

What Can Christmas Mean? Part II

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What Can Christmas Mean . . .

If I Am Bereaved?

Perhaps you will not agree with me, but I think bereavement by death is easier to face than the bereavement of desolation caused by desertion or infidelity, such as we were considering in the chapter just concluded. There is a finality to death, which in a way brings a measure of resignation to a Christian heart.

If, during the past weeks and months since the last holiday season, you have lost a loved one, be it father, mother, husband, wife or child, and that dear one is now in the presence of the Lord Jesus, you will find this first Christmas without them to be an empty one. You cannot overcome the feeling of sorrow and longing as you see the empty chair, and no matter how deep your faith in God, or your confidence that the beloved one but awaits you in the Father's House, your heart will ache, and tears will fall. And let me say in passing, do not try to hide the tears. They do not dishonor your faith, for you are yet living in the flesh, and the love you feel for the dear one gone on ahead was given you by God. You would be a cold and inhuman person, indeed, should you not feel grief and loss. Jesus wept at the grave of His friend, Lazarus!

But to have someone take advantage of you, walk away and leave you, break up your home, that is an experience which sears the soul. In God's hand are the issues of life and death; but desertion is the action of a fellow human being, in whom you loved and trusted, and the wound goes deep.

Thus, in one way, you can be grateful that the separation has been caused by death, for there is comfort for you, and the joy of the Lord abides in your heart, even though you do not find expression for the outward joy which makes the Christmas Season such a time of merriment and good fellowship.

In all of this I am, of course, talking to Christians about loved ones who had accepted Christ, and have gone to be with Him. For the unbeliever the story is a different one. There is no hope in this world nor in the hereafter for the man or woman who rejects Jesus Christ. There is nothing but the dull endurance of pain, sorrow and grief.

But your dear one is in the Father's House, and awaits your coming or, if the Lord should come, will return with Him to that glorious meeting in the air! But right now, you face your first Christmas in the lonely house. As we have said, it will make you weep, but you can lift up your eyes and take the long view, and be comforted. Let me say at once that there is no cure for the heartache and loneliness! But in His infinite grace and mercy, our blessed Lord has made provision for us in that time brings healing, and as the months build into years, the sharp ache dwindles. Did it not, and were God not thus gracious to us, I doubt if our human minds could stand the strain. But slowly and surely, as the days pass, healing comes.

How, then, to get through this first holiday season, when on every hand you are reminded of past happy holidays, when the dear one helped you trim the tree, put out the gifts for the children, and took part in a thousand and one little touches which make Christmas the happy time it is for families.

You may not want to participate in the gaieties of the season; there will be merrymaking all around you in which you will not want to share, but God can give you strength enough to endure, so that it will not bother you when other people observe the season with the usual happy customs. Others have not

lost a loved one, and you can enter into their joy in the sense of thanking God on their behalf, and praising Him for the real meaning of the Christmas they celebrate with carols, and gifts, and laughter.

You can actually be glad for Christmas even when your heart keeps aching until you can hardly bear it. There is no way of describing heartache to a person who has never experienced it! You can describe a toothache to your dentist, and point to a severe pain in talking to your doctor or surgeon. But a heartache? It must be suffered in silence, yet with the comfort and sustaining grace of knowing that the Lord Jesus suffered heartache, and knows just how you feel.

How can you be glad during this Christmas of your bereavement? It will bring back to your mind the wonders of affection and true love. You can remember, even with healing tears, the joy and beauty of the companionship you had with the one "loved long since, and lost awhile." As you go about the city, and see the gay lights, as you listen to the radio until you feel you cannot endure the gay music, you can yet thank God, down deep in your heart, for the reality of your faith, for your belief in this glorious gospel story which began on that night in Bethlehem so long ago.

I remember when we lost our small son. Our home was like a room where the lights had all gone out. There was my wife and I, and our four older children. The first Christmas Day after the Lord had taken our little boy to Himself, when we had our family devotions, we took special time to remember Peter. He still belonged to us, although he was in heaven, and every one of us expect to see him again when we join him up there. There never comes a Christmas in our home when we do not remember Peter, and thank God for his young life. He is long gone from us here, but he is with our faithful Lord up there!

There are other portions of the Christmas customs which can bring peace to your heart as you remember other years. The good will in families, the generous giving of one to another, all these things can remind you of heaven and of God's great and gracious gifts to you. The tree, bright with its tinsel and its bright lights, destined to be thrown into the trash-can three weeks after Christmas, can yet bring a little glow to your heart as you remember the thoughts you used to have when you trimmed a tree together as you celebrated something that was good and great and lasting - the Gift of God's love to you and yours and so, down deep in your heart you can rejoice. There will come a day when you are with God (and, in His presence, rejoicing in being with the dear ones who had gone on before), and the bright toys down here will fade away as but poor, earthly symbols of the greater brightness of His presence, and the joy of singing round His Throne.

