do not care for sheep, but for men. They are the guardians and the guides of mankind. It is a hard job with Satan and his angels doing all they can to lead men astray. The track record of the good angels in the Old Testament is not very

impressive. Satan led God's people astray over and over again. Now, at Christmas, they are rejoicing because their Lord has come to help them be more effective in the battle against evil. They knew that the Incarnation was an invasion into enemy territory that would lead them to be more victorious.

Now there is One who can destroy the works of the Devil, their greatest foe. Now they have their David who can topple the giant who is too much for them. Jesus is their hero. We read in Jude 1:9, "But even the Archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the Devil about the body of Moses, did not dare to bring a slanderous accusation against him but said, the Lord rebuke you." This is the most powerful angel we have any record about in the Bible, yet he had to be careful in his conflict with Satan. No wonder the angels rejoiced at Christmas. They now had a hero on the battlefield that would assure them of being on the winning team. Christmas is not just an earthly event, it is a heavenly event. It is cause for celebration in the heavens too, and that is why the angels are singing glory to God in the highest. They had been waiting for the Messiah to come too, for it meant victory for angels as well as for men. From their perspective, Christmas was the beginning of God's greatest strategy to defeat Satan.

The angels are not like the elder brother who was angry at the father for welcoming home the prodigal son. They rejoice at every sinner who repents, for they are on God's side, and rejoice that men are won back from Satan's clutches into the kingdom of light. We, as restored sinners to the family of God, are to recognize the angels as a part of that family. It is wrong to adore them and wrong to ignore them, but it is right to explore them and learn all we can about them so as to feel they are our friends. Christians have not always been friendly to angels. In this season of Christmas it is a good time to recognize our oneness with them, and to be aware that when we sing the praises of God for His gift of salvation in His Son, the Lord Jesus, we are being joined in our praise by the angelic host.

CHAPTER SIX

6. THE ENJOYMENT OF GOD based on Luke 2:8-20

One of the biggest attractions in all of history was the smallest man alive-General Tom Thumb. He was only 25 inches tall and weighed only 15 pounds. Over 20 million people paid to see him sing and dance. He charms his way into the hearts of the greatest people of his day-Queen Victoria of England, Queen Isabella of Spain, the Duke of Wellington and Abraham Lincoln, just to name a few.

He was born January 4, 1838 as Charles Sherwood Stratton. Oddly enough, he was a big baby weighing 9lbs. 2ozs. at birth, but at 5 months old he weighed 15lbs. 2ozs., and that is where he stayed. In this way he was radically different than Jesus for Dr. Luke tells us in Luke 2:52 that he grew in wisdom and stature. Jesus grew up as a normal man physically.

Tom Thumb did have some things in common with Jesus, however. Both were born as sons of a carpenter. Jesus was not conceived by Joseph but he was his earthly father. Both began as little mites who became mighty. Both remained single all their lives. Both drew large crowds. All of these are trivial and incidental. That which they really had in common was their adoration of their heavenly Father. Tom Thumb wrote, "I read the Bible every day, and am fond of reading the New Testament. I adore my Creator and know that He is good to us all. He has given me a small body, but I believe He has not contracted my heart, nor brain, nor soul. I shall praise His name evermore."

The smallest man who ever lived and the greatest man who ever lived had in common with each other the spirit of worship. Tom Thumb praised God for his little body with it's big heart and soul. The angels praised God for the little baby of Bethlehem who would grow up and cause people to praise God all over the world. The more you examine the Christmas story, the more you discover that the one thing all of the persons involved had in common was the spirit of praise.

Mary begins her song, "My soul praises the Lord." Zechariah's song begins, "Praise be to the Lord." The angels suddenly appear, "Praising God and saying glory to God in the highest." The shepherds in verse 20, "returned, glorifying and praising God."

One of the major differences between a Christian Christmas and a secular Christmas is the praise to God. The secular soul does not rise above the materialism of the season, but the spiritual soul recognizes that the essence of the celebration is in praising God for the Gift of His Son. The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. This is also the chief end of Christmas. The way to have a merry Christmas is to do what all the characters did on that first Christmas-they enjoyed God and they praised Him..

We are to enjoy God forever but we do not have to wait until eternity to begin this enjoyment. We start now, and the way we enjoy God is by praising Him. Praise is not only a pleasure for the receiver but for the giver as well. This is a case where we can see it is more blessed to give than to receive. We are, no doubt, more blest in the giving of praise to God than He is by receiving it. To be a praiser of God is to be in the highest state of joy. All other happiness falls short. The goal of Christmas is to enjoy God.

Martha was a wonderful Christian woman and Jesus loved her greatly, but she was so busy preparing a meal for Jesus she did not enjoy Jesus. She missed the enjoyment of his presence and His teaching and the result is she was rebuked for trying to rob Mary of her enjoyment of these things. Jesus said Mary made the right and wise choice. The point Jesus was making was that he wants to be enjoyed. His greatest enjoyment is in being enjoyed. This is God's greatest pleasure as well. More than service even, God wants us to enjoy who He is and to express that enjoyment is praise. The simplest definition of worship that I have come up with is-the enjoyment of God. If you truly praise God you are enjoying God and thereby fulfilling the very purpose for your existence.

The angels and the shepherds had this in common on that first Christmas: They were enjoying God and what He was doing in history. When a Christian says Merry Christmas, it is to mean a whole lot more than, enjoy your gifts, your food, your family, your friends, your

parties, etc.: It is to mean, above all else, enjoy God! In various places in the Bible even the rocks and the trees and the mountains break forth in singing the praises of God. The chief end of everything is to praise God. Happiness is expressed in praise. James 5:13 says, "Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise." Singing, praising, worshiping and being happy are all linked together in what it means to enjoy God.

That is why it is surprising that there ever was a debate about whether angels sing or not. I cannot conceive that God would make intelligent beings who can behold His glory and the wonders of His creation and withhold from them the gift of music and song. Heaven is always pictured as a place of praise and it would be cruel to be in this environment of perpetual praise and never be able to join in the joyful expressions of thanksgiving through song. To know God and His love and not be able to sing His praises would be more like hell. This is the state of the fallen angels who have lost the presence of God and therefore have also lost the enjoyment of praising Him in song. The essence of hell is the loss of the enjoyment of God. Satan and his fallen angels lose the essence of heaven which is, the enjoyment of God.

The angels on that first Christmas gave us a glimpse of angelic enjoyment of God in their song. It is of interest that the very first Christmas sermon that was preserved refers to this. The sermon is by Telesphorus, the Bishop of Rome in 137 A.D., who said in that message, "..that in the holy night of the Nativity of our Lord and Savior, they do celebrate public church services, and in them do solemnly sing the angel's hymn....." All through history Christmas has been a time of songs and praise. This is what men and angels have in common- the ability to enjoy God and express that enjoyment in song. Paul Gerhardt in 1653 wrote,

All my heart this night rejoices
as I hear far and near,
Sweetest angels voices
Christ is born, the choirs all singing,
Till the air Everywhere
Now with joy is ringing

What was the purpose of the angels appearing to the shepherds? It was obviously their goal to get the shepherds to enjoy God and what He was doing along with them. Don't be afraid the angels said for their goal was not to scare the shepherds and make them fearful of the supernatural world. Instead, they invited them to share in the secrets of the supernatural world. They brought good news of great joy for all the people. Angels are not exclusive. They do not want to sing God's praises to the exclusion of man. They want man to join them in their songs of joy. After they told the shepherds where to find the baby Messiah, they returned to heaven for they expected man to carry on the songs of praise on earth. They would enjoy God in heaven and they expected man to enjoy God on earth. The message of Christmas is, because God came to earth, we can, even in this fallen world, taste of heaven and enjoy God now in time.

The two things everyone most desires are happiness and health. Christians who enjoy God can be the world's greatest Santa Claus, for they can help people receive these gifts by sharing the Gospel of God's love in Christ. Ultimate happiness and health are found in the enjoyment of God. Prov. 17:22 says, "A cheerful heart is good medicine." What can make a

heart more cheerful than the enjoyment of God? When people receive God's gift of eternal life in Christ, they receive with him the hope of eternal health and happiness. That is why it is such good news and that is why joyful praise is at the center of the Christmas celebration. Philipp Nicolai wrote,

Now let every tongue adore thee!
Let men with angels sing before thee!
Let harps and cymbals now unite!
Heaven's gates with pearl are glorious,
Where we partake through faith victorious,
With angels round thy throne of light.
No mortal eye hath seen,
No mortal ear hath heard such wondrous things;
Therefore with joy our song shall soar
In praise to God forevermore.

Singing at Christmas is not a mere trimming, but one of the main purposes of the season. It is not the sweet potato, it is the turkey. It is not the ornament, it is the tree. Whatever helps us to enjoy God is a vital part of the Christmas experience. Music and song have always been a key means to this end. They get the mind and the body stimulated to praise God.

If everyone who enjoyed God, when Jesus was born, expressed that in praise, then we ought to do so also. Praise in song is a natural response to a major event. When a nation is born a national anthem is born too. Major things lead to songs and the most major event of history was the birth of the Son of God into human flesh. Michael Harbon tells of the cowboy who rode up to the Grand Canyon and said, "Something mighty big sure happened here." The manger scene is to Christianity what the Grand Canyon is to nature. We are to look at it with an awesome awareness that something might big sure happened here.

When Nixon was president, he got overly excited about Americans landing on the moon and he said, "The planting of human feet on the moon is the greatest moment in human history." If we spent a month out of each year celebrating that event with songs and plays and parties of all kinds, he would have had a case. But the fact is, the greatest event in human history was not when man set foot on the moon, but rather, when God set foot on the earth. That is the event that sent music through the hearts of angels and shepherds and through all of history. No human being will ever read all the poetry written about the birth of Jesus. No human being will ever sing all the songs sung about this birth. No human being will ever see all the paintings and other works of art created in honor of this birth.

Paul in IICor. 9:15, calls this baby, God's unspeakable gift. Some translate it God's inestimable gift or God's indescribable gift or God's incomparable gift or God's inexpressible gift. Why all these different words? They illustrate the very point of the verse which is, there are not enough words to communicate the wonder and the worth of this gift. That is why the Living Bible is good here for it refers to the gift of Jesus as "too wonderful for words."

Harry Ironside had an insight into this word that I treasure. He points out that it literally means, "not yet fully expounded." We have hundreds of thousands of songs and millions of

sermons expounding on Jesus, but the point of Paul is, we can never fully grasp all that we have in Jesus until we see Him face to face. Then we will say, as the Queen of Sheba said after seeing Solomon in person, the half was not told me. We will sing the Praises of God for all eternity for the gift of His Son for we will be ever learning more and more of all that was given to us in this wondrous gift. Because of this gift we will be able to enjoy God forever. Christmas is a time to enjoy God because He made it possible to enjoy Him forever by His inexpressible gift. He will go on forever expounding to us all that is included in this gift. Jesus is a gift that goes on giving and giving for He is infinite.

If I have a party and go to all the trouble to clean and cook and decorate, my greatest pleasure is going to be in the enjoyment of my guests. I will get pleasure out of their enjoyment of all I have done for their pleasure. I will enjoy their enjoyment. The same is true for God. What does God get out of Christmas? He gets the pleasure of our enjoyment of what He has done for us. If we love His gift of the Lord Jesus and we express that love in songs of praise we fulfill the purpose of God. The greatest gift we can give God is to enjoy the Gift He has given to us.

Beverly Sills after one of her performances at the Metropolitan Opera, was being congratulated by those who came back stage. After awhile one of them said they should go and leave her alone for she has to give another performance at eight. Miss Sills heard that and said, "No, I don't have to give another performance. I get to give it! I get to sing!" She so loved to sing that it was pure pleasure and not a duty or obligation. We are really filled with the Christmas spirit when this is our attitude. We don't have to sing Christmas songs, we get to sing them! We get to enjoy the praises of God! We get to enjoy God! The angels made it clear and the shepherds followed their lead, and wise men and women continue to do so realizing that the essence of Christmas is in the enjoyment of God.

CHAPTER SEVEN

7. THE BABE AND THE BELL based on Luke 2:1-20

Bells are one of the common symbols of Christmas, because all through history, bells have been used to play the role of the angels on that first Christmas. Bells ring forth the message of joy. The bell and the babe of Bethlehem are linked in many ways. Nowhere is this more evident, than when you compare the history of our famous Liberty Bell with that of the Christ-child.

Both designed to convey a message of good news. Jesus was God's Word, and He came to be heard. He came to sound forth a message of joy and liberty. This was the purpose of the Liberty Bell, as well. It was originally ordered by William Penn, the Christian founder of Pennsylvania. It was to celebrate the 50th anniversary of religious freedom in Pennsylvania from 1701-1751. The inscription on the bell is from Lev. 25:10, "Proclaim liberty

throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof." This bell, like the babe of Bethlehem, was to bring good news of great joy to all people.

The Liberty Bell was not cast and hung to ring happily ever after, but like the babe of Bethlehem, it had a battle for survival. The bell became famous on July 8, 1776, when the first public reading of the Declaration Of Independence, took place in Philadelphia. The bell began it's jubilant ringing in the tower of Independence Hall. That made the bell a great symbol of the birth of freedom. The star of Bethlehem was a symbol of the birth of the King of freedom, who came to set us free from the bondage to sin. Such symbols are a threat to those who oppose liberty.

Herod would shoot the star from the sky, if he could, and so he sent his troops to silence the Word, residing in that babe of Bethlehem. The bell was the object of a Herod like plot, as well. The British General Howe, and 17,000 troops attacked Philadelphia in 1777. They fought their way to the Liberty Bell to destroy this symbol of American freedom. Like Herod, they came close to succeeding in their evil plot. They came within a rifle shot of the bell. But in the night, they Americans lifted the 2,000 pound bell from the tower. They put it on a farm wagon, covered it with potato sacks, and got it to the Zion Reformed Church in Allentown. It remained hidden there for nearly a year. The babe of Bethlehem was taken off to Egypt, and so both Herod and Howe were foiled in their attempts to destroy the babe or the bell.

Both of them came back. Jesus returned to a life of teaching and service to His people, and the Liberty Bell was returned to the tower in Independence Hall, where it rang out for many great events. On July 8, 1835, it was tolling for the funeral of Chief Justice John Marshall. It was at this time that it cracked and was silenced. The babe of Bethlehem was also silenced after much blessed service, and was also broken on the cross.

