

A night scene in a desert landscape. In the center, a manger scene is illuminated from within, showing a baby in a manger and a figure holding a lantern. The scene is framed by a wooden structure with a thatched roof. The background is a dark sky with a bright star and several smaller stars. Silhouettes of palm trees and hills are visible in the foreground.

SAVIOR OF THE WORLD

25 Christmas Devotionals

by Mark Robinson

Intro:

This devotional guide is designed to help keep your focus on the Savior during the Christmas season. There are three sections to this book. The first 9 devotionals reflect on the Old Testament prophecy that predicted the birth of Christ. The second 7 devotionals are centered around some of the famous Christmas carols that we sing this time of year. The final 9 devotionals are simple thoughts designed to unpack the true meaning of Christmas. It is my hope that these devotionals help you and your family worship the new born King this Christmas season!

In Christ,

Mark

December 1

Preparing for the Required Course

When I arrived at the University of Oklahoma in the summer of 1992 to begin my college education, I was excited to take every class on my schedule . . . except one. Attending college meant the end of the 8:30 AM – 3:00 PM school day and the advent of the three day a week lecture rotation. As an aspiring procrastinator, committed intramural athlete, and John Madden football playing (on the Sega Genesis mind you) enthusiast, I was looking forward to all that free time! All of my classes had that three day-a-week rhythm except one . . . Spanish 1. The required five day-a-week mandate of this class cramped my style. Further complicating this course for me was the fact that it was taught by a Chinese man who, when flustered by a group of college students, would speak incoherently in a combination of the three languages he had previously mastered, Chinese, English, and Spanish. No me gusto.

Now, truth be told, I did not have to take Spanish 1 at OU. My degree program only required me to take one 3 hour (read 3 day a week) foreign language course in the “2000” level. The reason I did not simply sign up to take that Spanish reading course first semester my freshman year was simple . . . I did not speak Spanish. I needed to learn the basics before I could read poetry and short stories. My five day-a-week year long Spanish marathon was a prerequisite necessary for me to understand the material I would read in the one required reading course my sophomore year.

I was thinking about this experience today as I reflected further on the Law that God gave to His people in the Old Testament through His servant Moses. Moses went up on the mountainside and God gave him 10 commandments that would form a contract (we know it now as the Old Covenant) for how people in that era would relate to God. This Law was given to the Jewish people and governed humanity’s relationship with God for roughly 1500 years until God would establish a New Covenant with His Church through the saving work of Jesus Christ. When Christ came, God tells us through the book of Hebrews that salvation had always been through the person and work of Christ for all people. In a sense, the required course for salvation for people has always been about what Jesus has done and become effective as people take Christ into our hearts by faith.

If Jesus Christ had always been humanity’s required course, then why did God establish a 1,500 year period governed by the Law? The answer from Galatians 3:24 is clear, the Law was the prerequisite to people understanding Christ. Galatians 3:24 says, “So then, the Law was our pedagogue to Christ, in order that we might be justified by faith.” The idea of a pedagogue is one of a teacher who would come alongside a parent and help train a child, maturing them for adulthood. God gave the Law for 1,500 years to teach His people something in preparation for Christ. What does the world learn through the Law that prepares it for Christ?

In the Law we learn that God is holy and we are not. The Law shows us that the standards of God are lofty and perfect. Humanity's problem is that we cannot perfectly live out God's perfect standard. In a sense, the 10 Commandments are a document that condemns all of humanity. The Law says do not lie, yet even Abraham Lincoln told a lie at some point in his life. The Law says honor your father and mother, yet all parents (and children) know how impossible this is every moment of every day. Jesus goes so far as to apply the 10 commandments to our thought lives, effectively making virtually all murderers and adulterers! The Law shows us what Romans 3:23 famously states, "All have sinned and continue to fall short of God's perfect standards."

The Law also informs us that the result of sin is death. Think of all the bloody animal sacrifices the Old Testament demands as temporary coverings for the guilt of sin. Every lamb sacrificed on Passover, every sacrifice offered in the Temple was a reminder of what Romans 6:23 tells us, "The wages of sin is death."

The period of the Law also shows us the power and character of God. For 1500 years God poured out miracles and messages on the earth through supernatural means and the pen of the prophets. These prophecies, signs, and wonders helped people understand just how powerful the God of the Bible really is.

All these works of the Law helped prepare people for the truth of Christ. Jesus came into the world to seek and save the lost . . . the people who understood that they were not self-righteous enough to perfectly adhere to the Law and save themselves. The Law prepared people for their NEED for a Savior. Further, the Law prepared people for the understanding that death was the result of sin, so when Jesus died on the cross to take the payment for humanity's sins, we would know why that needed to happen. Finally, the supernatural demonstrations of God in the Old Testament help us to recognize the presence of God in the miracles of Jesus in the New Testament. The Law was given as a prerequisite to teach humanity so that they would understand Christ!

This Christmas, as you worship with your family, probably reading a lot from the first chapter or two of the first four books of the New Testament, allow yourself to skim back over the 39 books of the Old Testament. This prerequisite will help you understand the meaning of Galatians 4:4-5, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, to redeem those who were under the Law." The fullness of time came when the world had gone through the necessary prerequisite training under the Law to receive the new-born King.

December 2

A Two Fold Take on a 2,700 Year Old Story

Isaiah 7

700 years before the birth of Jesus, King Ahaz ruled over the nation of Judah. This reign was not marked by peace and prosperity, but by difficulty and war. Judah was being attacked by the armies of Israel (the Kingdom was divided at this time) and Aram. Ahaz, fearing the stability of the nation and his future legacy, turned to the feared Assyrian army to try to buy some help to fight off Aram and Israel. For a King who was leading God's chosen people, Ahaz's choice of an ally was very peculiar. God had made promises to protect Judah and provide for her needs, and He had delivered on those promises time and time again in her history. Ahaz, however, did not trust in the Lord, instead looking to other men to secure the stability He desired.

In Isaiah 7, God speaks to Ahaz and dares him to trust God (not man) for his deliverance. In 7:9-11, God says to Ahaz, "If you (Ahaz) want me (God) to protect you, learn to believe what I say. . . Ask me for a sign Ahaz, to prove that I will crush your enemies as I have promised. Ask for anything you like, and make it as difficult as you want."

I firmly believe that Ahaz thought that this dare from God was a test. Ahaz did not want to fail the test, so he says back to God in 7:12, "No, I wouldn't test the Lord like that." Ahaz must have puffed out his chest a bit as he said he would never put God to the test. What Ahaz thought was a pious rejection, however, was actually a good depiction of his spiritual allegiance. Ahaz would not put the Lord to ANY use in his real life. He wanted God on his side, but he assumed that in order to maintain the nation's stability, he would have to impress God with his self-directed wisdom, not a declaration of his utter need for dependence. Ahaz did not want to show God any weakness, thinking that God wanted him to be strong (or at least have strong friends).

After rejecting God's call for a sign, Ahaz is confronted by the prophet Isaiah who spoke God's response in 7:13-16: "Then Isaiah said, 'Listen well, you royal family of David! You aren't satisfied to exhaust my patience. You exhaust the patience of God as well! All right then, the Lord Himself will choose the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call Him Immanuel – God with us! By the time this child is old enough to eat curds and honey, he will know enough to choose what is right and reject what is wrong. But before he knows right from wrong, the two kings you fear so much – the kings of Israel and Aram – will both be dead.'" In this verse, God is telling Ahaz that God will extract Judah from underneath the oppression of the armies of Israel and Aram in a short amount of time. Indeed, God sets a time sensitive "sign" in place that says when God's people see a child named Immanuel born to a woman who was still a virgin at the time of Isaiah's prophecy, it will be less than two years until the kings of Aram and Israel will die and their threat to Judah will be subdued. In this way, Ahaz and Judah were called to renew their trust in God alone to provide deliverance

from their enemies. This prophecy was given in 735 BC. Just 3 years after this prophecy was given (in 732 BC), the kings of Israel and Aram were dead and the threat to Judah from these two “enemies” was subdued. God had made good on his promise. There most likely was a woman who was not married in 735 BC who met a man shortly after Isaiah’s prophecy, married him, and they had a child together. (NOTE: This would not have been an immaculate conception. The “virgin” referred to the fact that the woman was not married yet at the time of Isaiah’s original prophecy.) Before that child grew to be old enough to eat more than just baby food, Judah’s threats had been eliminated by God Himself. God had showed Himself worthy to be trusted.

Fast forward 700 years from the events of King Ahaz, and you will find a young virgin woman pregnant with a child named Jesus. Under the direction of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Matthew, as he writes his Gospel, is directed to draw a connection between Isaiah 7 and the birth of Jesus. Matthew 1:21-23 says, “‘She (Mary) will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel.’” Though undoubtedly there was a contemporary application to Isaiah 7 in Ahaz day, ultimately, the words of Isaiah were looking to a day seven centuries away . . . when another baby born, this time by a woman who was still a virgin, would be a sign that an even greater deliverance was forthcoming for God’s people. Jesus did not just come to rid His people of two pesky foreign kings . . . He came to deliver people from their sins!!

As someone who gets to read both stories from the comfort of the 21st century, I am so glad that Immanuel means more for us than just temporary military conquest. Ahaz got temporary relief from Aram and Israel 2 years after a child was born. We get to have permanent relief from the consequences of our sin 2,000 years after Jesus was born.

In our lives, like Ahaz, many times we assume that victory over our chief enemies (sin and its consequences) is found in our own self-righteous behavior. Real victory, however is not found in ourselves, it is found in a child who was born to a virgin. Jesus alone can deliver us from our sins. When it comes to the forgiveness of our sins, God is daring us to trust Him. He gave us (as Ahaz 2,700 years prior) a sign showing He is able to do marvelous things and is worthy to be trusted. “The virgin shall conceive a child” . . . and she did. . . and we can be saved as a result. Immanuel . . . God with us! Remember that blessed truth this Christmas season.

December 3

War and Peace

Isaiah 9

War is a terrible side effect of living in this fallen world. Had sin not entered the world, there would have been no World War II, no Vietnam, no Iraq or Afghanistan. I saw a statistic recently that floored me. It stated that 40 MILLION people died (civilian and military) in World War II alone. Another statistic estimates that 160 million people died in the twentieth century due to military conflict. These numbers are sobering and a stark reminder that we are not in Eden any longer.

Any reading of the Old Testament helps us understand that God does use war (inside this sinful world) to advance His purposes. I am not quoting statistics here to say that all war is “wrong,” but what I am saying is that all war has a huge cost . . . and I am not just referring to an enlargement of the national debt.