Your world is poorer, your days are filled with sadness and the nights are lonely as you find it difficult to get to sleep. Memories are always more poignant at twilight time and during the dark hours of the night. But if you are a Christian, you can look ahead to the bright day that is coming.

"When all my labors and trials are o'er,
And I am safe on that beautiful shore,
Just to be near the dear Lord I adore,
Will through the ages be glory for me.
Friends will be there I have loved long ago,
Joy like a river around us will flow ..."

Oh, the peace of mind and heart such contemplation can bring even on the first Christmas of your dear one's stay in Heaven. For there is that aspect of it, too. You are lonely and sad down here, but the dear one is spending his or her first Christmas in heaven. True, we know that heaven does not measure time as we do, nor take into account our earthly holidays, but we can be permitted that comforting thought,

that they are safe with Him in the midst of the greater joy and glory of Heaven.

One more way I would commend to you, as you seek comfort during a time of deep bereavement. You could be looking for someone who is alone, whether through illness or bereavement, some child or adult who has no one to make a "Merry Christmas" for them. You could take them a gift, or, if an adult, invite them for a meal, and share with them the joys of Christmas faith. If you do, I promise you, your own load of grief will be somewhat eased.

"O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be.

O Cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee;
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be."

What Can Christmas Mean . . .

If I Have Suffered Loss?

Is it possible that some who will read this little volume will be among the group of unfortunate people who have recently lost a much-needed job? Perhaps, instead of being discharged, you had built up a good little business for yourself, and then, due to some circumstance, you have gone bankrupt, through no fault of your own. How will you face the Christmas Season so nearly upon us?

Through a letter from one of our listeners not long ago, I heard of a woman employed at one place for over twenty years, and suddenly she was let out, discharged, and had nowhere to turn. How is she feeling as the holidays approach?

It would be bad enough if a person who had lost a job had only himself to consider, but what about the father of the family, and his wife and four or five children at home, food supplies dwindling, bills piling up for heat and light? What will Christmas mean in that home, and to that breadwinner, so sorely in need of gainful employment?

I know there is some government protection or provision for some people in such a case, but it does not meet the needs of many, many people who are outside of its range. It is a dreadful thing for a self-respecting man, previously able to support his family in comfort, if not in luxury, to face the possibility of applying for charity.

Perhaps you live in an area of this great country of ours where recent storms or floods have caused tremendous devastation, and your place of employment was washed away, possibly your home, too. What a burden you carry, as you look to relief agencies for the necessities of life. Christmas seems just too much to face in a situation like that.

If you are a Christian, you have learned to live by the faith of the Son of God; and although the way be dark ahead, you can still trust. No discharge from a job, no storm or flood, no circumstance of life can

take away your faith in God, nor change His promise to provide for His own. If you do not know the Lord Jesus Christ, then indeed is your condition dire, for even in the midst of plenty, life without Jesus Christ is at best a joyless pilgrimage.

Perhaps you really feel abused, even though you may be a Christian, and the devil is tempting you to raise questions, and ask why this has happened to you and your family. The temptation might be great, but God is greater than any storm which the devil may whip up to test and try God's children.

There are several suggestions I have for you as you face such a situation. In the first place (and I do not mean to be severe or unduly stern), might I ask you to look into your own heart and find out where you were putting your trust? Was your trust in "things" - in the bright new home, the splendid new car, perhaps the job itself, with its prestige in the community? All of these things, in themselves, are quite all right. They came to you through the permissive will of God, but had your thinking deteriorated to the point where to have money made everything all right, and to be without it was life's direst state? Did you need the shock of losing that job to bring you to your senses, to a right perspective on life? It goes without saying that bills must be paid for - light, heat, food, medical expense - but" . . . your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no [anxious] thought for the morrow . . . (Matt. 6:32-34). That is putting the emphasis where it belongs.

I am seeking to help, not to find fault, and I would ask some other questions. You need a job, but do you have your health? your eyesight? your hearing? Not long ago I received a letter from a young girl, a sweet, Christian girl, who had just been blinded, and she was striving to adjust in a Christlike manner to this calamity which had overtaken her. A whole new life confronts that young woman, with tremendous adjustments, and she is so young to face it.

You have a family whom you must support? Granted, but thank God for that family, and the loving home circle to which you may come at the close of the day. You have friends who care, you are living in a country where you are free to come and go, and select the job of your choice, if one or more are offered. You are not commanded by some bureaucrat to work in the place of the government's choosing. You live in a land where you are free to worship God after your own conscience. Take stock of your position, and then praise God for the blessings which are yours.