The parallel of the babe and the bell does not end there. The Liberty Bell was given a resurrection, and the crack was filled in. It was ringing again in 1846 for the birthday of George Washington. But near noon it cracked again, and after that brief restoration, it has been silent ever since. Jesus also rose from the silence of the grave and after a brief time with His disciples, He ascended to the Father. This fascinating parallel of the babe and the bell introduces us to the role that bells have played in the history of Christmas. We do not hear the angels, as did the shepherds, but if we listen to the Christmas bells, and know their history, we can hear the same message that leads to the Savior.

The wise men were led by sight to the Savior. God gave them a star. But the shepherds were led by sound. God gave them a message through the ear. Both are a part of God's methods, and both of them touch us all, in the sounds and sights of Christmas. We live in a visual oriented culture, and are more impressed by sight, than sound. But we need to learn to listen too., for by means of the ear we can enter more deeply into the full message of Christmas. Sound has the ability to produce emotion. The sound of bells can move us to enjoy God's gift, all the more, if we know their history.

There is not a lot about bells in the Bible, but the little there is, tells us that God loves the sound of bells. He had them play a role in the Old Testament that links them to the role of

His Son, He was to send into the world at Christmas. In Exodus 28:33-34, we have a description of the robe that Aaron was to wear when he went into the holy place before the Lord. Little golden bells were to be all around the skirt of the robe. Their tinkling sound, as he came before the Lord, made him safe. The sound of the bells, was a message in music, that protected him. Anyone who sought to come before the Lord, without the sound of these bells, would die.

You can see the parallel again, with the babe and the bell. No one could approach God without the bells, and Jesus said no man comes unto the Father but by me. There is no entering the presence of God, without the Babe or the bell. The only other reference to bells in the Bible, that I am aware of, is in Zech. 14:20, where the day of victory for the Kingdom of God, over the nations of the world, is being described. It says, "And on that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, Holy to the Lord." The bells are connected with total victory. So also, the Babe of Bethlehem was born to be the King of Kings, whose kingdom would conquer all the kingdoms of the world. It is no wonder that bells have become a symbol of Christmas, for God chose the bell to be a symbol of joy and victory in His presence.

There are numerous types of bells, but all of them have some positive value, and thus, have something in common with the Babe of Bethlehem. Two main characteristics stand out in the messages conveyed to man, by the Babe and the bell. First of all, their message is-

I. A LIFTING MESSAGE.

Good news is what they are both all about. Love lifted me, we sing, and in God's gift of the Babe of Bethlehem, He gave us the greatest lifting love ever. The Christmas message is a message of love, and thus, a message of joy. The bells ring out this message of joy. They are frequently referred to in Christmas songs.

- 1. I Heard The Bells On Christmas Day.**
- 2. Ring The Bells Of Heaven.**
- 3. Joy Bells Ringing In Your Heart**
- 4. Jingle Bells.**
- 5. Silver Bells.**
- 6. Come On Ring Those Bells.**
- 7. The Bells Of St. Mary.**
- 8. Angels Singing, Church Bells Ringing.**
- 9. Ring The Bells, Ring The Bells.**
- 10. Christmas Bells.**

All of these bells deal with a joyful message that gives a lift. The bell is the logical symbol of marriage. Wedding bells are popular the year around as symbols of love and joy. They are designed to bring a lift into life, and all relationships. God sent His Son into the world to lift the fallen. He came so low to lift us high. The sounds of Christmas must be lifting sounds to be consistent with the purpose of God. Bell sounds are ideal, for they convey, in a great variety of ways, the lifting message of love and joy.

The bells that ring at Christmas time

**Each bring a different greeting-
The door bell rings and tells of friends
Whom you will welcome meeting.**

**The slay bells tell of snow paths
And of fun, they are assigned.
The church bells tell of peace on earth
And joy to all mankind.**

**Yes, each bell has a greeting
Though it has a different ring-
And may you share the happiness
The bells at Christmas bring!**

Bells have the power to move us with sound. William Cowper, author of many hymns, gives us this graphic image, "The bells, the iron dogs of the air, Lift up their joyful barking." Thomas Hood writes, "Bells are music's laughter." Edgar Guest wrote, "I am not the kind that loves the past and all that's modern scorns. I merely say that sleigh bells were more musical than horns." What the stars are to the eyes, the bells are to the ears.

The star is a great Christmas symbol. It is heavenly, yet conveys light to the earth. This is symbolic of the Babe of Bethlehem, who was heavenly in origin, but brought His light to earth. So the bell hangs in it's tower above the earth, and is the most heavenly of instruments for music, yet it's joyous message is heard on the earth. The bells are like audible stars.

**Holy Night on wings of angels,
Thou descendest to the earth,
While the stars in quiet splendor
Hail the advent of Christ's birth.**

**In the stillness of the evening
Bells are heard from belfry tower;
Melodies of sacred music
Lend their beauty to this hour.**

-Tabitha Marie Ritzmann.

Bells are designed to get your attention. That is why the Salvation Army uses them. The angels had to get the shepherds attention, and the star had to get the wise men's attention. Bells have been used all through history, to call man to an awareness of something they should be in on. Bells ring to call you to a meal. The door bell and phone bell call your attention to the fact, someone is trying to contact you. The church bell calls you to the worship of God. Christmas bells are to call your attention to the fact, God has done something in the gift of His Son, that is the basis for a never ending joy. Their sound is to remind us, Jesus lifted man from the pit of despair to the pinnacle of delight.

Tommy's report card was not as good after the Christmas holiday. His father asked him why? Tommy replied, "You know how it is dad, everything is marked down after

Christmas." Unfortunately, it is true, there is a let down after the build up to Christmas. This is an emotional and psychological reality. But in God's value system, everything is marked up, after Christmas. God descended in the Incarnation to save man, and lift him to the level of children of God. Man is exalted to the level of infinite worth. Only the lofty bell can send forth a sound that symbolizes this marvelous life-lifting message. Let every bell do for you what the angels did for the shepherds. Let them call your attention to the Babe of Bethlehem, who lifted you to such heights.

Jesus said, "If I be lifted up I will draw all men to me." This good news is represented by a church in Holland, where the bell rings inside a large cross. The bell calls attention to that place where the Babe of Bethlehem laid down His life, and by so doing, lifted ours. We can chose what our minds turn to at the sound of bells. Longfellow chose to hear what God wanted him to hear, and he wrote,

The bells themselves are the best of preachers.
Their brazen lips are learned teachers.
From their pulpits of stone, in the upper air
Now a sermon and now a prayer.

Let every bell you hear lift your mind to think of that name that rings more bells than any other name on earth, and which will ring the bells of heaven, forever. Secondly, the message of the Babe and the bell is-

II. A LIBERATING MESSAGE.

If love is the cause of Christmas, then liberty is it's effect. The goal of God in giving His Son is, that man might be set free from his bondage to sin. Even the angels were so excited about this message of liberation, they broke forth in praise, glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests.

Heaven and earth are brought together in the Babe of Bethlehem, and there is jubilation in reconciliation. Liberty is the ultimate consequence of love. If the Son shall set you free, you shall be free indeed. It is no wonder that Christians in the South have celebrated Christmas with fireworks. Like the 4th of July, it is a celebration of liberty. Again, this is why the bell is linked with the Babe, for all through history the bell has been a messenger of liberty.

All through the middle ages every town had it's bell. The bell was the soul of the town. The church bell regulated life for many centuries. It called people to rise from sleep, to work, to worship, and to battle. The first thing a conqueror did when he took a town, was to remove the bell from the church tower. As long as that bell was pealing, the town was free. Silence the bell, and the town had lost it's liberty. The sound of the bell and liberty were synonymous. If a city was captured, everyone would wait in suspense to see if the enemy could be thrust back. If the defending forces were successful, the bells would signal the victory. Then joy and jubilation would fill the city along with the sound of the bell. Hitler silenced many of the church of Europe by melting down their bells to make cannons. But there were plenty of them left, to ring in jubilation, at his defeat.

In 610 A.D., the barbarians were attacking the French city of Sens. Clothair, the Christian leader, ordered all the bells of the city to be rung together. This so frightened the invading barbarians, they fled, and the town was literally, saved by the bell. The bell, like the Babe of Bethlehem, has been a savior of the lost many times. A blind boy wandered off his course and was confused. He was lost until he heard the bells of the nearby church. That sound was his guide, and he was able to get back on the path. Bells have done on an earthly level what the Babe of Bethlehem came to do on a spiritual level-guide men out of danger.

That is why the bell became so closely linked to the church. The first bell makers in the Western world were the Christian monks. Bells were made for the glory of God, and they were dedicated to God, just as was the Babe of Bethlehem. For centuries, no church was considered complete until its bell was installed. The bells in the Kremlin, in Russia, were once the bells of a church.

Paul Revere is famous for his horse ride to warn that the British were coming, but he did something over his life-time most Americans are not aware of. He was the most famous bell maker in American history. 37 of the 48 big bells he made are still in existence, and they still ring forth the message of liberty. Many of his bells are church bells. His masterpiece, made the year before he died in 1817, hangs in Kings Chapel, in Boston. The first bell he made in Boston, in 1792, still is used today in the St. James Episcopal Church, in Cambridge, Mass. Revere and his sons made about 400 bells. He and some friends, as young boys, got involved in ringing the church bells, He fell in love with bells and they became a major part of his life. He produced bells that ended up in many churches. They continue, to this day, to ring out the joyous sounds of the Christmas season.

Revere did not make them all, however, for there were many bell makers. The largest bell in the world, that is a tuned bell, which weighs 20 and a half tons, hangs in the Riverside Cathedral in New York. The worlds largest bell is dedicated to ringing forth the message of love and liberty that came into this world in God's Christmas package. Jesus transformed everything He touched. He touched the bell, and ever since the bell has been a primary tool for expressing, "Joy to the World the Lord Has Come."

Henry Longfellow was one of the greatest American poets. On Christmas day, in 1863, Longfellow heard the church bells ringing, and he questioned their message. The United States was engaged in bitter Civil War. He questioned how we could feel joy in the midst of such war. He thought deeply on the message of the bells, and then concluded their message would go on ringing long after the war had ceased. This motivated him to write the poem that has become a famous Christmas hymn-I Heard The Bells On Christmas Day. The battle of pessimism and optimism is written into this song.

**And in despair I bowed my head,
there is no peace on earth I said,
For hate is strong and mocks the song
of peace on earth, good will to men.**

As he listened to the bells, his spirit was lifted and liberated from this despair. He wrote,

**Then pealed the bells more loud and deep
God is not dead, nor doth He sleep.
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
With peace on earth good will to men!**

The bells of Christmas represent the optimism and hope that God sent to this world in His Son. Tennyson, another great poet, wrote,

**The time draws near the birth of Christ
The moon is hid, the night is still.
The Christmas bells, from hill to hill
Answer each other in the mist.
Rise, happy morn, rise, holy morn;
Draw forth the cheerful day from night
O Father, touch the east, and light
The light that shown when hope was born.**

The Babe and the bell bring in and ring in the message of liberating hope. Most of the poetry written about bells can be easily applied to the Babe of Bethlehem. They both bring the same liberating message.

John Greenleaf Whittier, when he heard the constitutional amendment had passed, to abolish slavery and set masses of people free, he wrote a poem that fits the finished work of Christ on the cross.

**It is done!
Clang of bell and roar of gun
Send the tidings up and down
How the belfries rock and reel!
How the great guns, peal on peal,
Fling the joy from town to town!**

**Ring, O Bells!
Every strike exalting tells
Of the horrid hour of crime,
Loud and long, that all may hear
Ring for every listening ear
Of eternity and time.**

The Bible, history, poetry, and experience, link the Babe and the bell, for both of them sound forth a message of liberty. Let every bell you hear make you think of God's greatest gift-the Lord Jesus, who lifted and liberated us, and gave us this great day of celebration called Christmas.

**Some softly-hidden magic dwells
Within the sounds of Christmas bells.
Some lovely note that must belong
In that triumphant, far-off song
The angel sang above the earth**

In joyous welcome to His birth.

In 1953, a collection of the chains and shackles that were once used to hold the mentally ill as prisoners, was taken to a foundry, and made into a 300 pound bell. In 1958, it was taken to the White House, where it's ringing proclaimed a new era of freedom for the mentally ill. As the compassion of Christ moved through history, lifting and liberating the oppressed, the bell is used to be a messenger of the good news. Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth good will to men-that is the good news proclaimed to all the world by the Babe and the bell.

**Ring louder, ye bells of the Christmastide;
Ye heralds, re-echo it far and wide;
Tell out to the nations again and again,
The Gospel of peace, good will to men.**

CHAPTER EIGHT

8. CHRISTMAS EXPECTATIONS based on Luke 2:8-32

Henry McCushy, of the Texas Employment Commission, said they had a hard time getting men to be department store Santa Clauses, one year. The reason was, the high percentage of children who were kicking Santa in the shins for not coming through the year before. They expected Santa to live up to his billing, and deliver the goods as they requested.

Bill Adler, in his book, Letters To Santa Claus, reveals the hostility children can develop because of their excessive expectations. One little boy wrote,

Dear Santa Claus, "Last year you didn't leave me anything good. The year before you didn't leave me anything good. This year is your last chance."

Excessive expectation is the quickest way to the land of doubt, despair and the drop out. If you expect God, your parents, your children, or anybody to cater to your every whim, you are setting yourself up for a fall. And if you expect Christmas to meet your every need, you are doing it again. There is no promise in the Bible that Christmas is the way, the truth, and the life, and that by trusting in it, you can have abundant life. It is a form of idolatry to expect Christmas to do for you what only Christ can do. Nobody's birthday-not even Christ's-can meet all of our needs, and it is a major emotional mistake to expect it.

A large portion of the depression associated with Christmas is due to people's unauthorized expectations. They expect milk to stop spilling, and people who haven't spoken to each other all year to be friendly, and the whole world to stop the folly of war, murder, robbery, and every form of evil, and they are shattered when they realize they can't even stop the spilt milk. It is depressing if you expect Christmas to make the world a paradise. The first one didn't do it, and to expect it of the next one is to expect what God does not authorize us to

expect.

It is also unrealistic from the point of view of psychiatry. One psychiatrist wrote, "Any celebration that sets up such unrealistic, magical expectations is very unfair to human beings. People are pushed to deny the reality of their lives-their financial situation, their true relationships. There is almost a delusional mood." In other words, people try to live in the realm of myth. They buy things they really can't afford. They pretend to be more loving than they really are, but it doesn't work very long, if at all. Tom Mullen says, "Seldom does reality measure up to the artificial and sentimental vision of Christmas which Hollywood, Hallmark Cards, the Chamber of Commerce, and our bad memories create for us."