Given the prevalence of war, and its destructive toll on humanity, it is not surprising that people (since the beginning of time) have longed for a day when peace would last. In many ways, the world is like a giant school yard full of insecure bullies who abuse their people with violence to secure their own position. People have always longed for a day when the bullies would be stilled, but is that day ever really going to come? God says it will. In fact, God issued a prophecy through Isaiah in Isaiah 9:1-7 declaring that the bullies of the world would one day be replaced by a most peculiar leader. Under the direction of the Holy Spirit, Isaiah prophesied this:

“Nevertheless, that time of darkness and despair will not go on forever. The land of Zebulun and Naphtali will soon be humbled, but there will be a time in the future when Galilee of the Gentiles, which lies along the road that runs between the Jordan and the sea, will be filled with glory. The people who walk in the darkness will see a great light – a light that will shine on all who live in the land where death casts its shadow. Israel will again be great, and its people will rejoice as people rejoice at harvesttime. They will shout with joy like warriors dividing the plunder. For God will break the chains that bind His people and the whip that scourges them, just as He did when He destroyed the army of Midian with Gideon’s little band. In that day of peace, battle gear will no longer be issued. Never again will uniforms be bloodstained by war. All such equipment will be burned. For a Child is born to us, a Son is given to us. And the government will rest on His shoulders. These will be His royal titles: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His ever expanding, peaceful government will never end. He will rule forever with fairness and justice from the throne of His ancestor David. The passionate commitment of the Lord Almighty will guarantee this!”

This prophecy is one of the most famous in all of the Old Testament . . . and for good reason! What a blessed hope it promises. From the land of Galilee, a small rural province in northern Israel that often drew the first attack from invading armies because of its northern exposure, a leader would emerge that would bring glory and peace to God's people. This leader would be a bully-buster who would establish peace on the earth and eliminate the need for trillions of dollars to be spent on national defense. Surprisingly, though, the leader who would quell the bullies would not be a bigger bully, but a child. What a contrast! The mighty Assyrian army (in Isaiah's day) could be stopped by God working through a little child. The terror of Al Qaeda could be silenced from the crib of Bethlehem's manger. This child, of course, was Jesus who would grow up and reveal Himself as Mighty God. 700 years after this prophecy was given, Jesus would be born as a child, clothing Himself in humanity, to set in motion a plan to bring lasting peace to the earth.

What is amazing about reading this prophecy from Isaiah at Christmas time, though, is that the accomplishment of this prophecy has not yet fully taken place. The gifts of Isaiah 9 are still wrapped under the Christmas tree of Christ's second advent. When Jesus returns to the earth at a future time, He will put an end to war and He will rule the world in peace. One day war will cease, and the bullies will be stopped. The One who was born a Child will return in glorious triumph and shine His light throughout our world. That is one present I cannot wait to be unwrapped.

December 4

Real Hope and Change

Isaiah 11

Every four years we have a Presidential election. These elections are hotly contested and often reveal a country that is very divided. No matter how the election turns out, roughly half the country is going to be disappointed by the outcome. In preparation for a Presidential election, both sides promise the moon. Some people believe all the promises they hear during election season, while others are more cynical. In the many years I have been voting, I have seen my hope in the political process deteriorate from idealism to a malaise. The endless rhetoric of elections leave many tired and wounded.

Regardless of our political fatigue, however, it is hard to argue that who our leaders are makes a big difference in our lives. This is true of the United States, and it was also true of the nation of Judah in Isaiah's day. When Isaiah wrote his prophecy (the Old Testament book of Isaiah), Judah was in political crisis. After 52 years of being led by "good King Uzziah," Judah was under different human leadership. This troubled God's people and increased anxiety about what would happen to the nation without their previous King. God addressed their concerns through Isaiah's prophecy. In chapter 6, he reminded the nation that God was still on the throne. In chapter 7, God promised relief from the attacks of Israel and Aram. In chapter 11, however, God looks further into the future, to remind Judah that their ultimate leader will provide a peace that will dwarf the accomplishments of even their favorite King Uzziah! Listen to what God promises to His people in Isaiah 11:1-10:

"Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot – yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root. And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him – the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. He will delight in obeying the Lord. He will never judge by appearance, false evidence, or hearsay. He will defend the poor and the exploited. He will rule against the wicked and destroy them with the breath of His mouth. He will be clothed with fairness and truth. In that day the wolf and the lamb will live together; the leopard and the goat will be at peace. Calves and yearlings will be safe among lions, and a little child will lead them all. The cattle will graze among bears. Cubs and calves will lie down together. And lions will eat grass as the livestock do. Babies will crawl safely among poisonous snakes. Yes, a little child will put its hand in a nest of deadly snakes and pull it out unharmed. Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain. And as the waters fill the sea, so the earth will be filled with people who know the Lord. In that day the heir to David's throne will be a banner of salvation to all the world. The nations will rally to Him, for the land where He lives will be a glorious place."

Wow. What a campaign promise! To a people facing uncertain national prospects, God promises a future leader who will restore peace . . . not just between people, but with all of nature! This future leader could only be God Himself to accomplish such a task . . . God coming (as this passage indicates) in the form of a little child. Jesus was to be the Branch of David's tree that would be the Messiah for God's people. Isaiah wrote this 700 years before Jesus was born, but what is amazing for us today is that the ultimate fulfillment of these promises has yet to be realized. Jesus will return to this earth one day to fulfill this campaign promise God made through Isaiah 2,700 years ago! When Jesus comes again, He will establish a government on this earth where the wicked are no longer allowed to rule and the poor and exploited will have a true champion. As surely as Jesus was born in Bethlehem, so we look forward to this future reign of Christ on the earth (for more details of this time, look at Revelation 20.)

This Christmas season as you either celebrate or denigrate the latest chosen American political "Messiah", I challenge you to lift your eyes up and gain perspective. We know who the real Messiah is, and He is not a registered Republican or Democrat. He is Jesus Christ, and the peace we long for will certainly come to pass one day when He returns. To a people facing political crisis, God encourages us with the campaign promise of Isaiah 11.

December 5

Light in the Dungeon

Isaiah 42

One of my all time favorite Charles Wesley hymns is the song, “And Can it Be?” In one of the verses of that song, there is a powerful lyric that speaks of the freedom we gain in Christ, “Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast-bound in sin and dark of night. Thine eye diffused a quickening ray. I woke, the dungeon filled with light! My chains fell off, my heart was free. I rose, went forth, and followed Thee. Amazing love, how can it be? That Thou My God wouldst die for me!”

The imagery of this song places mankind in a dungeon, held tight in the chains of sin’s oppression. The arrival of the Savior, lets light into the dark place, and liberates us from sin’s captivity. I love that picture . . . it is very meaningful to me. As beautiful as that analogy is , and as beautiful as that analogy was arranged to song by Charles Wesley, it would be wrong to give Wesley the credit. The Lord Himself penned a song centuries before “And Can it Be?” that Wesley (no doubt) drew from as he adapted the text to music. Around 700 BC, our great God wrote a song that he dictated to the prophet Isaiah, asking Him to share it with God’s people. This song (one of three “Servant Songs” in Isaiah’s prophecy) predicts Jesus’ role as God’s “Chosen One” or Messiah, who would accomplish His purposes in the world. Listen to the words of this song from Isaiah 42:1-9:

“Look at My servant, whom I strengthen,. He is my chosen one, and I am pleased with Him. I have put my Spirit upon Him. He will reveal justice to the nations. He will be gentle – He will not shout or raise His voice in public. He will not crush those who are weak or quench the smallest hope. He will bring full justice to all who have been wronged. He will not stop until truth and righteousness prevail throughout the earth. Even distant lands beyond the sea will wait for His instruction.’ God, the Lord, created the heavens and stretched them out. He created the earth and everything in it. He gives breath and life to everyone in all the world. And it is He who says, ‘I, the Lord, have called You to demonstrate My righteousness. I will guard and support You, for I have given you to My people as the personal confirmation of My covenant with them. And You will be a light to guide all nations to Me. You will open the eyes of the blind and free the captives from prison. You will release those who sit in dark dungeons. I am the Lord; that is My name! I will not give My glory to anyone else. I will not share My praise with carved idols. Everything I prophesied has come true, and now I will prophesy again. I will tell you the future before it happens.”

The first part of the song sees God describing Jesus to Isaiah and His readers, 7 centuries before His Bethlehem birth. He describes Him as someone who is fully in tune with the Lord . . . fully empowered by His Spirit. He is one who will bring about

justice, not just for Israel, but for the entire world. He will accomplish this justice by being a humble servant leader, not a loud-mouthed dictator. He will inspire hope, not crush it, and He will usher His truth and plan around the world . . . even to places not yet discovered yet by the ancient world (places like Oklahoma!)

In the second part of the song, God talks more about the specific task Messiah will accomplish. This is where Wesley echoed the Servant Song. Jesus is said to shine as a light into the dark, dank dungeon of this fallen world, and beckon His people to follow Him out of sin and into the freedom of life in Christ.

This Servant Song, spoke of the work of Christ centuries before His birth, and reminds us again of how God had been planning a rescue of His people for centuries. Reading this song today, makes me want to sing again Wesley's refrain this Christmas season: "And can it be that I should gain an interest in my Savior's blood? Died Him for me who caused His pain, for me who Him to death pursued. Amazing love, how can it be? That Thou My God wouldst die for me!"

As you see Christmas lights around this holiday season, may they remind you of the Light of Christ that invites you out of the dungeon of your sin and into a relationship with Him.

December 6

Different Strokes

Isaiah 49

Do you remember the old television show “Different Strokes?” You know the show. . . Gary Coleman, “What you talkin’ about Willis?,” Mr. Drummond, Mrs. Garrett . . . you remember this show right? Well in case you don’t, let me fill in the necessary details for the sake of this post.

Mr. Drummond was a rich businessman who lived in a Manhattan high rise. Mr. D had a housekeeper who passed away leaving two small boys, Willis and Arnold, orphaned. Willis and Arnold were adopted and joined their new family— moving from the projects to the penthouse. Though not born into the wealth and status of the Drummond family, Willis and Arnold had the full benefit of being sons because of the gracious and loving decision of Mr. Drummond. While the show often was a bit campy in its story lines, the basic premise was very heart warming and allowed the show to run 8 years from 1978-1986.