Today, half the people in this world never have enough to eat, and they are human beings, too. Do you remember the story of the man who felt sorry for himself because his shoes were so worn and shabby? He was ashamed of them, but one day on his way to work, he saw a man who had no feet! You see, if we look about us, we will find many people in worse plight than we are. The Lord Jesus Himself said, ". . . In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

I have heard of friends who, reaching the age of retirement, have found their activities greatly limited because of curtailed income. They might argue, well, I have so little now, I cannot do anything but worry through until I die: I must take care of myself. On the other hand, every hospital in the land has groups of men and women who give of their time to bring comfort and cheer in the hospitals, who use former office skills or other talents in helping in clinics, and in places where such institutions are so short of staff, and many small jobs can be successfully done by outside friends who care and are willing to share.

Why not plan to do things for other people, sharing your time and your thoughts and your experiences with the Lord, since you have no money to share. If you visit a cripple, or help in a home where illness has taken the mother for a time, or go and read to a blind person, or spend some hours with a bedridden individual, do you not see that you would be helping yourself as well?

And as Christmas Day comes, go and take another look at Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. That was not even a poor *home*; it was a borrowed spot in a stable, and yet the glory of God shone round about it, and shepherds came to worship.

Let Christmas time be a season when you see clearly that money, while necessary in this world of ours, is not everything. I do not minimize its importance, but the Word of God says "For the *love of money* is the root of all evil" (1 Tim. 6:10). Note that - not money, but love of money!

Let Christmas be a season when we all see clearly that the presents, the delicious dinner, and all the accompanying pleasure are not the important, the essential thing about this holiday. Greet your friends with a bright face, because the love of God shines out. Sing the carols because of your desire to worship the Father and the Son. The Word speaks of those who will bring "the sacrifice of praise" and David speaks of the "sacrifice of thanksgiving." Surely if you, in the midst of perplexity, testing, and great need, are able to lift up your heart and voice in such a "sacrifice of praise," God's heart will be gladdened, and your own life seems brighter, as you continue to trust and pray.

So don't blame God for your circumstances. Seek His face in prayer, thank Him for all of His goodness, and get ready to smile at friends and return every "Merry Christmas" which is flung at you! How? Not in your own strength, but in the strength of Him who came as a Babe, that He might redeem us from sin, and is able ". . . to present you faultless before the presence of his glory, with exceeding joy" (Jude 24).

What Can Christmas Mean . . .

When I Am Old?

There is really no need to spend time thinking of what Christmas means to a young person or a child, or to the family group where all are well and where there is money for gifts, and the hand of sorrow has touched lightly, if at all. It would be a time of happy, joyous frolicking, making merry around the Christmas tree, perhaps joining with others to carol from house to house in the neighborhood on Christmas Eve, and returning to some friendly house for refreshments and more joyous song.

But suppose you have reached the age where, in the polite phrase of the day, you are a "senior citizen," perhaps very senior indeed. You may have the problem of being left alone, not just at Christmas, but all the time. As a matter of fact, perhaps most of your generation has gone on before you; you may be in a wheel chair, a hospital, or a nursing home, and you are not expecting any visitors. It would be that way in July or September or May, not just on December 25.

Even people who knew you make plans which no longer include you, not because you are not able, in some cases, to get out, but you don't fit into their more active plans and programs. So often, some older people have the experience of being passed over in conversation. Their thoughts and hearts are in past days, and their conversation tends to linger on those happier times, but the younger generation will have none of this. They do not understand, they are not interested in what happened 50 years ago, even in their nation, city or church, to say nothing of what may have happened to you in that faraway day; but to you it is important. And so, heartache and loneliness and a sense of being unwanted creeps into the heart.

I think a great many of our dear, older people dread the coming of Christmas more than any other day during the year, because then the feeling of being "left out" is more acute, and the heartache seems to be greater.

One thing such dear ones ought to remember is that the younger people are not being callous. They have abounding energy. They are full of lively interest in a hundred and one things in this modern world which you have not experienced at all, and in which you would not be interested even if you did know about them. They don't mean to be unkind - they are just young!

It would seem to me (and I speak in great gentleness of heart here, with thanksgiving that, in the mercy of God, I am strong, well, and active in His service), that common sense should be the rich, ripe fruit of old age. This is the way to escape that feeling of being pushed aside. Perhaps you can get out occasionally, and you are invited to a Christmas party. Unless you are sure of the group, however, refuse with every evidence of appreciation, and you have done the wise thing. If you attend a Christmas party with people in your own general age bracket, I am sure you come away feeling happy and at ease, because, and let's face it, what appeals to you now, did not appeal to you fifty years ago! And what brings joy to young folks now will bore them fifty years from now! It is as simple as that, and that is what I mean by the use of common sense.