He says, if we dream of a white Christmas and it doesn't snow, then we are upset, for even the weather is against us. We go to get out the manger scene with the illusion it is ready to set up. But what we find is a shepherd missing and a three legged camel. Suddenly, it is no longer a manger scene, but a mangy scene. The family sits down to read the Christmas story with the idyllic dream that the children will listen with awe, as if they never heard it before. But one child is sure to say, let's open the presents right now.

The point of all this seeming pessimism is not to convince us that Scrooge was on the right track, but to help us keep our expectations from being excessive. It is not only at Christmas, but all of life can be damaged by excessive expectations. Dr. Howard Henricks of Dallas Theological Seminary, one of the great marriage counselors of our time says, "The greatest reason for failure in marriage is unrealistic expectations." People expect too much of each other, and assume that they could, if they would, make every waking moment of life full of excitement and satisfaction. Nobody wants to put up with the reality of monotony, boredom, and routine. A runaway in Chicago said, "I've done everything-had all the thrills, and I don't want to go on living. There's nothing more to anticipate." This is the pathetic end of those hooked on the emotional drug of excessive expectation. Give me a thrill a minute or Christmas is a bore, and life is not worth living.

Expectation is not foolish in itself. There is much enjoyable expectation that is a vital part of the Christian life. No where is expectation more acceptable than at Christmas. We do not start playing Easter songs weeks before Easter. There is no other holiday like Christmas, where expectation is so much a part of it's celebration. We look forward to Christmas, longer, and with greater anticipation, than all other holidays combined. The expectation is more than half the fun. The day itself may not be that outstanding, but the overall impact of the season is greater than any other period of time in the year. The journey is the joy, and not just the arrival of the day. When we see this, we can escape the myth of living for the day, and enjoy the journey along the way.

Dr. Luke, who no doubt worked with expectant parents, is the one God used to record almost all the expectations surrounding the coming of His Son. He tells us of the expectant parents of John the Baptist, as well as those of Christ. He tells of the expectant angels who announced His coming. He tells of Simeon, the old man in Jerusalem, who lived in expectation every day of the Messiah. And Simeon tells us the whole world was expectant of a Saviour. Never before was there a period of history so pregnant with expectation. Let's look at just three examples of this expectation.

I. PAGAN EXPECTATION.

This may be surprise if you did not realize how God prepared the whole world for the gift of His Son. God's Christmas preparation goes back a long way and covers all people. God has built hope into the very heart of man, and so there is a natural expectancy in him. God has never left Himself without a witness, and so men of every nations have expected God to act in history. The prophet Haggai in 2:7, refers to the Messiah as the Desire Of All Nations. This implies that God has put into all people a desire for a deliverer.

As we search the minds of men in all nations before that first Christmas, we see this confirmed. They expected a Christmas-like event. The words of the poet are in harmony with the facts of history.

**A little child-
A shining star-
A stable rude,
A door ajar.
Yet in that place
So crude, forlorn,
The hope of all
The world is born.**

Was Jesus really the hope of the world? Was anybody, but a handful of God's people, looking for a coming Savior? Consider the evidence-

- 1. Plato, the Greek philosopher, said, "We must wait for someone to be a god, or god-inspired man, who will teach us our duties and take away the darkness from our eyes." Here was one of the most brilliant men who ever lived, but he knew he could not deliver men from darkness. He looked for another to be the light of the world. He expected a man to come that was more than any man had ever been.**
- 2. Tacitus, the Roman historian, wrote, "People were generally persuaded in the faith of the ancient prophecies, that the east was to prevail, and that from Judea was to come the Master and Ruler of the world." Suetonius, another Roman wrote, "It was an old and constant belief throughout the East, that by indubitably certain prophecies, the Jews were to attain the highest power." The prophecies of Israel influenced the thinking of other peoples, and filled them with expectation.**
- 3. China also expected a great wise man, but they looked to the West. In the Annals Of The Celestial Empire we read this statement, "In the 24th year of Tchao-Wang of the dynasty of the Tcheou, on the 8th day of the 4th moon, a light appeared in the Southwest which illumined the king's palace. The monarch, struck by it's splendor, interrogated the sages. They showed him books in which this prodigy signified the appearance of the great Saint of the West whose religion was to be introduced into their country."**
- 4. Six centuries before Christ, Aeschylus wrote, "Look not for any end, moreover, to this curse until God appears, to accept upon his Head the pangs of thy owns sins vicarious." This sounds like an expectation, not only of Christ, but of His cross and the atonement for sin.**
- 5. Cicero writes of the ancient oracle which speaks of, "A king whom we must recognize to be saved."**
- 6. Virgil, in his fourth Eclogue recounts the ancient tradition of, "A new order of the ages with a new race to come out of a virgin from the heights of heaven." This child, said Virgil,**

would cast out fear and make the serpent die. Is any wonder that the early Christians believed these pagan writers were prophesying about Christ.

Constantine, the first Christian Emperor, said that Virgil's poem, written for Augustus Caesar, was really a prophecy about Jesus. Augustine, the great Christian theologian, also said this famous poet was speaking of Christ. They were saying that God had revealed to the Gentiles also, that He was sending His Son into the world. Listen to a portion of Virgil's famous poem, and you can see, in spite of it's pagan perspective, it points to The Desire Of All Nations.

Dear child of the Gods, great offspring of Jove!
See how it totters-the world's vaulted might.
Earth, and wide ocean, and the depths of heaven
All of them, Look, caught up in joy at the age to come.

Here is a pagan poet saying all heaven and earth are looking to the event of the birth of a special child. There is no escaping the facts, the whole world was filled with expectation before the first Christmas. No wonder the wise men of the Gentile nation were looking for a sign. They not only had the prophecies of Israel, but of the wise men of the world. They were looking because they were expecting.

In Gion-Carlo Menotti's opera, *Amahl And The Night Visitors*, the wise men stop on their way to Bethlehem at the home of a crippled child. They told the family about the great king whose birth had called them from afar. The mother responded, : "For such a king I've been waiting all my life." This gives a true picture of the world into which Jesus came. It was a world of expectation among the Jews and the Gentiles.

Jesus came to be the Savior of all men. There are many lost sinners in the world today who are hoping to find life's meaning. They expect to find light and love. Like the pagans of old, in B. C., they know God must have more than they have found. They will seek by drugs, alcohol, immorality, and a host of follies to find the happiness they know should be. Of course, all of these secular saviors will let them down. They will be disappointed in their excessive expectations. But the fact is, the pagan world does have expectations, and Christians need to build on this today, just as the early Christians did in their day. Pagan expectation is a key factor in sharing the good news of Christmas. Secondly, let's consider:

II. PARENTAL EXPECTATION.

There is no way we can enter into the emotional excitement and expectancy of Joseph and Mary. This was the most unusual birth story of all time. They were not just having a baby, they were having the Messiah-the hope of Israel and the whole world. They were having a child conceived by the Holy Spirit and announced to both parents by angelic revelation. This was not a routine birth, but the only one of it's kind, ever.

They expected the child to be born in Bethlehem, but, it is not likely, they expected the child to be born in a stable. They did not expect to find, no room. This was not, however, as great a problem as we think. They had been traveling for days and probably slept out in the fields. So in comparison, the stable was a cozy shelter, and possibly the best place they had

slept all week.

These expectant parents did not know what to expect, for they were involved in something that would only happen once in history. How could they know what to expect? Would the midnight sky light up like noon? Would the angels gather around the manger? Would God speak from heaven? What was going to happen?

They could never guess that shepherds would come to worship the child. They could not dream they would have to flee into Egypt. Their lives were filled with the unexpected. No doubt, God chose these two people to be the parents of His Son, because they were flexible and could adapt to the unexpected. It is a paradox, but people who expect the unexpected are better able to deal with it. There is not one hint of complaint that they had no room in the inn, that they had to flee their land, that they had to give up their family back home. They were ready to put up with radical changes to be partners with God in fulfilling His purpose in the world. They were ready to respond to the unexpected with obedience to God.

As parents and grandparents, we need to approach Christmas with this spirit of expecting the unexpected. It is nearly impossible to predict the responses of children today. I read of one grandmother who spent a lot of time making slippers for her granddaughter for Christmas. When the granddaughter opened them she just said, "Oh slippers," and threw them aside. The grandmother was expecting something more for her labor of love, and she was hurt. A wiser approach is to expect the unexpected, and not pretend children are programmed the way we would like them to be. We need to take the time to set them in our laps and explain the value of a gift. We need to give them a chance to respond properly with gratitude. Grace is not only the key to the God-man relationship, but to the human to human relationship.

We need to expect less than the ideal. God did, and that is why He was prepared to send His Son into the world to reconcile men to Himself. God expected, as a heavenly Father, that His children would disobey and make Him angry. But He anticipated that negative reality by providing a positive reality that would offset it. That is what Grace is all about and what Christmas is all about-God and sinners reconciled because God is ready to deal with what you would expect He should never have to deal with-ungrateful children. There would be no need for grace if there was no sin and ingratitude. We need to expect it and be prepared to respond to it with grace in the lives of our children and grandchildren.

If we are dependent upon all things going just right, in order to be happy, then we are slaves to a dream that can never come true. Things do not go just right for anybody all the time. Even Joseph and Mary had to do their parenting in a fallen world and be ready for the unexpected. A pastor wanted to use a visual aid for his Christmas sermon, so he got 4 children to help him. They were to march out at the appropriate time carrying the 4 letters that spelled out STAR. But they got turned around and came out with the letters backward and they spelled out RATS. The congregation nearly fell out of the pews with laughter. The pastor made the best of it by explaining that there were rats in the first Christmas. Herod was one who made part of the Christmas story a tragedy for many mothers. The pastor's little plan went wrong and developed a snag, but so did the plan of God on that first Christmas. The spirit of Christmas is not, everything must go perfect or I will be miserable, but rather,

no matter what the complications, I know that God works in all things for the good of those who love Him. I will rejoice in His grace which gave the Gift that can never be taken away. I will live in joyful expectation as a child of God and as a parent. Thirdly, note:

III. Personal Expectation.

Simeon was an old man ready to die because his expectations were now fulfilled. He saw with his own eyes the Christ-child, the promised Messiah. He did not see this as an end, but as a new beginning. He could die in peace because he knew the best was yet to be. This child would be a light to the Gentiles, and for the glory of Israel.

Simeon represents the ideal of balanced personal expectations. He does not look at life with rose colored glasses. He says in verse 34, this child will cause the rise and fall of many in Israel. He will be opposed and a sword will pierce Mary's soul. He faced the realism of a fallen world and had no illusions about this Christmas child bringing paradise to earth. He was a realist, but still ready to die in peace, for he knew the child would bring salvation to the whole lost world. He did not expect everything to be just great, but he did expect that man would now have God's best in history and eternity, because of this child.

As we approach another Christmas, we need this same balance in our personal expectations. Christmas will not make evil go away. But the good news is the bad news is not all there is. The Light of the World has come, and there is now hope for all men to enter into a relationship with God that will be eternal. But the best of time is also potential in the Gift of God. Berton Braley conveys this hope in poetry.

With doubt and dismay you are smitten,
You think there's no chance for you, son?
Why, the best books haven't been
written,
The best race hasn't been run;
The best score hasn't been made yet;
The best song hasn't been sung;
The best tune hasn't been played yet;
Cheer up, for the world is young!

No chance? Why, the world is just eager
for things that you ought to create;
Its store of true wealth is still meager,
Its needs are incessant and great;
Don't worry and fret, fainthearted,
The chances have just begun;
For the best jobs haven't been started;
The best work hasn't been done.

The best is yet to come-that is the gift of hope the Christian has a right to expect at Christmas. It is not promised that there will be no spilt milk or tough times, but it is promised that the worst can never rob us of God's best in Christ. We can, like Simeon, die in peace

knowing the best is always yet to be.

We have no promise of a white Christmas from nature, but God does promise us a personal white Christmas within. God says in Isa. 1:18, "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." Here is the white Christmas we should all be dreaming about and anticipating. We can be made clean from all sin and have peace with God. What a gift! The best is already ours in Christ. We need to make Christmas a time of thankfulness and a time of expecting to grow in our grasp of all we have in Christ. In Him, we have all that the world has expected from God. Let us never be satisfied with just a part, but ever live in expectation of the more that can be ours in Christ. Let this be our Christmas expectation.

CHAPTER NINE

9. PARADOXES OF CHRISTMAS based on John 1:1-14

Little Hattie, determined to give her hero the highest image and magnify his achievements, wrote the following in her history examination-"Abraham Lincoln was born Feb. 12, 1809, in a log cabin which he built himself." Lincoln was indeed a great man but historians, I think, are universal agreement that he did all of his building after he was born. In fact, you will find this to be the pattern in all biographies except one. And that is what makes Christmas so paradoxical. It is the story of one who is born into a world that he literally made himself.

John says, "through Him all things were made, without Him nothing was made that has been made." Jesus made the very stage of history on which he played history's greatest role-the Saviour of the world. He who made the stars became the Star on that stage lit up by the Star of Bethlehem. What this means is, Christmas began long before it even started. Dale Evans Rogers wrote,

Christmas my child is always
It was always in the heart of God, It was born there
Only He could have thought of it.
Like God, Christmas is timeless and eternal,
From everlasting to everlasting.

Not only was Jesus crucified before the foundation of the world, He was also born then, for Christmas like the cross is both historical and eternal. Christmas comes near the end of the year and this is very appropriate because it makes it a climactic event. That is what it is in God's plan for the whole of history before Christmas was in anticipation of it's coming.

I read of a woman who was caught up in the Christmas rush and when she saw some

Christmas cards on sale she grabbed them. When she got home she quickly got them into envelopes and sent them off in the mail. With a sense of satisfaction at both her economy and efficiency, she sat down and opened one of her bargain cards to read the message. It said in bold print-THIS CARD IS JUST TO SAY A GIFT IS ON THE WAY. Haste makes waste is often true and she blew it, but God did not. This was the message of the Old Testament-the law was just to say God's gift of grace is on its way. Christmas was the divine event toward which the Old Testament was every moving.

The paradox of it all is that this eternal divine event, in the heart of God, was so human. The genealogy of the Christ child was human. It was a loin that came down through kings and heros, to be sure, but it also was full of sinners. The paradox is that Jesus was the only baby ever born who had a choice of His heritage. Nobody else ever choose where, when, or to whom they would be born. But Jesus chose the time and place, the clime and race, where He would show the world God's face. He not only built the stage He chose the cast for the greatest story ever told.