I was thinking of Willis and Arnold’s turn of fortunes today as I read Isaiah 49:1-13. In these verses (the second of Isaiah’s “Servant Songs” foretelling the role of the Messiah), Isaiah records a conversation between God the Father and God the Son regarding Jesus’ work on the earth. 700 years before His Bethlehem birth, Jesus heard from God the Father as recorded in Isaiah 49:6, “You (Jesus) will do more than restore the people of Israel to Me (God the Father). I will make You a light to the Gentiles, and You will bring My salvation to the ends of the earth.” This was a huge statement to bacon eaters everywhere. God’s plan in Christ was to save more than just a faithful Jewish remnant . . . the plan was to save people from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

At times, when we read the Old Testament and we see the emphasis God had on the Jewish nation as God’s chosen people, we are tempted to think that God only speaks Hebrew. We are tempted to think that we non-Jewish followers of Christ are merely an afterthought to God’s actual plan. Nothing could be further from the truth. God’s relationship with Israel was always to serve as an object lesson so that the world might know the goodness of our God. The plan all along was for both Gentiles and Jews to be saved. Isaiah 49 tells us as much.

Personally, this truth means that a person of non-Jewish ethnicity (like myself) gets to be like Arnold or Willis . . . spiritually orphaned by sin and death but chosen by God to be adopted as a son into His family. All who call on the name of Christ for salvation move from the manger to a mansion because of His gracious and loving choice. We were a part of His plan all along. That is why Isaiah says in Isaiah 49:13, “Sing for joy, O heavens! Rejoice, O earth! Burst into song, O mountains! for the Lord has comforted His people and will have compassion on them in their sorrow.”

This Christmas there is joy in the world because the Lord has come for Moses AND you and me. It was no accident that by the different strokes Christ received on the cross, Jew and Gentile could both receive salvation.

December 7

Hit the Shower

Isaiah 53

Guys don't really like showers. By that, I don't mean that guys don't like to be clean (though some may anecdotally argue my point here). I mean that guys don't like parties called showers . . . you know: baby showers, wedding showers, etc. Most speculate that guys don't like showers. The theory goes that guys don't like to theme decorate or shop, two things that the average "shower" drenches all comers with. I don't buy this line of reasoning though. I think that guys like stuff, so the desire for stuff probably trumps guys reticence to shower. I think the metaphor of the shower-less guy stinks. Someone came up with this notion several years ago, and have figured out how to deduct man-card points for anyone who ever thinks of attending a party where gifts are exchanged.

I have been the recipient of a few showers in my life. When my wife and I got married, several family friends threw showers for us. When our son was born, I attended a baby shower in his honor. They were all great parties, and ended up blessing our family in huge ways. We eat dinner each night on plates we got at wedding showers years ago. Being showered with gifts by friends is a real blessing.

Now, knowing my experience with showers, it comes quite shocking that the birth of the Savior of the world brought only one baby shower . . . a personal delivery of three gifts by the Magi from the East. These three gifts are the most famous gifts to Jesus at His birth not because they are the most valuable, but because they are the **ONLY ONES MENTIONED IN SCRIPTURE**. Have you ever thought of that? We are so familiar with the story of Jesus birth that we sometimes fail to realize that though this event would become famous **AFTER** the resurrection of Christ, it was mostly obscure during the season in which Christ was born. He was born in a stable, not in a palace. He was born in front of His parents, not on Satellite television. His birth was honored by throngs of angels . . . but not people. The first Christmas was incredibly important, but mostly obscure. If anyone deserved to be showered with gifts at their birth, it was Jesus Christ, yet only three gifts arrived.

Knowing this, it helps us to understand more the prophecy concerning Jesus from Isaiah 53:2-3 which says, "He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief and as One from whom men hide their faces. He was despised and we esteemed Him not." Of course this passage is ultimately referring to the crucifixion of Christ, but it is also helpful for us to understand just how much praise Jesus did **NOT** get during His earthly life. He lived 30 years of virtual obscurity . . . even locally. The humility and patience of Jesus are powerful when viewed through this lens.

Jesus could have shown His glory fully at every point in His life, but He chose to live the simple life of a carpenter instead. He could have been incarnate only as an adult (i.e. arrive in Bethlehem as an adult instead of an infant), but He instead chose to fully identify with the human experience. He could have demanded being showered with praise and presents during His life, but He chose not to, inviting people to choose for themselves if they would trust in Him.

Think about that the next time you feel slighted, marginalized, irrelevant, or unimportant. Whether you are a man or a woman, you don't have to be showered with praise, presents, or power in order to be loved by Him.

December 8

A Team Game

Micah 5

Football is the ultimate team game. It takes 11 men on each down to make a play work. This sounds like coach-speak, but it is actually gospel truth. For instance, if the quarterback drops back to throw a deep pass to the wide receiver, everyone must do their part for the play to work. If any member of the offensive line does not make their block, the quarterback does not have time to throw the pass. If the running back does not pick up the blitzing linebacker, the quarterback will be sacked. If the other wide receivers (the ones not being thrown the ball) do not run their routes, the intended receiver will be double-covered. If the quarterback does not throw the ball on target the receiver does not have a chance to catch it. If the receiver does not catch the ball, the play is a failure. Everyone must do his job for a single play to work. This makes football the ultimate team game.

Even when a play is not “about them” everyone must do their part in order for the play to work. This is different than other sports. On a baseball team, the right fielder does nothing on a routine ground ball to the short stop. On a basketball team (while a very good team game), a great player can score lots of points playing a “one-on-one” kind of game. Only in football must everyone participate in order for the play to work.

I was thinking about this today as I was reflecting on the Christmas story . . . particularly the part of Jesus being born in Bethlehem. The fact that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem was promised by God through the prophet Micah in Micah 5:2, “But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah. From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.” In light of our analogy here, Micah 5:2 is like a play that God was calling in the “huddle” with Israel 700 years before the birth of Christ. As Israel broke the huddle though, and prepared for the play, it would take millions of people in motion to pull off this “play” for the team.

Mary and Joseph did not live in Bethlehem. They lived in Nazareth. Nazareth was a small town about 70 miles from Bethlehem. In a world without planes, trains, or automobiles, it was certainly not likely that Mary would give birth in Bethlehem. So, in order for God’s play to unfold, everyone had to do his or her part to get Mary to Bethlehem. Luke 2:1 tells us that Caesar Augustus issued a decree for a census to be taken. In order for all the people who lived in the Roman Empire to be counted, Caesar wanted everyone to travel to their ancestral home. While Caesar did not do this intending to see the Messiah born in the proper town, God used Caesar’s decree to properly execute His play. Imagine the scene . . . in order to get Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem (their ancestral home) at the time of Jesus birth, the decree for the census had to be issued at just the right time and would mandate that 4.2 million people would

travel to their home towns to be counted. (4.2 million is the count Caesar took from this census).

Think about that for a moment. 4.2 million people probably wondered why they were traveling . . . why they needed to be counted. Even though the “ball” was not coming to them, they were playing an important part in the unfolding of God’s play.

As I ponder the significance of the 4.2 million people moving around the Mediterranean in response to Caesar’s decree, I am reminded that at times the events of my life will unfold in ways that have me playing a significant part in God’s plan, but will not feature me “getting the ball.” We sometimes ask questions like “Why do I have this job?” “What was that all about?” “What was the point of that relationship/conversation/etc.?” Usually when we ask these questions we ask them because we assume that we will be featured in the “play.” In reality, we are always playing a part in God’s purposes, though sometimes we are not the ones getting the “ball.” From Bethlehem we see that the unfolding of God’s will is ultimately a team experience.

December 9

The Sound of Silence

Malachi to Matthew

January 1, 1611. This date is roughly 400 years ago. At that time, the original pilgrims were still a decade away from coming to the “new land” and settling Plymouth Bay Colony. 100% of the United States history beyond that of the Native Americans was yet to be written. On January 1, 1611, the King James Bible had not even gone to print yet! Think of all the history and all the changes the past 400 years have brought!

400 years is a very long time. Placing an actual date to 400 years and counting back adds needed perspective to this denomination of time. From a Biblical perspective, grasping how long 400 years is really helps us better understand the Christmas story. What do I mean by this?

The last Old Testament book written was the book of Malachi. It was written after the nation of Israel returned from exile in foreign lands in the early 400's BC. After God spoke to His people through Malachi, He went silent for the next 400 years. After speaking regularly through prophets in every generation from Abraham to Malachi, 400 years of silence transpire in what is known as the “inter-testamental” period of time (the time from the end of the Old Testament books to the beginning of the New Testament). When you hear that there were 400 years of silence you sometimes fail to grasp just how long a period of time that was. Looking back 400 years from today helps us realize how many generations of people lived their lives wondering if God had abandoned them. Did His silence mean that He was no longer going to bring His Messiah to them to deliver them from their sins? Did His silence mean that something had changed regarding God's promises?

Now, many reading this may want to argue that it has been 2000 years since ANY Scripture has been written. The recent silence from God may seem far more dramatic than the inter-testamental period. This simple observation, however, is unfounded. The Old Testament POINTED to the coming of Christ, and God had reaffirmed His promises to each generation through new generations of prophets up to the time of Malachi. The silence actually indicated a change that could have been interpreted as a NEGATIVE change. Since Jesus actually came in the New Testament time as a full revelation of God's plan, there now is no longer a need for Scripture to continue to be written. God has been consistent in ceasing His prophetic communication in the writing of Scripture since the end of the first century. The lack of new Scripture today is a POSITIVE, reminding us that Christ is the final and full revelation of all we really need to know.

Now, understanding this, we should be shockingly surprised (as Mary was) when the Angel shows up in Mary's room and tells her that she will miraculously conceive a Son who will be the Savior of the world. We should be startled by the whisper of the Angel to Zechariah in the Temple that he will have a son who will prepare the way for the Lord.

We should be startled at these words because they broke a period of prolonged silence. 400 years of silence, broken with a renewed promise of a Savior. What is particularly great about when God broke the silence is that He broke it saying that the Savior was going to come in 9 months!!! Generations had strained to see the day when Messiah would come, now it was only three trimesters from delivery.

Many times when we read the Christmas story, we read it thinking of Mary or Joseph . . . Zechariah or Elizabeth. Today as you think about this story, think about it from a 400 year perspective. God broke the silence with fantastic good news.

Do you feel like you are living in an era of “silence” from the Lord today? Do you wonder if He has forgotten you because you have not “heard” from Him in a while? This Christmas listen closely. God broke the silence at the birth of Christ and He wants to whisper to us through this story today, reminding us of His great love for us.

December 10

Hark, the Herald Angels Sing!

When the story of 18th century western church history is told, there are three names that simply must be included: John and Charles Wesley and George Whitfield.

Growing up within the Church of England, these three men each came to a genuine faith in Christ later in life. After their conversions, these men followed Christ in a radical way, spreading the knowledge of Christ to the common people. These three men were some of the early fathers of American Evangelicalism because they had an interest in taking the Gospel of Jesus Christ to people wherever they were. Instead of staying inside large stone cathedrals, these men took to the open air, holding outdoor revival meetings and church services where thousands were in attendance. In a day before microphones and high tech audio/visual equipment, Whitfield alone preached to as many as 30,000 people in one audience!