Somewhere I have read a phrase about "Roses in December," such blooms being the precious memories God gives us to gladden the winter of old age. No one will object if you remember, and if you thank God for all those happy memories of past days of joy and blessing. You may have a little feeling of homesickness for that time, but it will bloom again for you in your mind's eye as you think about it all.

Are you fortunate enough to be living with your family, and thus having the joy and blessing of some companionship? The same rule of thumb, the same common sense, can apply here. Does your family include you in merry making? Then show a merry face! If you don't understand all the references to things of today, show an interest in the individuals around you. If you don't like the TV program, or the blaring beat of modern music, you can ignore it. And if the younger members of the group plan to go out for some special festivities, don't look as if you felt neglected. Help them get ready, and wave them off with a smile, taking delight in their pleasure.

But above and beyond all these circumstances of the daily life, lies the deep spiritual truth. These are your people and you can pray for them. Ask God to protect them and to bring to their remembrances the real meaning of Christmas. By your gracious refusal to join in the more active games or entertainment, you can let them feel your love and your consideration.

What is left to you, as an older man or woman? Joy, peace of heart and mind, a desire to love others, a longing to let others know what the Lord Jesus means to you, a desire to be of help whenever possible! And if your conduct does not reflect a feeling of neglect or insult because you are not included, if your face presents a picture of content, and your whole attitude is one of wishing to be useful, not to bring constraint or restraint upon any gathering, you will reap a harvest of love and respect which may amaze you.

I have no doubt that some of my readers are experiencing this, and have learned to ". . . adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things" (Titus 2:10).

If you live alone, surely you can find one person who is worse off than yourself. Invite them to share some little Christmas joy with you, especially as you tell them about God's love and care as you experience it!

If you are in a home or hospital, you are surrounded by many people of your own age. Do they all know you as a warm, gracious personality, radiating peace of mind and heart, so much so that they might envy your content? Such can be your circumstances, if your faith and hope are fixed in Him who is the source of all joy, love and light.

I do not say, my older friends, that there will not be loneliness, heartache, or a longing for the days that have forever gone, but you are daily journeying nearer to the place God has prepared. Listen to what the Lord Jesus said: "In my Father's house are many mansions [dwelling places]: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place, I will come again, and receive you unto myself: that where I am there ye may be also" (John 14:2, 3).

What greater joy could any man, woman or child have at Christmas than the knowledge that today, tomorrow, next week, or 30 years from now, that divinely prepared place is waiting. Our Escort will meet us at the moment when our spirit leaves the earthly house, and He, our own blessed Lord, will go with us, into the new abode He has prepared. Merry Christmas? Yes, merry every day with a blessed expectation like that before us.

What Can Christmas Mean . . .

If I Am A Failure?

When you call "Merry Christmas!" to a friend, you are wishing, really, that they may have a holiday filled with the joy and blessing that comes from serving the Lord Jesus Christ. You do not stop to wonder whether their circumstances are such as to give them inward or outward joy. (And there is a difference between, inward, deep joy which comes from the indwelling Spirit, and the outward gaiety which is so evident on every hand during Christmas time.)

It may be, however, that you do not even feel like greeting your friends in this way because of trouble which has filled your own heart and life. Perhaps you are troubled by a deep sense of failure. This feeling can be deeply distressing and disturbing, no matter whom you feel you have failed, yourself or a dear one, an employer or employees. It may be that you have failed in business, and are bankrupt just when your family would expect extra money for Christmas. That would indeed be a time of grave anxiety for you, with your family to care for. Whatever the cause, failure can eat very deeply into the human heart and mind, and bring grave consequences.

Maybe these lines are being read by a student, or by an athlete, or an applicant for a scholar-ship or new job. Failure in any area can bring with it a sense of utter defeat and worse, of worthlessness.

If this is true of you, there is no desire for merrymaking or pleasure in your heart at the moment. But if you are a Christian, if you know the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior, Friend and Comforter, if you depend upon Him for the need of the moment, then your sense of worth-lessness, of inferiority, should slip away.

It is possible, of course, to find people who have what we might call a chronic sense of defeat which may have descended upon their spirit like a dark cloud. But if you know the Lord, you can claim His power to defeat Satan, who strives in this, as in many other ways, to draw God's children away from their trust in Him.

Such a feeling of chronic failure may have its roots in many experiences. You may have been brought up, as a child, by a strict parent, hard in judgment, harsh in punishment, and this has left its effect upon your spirit. This may have tainted your school and college life, and followed you into business in your subconscious mind. Such a parent would mean strict discipline for your own good, not realizing that dispositions differ; some children are tenderhearted and easily hurt, and can be controlled better by love than by chastisement.

It may be that your marriage is a source of difficulty, because husband or wife is always pointing out

the shortcomings of the partner in this mutual life. A nagging wife can be a burden, and a sarcastic husband can utterly destroy the feeling of companionship which is so necessary between a wedded pair. One partner to the marriage may always see things in the wrong light, never offer a word of praise, and facing this situation day after day, the other partner soon begins to feel as if failure is the only word to characterize their efforts in the home.