An eight year old boy came home from school and thrilled his parents with the news that he had been selected to announce the characters for the Christmas pageant. His father was so elated he went out and bought him the finest suit he could find. To give his son some assurance he pinned the names of the characters of the nativity on the inside of his new coat. When the characters appeared on stage the boy announced, "this is Jesus in the manger and Mary is nearby with Joseph standing next to her. The three men are..." His mind went blank, he could not remember and so he took a quick look inside in coat prepared for just such an emergency and he blurted out,"Hart, Shaffner, and Marx!"

He made a mistake and chose the wrong names but Jesus made no such mistake. He deliberately chose the characters that are forever linked to Him in the Christmas story. The three wise men, or kings, add some statue to the cast but most of them are rather commonplace. If you chose your parents would you have chosen Joseph and Mary? Nice people, but rather low on the totem pole of economic security. Okay for those who have no choice but He who could have chosen anyone, chose them. Then he chose to have His birth first announced to the shepherds, one of the lowest classes of people available. Plan before the foundation of the world, and this is what He chose? The angels give it a touch of class but let's face it, the Christmas cast is so humbly human. Conceived, planned, organized and arranged by heaven yet look at how earthly and human a story it is-

1. The earthly need for taxes to keep the Roman government going led to Caesar's decree that got Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem.
2. The earthly need to obey government law led them to risk going so near her time delivery.
3. The lack of accommodations that led to Jesus being born in a stable looks more like short-sighted human planning rather than eternal heavenly planning.
4. The wise men having to sneak out of town and head back home by a different route to avoid the anger of Herod, seems so earthly and fallibly human.

I can think of no other event in history so full of paradox. It is so heavenly yet so earthly. Consider these examples:

**The Word from which all wisdom comes could not speak.
The Power by which all exists was a baby weak.
He whom the heavens could not contain, lying in a manger.
Unto His own he came but was treated like a stranger.
For Him who made all space, there was no room.
For Him who made all light, there was gloom.
He who wipes all tears away entered flesh and wept
He who neither slumbers nor sleeps, became tired and slept.**

**The entire life of the God-Man was a series of paradoxes.
He made all the laws of nature but became subject to those laws.
He who cannot be tempted became subject to temptation.
He who is the bread of life became hungry.
He who is the water of life became thirsty.
He, the Spirit of Liberty, became a slave to the limitations of flesh even to the point of death.**

No life ever lived has been so paradoxical.

- 1. He never enjoyed a Christmas but had He not lived there never would have been a Christmas to enjoy.**
- 2. He never wrote a book but more books have been written about Him than any other who has ever lived.**
- 3. He never wrote a song or painted a picture but more songs and art portray His life than any other who has ever lived. Frederick Knowles said, "O Christ of contrasts; infinite paradox, yet life's explainer."**

The point is the whole story of His life is a mysterious combination of the human and the divine. When you mix these two ingredients the result is inevitable-paradox. Let's look at some specific examples from John's account.

I. THE INFINITE BECOMES AN INFANT.

John tells us that the Word became flesh. He has just made it perfectly clear that the Word was none other than God and was with God from the beginning.

**Who is this, so weak and helpless,
Child of lowly Hebrew maid,
Rudely in a stable sheltered,
Coldly in a manger laid?
'Tis the Lord of all creation,
Who this wondrous path hath trod;
He is God from everlasting,
And to everlasting God.**

What a paradox that the Word, the ultimate source of all wisdom was reduced to the level of an infant who could not say a word. The Word became inarticulate. The infinite most high reduced to an infants cry. Was ever such a story told of an eternal son yet one day old?

If God wanted to communicate with ants He would take on the form of an ant and speak ant language. This is a logical necessity. The infinite must become finite in appearance to

relate to the finite. This we see in the Old Testament when God appeared in the form of a man. But Christmas is something new. The infinite no longer merely masks Himself as finite; He actually enters into the finite and becomes a man. And not a man on the upper level of his being as an adult but the lower level of his being, as a baby. The infinite becomes an infant. You can't get any higher than infinite you can't get any lower than a man than an infant. God took the paradox as far as it can be taken. From being the source of all life, Jesus was reduced to the level of the least that human life can be, in the womb of Mary.

This is why Christmas is our most wonder filled holiday. It is based on an event that is so mysterious and wondrous that man is compelled to celebrate it with more wonder than anything else he celebrates. We strive to add the elements of mystery and surprise to Christmas. We hide gifts and make sure there is the suspense of the unknown that helps build anticipation. What can be more appropriate than mystery to magnify that day when the Infinite became an infant.

As Christians, we know about the incarnation so well that we forget Christians struggled for centuries to figure out how to state what happened when God became man. Samuel Zwemer in his book, *The Glory Of The Manger*, describes some of the process of history in coming to grasp more fully the mystery of the Incarnation.

At first, Christians stressed that Jesus was divine. He was the Son of God living in a human body, but His mind was not a human mind. But this meant Jesus was not fully a man. His humanity was incomplete. So they rejected this view. Then they said Jesus was God and man. This sounded good but it led to the idea that God just took over the body and mind of a man. This meant there were two persons, the Son of God and the son of man that coexisted. This theory also came to be rejected. Then by the fourth century Christian theologians developed a way of describing the Incarnation that has become the orthodox view ever since. Jesus was the perfect combination of deity and humanity. He had both natures in one person. He was not 50% God and 50% man but 100% God and 100% man. He was fully God and fully man in one person.

The point I am making is that what we celebrate at Christmas is such a paradox of mystery that it took centuries just to learn how best to describe it. Richard Crashaw wrote-

Welcome all wonders in one sight!
Eternity shut in a span,
Summer and Winter, Day in Night!
Heaven in earth, and God in man!
Great little One! Whose all-embracing birth,
Lifts earth to heaven, stoops heaven to earth!

C. S. Lewis in *The Chronicles Of Narnia*, has Queen Lucy say, "In our world too a stable once had something in it bigger than the whole world." That is the paradox of Christmas. Next, look at-

II. THE INFINITE BECOMES INTIMATE.

John says not only did the Word become flesh but He dwelt among us. He not only became one of us, He became one with us. Christmas is not only the celebration of birth but of relationship. When a Jr. boy reads about romance his favorite word is probably ick. But when he gets a little older his vocabulary changes when he meets a girl and discovers the beauty of relationship. It is no longer a icky idea but an experience of intimacy. Words, ideas and concepts become much more real when they are embodied in a person. When the most high became most nigh, He became our neighbor and our friend and our brother. The Infinite became intimate. Christopher Smart wrote,

**God all-bounteous, all-creative
Whom no ills from good dissuade
Is incarnate, and a native
Of the very world He made,**

This is a shocking paradox when you realize just how close and intimate God became with man. The Word became flesh and the Greek word for flesh is sarx. The same word used in other texts such as-

- 1. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.**
- 2. Paul said in my flesh dwelleth no good thing.**
- 3. Paul said we are not to walk after the flesh and live in the flesh .**
- 4. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God.**
- 5. The works of the flesh are contrasted with the fruit of the Spirit.**
- 6. We are not to glory in the flesh.**

Yet with all of these negatives the New Testament makes it clear that Jesus has come in the flesh. Incarnation means in the flesh. Jesus was God in the flesh. The paradox of a pure and holy Spirit entering into the weakness and fallenness of flesh is so shocking that Dan Erwin, professor of preaching at Bethel College, could even illustrate it with the story of Frankenstein.

Mary Shelley, who wrote the story in the 19th century, wrote it as a sort of romance. Dr. Frankenstein is the scientist who created the miserable monster who wandered in the forest seeking friendship. But whenever he tried to develop a relationship people were repelled by his ugliness. Finally, the monster returns to his creator and pleads with him to make him a partner, he concludes his plea with these words-"I am alone and miserable; man will not associate with me; but one as deformed and horrible as myself would not deny herself to me. My companion must be of the same species and have the same defects. This being you must create."

Here was the pathetic cry for intimacy; the universal hunger of all intelligent life. It is the endless cry of man and God heard that cry and answered that prayer when the Word became flesh. Man in his fallen state is like Frankenstein with the image of God so marred that he is ugly in his flesh and repulsive. But because he still has the need for love and acceptance, God so loved this Frankenstein-the world-that He gave His only begotten Son to dwell among us. The end result will not be the bride of Frankenstein but the bride of Christ; pure and spotless and without one wrinkle left by the fall. He became like us that we might become like Him. God went the limit; He gave the very best that He had-He gave Himself. This is the intimacy

we celebrate at Christmas.

This paradox is what sets Christianity apart from the great religions of the world. Judaism and Islam are both Bible oriented and monotheistic and full of what is good and noble. But there are limits to what God will do to save man in their theology. They refuse to believe He could go as far as the Incarnation and become one with man. This kind of intimacy of God and man does not fit their theology. Only the Christian has the Incarnation; the celebration of God's love without limits. This is the simple message of the profound paradox of the Incarnation.

W. B. J. Martain tells of an old missionary who finally got an assistant out of the seminary. When he arrived he called the natives together to welcome him. The young man only spoke English so the older man had to translate his message to the people. He began like this, "we must always remember that there is an infinite and qualitative distinction between the eternal Gospel and all the historical manifestations of it under the contingencies of human existence." The old missionary just stood there dumbfounded as the young man paused for him to translate. The old man just said, "he says he loves you and he's glad to be here."

The world is full of theological volumes which give profound and complex explanations of the Incarnation, but when you come right down to it, the message God intends is very simple- He loves you and is glad to be here. The Infinite became intimate. He did so because there is just so much you can communicate with words. God had given a great deal of revelation concerning His love for man in the Old Testament. But words have their limitations. So the final revelation of God was not just uttered, it was born. F.W. Boreham put it-

The Word was made flesh-
soft, warm, live flesh that
throbbled and felt and developed
and matured, as all sound and
healthy flesh will. And this Word
-Jesus-is God; He is the
pronunciation of the
unpronounceable Word!

Jesus is the sweetest name we know because Jesus is God's fullest and finest Word. That is why the angels could say to the shepherds- fear not. If God had come into the world in the fullness of His Deity and not clothed in flesh, the shepherds would have plenty to fear. One look and they would be dead. But in the Christ child they could encounter God and feel comfortable. For in Christ God is approachable. There is no mention in the Christmas story of taking off ones shoes even though they bowed and worshipped the new born King. It was holy ground but it was also common ground where God and man could meet for in Jesus God and man were intimately one.

Studies show that more than 65% of what we communicate is in body language. We say much that is non-verbal by what we do. The Word did this as well. The Word became non-verbal and by what He did He said to the world, I love you. Actions do speak louder than words. There were plenty of words about the Messiah's coming but not until He actually

came and the Word became flesh did anybody dream of celebrating.

We are to respond to God's body language with more than just words. We are to have a body language of our own. We are to so live and give that God's love in Christ becomes embodied again in us. We are to perpetuate the paradox of the Word becoming flesh by doing. Christmas is what God did; the Infinite becomes an infant, the Infinite becomes intimate. You become the best Christian at Christmas by conveying to others the wonder of the paradoxes of Christmas.

CHAPTER TEN

10. THE TRUE LIGHT based on John 1:1-14

A young man went from paper to paper trying to get a job as a cartoonist, but he was rejected and told he had no talent. Finally, a pastor hired him to draw advertising for the church events. It was a poor paying job and he had no place to stay and so he was allowed to sleep in the old church manse. One morning as the sun rose he was awakened by the noise of scurrying mice and this gave him an idea. He began to sketch one of those church mice and that morning one of the most famous of fictional characters was born-Mickey Mouse. Walt Disney always looked back on that morning as the dawn of his career. Amazing and wondrous things happen in history and in our physical world when the Sun, the light of our world, rises.

Everyday is a new adventure in life as we rise from the darkness of night and walk into the light where God promises His mercies are new every morning. What a wondrous thing is light.

Out of the scabbard of the night
By God's hand drawn,
Flashes his shining sword of light,
And lo-the dawn.

Every dawn is a wonder but never has there been a more wondrous dawn than that on which the sun arose for the first time on this planet when it's creator was one of the inhabitants. Through Him all things were made and now He is a part of His own creation. The artist has entered his own painting. The author has become a character in his own drama. It is a wonder beyond all wonders for on that first Christmas dawn the light of our physical world was shining down on the light of our spiritual world. It was a dawn of a new day in a new way, for never before in history had the sun ever risen on Him who is the origin of all light.

John was so dazzled by the light of Christ that he became the apostle of light and used the word light in his Gospel more than all the others put together. In this opening chapter of his

Gospel he gives us some of the most amazing revelation about this light that came into the world on that first Christmas. The first thing we want to look at is-

I. THE WONDER OF HIS LIGHT.

John makes some statements here about Jesus that are as mysterious and beyond comprehension as physical light is to science. Light is the very essence of science and everything that is wondrous about science revolves around light. Science and theology have this in common for all theology also revolves around light.

In verse 4 John says, the life of Jesus was the light of men, and then in verse 9 he says, the true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. Later in John, Jesus says, I am the light of the world. The more you know about the wonders of light, the more you know about the wonder of God's Christmas light-His only begotten Son. Light and Jesus have so much in common. It is as if light is an expression of His image. For centuries scientists debated the nature of light just as theologians debated the nature of Christ. Was light a wave or a particle? It was so hard to decide because light was so creative it could be either. In 1905 Albert Einstein won the Nobel Prize for his paper on light. He proved that the whole controversy over light was nonsense for light did not have to be one or the other. It could be and it was, both. Light, he proved, has a dual nature.

So also, theologians have debated the issue-was Jesus God or man? Oceans of ink have been used on both sides. But the Bible makes it clear that this too is nonsense. Jesus, like light, has a dual nature. He is not God or man but both God and man. The Word who was God became flesh and lived among us. Just as scientists had to face up to the reality that light has a dual nature which is contradictory, so theologians had to face up to the reality that the light of the world is both God and man. It may not be easy to grasp but light does not have to be logical. It is the absolute of science and theology and man has to bow to it's power to be dual in nature.