Given their common threads, it is not a surprise that these men were friends and had a great deal of respect for each other's ministry, even though they had some theological differences. Charles Wesley wrote over 7,500 hymns in his lifetime. Some of these hymns were incorporated into Whitfield's open air revival meetings. One of Wesley's hymns that Whitfield used was a hymn Wesley titled, "Hark, How the Welkin Rings!" (The word "welkin" means "vault of heavens".) This song had the same tune as another famous Wesley hymn, "Christ the Lord is Risen Today!" Whitfield loved the song, but did not care for the opening line. He changed the opening line to further connect this song with the birth of Christ. His new first line was the now famous, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing!" Whitfield made this change, but never asked his friend Wesley for permission to do so. This outraged Wesley. Even after Whitfield's version grew in popularity and became very well know, Wesley refused to acknowledge or sing the Whitfield abridged version of his song. Can you imagine that? The author of one of the most famous Christmas songs ever written never sang it! About 100 years later the tune was changed to the current form by Felix Mendelsson.

What are your Christmas traditions? What do you do every year at Christmas time that you would be very upset if it changed? For some it is the day and time that presents are opened. For others it is the songs that you "should sing" in church or on Christmas Eve. For others it is a particular service (and time) that must be attended or a particular passage of Scripture that must be the text for that service. Whatever it is, there are somethings that just "have to happen" in order for it to be Christmas for you. What happens if your form changes? What happens if you open presents on Christmas day instead of Christmas Eve? What happens if you sing "Manger Throne" instead of "Silent Night"? What happens if the "wrong passage" is preached at the Christmas service? If these changes happen, will you refuse to sing?

May we learn something from Wesley's folly. May we learn that most of the traditions we embrace today have evolved over time. Santa Claus has not always been at the

mall, Candles weren't always a part of Christmas Eve services, and at one time, it was the "Welkin," not the "Herald Angels" that were ringing/singing. At one time, maybe the greatest Christmas hymn in existence today sounded like an Easter song to our modern ear. The key is not the form, but the spirit behind it. Whitfield and Mendelssohn improved Wesley's hymn. Is it possible that God might be using some of the changes in your Christmas worship celebrations to increase your soul's rejoicing this season? Don't refuse to sing. Join the angel chorus and worship Christ the new born King!

I have attached below the original lyrics of Wesley's hymn, "Hark How the Welkin Rings!"

"Hark, how all the welkin rings,

"Glory to the King of kings;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!"

Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
Universal nature say,
"Christ the Lord is born to-day!"

Christ, by highest Heaven ador'd,
Christ, the everlasting Lord:
Late in time behold him come,
Offspring of a Virgin's womb!

Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see,
Hail the incarnate deity!
Pleased as man with men to appear,
Jesus! Our Immanuel here!

Hail, the heavenly Prince of Peace!
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
Risen with healing in his wings.

Mild He lays his glory by,
Born that man no more may die;
Born to raise the sons of earth;
Born to give them second birth.

Come, Desire of nations, come,
Fix in us thy humble home;
Rise, the woman's conquering seed,
Bruise in us the serpent's head.

Now display thy saving power,
Ruined nature now restore;
Now in mystic union join
Thine to ours, and ours to thine.

Adam's likeness, Lord, efface;
Stamp Thy image in its place.
Second Adam from above,
Reinstate us in thy love.

Let us Thee, though lost, regain,
Thee, the life, the inner Man:
O! to all thyself impart,
Form'd in each believing heart."

December 11

O Holy Night

In 1847, a French Catholic Priest commissioned a Christmas poem from local winemaker Placide Cappeau de Roquemaure. This local poet penned the words to “O Holy Night” while traveling to Paris. After writing the poem, Cappeau believed these verses would do well set to music. Not being a musician, Cappeau approached noted composer Adolphe-Charles Adam to add music to his message. After Adam added song to Cappeau’s words, the finished product was first sung by the choir at the Christmas Eve Mass in 1847. The song quickly became popular and was sung all over France. After time, however, Cappeau left the Catholic Church to become a socialist. Adam (the song’s composer) was actually Jewish and did not believe that Jesus was the Son of God. Once the church saw the exodus of Cappeau and learned of Adam’s religious beliefs, they banned the song from being sung in churches. In fact, the church’s official stance on the song was that it embodied a “total absence of the spirit of true religion.”

Because this song was blackballed in its home country, it may have never reappeared had it not been for American John Sullivan Dwight who heard the song and fell in love with it. On top of the fact that Dwight loved the total message of the song, he had a special affinity for the third verse that says of Jesus, “Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother, and in His name all oppression shall cease.” Dwight was an abolitionist and found in Cappeau’s words a hymn that resonated deep within his soul. Dwight translated the song into English and on the verge of the United States Civil War, introduced the song to American Churches. The song gained quick acceptance in the North due to its anti-slavery message. Once inside the American Church, the song exploded around the world and is one of the most famous Christmas songs today. Eventually, the French Catholic Church reintroduced the song because of the deep love people had for it.

As I reflect on this story today, I am reminded of a couple of interesting passages of Scripture. In Philippians 1:15-18 the Apostle Paul says, “It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.” Also, Mark 9:38-40 says, “‘Teacher,’ said John, ‘we saw a man driving out demons in Your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.’ ‘Do not stop him,’ Jesus said. ‘No one who does a miracle in My name can in the next moment say anything bad about Me, for whoever is not against us is for us.’” These two passages of Scripture remind me that God does not use perfect people to accomplish His plans. In fact, He does not always even use believing people to accomplish His plans. God can call forth praise for Himself from any vessel He chooses to use. In the case of “O Holy

Night,” God used a Socialist French poet and a Jewish composer to inspire praise and worship among His people. Now THAT is sovereignty.

Sometimes we begin to think that God only chooses those with the most pristine resumes to accomplish His plans, but the fact is that God will do His work through whoever He chooses to use. This is good news for those of us with less than perfect resumes (read: all of us). If God can call forth praise from those who reject Him, how much more can He use those of us who (though imperfect) are looking to Him for direction and leaning on His grace for daily strength! If you are a believer in Christ rejoice this Christmas as you hear “O Holy Night” sung. On top of the great truth this song puts forth, the story behind it reminds us of God’s gracious intentions of using fallen people to accomplish His grandest plans.

One last note about this great Christmas song . . . in 1906, Chemist Reginald Fessenden (working with Thomas Edison) turned on a microphone on Christmas Eve and spoke into it, reading the Christmas story from Luke 2. After reading the story, Fessenden picked up his violin and played the hymn “O Holy Night” into that mic. What makes this significant was that Fessenden’s performance was the first ever broadcast of music over the new technology of radio. Telegraph operators on ships and in newspaper offices around the country, instead of hearing their usual codes of clicks and pops, heard clearly the words of the Bible and the beautiful tune of Cappeau and Adam. If you ever get asked the trivia question, “What was the first song played on radio,” you now know the answer! From its very beginning, radio (like the printing press before it) was being used to spread the knowledge of Christ to all the people!

O holy night! The stars are brightly shining,
It is the night of the dear Saviour’s birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.
Fall on your knees! Oh, hear the angel voices!
O night divine, the night when Christ was born;
O night, O holy night, O night divine!
O night, O holy night, O night divine!

Led by the light of faith serenely beaming,
With glowing hearts by His cradle we stand.
So led by light of a star sweetly gleaming,
Here came the wise men from Orient land.
The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger;
In all our trials born to be our friend.
He knows our need, to our weakness is no stranger,
Behold your King! Before him lowly bend!
Behold your King! Before him lowly bend!

Truly He taught us to love one another,
His law is love and His gospel is peace.
Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother.
And in his name all oppression shall cease.
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we,
Let all within us praise His holy name.
Christ is the Lord! O praise His name forever,
His power and glory ever more proclaim!
His power and glory ever more proclaim!

December 12

O Come All Ye Faithful

In the 1700's, England had a set of 13 colonies in a "New Land" but they did not have room for the Catholic Church in their country. This led to many English people who were practicing Catholics, fleeing the country to pursue their religious liberty elsewhere. As time wore on, however, many within England became sympathetic to the cause of the Catholic Church, and word was beginning to spread throughout Europe calling all English Catholics home. Part of the marketing campaign to attract English Catholics to return to their home country included the writing of several masses that encouraged their return. Included in one of these masses was a hymn (written in Latin) by John Francis Wade, "O Come All Ye Faithful." In the margins of the mass script, beside the song lyrics, in Wade's own handwriting, was a plea for the faithful Catholics of English descent to return to their mother land. Therefore, the song was originally written to inspire English Catholics gathering together around Christ in England by drawing from imagery of the gathering of the faithful around the manger in Bethlehem.

After many Catholics returned to England (and brought this mass with them), the popularity of this hymn began to grow outside the circles of the Catholic Church. In 1841 the Duke of Leeds had the song translated into English and included in a choral arrangement he was preparing for the Church of England. That translation is the song we still sing today.

Though we are not English Catholics of the 18th century, this song still holds great truth for us. In fact, understanding the historical context of the song should encourage believers today. Increasingly, I have heard people crying out in distress over the wandering of our country away from Biblical values. As we sing this song this season may we all be reminded that the faithful can come to Christ any place, any time, regardless of the political setting. O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!

"O come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem
Come and behold Him, born the King of angels!
O Come Let us Adore Him! O Come Let us Adore Him!
O Come Let us Adore Him, Christ the Lord!

God of God, Light of Light;
Lo, He abhors not the Virgin's womb;
Very God, begotten, not created
O Come Let us Adore Him! O Come Let us Adore Him!
O Come Let us Adore Him, Christ the Lord!

Sing choirs of angels, sing in exaltation
O sing, all ye citizens of heaven above

Glory to God, all glory in the highest!
O Come Let us Adore Him! O Come Let us Adore Him!
O Come Let us Adore Him, Christ the Lord!

See how the shepherds, summoned to His cradle,
Leaving their flocks, draw nigh to gaze;
We too will thither bend our joyful footsteps;
O Come Let us Adore Him! O Come Let us Adore Him!
O Come Let us Adore Him, Christ the Lord!

Lo! star led chieftains, Magi, Christ adoring,
Offer Him incense, gold, and myrrh;
We to the Christ Child bring our hearts' oblations.
O Come Let us Adore Him! O Come Let us Adore Him!
O Come Let us Adore Him, Christ the Lord!

Child, for us sinners poor and in the manger,
We would embrace Thee, with love and awe;
Who would not love Thee, loving us so dearly?
O Come Let us Adore Him! O Come Let us Adore Him!
O Come Let us Adore Him, Christ the Lord!

Yea, Lord, we greet Thee; born this happy morning
Jesus to Thee be all glory given
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing!
O Come Let us Adore Him! O Come Let us Adore Him!
O Come Let us Adore Him, Christ the Lord!"