In such a home as this there is not much room for joy and peace at Christmas. Neither husband nor wife look forward to a day of simple pleasures, joy in the giving of gifts, and the feeling of togetherness which is the richest fruit of happy marriage, the joy of knowing that the loved one wants to be with you, and no outsider can satisfy, no companionship is as precious.

There may be physical reasons for such feelings of depression. There may be glandular conditions which are not normal. You may be an arthritic, or suffer from chronic indigestion, or any number of other complaints which, without your realizing it, have slowly brought upon you a feeling of depression. Let me assure you that Satan is ever on the alert to profit from such conditions! And one's physical condition can influence one's spiritual condition unless the heart is closely in tune with the Lord Himself in daily communion.

We cannot deny the fact that this feeling of failure can hinder you in every aspect of your life, in the home, at the office, or wherever you work or study. And Christmas makes it all seem worse. Have you ever had a day when you didn't want people to be nice to you? You know you won't respond nicely, and you'd far rather they would be obnoxious? When someone says "Good morning" you feel like replying, "What's good about it?" Then truly, my friend, you are in a sorry state. You need to sit down and take account of your life, and find out why this mood persists.

If you are not a Christian, then the way is clear before you. Turn to the Lord, ask His forgiveness for your sinful ways and let Him come into your heart and bring you joy and peace!

But if you are a believer, and Satan has been winning a victory in your life, then you cannot blame the Lord - you must look within. By the power of the Holy Spirit, you can ask for conviction as to whatever has brought you to this state of mind. If it is a physical condition, you have not been trusting the Lord to take care of it. If you have failed in business, or in school, He is still the same gracious and all-sufficient Lord; remember that, and your attitude will be different.

Actually, Christmas is a good time of year for you, because you will see many people who are joyous, and surely the thought will come to you, why am I not joyous, too? Why is it that I don't want to answer sincere wishes for a happy holiday?

Does your pride, or your conceit or vanity, block the way? It may not be just the feeling of defeat, but also of outraged pride that others should know of your failure.

A good many people in the world, who know not Christ, have a fine Christmas celebration, according to the world's standards of gaiety. Usually it means having enough drinks to make the celebrants happy to the point of being foolish and uncontrolled. But that is not joy! And even the world realizes it the next morning, for there is always a price to pay for such a celebration.

If you are glad that Jesus Christ came at Christmas to be your Savior, if your holiday fun and merrymaking, your carol singing, your giving of gifts, is all done with that thought in the background, then it should make no difference if you failed in an examination, or a business, or in any other phase of life. No matter how somber you may feel, or how poor your record, the light still glows with intensity over the Bethlehem manger. Ask the Lord to put His finger upon the weak spots in your life, and trust Him, as you turn to Him and ask forgiveness and needed strength.

The Lord has never had a more faithful servant than Paul, and Paul had a thorn in the flesh. He said,

"For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. [Paul is writing to his friends in Corinth.] And he [the Lord] said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness." And, as if that were not enough, Paul added "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Cor. 12:8-9). What a spirit in which to face Christmas or any day! May such grace be yours, and mine!

What Can Christmas Mean . . .

If I Have Been Humiliated?

As we have been thinking about Christmas, its celebration in a true Christian spirit, and the way people react to this holiday under varying conditions, I have been impressed with the fact that the way a man or woman reacts to Christmas, under any set of circumstances, is pretty much the way that individual reacts to life - to the round of daily duties, pleasure, joys and sorrows. If you will think about this, I believe you will agree with me.

The experiences we have been considering in the life of an average human being, which may hinder his acceptance of Christmas in the right spirit, will also hinder his acceptance of life as he should.

There is about us a group of people, a larger group than you might think. I refer to those who have been embarrassed, shamed or humiliated by others, or by some fault or mistake of their own. There are people who are grievously sensitive, and all their lives they suffer from a self-consciousness which others of us never feel and, mark it well, fail to sympathize with. Perhaps the reason for this is that members of this group tend to hide themselves, to cover up their embarrassment. We are glad to say that such unhappy experiences do not, as a rule, last long, but they can be very wounding to a truly sensitive spirit, particularly if such a friend is not well grounded in Christian experience.

One's family can be a real source of distress along this line because, as is the habit in most family groups, discussion is free and frank, and when attention is drawn publicly to something left undone, or a job done poorly, it can cut very deeply into the heart, and give the person so criticized a scar which will remain for a long time.

Such an experience of being humiliated can be especially distressing at Christmas, and may, indeed, affect life as a whole, even temporarily robbing one of a good testimony.