The very first thing that God called good was light. He began the process of creation of all order by saying, let there be light. Then He said the light was good. Everything else that He made He made in the light and He made all life dependent upon light. Christmas marks the beginning of a new creation. When Jesus was born God was saying for the second time, let there be light. Thus began the creation of a new order based on the light of His Son. The wonder of this Christmas Light is that it is as universal as the physical light of the sun. John says Jesus is the true light that gives light to every man. Christmas is the most universal of holidays for even the most worldly people get involved, even if they do not know it's true meaning. Light shines on all men even if they are blind and cannot see it. Christmas is the most unique of all holidays because God gives His light to all men even if they are not aware of it. The wonder is that every human being on this planet has a right to receive God's gift of light and thus become a child of God. Spurgeon said, "The most despotic monarch cannot enclose the light for himself. The meanest beggar takes a royal share. It cannot be monopolized, but pays it gladsome visits to all alike. Even thus Scriptures reveal the freeness of divine grace and experience shows that it shines on the poorest and the simplest, and it enlightens the foolish and the ignorant." Take away light and you take away life for darkness cannot produce life or sustain it. Only light can give life. There is no power in the universe

like the power of light. It is the source, not only of life, but of joy, pleasure and healing and all that makes life worthwhile. Jesus is all of this to the spiritual life of man. And the wonder of it is that it comes to us like the light of the sun, not like the thunder, but quietly.

How silently, how silently
The wondrous gift is given.
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven.

Light is the greatest power in the universe yet it works so gently. A thread has more power to stop you than millions of rays of light. We can pass through them with no resistance at all and feel no pressure as they flood our bodies with life-giving power. Jesus is the wondrous light that can silently enter our lives and give us victory over the power of darkness.

In the December issue of Discover the world of Science, there is an article about physicist John Asmus and his wonderful flashblaster. He travels around the world with a light machine which can clean corroded works of art. It restores them to their original white marble. Chemicals of all kinds have been used but they do damage to the marble. To art conservators around the world, Asmus is a sort of technical missionary saving works of art by means of light. He can focus an intense flash of light-millions of watts packed into a spot smaller than a dime-which heats a black crust of gypsum to as much as 3 thousand degrees. Then with a pop it is vaporized in a millionth of a second leaving the surface clean. Beautiful works of art in museums and churches all over Europe, which have turned black by centuries of pollution, are being restored to their original white beauty by his flashblaster.

God gave the world a spiritual flashblaster on that first Christmas. Jesus is the only light that can cleanse God's highest and most noble work of art-man. Man has been corroded by sin and has lost the luster of his original purity. Nothing can restore him but the light of Christ. John says, "If we confess our sin He is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." The light of the world working in total silence can focus on our sins and vaporize them and leave us clean in an instant. Thank God for this wondrous gift of light at Christmas.

Man will go on discovering wondrous ways to use light. The plan is for a garbage disposal system where a laser will simply vaporize all of our garbage. But on the spiritual level there can be no improvement for Jesus is our light and He can vaporize our spiritual garbage right now. John Asmus, who developed the flashbaster, also worked on 6 devices for Star Wars. Modern man knows that light is the key to the best weapons of the future. H. G Wells, long ago, wrote, The War Of The Worlds and told of the Martian invasion of earth with their mysterious swords of light. They could drop men in their tracks and make lead run like water and flash any substance into a mass of flame. Modern science is making this fantasy a reality by means of laser beams. But the Christian has had this weapon of light all along in spiritual warfare. By means of the Sword Of The Spirit, Christians have penetrated the world of darkness everywhere with the power of light. This wondrous power sets the prisoner of darkness free and ushers then into the kingdom of light.

When the baby Jesus was brought to the temple in Jerusalem, Simeon took the child into

his arms and praised God saying, "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." This little baby was already being declared the light of the world. He is the light that saves, that cleanses, that heals and that guides.

As the light of the world Jesus is also the hope of the world. Light is the hope that every form of evil can be defeated. In the physical realm light is man's hope for defeating the negatives of life. William J. Young, at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, uses the laser to detect if a painting is authentic or a fake. For example, the laser revealed that a 16th century painting had zinc in the paint. This proved it was a fake because zinc was not used in paint until 1820. Light reveals the fake and that is why the Christian is to test all things by the light of Christ and His Word. Any idea or practice that cannot look good in the light of Christ is a fake. Paul makes a major issue of this to the Ephesians in 5:8-9, "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light. For the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth." These are the kinds of gifts God wants to give the world through Christians who are children of light.

When God gave His Son as the light of world, He began a whole new family called sons of the light. In I Thess. 5:5 he writes of Christians, "You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness." Peter put it this way in I Peter 2:9, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praise of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light."

The wonder of this wonderful light is that we are welcome to walk in it and like the angels, the shepherds, and wise men, become witnesses of that light God gave at Christmas. That is the next point we want to look at-

II. THE WITNESS TO HIS LIGHT.

John the Baptist was not the light, says verse 8, but he came as a witness to the light. That can be said of all other persons involved in the Christmas story. The angles broke into time and space and when they did the glory of the Lord shone around them. This was a light in the darkness the shepherds would never forget, but they did not bow to the angels or set up a monument to them. They went to the manger for the light of the angels was not the light God sent into the world. It was only a witness to the Light.

The star that led the wise men to Jesus had to be a spectacular light to get their attention but they did not worship the star. It's light was to lead them to the light of the world and so it's purpose was to be a witness to that light. What we need to see is that this is the case with all lights. They are all to point us to Him who is the True Light and the source of all of lights wonders.

As children of light, all Christians are to be witnesses to the True Light. This is the greatest challenge of the Christian life and there are more ways to fail than can be counted. We try the laid back approach of just being nice people and we seldom see anybody come to

the True Light. We are often like bald men trying to sell hair tonic. We do not impress people very intensely with the product we give witness to. On the other hand, there are Christians who blaze like a tumble weed for awhile and then burn out. Their witness is also negative for they are soon back in darkness. Others come on so strong they scare those in darkness.

Don Richardson in *Peace Child*, tells of he and his family moving into a hut among the Savi people. As natives often do, they surrounded his house and filled the porch and were peeking in the windows. Dan, thinking nothing of it, pumped up his kerosene pressure lamp and turned it on. Listen to his description of the effects-

forgetting that this was the first time I had used such a device among the Savi. There was a mad scramble as the unexpected burst of light struck their eyes. No one took the time to find the stairs-they simply abandoned ship by leaping over the railings. Fortunately the level of our porch was only five feet above ground.

Outside, the drumming came to a sudden halt, and the chanting boiled over into a wail. There was an unmistakable sound of hundreds of feet stampeding into the night. Setting the lamp on a counter, I hurried outside to reassure the people.

Then I saw why they had fled. Our entire home was agleam with light like some gigantic, awesome jack-o-lantern. Through hundreds of cracks in sago-frond walls, through every door and window, the blinding light of the little five-hundred-candlepower silk mantle was stabbing into the darkness.

Slowly he was able to get them to return and not be afraid. As children of the light and witnesses to the true light, we need to be sensitive to the fact that people in darkness are not impressed by a dim light and they are not attracted by a light so bright that it frightens them. Light that is attractive has to be of an intensity that is pleasant and revealing. It has to give people hope in their darkness that there is a way out: That there is a power available that can cleanse and heal and set people free from the bondage to darkness. That is what motivates people at Christmas. All the lights and beauty give people hope that life can be beautiful and darkness can be overcome.

God's plan is that we, as children of light, bear witness to the Light that can save and heal and give life. Jesus is the Lord of Light but He is also the Lord of the lesser lights which He uses to point to the greater. We are those lesser lights. A Danish author tells the true story of a widow and her child who were going to be put out of their home because of a debt. Her husband had paid off most of the debt to a friend who loaned him the money. But a plague took both he and his friend and the heir of the friend had no record of any payments and demanded the full value of the debt. Without any record of payments she had no proof and was forced to lose her home. The night before she was to leave, a fire fly came into her bedroom where she was earnestly praying for God to help her find a solution to her dilemma. She did not want this creature in her house and she began to chase it. It went behind a big chest that stood against the wall. She could reach it so she pulled the chest out a bit.

Something wedged between the wall and the chest fell to the floor. She pulled it out and to her great delight it was the book in which her husband had receipts for all his payments. God answered her prayers by the tiniest little light. This little light of mine, we sing-I'm going to let it shine. Why? Because God can use our little light to answer major prayers and lead people to the Light of the world.

In 1979, a crew of physicists and astronomers from Minnesota were up near Winnipeg with a large array of scientific equipment. They were there to study a complete solar eclipse. Peter Fribley was one of them and he gives this account-

It was the most eerie sight I have ever seen or likely ever will: fifteen degrees drop in temperature in minutes, sudden high winds, the long skip of night communications coming up midday, birds nesting as if it were night, and most awesome of all, a 360-degree sunset. And then darkness.

And yet, all the while, light, the ring of refracted light from behind the blotting moon. Thus even during the time of so-called total eclipse, "the light shone in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

On the cross, the Light of the world went through His total eclipse and for three hours there was darkness over the land. But as with the sun of our solar system, it was only a temporary eclipse, for darkness at it's worst cannot conquer light. The cross is not a very popular Christmas symbol but it should be, for Jesus as the Light of the world is God's greatest gift to man. On the cross Jesus continued to shine when evil was doing it's worst. Love was stronger than hate and forgiveness was stronger than sin. In this Christmas season, let us thank God often for His gift of the True Light.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

11. THE FACE OF GOD based on II Cor. 4:1-6

John Mcgee Jr. wrote the poem High Flight. It is so meaningful to some pilots, they repeat it as they sit in their planes soaring though the skies. It goes like this-

How do we know who God is and how He feels about us and His lost world? Where do we go to get this kind of knowledge? Do we go to the Information Super Highway? No, we go to the face of Christ-the face first seen on the first Christmas morning.

Robert Coles wrote a fascinating book titled, *The Spiritual Life of Children*. He is a Harvard Univ. professor who has written about the inner life of children like no other author. He has studied children around the world in all different cultures. One of the things he does is to get children to draw the face of God. Jewish and Muslim children will not do it for they are taught not to make pictures of God. But Christian children all over the world feel free to make pictures of God. Why? Because for Christians, God has shown His face to the world in Jesus Christ. All the religions of the world have invisible gods but Christianity has a visible God; a God who was seen and touched. That is what the incarnation was all about. God became visible in flesh so men could see Him face to face.

Professor Coles has 293 pictures of God and all but 38 are of His face. When Christians children visualize God they primarily see His face. All around the world, artist in every land and culture paint the face of Jesus. There are oriental faces and Negroid faces or Italian or German and dozens of others. All facial features are found in the face of Jesus. He is the man of a thousand faces yet His is the face of one-the face of God.

A Sunday school teacher and her second grade class were looking at a painting of Jesus. Little Billy exclaimed, "Isn't it wonderful! It looks just like Him!" If it's a face that children fall in love with, that is truly a legitimate face of Jesus.

I have not seen it but I have read about an artist that painted a portrait of Jesus, which if you look at close, is composed of 48 different faces. There are all kinds of people of every race, color and age. He was conveying a theological reality. In Christ the entire human race with all of it's variety becomes one. Jesus was the son of man, the perfection of all men. Many feel the reason we have no description of the face of Jesus is so all can portray Him like themselves.

Artists all through history have conveyed many theological truths by means of the face of Jesus. Thorwaldsen has his famous sculpture of Christ in the Cathedral of Copenhagen, Denmark. The beautiful white marble statue of Jesus has His arms outstretched for all who enter. It draws you down the isle like a magnet. But when you come near you still can't see the face of Jesus. You have to get down on your knees and then look up to see His face of love and compassion. No one can see His face unless they first kneel. Whoever humbles himself will be exalted, said Jesus. He humbled himself to come and show us God's face and we need to bow before Him in humility to see that face.

Leonardo da Vinci became very angry with another man when he was painting the famous Last Supper. He was trying to finish the face of Jesus but he could not get it right. Finally he humbled himself to go to the man and seek forgiveness. The man accepted his apology and Leonardo was then able to complete the face of Jesus. Jesus said get right with your brother before you come before God for then you will see the face of God smiling with pleasure as you offer your gifts.

One of the major goals of Satan is keep men from beholding the face of God. In Rev. 12:1-9, we have one of most amazing accounts of the Christmas story. It is Christmas from the perspective of spiritual warfare. Satan desperately wanted to keep mankind from ever seeing the face of God in Jesus Christ. The birth of baby Jesus, the Prince of Peace, led to the greatest warfare this universe has ever seen. Satan, called in this text the dragon, had power to sweep a third of the stars out of the sky. We are talking of power that makes all of man's atom bombs look like the power of a gnat. He was determined that Christmas would never happen and he risked everything to prevent God from showing His face. Listen to this account of Christmas from a heavenly perspective.

"A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.

And there was war in heaven. Micheal and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down--that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

The dragon wanted to devour the Christ child so that no one, not even Mary, would ever see the face of God in the flesh. Satan knew if this baby lived the whole relationship of God and man would be changed for the better. The whole power structure of the universe would be altered and so he fought desperately to stop the Incarnation. The angels not only sang that first Christmas, they fought the devil and his angels to make sure there was something to sing about for all mankind. We know of no other event in the history of the universe that was so important to all the forces in the universe, both good and bad. The destiny of man was wrapped up in that baby wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger-for in Him was the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. The entire Christmas story can be seen as revolving around the face of God revealed in the Christ child. I have said it in poetry-

**Christmas is God's great invasion
Of this earth from beyond space.
On this marvelous occasion
He revealed to man His face.**

At the start He was a stranger

**Just a baby out of place.
Earth's Creator in a manger
Was not to Him a disgrace.**

**Shepherds watching their flocks by night
Heard the good news of God's grace.
When the angels had left their sight
They left too with hurried pace.**

**They ran to Bethlehem's stable
Where the Christ child they embrace.
Praising God that they were able
To behold Him face to face.**

**Wise men saw His star in the East
It was rare, not commonplace.
When heaven celebrates a feast
They it's meaning long to trace.**

**No journey could be on a par
Nothing could that sight erase.
They would ever follow that star
Till they saw Christ's shining face.**

**He came here to be one of us
To stand with us face to face.
Taking on Him the name Jesus
Saviour of our fallen race.**

**To the heavens He's ascended
He has returned to His base.
All that's broken will be mended
And all evil He'll replace.**

**When we see the face of Jesus
We behold the face of God.
May this amazing truth seize us
As we through this season trod.**

**We look upon the face of God
When the face of Christ we see.
Let this Christmas spirit, you prod
To look and in Him be free.**

Jesus said in John 3:14-15, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life." People in the Old Testament could look at the serpent on the pole and they would be healed when bitten

by poisonous snakes. Their salvation was in looking to this symbol. Jesus said He was lifted up on the cross for the same reason. Men bitten by that old serpent the devil will die in their sin unless they look to Him on the cross. If they look they will live

Some of the greatest conversions of history have happened because of this text. Charles Hadden Spurgeon heard a Methodist preacher preach on looking to Jesus on the cross. He looked and was forgiven and became one of the most famous preachers in history. He then pointed thousands of others to look to the face of Jesus and become children of God.