December 13

O Come, O Come Emmanuel

“O Come, O come Emmanuel” is a Latin hymn from the 12th century that was translated into English in the 1800’s. The Hymn focuses on the nation of Israel’s hope and expectation that their Messiah would soon come. The term “Emmanuel” means “God with us” and highlights the fact that “As for us, the nearness of God is our good (Psalm 73:28).” This Hymn is inspired by the Messianic portions of the book of Isaiah, whose prophecies remind us that God had planned and promised to send the Messiah centuries before Jesus birth. Hundreds of years before the stable in Bethlehem held a manger throne, Isaiah prophesied God’s promise, “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Emmanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)”

As you read the text of this hymn today, meditate on the different names of Jesus mentioned in the song. He is called Emmanuel (God with us), Son of God (fully God), Dayspring (the Son who shines brightly in the world dawning a new day), Wisdom from on High (He is the Way, the TRUTH, and the Life), and Desire of Nations (one day, people from every nation, tribe, and tongue will bow before Him). At Christmas we are celebrating THIS GREAT GOD!! Praise Him!

O come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear
Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee O Israel!

O come, Thou Dayspring come and cheer, our spirits by Thine advent here.
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death’s dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee O Israel!

O come, Thou Wisdom from on high, and order all things, far and nigh.
To us the path of knowledge show, and cause us in her ways to go.
Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee O Israel!

O come, Desire of nations bind all peoples in one heart and mind.
Bid envy, strife and quarrels cease, fill all the world with heaven’s peace.
Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee O Israel!

December 14

Manger Throne

I love how our house looks at Christmas time. Lots of meaningful decorations fill each room. In our house, we have the great blessing of three nativity scenes. These nativity scenes are all different, yet the same. Each set has different characteristics.

One set is a “Willow Tree” nativity. The characters have no faces, but their long carved bodies evoke emotion like an impressionist painting. I love the simplicity of this set.

A second set is a “Precious Moments” nativity. This set was a gift to my wife from her parents as she was growing up . . . a different piece every year. Because of that history, this set is a yearly reminder of the “good deposit” Kimberly’s family gave her by telling her the truth about Jesus.

The third set is a “Little People” nativity set that we acquired when our son was only a couple of years old. It allowed our two year old to play with the pieces in an interactive way, and learn the Christmas story (or at least his version of the Christmas story). A short time after he got this nativity set, he started to tell me the Christmas story using the angel and Mary. The angel came to Mary’s house and told her (in his words), “Good news about Jesus. He came to take away our badness.” I was so proud. Then the angel tackled Mary. We asked him what Mary said to the angel, and he said, “Thank you for coming to my house and tackling me.” I think that last twist must have come from a Dan Brown novel.

For all the differences between these three nativities, there is one striking similarity. They all have Jesus as a baby, asleep in a horse trough full of hay. As I look at that each year, I am awestruck again by the fact that the God of the universe would humble Himself to THAT point. The independent God coming as a dependent baby. The One who sits at the right hand of the Father, lying in a cow’s cafeteria. This just seems so drastic . . . and so odd. However, there is a plan in it all. Jesus comes as a baby to fully identify with our experience (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus came in a mortal Body so that He might be able to die to bring immortality to His people (Romans 5:8). The baby in the manger looks out of place until we place it in context.

In the Old Testament, the presence of God hovered over the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. First this was in the Tabernacle, then it was in the Temple. The Holy of Holies was a place of great grandeur and formality. Because of this, it is surprising to find the Savior in the manger in the Christmas story. I think it is possible that Jesus was born in the stall to announce to the world in a very definitive way that the presence of God would not reside behind a curtain any longer. The Spirit of God was moving away from a super-protected room inside the Temple that only a few people would ever see, to a public location where lowly Shepherds and foreigners could visit. This move of the presence of God from private to the public, helps set the stage for the Spirit of God

taking up residence in the hearts and lives of those who believe in Jesus Christ today.
The same God who lay in the manger, now resides within us!

This awesome truth is spoken of in today's song for reflection, Julie Miller's "Manger Throne" (recorded by Third Day with Derri Daughtery and Julie Miller on 2002's "City on a Hill: It's Christmastime" album). May you be reminded of God's residence in your life each time you see the baby in the manger in a nativity scene this Christmas. "Our heart is a home for God's Own Son!"

"What kind of King would leave His throne in heaven
to make this earth His home?
While men seek fame and great renowned, in loneliness our King comes down.
Jesus, Jesus precious One
How we thank You that You've come
Jesus, Jesus precious One
A manger throne for God's own Son

You left the sound of angels praise to come for men with unkind ways
And by this baby's helplessness, the power of nations is laid to rest.
Jesus, Jesus precious One
How we thank You that You've come
Jesus, Jesus precious One
A manger throne for God's own Son

What kind of King would come so small from glory to a humble stall
That dirty manger is my heart too. I'll make it a royal throne for You.
Jesus, Jesus precious One
How we thank You that You've come
Jesus, Jesus precious One
A manger throne for God's own Son

My heart is a throne for God's own Son."

December 15

O Little Town of Bethlehem

In 1868, Episcopalian Pastor Phillip Brooks needed a song for the kids to sing at a Christmas service at his church. Not satisfied with any other songs he had heard, Brooks decided to write a song himself. Inspired by a Christmas Eve service Brooks had attended in Bethlehem during a Holy Land trip three years prior, Brooks sat down and wrote the song, "O Little Town of Bethlehem." Not only did the children in his church sing this song in their Christmas program, but millions more continue to sing the song today, some 150 years later. Think about that for a moment. This Philadelphia Pastor has a top hit that has lasted 15 decades! Knowing that best sellers in the iTunes music store top the charts for only about 15 days and even the best of our contemporary praise and worship songs might only persist for about 15 years, Brooks song is amazingly durable. What is it about this song that has allowed it to endure?

I think the message of this hymn is very powerful. I have always been struck by the phrase at the end of the first verse, "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight." The idea that Jesus Christ comforts our deepest fears and provides for us our greatest hope is an amazingly powerful message! As I ponder the significance of this phrase, I am reminded of 1 Peter 1:8-9, "Though you have not seen Him, you love Him; and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls." Our deepest fear is death. Our greatest hope is eternal life in fellowship with our Creator, the salvation of our souls. Truly, in Christ the hopes and fears of all the years are met.

As you read the words to this hymn today (and as you sing this song many times in the days to come) may you be reminded of the comfort and hope Jesus Christ provides to you and me.

"O Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight.

For Christ is born of Mary, and gathered all above,
While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of won-d'ring love,
O morning stars together proclaim the holy birth!
And praises sing to God the King, and peace to men on earth.

How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heav'n.
No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still the dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem! Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in; be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel.”

December 16

The First Noel

In 1833 William Sandys wrote the hymn, "The First Noel." The song details the story of Jesus birth, with each verse of the hymn telling a new part of the story, separated by the chorus refrain, "Noel! Born is the King of Israel!" The word "Noel" is a French word for Christmas that comes from Latin roots that mean "New birth." Therefore, the song is ultimately about how the "new birth" of Jesus in Bethlehem's stable leads to the New Birth of the people of God in Christ.

2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" Again Jesus tells Nicodemus in John 3:3-8, "I [Jesus] tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.' 'How can a man be born when he is old?' Nicodemus asked. 'Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!' Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sounds, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.'" These verses talk about the new birth that believers in Jesus Christ have. A Christians "second birth" occurs because in Christ, their full identity has changed. The core identity of who they were before Christ was an "object of wrath" before a Holy God. After trusting in Christ for the forgiveness of their sins, the Christian's core identity is as a child of God . . . an heir according to His promise.

What this means is that believers in Christ celebrate the first birth of Jesus because it provides for them their new birth into the family of God. That is why the sixth verse of this hymn has such power to me. It begins, "Let us all with one accord . . ." Since this song has been sung for 180 years now, our voices join the "one accord" with literally millions who have sung this very song. The verse concludes with declaring the reason for our cross-generational unity, "With His (Jesus) Blood mankind hath bought." Because of the blood of Jesus Christ, all believers now have a second, "new" birth. With this in mind, the chorus sounds off like a 1930's newspaper salesman shouting, "Extra, Extra, read all about it!" The chorus shouts out, "New birth! New birth! New birth! New birth! Born is the One who brings us new birth!

Think about that as you reflect on the lyrics of this great Christmas hymn today.

"The First Noel, the angel did say,
was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay;
In fields where they lay keeping their sheep,
on a cold winter's night that was so deep.
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel Born is the King of Israel!

They looked up and saw a star
shining in the east, beyond them far
And to the earth it gave great light,
and so it continued both day and night.
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel Born is the King of Israel!

And by the light of that same star
three wise men came from country far;
To seek for a king was their intent,
and to follow the star wherever it went.
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel Born is the King of Israel!

This star drew nigh to the northwest,
o'er Bethlehem it took its rest,
And there it did both stop and stay,
right over the place where Jesus lay.
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel Born is the King of Israel!

Then entered in those wise men three,
full reverently upon their knee,
And offered there in His presence
their gold, and myrrh, and frankincense.
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel Born is the King of Israel!

Then let us all with one accord
sing praises to our heavenly Lord,
That hath made heaven and earth of naught,
and with His blood mankind hath bought.
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel Born is the King of Israel!"

December 17

Wandering Around the Mall

One day, Kimberly and I went Christmas shopping. Faced with a long list of “to dos” that needed to get done, I took a day of vacation and we headed out in the All Wheel Drive sleigh trying to fill it with presents to deliver on Christmas morning.

As we worked our way around the malls looking to make purchases, we were guided by a list of names of people we were buying for. On this list were friends and family, and because they are so dear to us, the opportunity to bless them with a gift is always a real privilege. The problem, however, was what kind of a gift do you bless them with? Moments like this are a great object lesson for understanding the need for a budget. If I were to let my love for the people on my list dictate what I bought them, I would never be able to pay off the balance of the bills! I simply have more love in my heart for the people on that Christmas list than I have money in my bank account — or even than I WILL have in my bank account if I did not spend a cent between now and when Jesus returns. Therefore, I could not determine what to give them based on how much I love them, because I do not have a matching resource to offer to the scope of my love.

A second way I could determine what to give them would be to play the principle of reciprocity. By this, I mean that I would try to give a gift back to someone of equal value to what they have given me. This principle, however, is also flawed. I can never pay back my parents (for instance) for all they have done for me. No sweater (I don't care which logo is on it) can ever equal sitting through little league games in 40 degree weather or caring for me when I was sick or providing love, food, and shelter for me throughout my growing up days. I simply will never be able to pay back what has been given to me — I have just received so much.