Each life holds many things of which one need not be ashamed. For the most part these are the great issues, the important factors in our lives. It is so often a tiny detail which causes the reaction of shame, and forgotten are all the good things, the big things, the blessings we have had from the Lord's gracious hand.

If anyone reading this page has had a real toothache, you will know I am not exaggerating when I say that such a pain is so overwhelming as to drown out all the joys and blessings of the day. One is conscious only of the jabbing, nagging pain. The same is true of the unhappy cloud of humiliation which may suddenly fall upon you.

If the shame from which you suffer is caused by sin in heart and life, by your own wrong doing in the sight of a just and holy God, that is a different matter. Then confession of sin and repentance are the important matters to concern you, at Christmas or at any other season of the year.

Sometimes the most insignificant act assumes an importance out of all proportion. Do you sing in a choir, and have you ever missed a cue and come in at the wrong time? Or were you playing a good game of baseball at the summer picnic, and then suddenly you muffed the ball and the opposing team scored a

home run, all because of your lack of skill? Little events like these can, if you are teased about them, become all-important in your thinking, when other people have entirely forgotten the matter. Oh, for the grace of laughter at one's mistakes, if they are not serious and do not adversely affect other people.

Having had such an unhappy time recently and with Christmas fast approaching, you feel you cannot go to that party; you cannot sing in the choir this year; or, you simply cannot take part in that pageant this year, for everybody will remember how you lost your place last Christmas. Now in all this bundle of humiliation there are tied up certain flowers of pride. To you this mistake is all-important, whereas almost every one else has forgotten all about it! If only some of our unduly sensitive friends could remember this.

But let us lift this above the purely human level, and put it on the spiritual plane. No other holiday of our Christian year, except Easter, so clearly sets forth the love of God for you and for me. Here is the Almighty, taking upon Himself in the person of His Son, the form of a man, that He might suffer weakness, physical pain, humiliation beyond all we can imagine - so that we might find forgiveness, salvation, grace for each need. What does Paul write in Hebrews?" . . . Let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus . . . who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame . . ." (12:1-2).

It is the social aspect of Christmas which so much distresses sensitive people, when their hearts have been wounded. It is the merrymaking, the high spirits which characterize each Christmas celebration, and the word of your heart to your brain is, "No joy, no gladness, no laughter, no merrymaking . . . because I am hurting." Now, let me raise a question with you. If you are a Christian and you have within your heart a sense of shame or humiliation, what should you do? Deep down in your heart you know the answer, for the Lord Jesus stands with hands outstretched, ready and waiting to give you joy and peace.

If the matter is one of a confession, the remedying of a wrong action to some other person, then the way is clearly marked out for you. Set the matter straight with that individual before you try to set it straight with the Lord!

Again I say that the Christmas message so clearly reflects the great love God has for us, immeasurably greater than we can ever realize with our finite minds! Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God. Do you feel that you have been humiliated? Then lift your eyes to the picture of Christ dying on the cross of shame. Remember, it was no glorious death which our blessed Lord suffered. The cross, in the days when He walked the earth, was the method of executing the worst of criminals, and He endured that shame for you, and for me.

Be honest in His sight, and confess to Him the sin of your lack of faith, and your pride. Tell the Lord that you are poor and needy, but that from now on you will trust Him for grace, and He will reach down and touch your heart to bring you peace and deep inner joy such as you did not dream existed. He is faithful, He loves and cares, and you can rejoice in His sufficient grace. Then Christmas can be a time of joy and blessing!

What Can Christmas Mean . . .

If I Have Been Very Fortunate?

I wonder how many of you, glancing at the heading for this chapter, have said to yourselves, "Well, if fortunate, why worry? Christmas cannot be anything but joyful to anybody who has been successful in the world."

Some of you may have been unusually fortunate during the past year. Perhaps you received a raise in salary, and have never earned as much as you do now. Perhaps somebody left you an inheritance, and full settlement has been made so you feel wealthy indeed. Maybe you have just become engaged to the most wonderful person in the world, and the date for the wedding has been set. Perhaps your employer has given you an extra holiday week and a bonus just at the Christmas Season. Whatever the reason, you may be one of those happy people who feel "on the top of the world" at the moment, and you expect Christmas to be the "best ever."

Why consider this as a problem?

Let me assure you, my fortunate friend, that there is a very real danger of being cocksure, and you may be "riding for a fall," if we may use a very expressive phrase. Do I sound like a pessimist, with no joy of life or love? I have no wish to convey that impression, but the problem here is a spiritual one, and in very truth, it can become a serious one.

There is a very real temptation to ascribe to yourself, to your own cleverness and ability the promotion which is yours. True you may have worked hard, and been rewarded for some very sound and good accomplishments, but who gave you your fine intellect and the excellent health? Who opened the door into this field which has proved so successful? If you are honest with yourself, you will have to admit that a greater hand than yours was leading, and that you owe these mercies to God, your loving Father in Heaven.