416 times the face is mentioned in the Bible. It is an important part of the human anatomy. It is also an important part of our theology for it is in the face of Christ that we come to know God. For centuries the hope of heaven revolved around the beatific vision-the seeing of God's face. Christians do not stress this today for the modern Christian is more interested in seeing the streets of gold than seeing the face of God. In a materialistic world rewards become a priority over the personal. But the personal is the primary focus of the Bible. When Stephen was stoned to death for being a Christian, we read in Acts 7:55, "but Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." What he saw was Persons. It is true John was caught up to heaven and showed us a lot of the things that will be there, but the first vision he had in Rev.1 was of the glorified Christ. Our primary hope is not to see things but to see Him. "Face to face I shall behold Him, Far beyond the starry sky; face to face in all His glory I shall see Him by and by."

A little Italian boy once said, "Jesus is the best photograph that God ever took." that is what the writer of Hebrews says as well for Jesus is "the express image-the exact likeness of God."

In the famous text of Isa. 9:6 we read, "unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." How can this Christ child be called Everlasting Father? How can the Son of God be called the Father? It is because the Father and the Son are one and when you see the face of Jesus you see the face of God. Jesus is God with a face.

The Incarnation means God can be known as never before in history. The shepherds were not content to take the angels word for it. They wanted to see the Christ child face to face. The wise men were not content to see the miraculous star. They did not stop their pursuit until they saw the child face to face.

When you go to the hospital to see a new born baby you are not content to see a blanket-wrapped bundle. You want to see the face-not the back of the head or the bottom-but the face. No one is satisfied until they see the face. The face makes the bundle personal. It is seeing the face that makes you feel you have met the person. We need to see the face of God in Jesus to feel that we have met God personally.

God becomes a real person in Jesus. I saw the cutest cartoon of a father reading to his little boy a bedtime story of the first Christmas. The little guy with his head on his pillow with two pictures of his dog on the wall over his bed says to his dad, "Gold, frankincense, and myrrh? I

bet what he really wanted was a puppy." The baby Jesus was a real person to this boy and he could feel the sense of identity with him which was the whole point of the Incarnation.

Christmas is more than mistletoe and ho ho ho
And brilliant lights that reflect in snow,
And the warmth we feel in the fireplace glow.
Christmas is about the God we can know
Who descended from heaven to earth below
To His kind face to mankind show.

Paul Reese, the great preacher, tells of reading about the French Revolution. A lawless mob broke into the king's palace. They were wild for vengeance and loot. They rushed down a long corridor and busted into a room at the end. Suddenly the looters grew quiet the yelling and cursing ceased and some of them even knelt on the floor as others removed their hats. What happened to cause such quiet reverence? It was the face of Jesus on the wall.

Unfortunately the story did not end there. One of the leaders stepped forward and turned the picture of Jesus toward the wall. He then shouted to the crowd to continue their plundering. This is a parable of what the whole world is now doing. They are either, like the shepherds and wise men, seeking to bow before the face of Jesus, or, like Satan and Herod, seeking to turn the face of Jesus to the wall.

We all have a choice. The call of Heb. 12:2 is, "let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfection of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning it's shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." The greatest sight you can see this Christmas ,and any other time of the year, is the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER TWELVE

13. THE FOOLISHNESS OF CHRISTMAS based on I .Cor . 1 : 18 - 25

A large number of life's greatest blessings start out as stupid, moronic foolishness in the eyes of many people. This was the case with Samuel Morse, a pastor's son and an artist who left his art for a new idea. He thought that a message could be sent by means of electricity. He labored for years in lonely obscurity living alone and cooking his own meals. After 4 years he had a working model of the telegraph. In 1837 he applied for a patent but nobody was interested in such nonsense. He tried in England, France and Russia but foolishness was not popular anywhere. He finally got the chance to demonstrate his contraption before President Van Buren, his cabinet and leading scientist. They all too, considered it much ado about nothing. For 5 years he labored to improve his instrument and finally got a grant

from congress to make an experimental line. It was considered such an idiotic project that some congressman failed to get re-elected because they voted to support this lunatic fringe idea. On May 24, 1844, the test was ready for sending a message from Washington to Baltimore and back. A text of Scripture was sent and back came the historic reply, "What hath God wrought!"

Morse the moron became more the genius over night and the world over he was famous and honored. As a man of God, he gave all the glory to God. He said, "It is all of God. He used me as His hand in all this. I am not indifferent to the rewards of earth and the praise of fellow men, but I am more pleased with the fact that my Father in heaven has allowed me to do something for Him and His world....unto God be all the glory."

The birth of the electronic age of communication was a gift of God to modern man. But man in his supposed wisdom considered it pure foolishness until he saw it's valued consequences. There are numerous examples of this in the realm of science and literature and the arts. Many of the great heroes of history were first considered fools and unworthy of serious thought. The greatest example of this in all of history is God himself. God's ways are so different from the ways of human wisdom that when man first considers them they seem like foolishness.

This may sound like radical language but it is not my choice for effect, it is the language of Paul. The Greek word he used in I. Cor.1:25 for the foolishness of God is moron. This was one of Paul's favorite words. It is used to all it's forms 23 times in the New Testament and 14 of that 23 are by Paul. All the other 9 are from the lips of Jesus. So Paul and Jesus are the two New Testament authorities on the moronic foolishness of life. Paul is especially fond of this word in this letter of First Corinthians, for of his 14 uses of the word, 10 of them are right here in this one epistle.

Paul is so intent on the contrast between the foolishness of God and the wisdom of men that he considers it an honor to be one of God's morons. In 4:10 he says, "We are fools for Christ". He uses the word morons. In 3:18 he urges the Corinthians to become fools or morons in order to be wise. Paul goes out of his way over and over again to stress that the ways of God in the eyes of the worldly wise are just plain foolishness. Now what does all this have to do with Christmas?

Christmas is the being of the foolishness and weakness of God that ended on the cross. The resurrection was the great transition. It was the smartest thing God ever did through His Son. It was wisdom and power. This was more like it for a God-sheer genius and awesome power. But the story of Jesus in His birth to the cross-the Incarnation and the Crucifixion: these were events of madness and folly. These were the foolishness and weakness of God.

The whole story of Jesus is going backwards and instead of from rags to riches, it is a riches to rags story. The wisdom of the world says you move from weakness to power. The goal of life is to get more not less. You labor and fight to climb higher in status and power. You move from being poor to being rich. That is the flow of life, from less to more.

Now we come along with the story of an all powerful God with riches beyond the wildest dreams of earthly men. He has infinite resources and yet He comes up with a plan whereby

He gives all of this up to become a baby who is so weak He has to be carried away or be killed by Herod. The Son of God, equal with the Father, empties Himself of this equality and becomes the child of a poor homeless couple in a podunk town, where they have no more clout than the barn yard critters they are forced to sleep with. Give me a break! You call this a plan? This is more ridiculous than the president of General Motors resigning to make fries at a fast food restaurant. This more ridiculous than the president of the world bank quitting to sell cool aid in front of his house. This is more ridiculous than the president of the United States leaving office to make popsicle sticks. This is so incredibly ridiculous, Paul calls it, the foolish of God.

It even gets worse. This tiny baby grows up to be a powerful man who is a channel of God's power in the world. He moves people by His teaching and He moves mountains by His miraculous power. Masses are fed with a lads lunch; storms are stilled; people by the thousands are healed and some even raise from the dead. Maybe this story is going to make sense after all. But no, He lets himself be taken to the cross and by narrow minded bigots cruelly crucified. He could have called ten thousand angels, but He called no one. He died in utter weakness. He had all that power and He never even lifted a finger to stop them. This is more ridiculous than an elephant being brought to his knees by a butterfly. This is more ridiculous than the United States being defeated by Cuba. This is so profoundly ridiculous, Paul calls it the foolishness and weakness of God. Only God could make a plan so weak and foolish pay off.

If God would have let us be advisors on the plan of salvation we would have told Him to make a show of power. Send you son into the world on a great white stallion with a vast array of angels. Take the world by storm and have every knee bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord. God would have said, not a bad idea, but I'll save that for the Second Coming. The first coming of my son will be as a helpless baby in an obscure stable where only a few of the world's most uninfluential people will be informed.

Most of us would say don't bother to call me the next time you are looking for advice. What foolishness, we would mutter as we walked out of the council chambers of heaven. The least He could do is to start His Son off as a grown man like He did with Adam. To start Him off as a baby is foolishness. At least give Him to respectable family and not to a poor carpenter who will never be able to give Him the things He deserves. The whole plan is absurd, we would conclude, and we would be right. That is why Paul calls it the foolishness of God.

God was choosing to send His only begotten Son into the feeble body of an infant. He would need the constant care and protection of His parents. He would need help to learn His ABC's and how to build a fence and study the Bible. He who made the universe would need to be taught how to make a bird house. He who is the embodiment of all truth and wisdom would need to be taught how to spell His name. The true story of Christmas is incredible. Man cannot invent a story that is more incredible. Truth is indeed stranger than fiction. But you can count on this, when God does what seems foolish it will in the end be an amazingly clever plan to overcome evil and achieve the salvation of man. So let's look closer at the foolishness of Christmas and see just how wise it really is.

The foolishness of God is very simply the foolishness of love. True love tends to be foolish for it takes risks. The costly ointment that Mary poured on Jesus was considered a scandalous waste and act of sheer folly. But Jesus saw it for what it was, and act of love. Was it foolish? Of course it was, but it was the foolishness of love that is wiser than the wisdom of men who do not love.

Love does crazy things. I risked my life once just to keep a date with Lavonne. I took off in a terrible storm to drive the 20 miles to her house. It took so long to get there, they were all in bed and I didn't want to disturb anyone. It was too bad a snow storm to go home again so I decided to sleep in the car. Fortunately for me, Lavonne's father saw the car in the driveway and came out to invite me in for the night. Everyone thought I was an idiot for doing such a foolish thing, and I was. Do you think I would have so stupid if I had not loved her?

Somewhere along the line we almost always do something moronic for the ones we love. Love and foolishness often go together. God is love and therefore there has to be, by the very nature of love, some foolishness in God. The difference is God's foolishness is always based on wisdom that assures the final result will be victory for good. The foolishness of man often gives evil the victory.

It is probably foolish to compare the story of Christmas and the story of the cross to see which was the most radical example of God's foolishness. But as I did, I at first assumed that the cross was the ultimate in foolishness. What could be more foolish than submitting to the power of death? But as I thought more, I could see that the birth of Jesus could, in fact, be even more radical than His death. On the cross Jesus had a choice and He could have saved Himself. As a baby, Jesus had no choice. He had reduced Himself to a level where He was completely dependent upon others for His survival. By being born as a baby He gave up all control and submitted Himself to the ultimate in limitations.

The foolishness of Christmas is the foolishness of love and the foolishness of love is the choice of self-limitation. Jesus had it all but He gave up equality with God to take on the limitations of human flesh. He was rich but He became poor for us. If you want to see love, look for one who will choose a self-limitation for your benefit. There is no love without the choice of limitations. Even God cannot love without the cost of self-limitation. That is what Christmas and the cross is all about. They are about the limits God is willing take on Himself for our salvation.

If we will not give up something for another person, we do not love that person. Love is a choice to give up some of my time, some of my energy, some of my money or some other resource for the benefit of that other. Paul in Phil. 2 is stressing that Christians love one another and then he gives us the essence of what that means in verse 4: "Each of you should look not only to your own interest, but also to the interests of others." In other words, if you are totally self-centered and not interested in others needs, you are not loving. Love is a choice to limit self interest so as to take on the interests of others. If God was not love there would be no Christmas, for there would be no such foolishness as the Son of God taking on human flesh. This is the greatest limitation of one's person and power in all of history. That is why the Christmas story is the greatest love story of all time. Love has to care and take on

limitations or it would not be love. Love has to be foolish in this way and take on risks or it will cease to be. God cannot be Love and not take some foolish risks for those whom He loves.

If there was no foolishness of Christmas and the Cross, we could do nothing about it, but God would not be Love. God could not leave men lost and headed for hell with no hope of salvation for that would be a denial of His very nature. But the sacrifice of love seems foolish to the non-loving. Because your neighbor does not love your child he may think it foolish to lavish your hard earned money on their pleasure. Because your neighbor does not love your favorite tree or plant they may consider it foolish that you spend all the time you do watering it and caring for it. Anything thing or anyone you love sacrificially will seem stupid to those who do not share your love. That is the point of God's foolishness. It is not foolish to God nor to those whom He loves. It is only foolish to the worldly wise who do not understand love.

The greater the limitation one puts on ones self, the greater the love. The Incarnation and Crucifixion are the greatest limitations conceivable for the Person of God. Thus, they reveal the greatest love conceivable and therefore the greatest conceivable foolishness to the worldly wise. God so loved the world that He gave His Son and therefore, God's love is the foolishness of Christmas.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WHERE DOES CHRISTMAS COME FROM? based on Gal.4:1-7

An aviator trainer told of how he would take students up in plane, and deliberately fly in all directions to confuse them. Then he would turn the controls over to the student and say, "Now take us home." It was the job of the student to learn how to find the radar beam, and stay on it until they were back at home base. The birds and fish have their homing instinct built in, but man needs to have outside help to get home.

Paul is helping the Galatian Christians develop their homing instinct. He wants them to get back to the place where they can feel they are really a part of the family of God. They are confused by the legalist, and feel disoriented and uncertain about their relation to God and the law. Paul helps them get back to home base, and to their freedom in Christ, by following the beam God sent into the world on that first Christmas.

Follow this light, and you will know where Christmas comes from, and it will take you home. For where it comes from is where you want to be. This is not a mere seasonal question. It is a supreme question for all time-where does Christmas come from? The answer can guide us through confusion and uncertainty back to home base, in the very heart

of God. In this passage, Paul indicates that Christmas comes from three sources. First of all-

I. CHRISTMAS COMES FROM HEAVEN.

In verse 4, Paul says, "When the time had fully come God sent forth His Son." The God of the Bible is a God of action. He gets involved in history to achieve goals for man, and to develop relationships with man. He is not like Aristotle's God-The Unmoved Mover, who is so perfected that he needs nothing, and so he does nothing. The God of the Bible does have needs. He needs to redeem man and restore him to the family of God, because He is love and love cannot remain unmoved. The forces of darkness have enslaved man, and love demands that they be set free.