I was thinking about all as we shopped, and it reminded me of a deep spiritual truth that impacts my understanding of God's love for me and my response to that love towards Him.

First of all, though our budget always constrains our ability to give, it never constrains God. God is the only One anywhere who has no budget. Even Bill Gates and Warren Buffett have their limits, but God does not. He has everything at His disposal, so He never tires at ways to demonstrate His love for us. The obvious “big gift” that God gives us each day (including Christmas) is the gift of salvation through His Son Jesus Christ. As Romans 5:8 says, “God demonstrates His own love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” The God who has everything gave His very life so that we might live and know that He loves us. Even beyond that big gift, however, God continues to give to us without a budget. The beauty of nature, the spiritual encouragement of the Body of Christ, tasty food to nourish our bodies, etc. are all evidences of God's gifts to us. He never tires or grows weary in giving to His children. He has all the resources to match the scope of His love for us.

As I was shopping, however, a second thing stood out to me. I cannot practice the principle of reciprocity with God. There is no “sacrifice” that I can make in this life that is of equal value to the gifts God has given to me. No “I’ll go serve you in Africa” claim could ever be the same as all that God has given to me. We cannot pay back to God what He has given us — for we simply have been given too much.

Given these truths, what are we to do? Well, when it comes to understanding how much God loves us, we should stand in awe of the gifts He continues to send our way. What great demonstrations of His budgetless love! Stop right now and thank Him for His indescribable gifts. Second, stop trying to pay God back for His gifts to us, for you can never give enough. This does not mean that we do not serve Him or worship Him or love Him or give back to Him. We absolutely do that. Just as I still bought presents for family and friends that day as reminders of my love for them, we still give to the Lord out of our love for Him . . . we just don’t do it to settle a score. This frees us up and purifies our motives in responding to His gifts!

As you take a day or two to shop this December, may the gifts you purchase remind you of the gifts we have received from Him that we can never repay.

December 18

Marketing the Manger

From a secular, United States culture perspective, Christmas is a marketers dreamland. Beginning sometime in mid-October or early November, marketers begin their work to convince us what we “need” this holiday season. Our desire to be festive, drives us to ask the question, “What trinket, toy, bling, or do-dad really says ‘I love you’ most effectively?” Marketers representing virtually every product begin a targeted blitz to get the word out for their product. After two months of being worn down by the marketing machine, we all realize NEEDS, we never knew we had, so we go out to purchase the product.

Most people have negative views of marketing because they have had a bad experience with it. Virtually all of us have bought (at some point) what marketers have been selling. Many times, we thought we were buying happiness, but instead we were just buying a bill of goods. In the end, it is amazing how few of the “needs” marketers sell that we actually have.

The very first Christmas gift ever given was given by our Heavenly Father to mankind. The gift was the baby Jesus, born in Bethlehem. When God gave this gift to men and women, He also launched a “marketing campaign” to announce His arrival. Angels appeared in the sky to speak to “certain poor shepherds in fields where they lay,” advertising the birth of Jesus and telling them why it was Good News for them. About the same time that the Father sent His Angels to talk to the shepherds, He also placed a marquee in the sky, illuminating the way to the Savior for those in the East. This star would be a cosmic press release announcing His coming to a set of gift-bearing star gazers. On the night of Christ’s birth, God launched a media blitz to remind the people of their need and illustrate how Jesus was the One who could bring them joy.

Now, because of our past experience with marketers, the language I used above might have made you furrow your brow. It seems rather crude and insincere to think of God’s announcements in this way. In some respects, I agree with you, and it certainly is not my intention to dumb down Advent as a result. However, I think it is important for us to think through the illustration provided above, because marketing a product that is actually necessary is not self-serving, but loving.

Since the needs Christ addresses are not imagined but actual, and since Jesus provision delivers all it promises and does not disappoint . . . the marketing of the coming of Christ is a blessed thing! Can you imagine if someone came up with the cure for cancer but never told anyone about it? That would be crazy. You would want them to market that cure because its provision is so important and its need is so real. In the same way, the arrival of the Savior of the world is not a truth to keep quiet, but something that should be shouted from the mountaintops. God did that through the media blitz on the night Christ was born.

Think about that this year as you consider what God wants you to do with the good news that the baby in Bethlehem is the One who saves you from your sins. God does not want you to conceal that information . . . He wants you to be a part of His marketing campaign, spreading the good news to all who you interact with. He began this campaign on the first Christmas, and is continuing it through us today.

December 19

A Targeted Piece of Communication

I still remember the morning when our son was born. It was truly an event to celebrate! After 11 years of marriage, our family had grown from two to three, and joy filled our hearts. When Josh was born, the news was so great that we could not keep it to ourselves . . . we had to get the word out. We made phone calls, sent birth announcements, and even had friends decorate our front lawn, all announcing the arrival of this precious newborn!

As I think back on how we announced Josh's birth, however, I am mindful of the fact that we were quite focused in our announcement. The waves of people we informed were customized to our situation. We did not take out an ad in the "Oklahoman" newspaper, or notify ABC News. Instead, we contacted friends and family in a very targeted way.

In a similar way, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, God the Father could not keep the news to Himself. After thousands of years of relating to His creation, His one son had now taken on flesh and entered the world. The Father was so overjoyed, He began sending birth announcements to the world. He had Angels sing to shepherds and He placed a star in the sky for the Magi. Far more than just placing an ad in the newspaper, these two announcements were a very targeted form of communication letting us know something of the purpose of Jesus's life.

The shepherds were common, working class people in Jesus' day. These Jewish commoners sleeping in a dirty field receive an announcement to remind the world that Jesus would be more than just the Messiah of the Government Palace or Temple, but that He came to seek and to save all Israel. The shepherds became a figure of the scope of Jesus' saving work in Israel.

The Magi were Gentiles. These foreign star gazers bring gifts to the new born King reminding all that Jesus' rule was not just Jewish. He came to provide a way for any person of any ethnicity to be saved. The Magi (in some senses) represent me (and probably you), a person of non-Jewish origin forever changed by Israel's Prince of Peace.

This Christmas as you set up your nativity set and place the wise men and the shepherds beside the manger, may you remember the targeted communication that brought them there . . . and the blessed hope that means for you and me.

December 20

What Do We Have in Common with the Shepherds?

As Linus (from the Peanuts) would say . . . “Lights please.”

“And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angels said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.’ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests.’ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.’ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.” – Luke 2:8-16

Imagine that you were the shepherds that first Christmas night. You were gathered out on the hillsides surrounding Bethlehem watching your livestock. You were bundled up to keep warm. Having never been a rancher or taken care of any animal larger than my 36 pound Beagle, I have a hard time imagining what they were doing. My best guess is that they were living out the imagery of James Taylor’s classic “Sweet Baby James”:

“Their horse and their cattle are their only companions. They work in the saddle and they sleep in the canyons, waiting for summer, their pastures to change. But as the moon rises they sit by the fire, dreaming about women and glasses of beer. Close their eyes as the doggies retire. They sing out a song which is soft but is clear, as if maybe someone could hear.”

So, as the doggies retire, these shepherds saw an impressive sight. It is hard for me to imagine what shepherds were doing on that Christmas night, but it was even harder for the shepherds to imagine the sight they were getting ready to behold. Out of no where angels appeared in the sky singing a different song (sorry JT). They were singing “Gloria in Excelsis Deo!” For me today, it is easy to imagine the shepherds seeing the angels . . . this is a story I have heard since I was born . . . but for the shepherds, this was a very “out of the ordinary” situation. It was not normal for them to see angels on the hillside, no matter how many glasses of beer they may have been dreaming of. This was a unique event! The angels told the shepherds to go to Bethlehem and see a baby which was the Savior of the world.

The shepherds quickly took off for Bethlehem. Can you imagine the conversation they may have had with each other all the way to the stable? “I wonder what He looks like?”

What could this all mean? I wonder if everyone got this same announcement . . . if so, I wonder how long we will have to wait in line?!?” The questions would have no doubt fired back and forth throughout their walk/run to the manger.

Upon arriving on the scene, however, I am sure the shepherds were probably scratching their heads a bit. There was no line outside the stable filled with government and religious dignitaries and local celebrities. Upon entering the stable, the place smelled more like a barn full of animals than the temple incense. As they approached the baby in the manger, no halo circled His head, and the child was probably crying for His mother to give Him more milk. While the text does not say it, I am guessing that the shepherds were probably wondering (either aloud or to each other) if they had heard the angels correctly. Given the disparity between what they saw and what they had heard, these old school cowboys were placed in a spot that is very familiar to us . . . they were being asked to take God at His Word.

I walk through this story today because many times as I read the Christmas story I think, if only all people could see what the shepherds saw then all people would believe that Jesus is the Savior of the world. To my old way of thinking, the shepherds, based on what they had seen, would not have needed a lot of faith to believe in Jesus as their Savior. The reality, though, is that I still think it took LOTS OF FAITH for the shepherds to believe. In fact, they did not have some of the benefits that we have.

When the shepherds saw Jesus in Bethlehem, they had never heard Jesus preach; they had never seen Him work miracles; they had never imagined the cross; they had never conceived the empty tomb. While they had an angel declaration, there were many facts of the story that they did not have. Based on what they knew, they were asked to take God at His Word (through the angels) and trust Him with the rest. As people today, we have record of His preaching, miracles, death and resurrection. We have the testimony of 2,000 years of Church History, and the corroborating evidence of ancient historians. Given that, however, we have never seen Jesus face to face, and angels have not visited us on hillsides. Based on what we know, however, we are asked to take God at His Word (through the Bible) and trust Him with the rest. When we do this, great blessings come our way.

The Apostle Peter wrote a letter to the first generation of Christians who were growing up in our present reality . . . people who had the testimony of eye-witnesses and the Scripture, but had not physically seen Jesus. To this group (to us) Peter writes in 1 Peter 1:8-9, “Though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” Peter celebrates the faith of those who have not seen Jesus, but still love and believe in Him. This verse of Scripture is talking to you and me!

1 Peter 1:8-9 further indicates that when we believe in Jesus based on what we know (but have not seen), we reap the same benefits that His first followers experienced, “an

inexpressible joy” (“Good news of Great Joy”) and “the salvation of our souls” (“a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord”).

At first glance, it appears that we have very little in common with the shepherds that first Christmas night, but in the end, we have something big in common . . . we are both being asked to embrace by faith that the child born in Bethlehem is our Savior, Christ the Lord. Upon hearing this announcement this Christmas will you run to the manger as the shepherds did? Will you believe in Him based on what you know and trust Him for the things that are harder for you to understand? If you will, then joy and salvation await. Those are two Christmas gifts that are on everyone’s list.