Do not be tempted to a pride in self, into vanity that might by its destructive power undo some of the benefits you have enjoyed, or change the conditions which made your achievements possible. God "is not slack concerning his promises," nor is He slack in rebuking us when we take to ourselves credit which is His alone. It is so easy, in a time of prosperity, to think, "Well, I must be smarter than I realized. I am strong and good at this kind of thing," and fail utterly to realize that without the sustaining strength of the Lord you are worthless!

Another harmful side product, if we may call it that, of such a sinful frame of mind is quickness to forget others less fortunate, and that leads to disrespect for others, and, in the end, to irreverence for the God and Father of us all. Many people have sinned in just this way. I have seen it happen often that a man will make his own way in the world, prosper in his business, until he and his wife have a lovely home and a delightful family, but as the bank account grows and investments begin to bring in good interest checks, there is the tendency to forget the loving Father who made it all possible.

I am thinking of a certain man who lived in a big city a number of years ago. I knew him well. He worked long hours at his business and it began to prosper. He had accumulated a considerable sum of money, and the community looked up to him. In the early days he was a regular attendant at a church in that community, a member of the Men's Bible Class, and faithful in his duties as a Christian, a church member, and a father and husband. I was sure the Lord was dealing with that brother, and in His own love permitting him to prosper.

This friend's prosperity grew, and he had an opportunity to buy a new home in a highly restricted and expensive area of the city. He and his family moved to the beautiful dwelling, but God was not in that move. Let it suffice to say that his wife and two lovely daughters began to attend church less regularly, and gradually dropped their many church interests. They became absorbed in a social life of the community, and gradually my friend's face grew sad. Although he tried to continue his church activities, it was clear that the joy had gone out of his life, as the members of his family were almost ruined by the life which engrossed them. He paid a high price for his prosperity, and it was evident that the foundation of his life was not built solidly upon the Rock, Jesus Christ.

Do not misunderstand me at this point. I am not finding fault with prosperity. If God prospers you in business, or in other ways, accept this as from His gracious and loving hand; praise Him, and fail not in your duties to Him, to your church, and to those around you who are less fortunate than you. There are so many places where God's money can be put to use today, to His glory!

Stop and think for a moment, if you belong in this class of Christians, of your attitude toward Christmas. A time of merriment and celebration, with gifts of love for the family . . . and for others outside your own circle? Yes, by all means. A special gift for the work of the Lord, as He may lead? Yes, and your own heart will be gladdened thereby. But your prosperity does not take away from the wonder of the season, the glory of that advent story when the Lord Jesus came down to dwell among men. How does John put it, in a glorious summation of the coming of Christ? "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

I tell you, beloved, whether rich or poor, prosperous or living on a small pension in the sunset years of life, the poorest among us is richer than any millionaire when we are in the possession of our Lord and Savior.

"Merry Christmas!"

Christmas Day! What memories it brings to the heart as those of us who are older remember former years when "hearts were young and gay." To the children, each Christmas brings surprise and joy, and many countries celebrate the day, although it may bear other names.

But let us have a serious word or two. Those of us who are truly servants of God know that there is no actual fact behind the date on which we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. The world is inclined to think of December 25 as the actual date, but as far as the Bible is concerned we do not even know the time of year. There are several legends about the selection of this date, but we need not enter into them within the scope of this small book.

What *is* important is the fact, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that in the fulness of time, God sent forth His Son. One would assume that the story is fresh in the minds of God's people everywhere, but let us set it forth, so that a re-reading of it may bring new blessing to our expectant hearts. We will begin in Luke, Chapter 2, verse 6:

"And so it was that while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (6, 7).

This is a very simple account, Mary gave birth to her Son in a normal manner, and the Child was wrapped in swaddling clothes after the custom of the country and people. Swaddling clothes were cloths which were carefully wrapped around the tiny body to keep it warm and snug. When we read "laid in a manger," we might almost read, in accordance with our present-day civilization, "laid in a garage," for the inn-keeper certainly kept some farm animals, and in that country these creatures were housed in a barn or stable very near, if not an actual part of the dwelling or inn where dwell the innkeeper and his family. All of this was in keeping with the customs and situation of the land in which they lived.

"And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night" (verse 8).

Here again, is something so natural as to need no comment. Simple shepherds were tending their

flocks, guarding against prowling wild animals, and some of the shepherds probably were asleep by their campfire. But listen!

"And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid" (verse 9).

Now we have lost the "common touch;" now we are faced with something outside the experience of these shepherds, or ourselves today. Would you or I have reacted differently from those shepherds? I hardly think so, for this was a strange, exciting and terrifying sight. We are not told in specific terms how the angel of the Lord came, in what form or manner, but we can surmise that the glory of the Lord that shone round about him was great light, a glorious light. It was an experience which made them "sore afraid." However, the angel spoke at once to allay their fears.