Christmas comes from heaven, because God cares about what happens on earth. He sent His Son to bring light into earth's darkness. As American Christians, who enjoy both political and spiritual freedom, it is hard for us to appreciate the liberating light that God sent in Jesus. We have the light and the liberty, and, therefore, we take it for granted. That has not been the case with all Christians in the 20th century. Hans Lilje, the evangelical pastor who resisted Hitler, and ended up in a concentration camp, tells of his experience in his book, *The Valley Of The Shadow*.

"Christmas was near. Christmas Eve in prison is so terrible because of wave of sentimentality passes through the gloomy building. Everyone thinks of his own loved ones, for whom he is longing; everyone suffers because he doesn't know how he will be celebrating the Festival of Divine and Human Love. Recollections of childhood comes surging back, almost overwhelming some, especially those who are condemned to death, and who cannot help looking back at their past lives. It is no accident that in prison suicide attempts are particularly numerous on this special day; in our case, however, the most remarkable thing was the sentimental softness which came over our guards. Most of these S.S. men were young fellows, who were usually unnecessarily brutal in their behavior, but when Christmas Eve came we hardly knew them--the spirit of this evening made such a deep impression upon them."

He goes on to tell of the camp Commandant, who allowed a few of the prisoners to get together and sing on Christmas Eve. They were in bondage to the forces of evil, but they could see that even those who kept them imprisoned, knew it was wrong and contrary to the spirit of Christ. They could see the light of heaven penetrating even the Nazi darkness. Lilje wrote, "Upon us shines the Eternal Light, filling the world with radiance bright." Their very darkness made them see, more clearly, the light they had received from heaven, in the gift God gave at Christmas.

Helmut Gollwitzer was another Christian leader who spent Christmas in prison, during

World War II. He was a German held captive in Russia. In his book, *Unwilling Journey*, he writes of planning to celebrate Christmas in a setting deprived of all that makes life worth living-

The Russian camp leader had given his permission, but some of the prisoners objected loudly and even begged me to forgo every reminder of Christmas; "Only by not thinking about it--that's the only way I can endure it; if you celebrate I shan't be able to stand it and I shall hang myself..."

He did not hang himself; not because at the decisive moment he was to cowardly but because he had seen the Christmas Light which shines in the darkness. Not "not to think about it", but rather to think about it with all one's might--that was the lesson that Christmas Eve taught us. But what exactly were we to think about? To immerse oneself in that dream could not of itself bring salvation. Homesickness filled our hearts too bitterly in those days. But when we heard the Christmas Gospel and discussed it, a miraculous light seemed to have been turned on; "God hath not forgotten those who sat in darkness." On earth there was no power that could or would help us. Surrounded by vast forests, we were forgotten and abandoned. We hardly dared to hope that things would ever be different, and yet we could not stop hoping. Was it that someone was thinking of us and knew about us, someone stronger even than Stalin and the N. K. V. D.?

Here were men who knew that Christmas came from heaven, because there was no other source of light and hope, strong enough to overcome earth's darkness.

In 1944, Corrie Ten Boom spent Christmas in the Nazi prison camp, Ravensbruck. She tells of unbelievable darkness. Christmas trees were set up between the barracks. The bodies of dead prisoners were thrown under them. She tried to talk to others about Christmas, but they mocked and sneered. One feeble minded woman was crying for her momma in the night, and Corrie was able to comfort her. She told her about Jesus, the only light that could penetrate that darkness. The woman did pray to receive Christ, and Corrie writes, "then I knew why I had to spend this Christmas in Ravensbruck."

The point of these three examples, that represent many thousands, is that Christmas comes from heaven. But all too often, only those who lose their earthly light and liberty fully recognize this truth. When we have so many earthly lights, we sometimes fail to see the beam from heaven. Thank God we do not have to spend Christmas deprived of liberty, love, light, and laughter. But let us remember, we only have all of these blessings, and more, because God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law. Christmas comes from heaven, but secondly note-

II. CHRISTMAS COMES FROM HISTORY.

Jesus did not come into history in a fiery chariot, announcing, "This is Christmas!" He

came from heaven, but he came by the same slow process that all men come by-conception, development, and birth. Jesus came into a particular historical context. Christmas marks the day that God became historical. As the Son of God, Jesus existed with the Father for all eternity. But as Jesus the man, he began His history on that first Christmas.

Christmas is a new beginning. History is divided between B.C. and A.D., because when Jesus was born, something began which never before existed. God is no longer on the outside of history, reaching in to touch man, but now is on the inside, helping man to reach up and touch God. Christmas is a holiday to celebrate this new beginning of the God-man relationship.

When the church invaded the world with the good news that God had invaded history, it was a minority group facing a vast majority, who already had their own holiday's. The Jews had their feast days and festivals and so did the Gentiles. These pre-Christmas festivities were much like our own present Christmas celebration. They were held in December and January because work in the fields was done, and there was no better time for the leisure of feasting. Food, fun, sports, and the giving of gifts were all part of the Greek and Roman celebrations of December 25th and January 6th. These have been the two key dates for Christmas all through Christian history.

When the church gained power in the Roman Empire, it just made good sense for the Council of Tours, in 567 A.D., to proclaim the 12 days from Dec.25 to Jan. 6, to be the sacred season to honor the coming of Christ. Thus, the 12 days of Christmas took in the entire period covered by the pagan celebrations. The Church was saying, we claim this joyous period of the year for Christ, and dedicate all it's festivities to Him.

As Christianity spread, this process of incorporating the pagan holidays and customs into Christianity continued. Christianity came to Ireland in the 5th century, to England in the 6th century, to Switzerland and Austria in the 7th, to Germany in the 8th, Hungary and Scandinavia in the 9th and 10th, and by the 11th century all of Europe had been converted to Christianity.

In this historic march of the church, every conceivable combination of pagan and Christian culture developed. It is easy for some 20th century critics, to look back and scream, at this or that custom, as being pagan. They did not have to go into those pagan cultures and strive to win those in darkness to the light of Christ. They failed to realize that Christian missionaries, all through history, have followed the same procedure as Paul did. They were all things to all men, that by all means they might win some. It is true that Christians incorporated pagan customs into Christianity. Things the pagans once did to honor their gods, they were now encouraged to do to honor their new found Saviour, the Lord Jesus.

The legalist gets all bent out of shape about this. He yells compromise, and wants to rid the church of all these customs that have a pagan origin. This can sound very spiritual, but it is, in fact, a rejection of God's plan, and the whole purpose of the Incarnation. God made Christmas historical by entering history to change it from within. That is the strategy of the Incarnation. Change is not to be imposed on man from the outside, but it is to be

accomplished as an inside job. Missions has followed this strategy. You don't go into a culture and force on them an external system. You enter a culture, learn it's values understand it's ways of expressing love and celebration, and then you incorporate these into the Christian expression of love and the worship of Christ.

The point is, you cannot take anything that is pagan, and say it is now contaminated, and of no use to the Christian. This is utter nonsense, for everything that God has created was used by pagans, before Christians even existed. The pagan world used the Sun, Moon, all the stars and planets, and all of nature in their worship. It is folly to try and avoid all of these things just because they used them as idols. The perversion of a thing is no excuse to reject the proper use of it. The pagans perverted sex and food and music and everything you can imagine. Should the Christian give up these things because of their perversions? Of course not! These things are to be used to the glory of God.

You do not honor the god Thor, by getting up and going to work on Thursday, just because that day is named after a pagan god. You do not serve the Emperor Augustus, just because you have a delightful family picnic in August. By having our prayer meetings on Wednesday, we do not honor the pagan god Woden, just because his name is attached to the day. We do not honor the pagan god Janus, just because we start off our New Year with a month named after him.

The point is, everything we do has been done before by pagan people, who did not know or love Jesus Christ. They sang, they prayed, they lit candles, they built temples, they fed the poor and they cared for children and everything else you can think of. Anything that is not inconsistent with God's revelation, is proper for the Christian, even if pagans did it too. Yule logs, Christmas trees, lights, presents, feasts, concerts, you name it. If these things are not inherently evil, but can be enjoyed with thanks to God, then they ought to be a part of the Christians Christmas. Christmas did not come to us ready made, dropping out of heaven, it came to us through the process of history, whereby the God of history touched and transformed everything in the light of Christ. Christmas comes from heaven, but it also comes from history. Thirdly,

III. CHRISTMAS COMES FROM THE HEART.

Paul says in verses 5 and 6, when we receive God's gift of His Son, He sends another gift, the gift of the Holy Spirit to indwell our hearts. This Spirit of His Son calls out in us, Abba, Father. The spirit of Christmas is the spirit of assurance that one is a child of God. This is the source of all our peace, joy, and love. This is the basis for all the self-esteem that is necessary to be what God wants us to be.

We can know that God sent His Son, and recognize Christmas comes to us from heaven. We can know of the progress of Christianity in time, and in the cultures of the world and, thus, know that Christmas comes to us from history. But the bottom line is where Christmas becomes personal, and we experience it's meaning in our heart. When you can feel you are not a mere servant but an actual child in the family of God, Then you are really into Christmas. This is why God sent His Son, and why he died and rose again, and why He is coming to receive us unto Himself. The point of God's whole program of redemption is to

incorporate man into His eternal family. There is no higher goal in this universe than that of becoming a child of God. The ultimate gift of Christmas is to be able to call God, Father.

One of our problems is, even as Christians, we strive to get the spirit of Christmas from other sources. We like to get joy and security from other things. This can work to some degree, for things do give pleasure. But when we depend upon things, we lose our sense of balance. If things are the source of our joy, then the greater our wealth, and the more we spend, the greater will be our enjoyment of Christmas. This is a perversion of values, and can lead to excess and disappointments. The fact is, the poor shepherds experience the same joy as the wise men. The source of Christmas joy is not possessions, but relationships. Christmas joy cannot be purchased like things can be.

A magazine recently described a shopping spree of an oil-rich Sultan. For each of his 19 wives he bought a Cadillac, and he paid extra to have them lengthened. Then he purchased two Porsches and 6 Mercedes, a \$40,000 speed boat and a truck to haul it, 16 refrigerators, and a stack of luggage. For good measure, he added two Florida grapefruit trees, two reclining chairs, and a slot machine. The total bill was \$1,500,000--plus \$194,500 to get it all delivered.

Now, I am not saying that if I had an uncle like this, he could not add anything to my enjoyment of Christmas. The fact is, we all spend more money at Christmas than any other time of the year. Money is not a negative element in Christmas, in itself. . The wise men brought gifts worth a lot of money, and they supported the holy family when they fled to Egypt. Money was important even in the life of His Son. But money cannot buy the meaning of Christmas for you. It is not the source of Christmas. Christmas comes from heaven, from history, and from the heart. If one has not opened their heart to receive the gift of God, there can be no true Christmas joy. The final spirit of Scrooge was expressed in his words, "I will honor Christmas in my heart and try to keep it all the year." Open your heart to Jesus and your Christmas too, can come from the heart.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

14. RECIPE FOR A MERRY CHRISTMAS based on Phil. 2:1-4

Back in the 60's, a movie was made telling the story of a man, who, like Job, got so discouraged, he wished he had never been born. His guardian angel granted him his wish and also the freedom to go back to his hometown to observe the consequences. Nobody knew him,

of course, not even his own wife and mother , for he had never lived. He discovered many things had not been done because he had not lived to do them. Many of the lives he had aided in rough times, had gone astray because he had not been there to give a helping hand. Many bad influences had grown strong in the community because he had not been there to prevent them. He then realized how important one ordinary life can be in it's long range influence for good. He was so grateful that he was allowed to wake up, as from a dream, and be alive. His life was full of meaning and significance after all.

Most all of us would have had the same experience. Most of us underestimate ourselves and the influence we have on other lives. Paul did not do this with himself or any other child of God. He knew that every believer could, if they would, add to this world the same kind of joy that Jesus brought when he entered history on that first Christmas.

Paul, in this passage, holds up the example of Jesus in His Incarnation as the pattern for all Christians to imitate. He says, that if the Philippian Christians will imitate Jesus, his joy will be complete, and he implies their joy and the joy of Jesus would also be complete. What we have here then, is a first century recipe for a merry Christmas. All we have to do is mix into the bowl of life those ingredients that Jesus brought into the world on the first Christmas.

This is the season to be jolly, but we often make it a season of folly because we spend most of our time comforting to the world, rather than to Christ. We become so busy getting things ready for Christmas that we tend to neglect relationships. Jesus did not come into the world to give us religious jewelry, though it has great value as being both beautiful and symbolic. He did not come to give us a holiday and a day of feasting, though it is much appreciated. No Christian should complain of all the fringe benefits. But He came to give Himself and His Spirit, and all the fruit of the Spirit. When you care enough to give the best, you give yourself.

Christmas is a time when God would have us look back at our roots as Christians Paul expects, that by focusing on the roots of Christmas, to help Christians produce the fruits of Christmas. He expects Christians to look at what Jesus did in the giving of Himself, which led to the cross, and apply that spirit in their relationship to others.

The Philippian Church was one of the best churches of the New Testament. But even there, the problems of disagreement developed. Chapter 4, verse 2, tells of two women who were in a state of contention and this was hurting the unity of the church. A breakdown in unity is a major problem in the church and in the family. Paul is offering, in this passage, a recipe that will restore unity to any group and produce a merry Christmas.

The beauty of this recipe is that all of ingredients are available to every believer. You don't have to order them and wait for them to be imported from some distant land. Another great value is that each of the ingredients is a gift that does not diminish, but multiplies when given away. The more you give it away, the more you possess. If I have one pen and I give it to you, I no longer have a pen and have been diminished by my giving. But, if I have a sense of encouragement, comfort, and joy in Christ, and I share that with you, I have multiplied these values, and by so doing, have even more myself. It is like an idea. If I share it with you, it is multiplied, and the idea becomes stronger in my mind by sharing it. Self-interest, rightly

seen, leads us to share our gifts, and thereby enrich others as we enrich ourselves. In the realm of spiritual values, it is always better to give than to receive, for the giver gains more than the receiver, just as a teacher gains more than the student. That is why we should be excited about this recipe for a merry Christmas. Like any good recipe it can be used the year around. Let's examine the ingredients. The first is-

I. ENCOURAGEMENT.

The first part of verse 1 has many different translations, but the key word in most of them is encouragement. The KJV has consolation, and the Living Bible puts it in a question form, "Is there any such thing as Christians cheering each other up?" That is the same thing as encouragement. The NIV has, "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ." The RSV has, "So if there is any encouragement in Christ." Phillips has, "Now if your experience of Christ's encouragement and love mean anything to you..."