December 21

Houston, This is Our Problem

There is a great scene in the 1995 movie “Apollo 13” where Tom Hanks (playing the part of Astronaut Jim Lovell) sits in his back yard staring at the moon. Lovell was soon to pilot the famed Apollo 13 spaceship all the way to a lunar landing. As he sat in his suburban backyard on terra firm, however, Lovell was thousands of miles away from his destination. While staring at the moon, Lovell closed one eye and extended his hand in front of him. The captain then extended his thumb up into the air. The camera switched to Lovell’s perspective and showed us the captain’s ability to make the moon disappear behind his thumb.

Now, two possible explanations exist regarding Lovell’s disappearing moon technique:

1. The disappearance of the moon was an optical allusion created by the close proximity of the finger to the eyeball. In other words, it was a matter of perspective.
2. Tom Hanks has an extremely large thumb! In other words, his thumb is bigger than the moon.

Of course, option one is the correct answer. It also serves as a helpful reminder to you and me.

In our lives, the problems we face everyday have a very close proximity to our eyes. Medical issues we deal with, relationships that crumble, dreams that are dashed, are so close to where we live that they feel absolutely enormous. In fact, they feel so big, they can even cause us (as we close one eye of perspective under the strain) to not be able to see God in the midst of our difficulty. As we ponder this phenomena, two possibilities exist:

1. We have some really large problems . . . larger than the God who created the universe.
2. We are allowing our current circumstances to create an optical allusion blinding us to the reality of the presence of our God.

This Christmas season, many of you are no doubt dealing with difficulty. In fact, I would hazard a guess that virtually all of us are facing a tough trial of some kind. Because of that, we might have a tendency to miss God this holiday season. Under the stress and strain of life, we squint our eyes and see only that which is attached to our own hands. However, do not be fooled. God is there! The infant born in Bethlehem is not small in stature . . . He is larger than life, and He is our Immanuel – God with us. Because of this, we can sing loudly the chorus to the hymn “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen” -

O Tidings of Comfort and Joy! Comfort and Joy! O Tidings of Comfort and Joy!

We are comforted because God does not disappear from us . . . He has come to us in Christ. We have great joy because when we open both eyes of biblical perspective, we can see that the Lord has been here all along. Remember, Jesus last words to His disciples were, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” This promise opens our eyes to dispel the allusion that we are alone. He is here, and He is bigger than all of the problems and issues we face. We can trust Him with all our problems, big and small.

December 22

Undercover Boss

Have you seen the television show, “Undercover Boss?” Honestly, I haven’t . . . but I am familiar with the concept. On the show, a CEO of a big-time company leaves the boardroom and perks behind to become a common worker in his/her organization. The ensuing drama inevitably leads to some dynamic shift in perspective as the CEO ultimately sees how their executive decisions are effecting front-line employees.

Jesus birth in Bethlehem was not an accident and was not by chance — God had planned it all along, and had been making preparations for Christ’s arrival from the very beginning.

It is a misnomer to think that Jesus came into existence at Bethlehem. The Bible is actually quite clear that from the time that was the beginning, Jesus already WAS. John 1:1 says it this way, “In the beginning was the Word (Jesus) and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” Notice the tense of the verb in this verse. Literally, this verse says, “Imagine the time when there were no people, no planets, and no plants. At that very moment before anything was created, Jesus WAS ALREADY THERE.” In fact, John 1:3 goes on to say that “All things were made through Jesus, and without Jesus was not any thing made that was made.” Jesus created the world. He did not originate in Bethlehem, He created the earth under which Bethlehem sits. Jesus birth is not so much a simple Baby Story, as it is an episode of “Undercover Boss.” The CEO of the universe came to the earth He created “dressed” as a common carpenter’s son.

But why did Jesus humble Himself to come as a baby that first Christmas day? Here is a hint from Hebrews 4:15: “For we do not have a high priest (Jesus) who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” Jesus went through the full human experience so that we could fully know that the King of Kings has a dynamic, personal understanding for what it means to be human. He knows what it means to cry, laugh, and love. He knows what it means to be disappointed, discouraged, and dissed. He knows first hand what it means to spend a sleepless night in prayer, seeking God’s will while asking if “the Cup could pass from Him.” Jesus knows. Because the Boss went Undercover as the carpenter’s son, we can (as Hebrews 4:16 concludes), “with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Therefore, this Christmas season, as you see reminders of the infant in the manger, remember that the baby was the Boss undercover. He has lived our lives, and He understands what we are going through. He is not a disconnected Executive. He is the Sovereign Savior who cares.

December 23

Skipping Christmas

Have you ever stopped to think what life would be like without Christmas? If somehow it were possible to eliminate Christmas from the landscape of human history, what would be the net effect? In answering that question, here is a sort of “un-Christmas” list of the things lost if Christmas never happened:

- Wal Mart would be forced to find other items to fill their shelves from August to December.
- Ebenezer Scrooge would have been able to work every day in December without any “unwanted visitors.”
- The average man would own 10 less “bad ties” and the average woman would own 14 less “decorative items,” the cumulative result of one less yearly gift giving mandate.
- Hallmark would go out of business.
- The Grinch would have to find something else to steal.
- Families would no longer get together for big parties and meals at the end of every December.
- Jimmy Stewart would never have realized that he had a wonderful life.
- We would never have heard anything about flying reindeer or jolly overweight men in red suits giving gifts to those who have been “nice”.

As sad as it would be to give up all that, the loss of Christmas would cost humanity so much more. To fully understand the impact of a Christmasless history, we have to go back and investigate the origin of Christmas and the reason for this season of celebration.

If Christmas were truly lost, the greatest impact on humanity would be that mankind would be separated from God forever. That’s right. Without Christmas, you and I would stand no chance at gaining access to heaven after we die and no opportunity to have a relationship with God in the here and now. If Christmas were skipped historically speaking, humanity would be without hope.

All humanity suffers from a terminal condition known theologically as “sin.” Sin is anything that falls short of God’s perfect standard. Any honest survey of our own lives informs us that there is plenty in our lives that falls short of divine perfection. The problem with the sin in our lives is that it has a consequence. The Bible tells us in Romans 6:23 that the “wages of sin is death.” Therefore, because of our sin, a price of death has to be paid. When Jesus was born into the world 2,000 years ago at the first Christmas, He started His earthly life so that He could end it on the cross. Without physical birth, physical death would be unattainable, so He was born . . . and He was born to die in our place. Your sin (and mine) demands a death, only who will die for your sin? There are only two options. Either you

will pay the price for your own sin and after your physical death be separated from God forever in hell, or you can put your faith in Jesus Christ. If you do, then the death He died in His Passion will pay the penalty for your sins, so that you might spend eternity with God in heaven.

If Christmas never happened, Wal Mart would find another way to sell toys and decorations, people would find other ways to honor each other with gifts, families would gather for celebrations at New Year's, and Hollywood would entertain us at Winter Wonderlands instead of at the North Pole. Life would move on in each of these areas. However, if Christmas never happened, mankind would be without a Savior . . . and there is no other solution to that problem. This year, as you celebrate the holidays, remember the part of Christmas that you cannot afford to skip. Without Christ in your heart, your life and future are without hope.

December 24

Far and Near

In our home we have many Christmas decorations. Along the roof line is a set of lights designed to make Clark Griswold proud. In the front window is the Christmas tree full of memories disguised as ornaments. On the mantle is a Saint Nicholas statue given to us as a wedding gift many years ago. And in three prominent locations, we have nativity scenes. These nativity scenes are my favorite Christmas decorations . . . and I am not just saying that because I am a Pastor.

I truly love these nativity scenes. I always have. As a kid, we had one that set on top of our cabinet television set and I used to love to see those simple figures in a tiny barn surrounded by fake hay. They were a real reminder of the reason for the Christmas season. When Kimberly and I got married, Kimberly brought a very special nativity set forward with her into marriage . . . a gift her mom and dad got for her one piece at a time during her growing up years. It is one of the greatest treasures we own. Each nativity set has a back story of how we came to own it, but also points us to the ultimate reason for why we celebrate Christmas at all — the birth of Jesus.

Each set in our house is arranged similarly. All the pieces are crowded together around the baby Jesus . . . as they should be. After all, Jesus was at the center of it all that first Christmas night. However, what is sometimes lost in nativity sets is how those pieces ARRIVED at the manger scene. Unlike the pieces that adorn our mantles, the participants at the first Advent did not all come out of the same box.

Most nativity scenes include 3 “wise men” or “magi.” Sometimes they are riding on camels and most every time they are carrying three neatly wrapped gifts. They are often painted the same color as the other pieces in the set. In our nativity scenes, they look like they totally belong. However, those familiar with first century Jewish culture would have been quite surprised at their inclusion in the story.

By the first century, the Magi were considered to be more “wise guys” than truly wise. The Magi were an ancient order of star-gazers from Babylon who made a living interpreting dreams and foretelling the future. While there were certainly some honest men among them, their reputation had deteriorated toward “snake oil salesmen” — people who would tell you what you wanted to hear just as long as they could make a buck. Most people did not view them as honorable, and certainly, no one viewed them as godly. Metaphorically, these Gentile heathens were about as far away from the birth of the Jewish Savior as you could possibly be. The songs we sing of them talked about them traveling far to see Jesus, but their distance was even further spiritually than physically. For the wise men to look the part in our nativity sets, we should paint them contrasting colors and place them at the beginning of December in the garage while the rest of the pieces nestle together in the living room.

Yet in God's mercy, those who were far off are brought near by the birth of Jesus.

Further, they were brought near INTENTIONALLY. The Magi made it to the manger at the end of a very long and well thought out plan:

- 1400 years before the birth of Jesus, Balaam issued a prophecy about a star rising for the Messiah. This led Jews to a belief that a real star would one day be a sign that Messiah had arrived.
- 700 years before the birth of Jesus, Micah prophesied that the Messiah would be born in the little town of Bethlehem.
- 600 years before the birth of Jesus, the Jews were taken captive by the Babylonians. The Babylonian foreign policy of the time was to take the best and brightest people of the lands they conquered back to Babylon to work for the improvement of their culture. One of the Jews exported to Babylon in this captivity was Daniel. After demonstrating his ability to interpret dreams, Nebuchadnezzar promoted Daniel to become the overseer of (you guessed it) the Magi – see Daniel 2:48. Daniel would have been in a position to influence this group with his understanding of Jewish prophecy, which would have included the idea that one day the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem and a star would mark his arrival. This story was passed on from generation to generation of Magi until the birth of Jesus.
- At the time of Jesus' birth, God sends a special star in the sky to guide the Magi from Babylon/Persia to Israel to see the newborn king (see Matthew 2:1-12).

For 1,400 years, God had prepared a plan to invite those who were far off to come near and into a relationship with Himself. The night Jesus was born, the star rising in the sky made sense to the Magi because of years of divine planning. The pieces that began in the garage were brought into the living room by God's grace.

Contrast the response of the Gentile Magi with the response of the Jewish religious elite. In Matthew 2:1-12, we see the chief priests and scribes correctly answer the question, "where will the Messiah be born?" BUT, they do not do anything with that knowledge. Though the Savior of the world was right down the road from them, they were too busy or preoccupied to go check Him out! The absurdity of the Jewish leaders' actions might be best reconstructed in script form:

- HEROD: Hey Jewish religious leaders . . . there are some Magi out here who have traveled hundreds of miles over hard terrain following a special brand new star that they believe is leading them to see where the Savior of the world was born. Do you know where the Savior of the world is supposed to be born?
- RELIGIOUS LEADERS: Yeah, the Savior will be born in Bethlehem. The town directly underneath that brand new and bright shining star.
- HEROD: Oh really? Should we go check it out?
- RELIGIOUS LEADERS: Nope. Can you pass the pretzels? We are busy watching some paint dry.

The religious leaders of Israel WERE in the same box as Jesus. They were painted with the same colors. They did look like they belonged in the same room . . . however,

the story of Matthew 2 shows us that sometimes those who look near are really VERY FAR away spiritually.

The contrast between the Magi and the Scribes and Priests is shocking. Those who were far are brought near while those who looked near are revealed to be very far away. The implications of this are extremely important to us at Christmas time.

Are you someone who is currently very far away from the Savior? Someone who is painted a totally different color than most church people? Maybe your life is marked by addiction, abuse, or sensuality. Maybe you are known by your peers for your marginalized business ethics or immoral lifestyle. Maybe you even follow another religion and do not own a Bible. Because of the sin in your life, you appear to be in another zip code compared to Jesus, much less in the same room. This Christmas, are you someone who is far from Him?

Or, are you someone who has grown up inside the church. You were dedicated at First Baptist Church, confirmed in the Catholic Church, and attend a non-denominational church . . . you just want to make sure your bases are covered! Do you have multiple bibles in your house, never miss a History channel documentary about the historical Jesus, and have a set of Jimmy Stewart "It's a Wonderful Life" morals. Do you realize that it is possible to have all these things . . . to look like you belong . . . yet to never really have begun a real relationship with God?

The beauty of the Christmas story is that there is hope . . . for people who are both FAR AND NEAR. If you feel very far away from the Savior today, know that God has been working since the foundation of the world to get the message of salvation to you. The combination of the life of Christ, the preservation of God's Word, the sending of the Holy Spirit, and your network of friends, family, and opportunities have served as a "star" to invite you to the manger this Christmas. The same set of signs have also been shared with those who are "near" the church. The big question is: will you (like the Magi) follow the signs God has given and worship the Savior this year, or will you simply enjoy some pretzels and ignore the real reason for this season (like the Jewish religious leaders)? To those who are far or near, Jesus is the "good news of great joy for all the people." He is our Savior, so come let us adore Him

December 25

Dream Team

Last year, we got to spend a few days in Bartlesville celebrating Christmas with family. We had a great time quoting lines from Elf, opening presents, eating way too much, and getting schooled in Scrabble by my 10 year old niece. In other words, it was a perfect holiday. Since I grew up in Bartlesville, any trip back home brings back all kinds of memories – good and bad. In many ways, I have grown into a different person since I moved away from there 20 years ago. Some of those changes have been positive, some have been negative.

One of the changes that I would consider negative, is my general optimism about life. When I lived in Bartlesville I was much younger, and much more optimistic about my future. Let me give you an example. Back in 1984 when the Olympics were in Los Angeles, I remember dreaming that one day I would be a part of the U.S. Olympic basketball team. I loved playing basketball, and thought I had a “realistic” shot at making the team one day. I actually did the math and thought that I would only have two chances to make the team – 1992 and 1996. I thought I would only have the chance for those two Olympics because I would be in the NBA in 1997, thus making me ineligible for an amateur competition (the Olympics at that time were only open to amateurs). Best I can tell, I wanted to be an Olympian for three reasons:

- A love of America. Putting on the stars and bars and taking on the world was an incredibly motivating idea.
- A love of Basketball. I thought I had the skills to compete.
- A love of Mary Lou Retton. Remember the 1984 games? As an 11 year old, I thought if I could just meet her, I had a chance . . .

Anyway, by the time 1992 rolled around, I no longer lived in Bartlesville . . . and I no longer thought I could be an Olympian. Though the inclusion of the professionals did not help me (thanks a lot Dream Team), the reason I did not make it to the Olympics in 1992 was that I was not good enough to make the team. Time has an incredible ability to kill our dreams, doesn't it? The longer we live, the more we are in tune with our own abilities and liabilities. The more basketball I played against better and better competition, the more I realized that I was not going to be the next Mark Price or even the next Tim Legler. My talent ceiling was 6A sports in Oklahoma. Getting a realistic picture of what I could accomplish caused me to alter my idealistic notion of being a Olympic champion.

What about you? What did you used to think you were going to grow up to be? How has time changed your hopes and dreams?

While it is fun and nostalgic to look back on our dreams of fame, it is tragic when we let the passing of time ebb away at the confidence we have in our spiritual lives. For far too

many of us, we trust God with less with each passing year. This happens because over time we become more and more acquainted with our lack of ability to accomplish things we genuinely desire. Year after year, an illness remains, a relationship deteriorates, a sin struggle lingers, depression clings on. Because of the persistent nature of some of our struggles, and our lack of ability to change them, we begin to trust God with less. As we become aware of our liabilities, we begin to limit our expectations. When we limit our expectations, we shrink our dreams. When we shrink our dreams, we have a tendency to shrink our God as well.

The flaw in all this is that we are attaching our hopes and dreams in the areas that matter most to us only to our own ability. As believers in Jesus Christ, we have a God we can trust for things way larger than that! Think about it: if you are a believer in Jesus, you are trusting God for forgiveness of all your sins. Your ability to be forgiven has nothing to do with your ability to accomplish something yourself, but it has to do with God's ability to do more to you and through you than you could ever do alone! God forgives by sending His Son to die on the cross for us. That is how we are forgiven. However, as believers live out their spiritual lives, we can allow time to cause us to focus more on what we can do and less on what God can do. When we do that, our vision for tomorrow deflates.

This year, this Christmas, I want to encourage you to inflate your vision again. Trust God more this coming year for things bigger than what you can accomplish on your own. I want to encourage you in this direction by looking at the first few words in Luke 2 tonight. At the beginning of the story of Jesus birth, Luke says this, "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus. . ." If you have been a Christian for a long time (or if you have recently watched the "Charlie Brown Christmas" special), no doubt these words are very familiar to you. In fact, the name Caesar Augustus is one of the most famous names of any Caesar in the history of the Roman Empire. But who was Caesar Augustus and why do we know his name today? Answering that question is a very interesting story.

In 63 BC, a young man named Gaius Octavius was born. Octavius was in the Roman army. At that time, a man named Julius Caesar was the dictator of Rome. Julius noticed the great skill and leadership ability that Octavius had. Octavius was Julius's nephew. Julius had no children of his own. Unknown to Octavius, Julius had written into his will to adopt Octavius upon his death, and make him the heir to his fortune and political successor. On the Ides of March, in 44 BC, Julius Caesar was assassinated by political adversaries in the Roman Senate. Octavius was summoned to Rome to hear a reading of his late Uncle's will. In the will, Octavius found out his future would be changed forever. He had been post-humously adopted by his uncle Julius and at the age of 19, Octavius had become the leader of Rome. As a tribute, Octavius took on Julius's name "Caesar," making him Octavius Caesar. In 42 BC, the Roman Senate deified Julius Caesar, making him the "Divine Julius" and Octavius, "The Son of the Divine" or as we might say, he became known as the "Son of God." Then, in a twist that changed the course of Rome, Octavius changed the Roman constitution making himself an Emperor and Rome an Empire. At that time, they changed his name to Augustus . . . which

means “Sacred one” . . . Thus Augustus Caesar became known as the Sacred One, the Son of God. He was the leader of the world at the time of Jesus birth.

Caesar Augustus was such a powerful man that he was able to speak a word and make the entire Roman Empire move. When you are an emperor and people think you are a god, you have lots of power. That is why when Caesar developed a new tax code and said that people needed to go to their ancestral homes to register, people started walking – among them Mary and Joseph.

Now imagine that you were alive in the Roman Empire on the night that Jesus was born, and imagine that you were walking with a set of travelers to the town of Bethlehem to register for the census. Imagine that someone were to say to you that alive in the world at that time was one known as the Son of God, the Sacred one, who would be known for 2,000 years and counting into the future. Imagine that someone were to tell you on the way to Bethlehem that 2,000 years later all of human history would hinge around this Son of God and what He would accomplish with His life. Imagine that someone were to tell you that 2,000 years later, people would look at pictures and symbols of this Sacred One and think of how the Son of God had changed their lives. Imagine that. I would imagine that if someone would have told you all that on that night, you would have thought they were talking about Caesar Augustus. In reality, however, they were talking about a child that would be born later that night in a cave and placed in an animals feeding bin.

Despite the drastic differences between Jesus and Augustus on the first Christmas night (one in a manger, the other on a throne), the world has come to remember the one, only because of His association with the other. Think about it, the man who was responsible for starting the Roman Empire . . . the man who was known as a god by the most advanced civilization in the world at that time, would be known to us only because he was the ruler at the time of the birth of Jesus Christ. As Andy Stanley has correctly said, Augustus Caesar is merely a footnote in the history of God’s Story in Christ. Men and women, we serve a God who can make a baby born in a manger infinitely more powerful than the leader of the “free world.”

This Christmas, as you ponder anew what the Almighty can do, I want you to stop limiting what God can do. I want you to renew your belief that God can do big things. As the Christmas story is read and you hear of Caesar Augustus, I want you to remember the power of God. Caesar thought he was a god and tried to make himself famous, but in the end, he was a footnote in history. Time has taught us of the limitations of human power. However, time has also taught us of the enduring nature of God’s story. When we are attached to Christ, He can do infinitely abundantly beyond all we ask or think. I want you to trust God again for big things this year, because we serve a big God.

Now, I want to ask you this question. Who are you trusting tonight? For the problem of our sin. For the problem of our uncertainty. For the problem of our mortality. For the things you truly long for. Who are you trusting? Yourself? The best a person could do is what Augustus did . . . and he is rotting in a tomb. Trust instead in the One who has

gone from the manger to a throne that will never be unseated. He can offer us forgiveness, and hope. He is the One we orient our history around. His story gives meaning to ours. My dreams are bigger because I am a part of His team.

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