What Paul is saying is that encouragement is one of the ingredients Jesus added to our lives by His coming into history. If we in turn add encouragement to the lives of others, we are keeping alive that which Jesus came to give. Abundant life does not come only from Christ directly, but it comes indirectly through His body. As believers imitate Jesus and encourage one another, they have a profound influence on each others happiness.

Dr. Lewis Dunnington, whose books have been an encouragement to many, tells of how he learned the power of encouragement. He was just 18 and working his way through college. He was selling, The Volume Library, in Bay City, Wisconsin. After four days without a sale, he was ready to hang it up. He wrote to the sales manager for a transfer. That sales manager wrote him such a letter of encouragement, it changed his life. The letter explained that he knew it was a tough area, but he sent Dunnington there because he had confidence in him. He was convinced that Dunnington had the ability to persuade people that these volumes were the best on the market. This letter of encouragement so motivated Dunnington, that he went out and began to sell and he stayed in Bay City all summer. Success or failure often depend on whether you get a kick in the pants or an encouraging slap on the back. Encouragement can make a big difference.

He tells the story of the late William Henry Eustice, one of the best mayors Minneapolis ever had. At age 12 he was stricken with infantile paralysis and lay helpless for four years. By super human effort he was able to educate himself. At 19 he proudly applied for entrance to a small college. It was hard for a cripple, and just when he needed a boost, he got a kick. One of the instructors told him he was incapable of college work and he advised him to drop out.

The discouragement mounted in him that night until he was overwhelmed by despair. He decided to take his own life. Fortunately, the rope he used broke, instead of his neck. By morning the dark mood had passed and he was determined to graduate from college. He not only did that, but went on to establish a record of public service that was outstanding, and he gave a fortune to meet the needs of others. All that he did to encourage others was almost lost because someone failed to give him encouragement when he most needed it.

Very few of us go through life without coming to those points where we need a word of encouragement. One of the most helpful ministries in the body of Christ is the ministry of encouragement. The more I evaluate life the more I am convinced, the greatest tragedy is wasted love. Love that never gets expressed is love locked in because we do not know how to release it. If you really want to help others have a merry Christmas, let the Spirit of Christ be incarnated in your flesh, so that your life, acts, and words are used to encourage others.

Don't be just thinking of yourself, Paul says, but think on the things of others round about you and ask yourself-who in my environment can use a boost. Search for appropriate ways of doing it, and you will give a greater gift than money can buy, for encouragement is priceless. You can run yourself ragged and spend a small fortune, and never make anyone as happy as you could by giving them yourself in deeds or words of encouragement.

A woman was asked why she put artificial flowers around her flower garden and she said they were just there to encourage the real ones. It may not have any effect on flowers but encouragement has a major effect on people. Walt Whitman, like many creative people, had a hard time believing in himself. Then one day he received this letter in the mail that said, "Dear Sir, I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of Leaves of Grass. I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. I greet you at the beginning of a great career!" The letter was signed, Ralph Waldo Emerson. From that day, Whitman never doubted his own ability and he did have a great career. All he needed was the encouragement of one he admired. All of us can add this ingredient to what we share with the people in our lives.

The second ingredient sounds so much like the first, but like the ingredients of any recipe, each one has it's own special flavor. The second is-

II. THE COMFORT OF LOVE.

In this context, it is that sense of warmth and security we have when we realize how much Jesus loved us. He emptied Himself of equality with God and reduced Himself to a servant. He finally humbled Himself to be put to death on the cross. All of this He did, not for His own interest, but for ours. The comfort of such love is beyond calculation. We are comforted both by the gift of the lover and the love of the giver.

When you begin to grasp the wonder of Christ's love, it begins to grasp you and make you a channel of His love to others. That is why Paul describes the great humiliation of Christ as our example. That is why Jesus said, do this in remembrance of me. If we are not constantly focusing on the love of Christ, we have a tendency to become self-centered. This was the one flaw in the church of Philippi-selfishness. It is the one problem that produces friction in the best churches and the best families. When children fight and make parents frustrated, you can trace the problem to self-centeredness. So it is with the vast majority of conflicts in the family of God.

Paul had such joy in the Philippian Christians, but he also had some pain. It is like your experience as a parent. You can be so proud and delighted with most aspects of your children's lives, but then be frustrated and wish they would change in other aspects. Paul's

cup of happiness would be filled if only the Philippian Christians would be less self-centered and begin to think of others. Even a non-Christian life Albert Einstein could say, "Only a life lived for others is a life worth while." That is the Christlike life that Paul holds before the Philippian Christians. But the fact is, Christians are constantly forgetting this basic truth, and the result is million of Christians struggle with the pain of being part of the church.

J. H. Oldham said to a friend, "You know-Christianity has no meaning for me apart from the church, but I sometimes feel as though the church as it actually exists is the source of all my doubts and difficulties." That is the very paradox Paul was fighting and the one that every pastor struggles with along with most of the members. The church is both the source of our pleasure and our pain. Christians are other Christians greatest problem.

The healing of this pain lies in the comfort of love. Love has tremendous healing power. Dr. Karl Menninger, in his famous clinic in Topeka, Kansas, told his staff of doctors, nurses, orderlies, and cleaning people, that the most important thing they had to offer patients was love. He said, if people could learn to give and receive love they would recover from most illnesses.

The church is a spiritual clinic treating the illnesses of the soul and there is no doubt about it, love is the primary medicine by which it brings healing. By dispensing love the church becomes a true assistant to the Great Physician.

It is amazing when you think about it, many of us have it in our power to give healing to others. None of us lack this power, really, for by words of encouragement and deeds of love, we can heal many of the hurts of this world. By mixing these ingredients together, we can produce, not only a merry Christmas, but a happy forever, for the sharing of these values is the essence of eternal life.

A man once dreamed he had a vision of the after life. In one place he saw people all seated at a great banquet table with forks with such long handles that no one could get any food into their mouth. It was as terrible scene for the food could only be touched by the long forks and nobody could get it. It was a scene of agony, torment, and starvation.

Then he saw another banquet table full of people and all the same provisions and the same forks. The same rule applied that only the forks could touch the food. Yet this scene was one of great joy and feasting for each person was picking up the food and feeding the person on the other side of the table from them. They were having a delightful time because they were being selfless and not selfish. That is the difference between heaven and hell.

Paul would say "amen" to this story for it is saying just what he wants to convey to the Philippians. Selfishness is the road to a miserable now and forever. Selflessness is the road to a merry now and forever. There are other ingredients that Paul mentions also but these two are the major ones for producing a merry Christmas.

If a merry Christmas is to be,
One blest by heaven above,
You must add to life this recipe,

Encouragement and the comfort of love.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

15. CHRISTMAS AND THE CROSS based on Hebrews 12:1-2

Dr. Samuel Upham, a theological professor and a man of great learning, was dying. The family was gathered around his bed and someone said I believe he is already dead. Someone else said his feet are still warm and nobody ever dies with warm feet. Dr. Upham opened one eye and said, "Joan of Arc did." These were his last words and he died with a smile on his face.

Some may feel it is not appropriate to crack a joke on your death bed, but there are others who consider it a great virtue to be merry in the midst of misery. When the German bombs were landing on London, a man and his wife were fleeing their home. The wife said in frustration, "I can't find my dentures." The husband replied, "What do you think they are dropping-sandwiches?"

It is possible to have a sense of humor and a glad spirit even in the worst of times. Those who do, tend to be healthier than those who do not. Being Merry is a potent medicine that drives off diseases of both body and mind. Proverbs 17:22 says, "A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones."

Since medicine is something you only take when you have a problem, being joyful and merry goes hand in hand with the fact that life is filled with trials and troubles. In other words, being joyful is not the same as being blind to the reality of evil and sorrow. It is possible to look forward to a merry Christmas in full awareness that we live in a world of misery. Just as there is nothing inconsistent with taking medicine to feel better in a world of sickness, so there is nothing inconsistent with a merry spirit in a world of misery.

Laughter is a good lubrication that keeps the body, mind, and spirit going for many more miles. In laughter there is life. The Jews had a saying, "The gladness of the heart is the life of man, and the joyfulness of a man prolongeth his life." It is this philosophy that has caused the suffering Jews to produce the greatest comedians. No race can match the Jews for great comics and producers of laughter. For the Jews, it is a religious duty to be cheerful.

In spite of the severity of the Old Testament law, and the punishments it demanded, the fact is Judaism is a religion of joy. The Jewish year was full of great feasts and festivals and

times of national rejoicing. God wanted His people to be joyful people. God's idea of a good time is not a group of people who sit with sour faces dwelling on the sin, folly, and tragic evils of life. We sometimes get the idea that God delights in the sober, somber, and solemn fast more than in the festivities, food, and fun of the feasts. There is a time for both, but when it is time for the joy of feasting, God wants no wet blankets on the flame. In Neh. 8:9-10, Nehemiah says to the people of Israel, "This day is holy to the Lord your God: do not mourn or weep....Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to him to whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy to the Lord, and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." If God wanted His people to be joyful under the law, how much more is this the case for those under the new covenant, who have received His best, the gift of His Son?

The Christmas message is a message about light in darkness. In Christ's coming the light invades the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it, even though it tried. The Christmas story is one of joyful angels with a message of joyful news to the shepherds, who joyfully responded by going to Bethlehem to see the Christ-child and to go away rejoicing. But we cannot forget, it is also the story of the hatred of Herod, the lying, the deception, and finally the slaying of babies of Bethlehem that left many in tears. The first Christmas represents all Christmases-it was merry and it was misery combined.

Jesus experienced this paradox of the merry and the misery and all the major phases of His life from the crib to the cross. We have seen the merry and the misery in His birth. In Heb. 12:2 we see them both again in His death. "Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, scorning the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." Joy was motivating Jesus even as He died on the cross. You would think the paradox would be over when He ascended to the right hand of God, but Hebrews says the conflict continues. Jesus even now is touched with our weaknesses and feels the suffering of His body-the church.

What this means for us in practical everyday living, and especially in these days before Christmas, is that we need to learn to accept both the merry and the misery in such a way that the misery does not eliminate the merry. In other words, even though life and circumstances are far from what they ought to be, every Christian should have a merry Christmas.

Christmas does not stop sin, war, crime, famine, murder, accidents, and sickness, but the joy of Christmas is a joy that rises above all these things. There is no tragedy so dark it can blot out the light that came into the world at Christmas. Christmas joy is joy in spite of all evil because one greater than all evil has come into the world to save us from all evil.

Jesus could have joy even as He endured the cross because He could see beyond the cross to His victory over death. Jesus abolished death, yet it is still around to cloud our joy. Modern technology has abolished distance. This does not mean the distance is no longer there. It is still just as far from here to Washington D. C. as it was in the days of Lincoln, But now distance does not mean what it meant then. Distance can no longer function as it did to keep information and events isolated and very slowly communicated. Now it does not make any difference if you live one mile from the White House or 2000 miles. You can have the same information at the same time by means of television. Television has abolished distance even though it is still there.

So Jesus abolished death even though it is still there. It no longer means what it use to mean. It no longer means an entrance into darkness and a state of unconsciousness, but now it means an entrance into light and the conscious presence of God. Jesus brought life and immortality to light and the result is none of life's miseries mean what they use to mean. None of them can rob us of a merry Christmas if we keep our thinking balanced.

Beware lest you become a chronic Christmas complainer about the hustle and bustle, the rush and the crush, the hurry and the scurry of Christmas preparation. You can get so fed up with the materialism and commercialism of it all that you lose your appetite for the things of God. The fact is, a Christian has no business expecting the world to act like Christians. But God does expect Christians to act like Christians. It is folly to get so upset by the folly of the world that you do not enjoy the things of Christ. If you find yourself more concerned about griping at the abuses, than about anticipating the uses of this season of joy, it is time to get your priorities straightened out. There is no better place for this than at the cross.

The cross is our perpetual reminder of the high cost of a merry Christmas. Without the cross the birth of Jesus would never be celebrated. His birth is only famous because of what He did on the cross. The cross, therefore, is to provide for us some perpetual guidelines for the celebrating of Christmas. It reminds us that joy is costly. Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was before Him. The joy was worth the price of what He suffered. It was worth the misery for the sake of the merry. Applying this to our lives in these days before Christmas, it means there is a price to be paid for a merry Christmas. Have you ever been to an enjoyable party that did not cost in terms of time, effort, and resources. It is a lot of work and a labor of love to put forth the effort to prepare for others to have an enjoyable time. Jesus paid the price for our merry forever, but we need to pay a price also to have a merry Christmas. There is always some of the cross involved in the positive and blessed things of life.

There are two ways of being merry and entering into a season of parties and festivities. The Prodigal Son experienced both. The first was the kind of parties he experienced when he spent all his money on wine, women, and song. There is no doubt that he had a great time, and his life was full of fun and laughter. But it was all on the surface, and it did not last, because it was the joy of pleasures and possessions only, and not the joy of relationships. He ended up with nobody but the pigs.

The second kind of party he experienced was when he returned home and his father called for new clothes, a feast, music, and dancing to celebrate his homecoming. This joy lasted and was a deeper joy because it was based on a relationship of love.

The merriest Christmas will be experienced by those who are motivated to build their joy on relationships. That was the source of the joy of Jesus on the cross. His body, the church, could only exist by His going to the cross. All the redeemed enjoying an everlasting love relationship to Him, and each other, was only possible because of the cross.

Let it be said of us when this Christmas is over, who for the joy that was set before us, endured the costly gifts, the hectic schedule, the time consuming preparation, and our seated with Christ in heavenly places enjoying the relationship to Him and His body.

In the novel, Bread and Wine, by Ignazio Silone Pietro, a revolutionary has lost his best friend. Many are gathered at the home of the friend to mourn his loss. The father stood at the head of the table and gave out food and drink to all who came. He said, "It was my son who helped sow the seed from which this bread was made. It was my son who helped harvest the grapes that were used to make the wine." What he was saying was, the food they enjoyed was a gift from their friend. It was his labor that led to their joy.

The bread and wine of the communion service are reminders that it was the labor of Christ on the cross that led to our having the right to enjoy the pleasures of time and eternity, and to enjoy a merry Christmas. A merry Christmas is Christ's gift to us from both the crib and the cross.