"And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you, Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger" (verses 10-12).

Notice that we are again given no direct description as to general appearance, and the word *angel* carries with it simply the meaning of messenger. We can, therefore, as we meditate upon this unusual appearance, let our sanctified imagination run riot a little bit, and picture to ourselves the star-studded sky, the quiet hillside with the flocks resting peacefully, the camp fire as the one bright spot of light, and then, suddenly, glory!

Verse 13 continues: "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." One translation renders this "peace to men of good will," but it seems to me the emphasis is upon the "peace and good will." This message comes to saint and sinner alike, the only difference being that the former has accepted the proffered gift, and the latter has either rejected or failed yet to accept the salvation which was promised through this Babe.

And now we come to action on the part of the shepherds. They had been told where the Baby was to be found, and "It came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which has come to pass, which the Lord hath made known to us" (verse 15).

Let me emphasize again the complete contrast in these two parts of this beautiful story. The first part was normal, in complete keeping with the habits and customs of the country. The second section is arresting, strange, exciting, telling of the most extraordinary circumstances as God came by messenger, and sent a great group of the heavenly host to sing His praises and thus celebrate the birth of His Son! And note the faith of the shepherds, for they did not question. They were "sore afraid" at first, but this opening up, as it were, of the doors of heaven, did not unduly frighten them, for they said, "Let's go and see this great thing about which the Lord has told us." They did not consider it a strange tale, or unbelievable story. They acted on their faith in God's Word to them, at once, as verse 16 tells us.

"And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger." In other words, they found exactly what the heavenly messenger had told them they would find. Did they seek to conceal this great event? No.

"And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which had been told them about this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds" (verses 17, 18).

This is perhaps the first word of personal testimony concerning the Lord Jesus, of which we have any

record. The shepherds "made known abroad the saying which had been told them concerning this child." In other words, they told all the people they could find about the "Savior, Christ the Lord," born that happy morning. And note the result: "All that heard it wondered . . ." Think of the countless millions who have since heard, wondered, turned and found salvation, eternal life, peace, joy and blessing through the Babe who came in such a humble way. Someone has spoken of the "almost unbelievable humbling" in describing this coming of Jesus into human form, who "made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:7).

There is a lovely word here about the mother of our Lord, in verse 19: "But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart." We can only conjecture as to what Mary was thinking, but I think we may safely assume that her understanding of her holy Son was limited in many ways. The thing to remember is that she was faithful to her trust, in her care of the Babe, the Child, the growing boy Jesus, for we read in verse 40 of this chapter, "And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him."

Again, at the end of the chapter, we have another brief revelation of the fruit of Mary's care, for verse 51 tells us He was "subject unto them," which would indicate obedience. And verse 52 adds a final picture, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man."

Christian mothers would do well, as this holiday season approaches each year, to measure themselves by the standards of Mary, and strive for the faithfulness and love which characterized her rearing of the holy Child committed to her care during those tender years.

As we indicated before, we are not given any revelation as to how the shepherds acted when this experience came. Did they hear it in their own language? One would assume that the angelic messenger did so speak. These minor points are of little importance, however, and the lesson for us as any Christmas Day approaches is to have open minds and hearts. We will not have a special vision, with an angel messenger and the glory of God shining through the open door of Heaven. And yet, is your heart, is my heart, open to the refreshing breath of God's Holy Spirit when He has some new experience for us? What do you see in this Christmas story? Merely some beautiful fairy tale? Or do you recognize truthful statements about the coming of the Lord of Glory to indwell our humanity for a season, until He accomplished His purpose - redemption for any sinner who will come to Him in faith, believe and accept?

If you feel that the life of Jesus Christ, as lived on this earth, was merely a natural human existence, then you will have to blot out of your remembrance most of this Christmas story. If you say that these verses are not to be taken at their simple face value, then the Christmas story can have no meaning at all for you, beyond the sentimental singing of carols because you have heard them from childhood. There is no possibility of misunderstanding this simple and direct record of the coming of the Son of God to redeem sinful man. Almighty God was watching over the birth of this Child. He sent the messenger down to certain people who were to begin the work of spreading the glad and good news to others, and those people - the shepherds - were true to their task.

It is of interest to me to note that God did not send this message through the High Priest, nor the Roman Governor, nor to any prominent people in Bethlehem. This message did not come to a group of worshipers in the temple. It came to simple shepherds on a quiet hillside, under glimmering stars, as they tended their sheep.

This also has its precious significance for us today. At Christmas or at any time, God can speak to you, just where you are. Are you prepared, as you do your daily tasks, to have a heavenly visitor come to you? For now, since the Lord Jesus died, rose again, and has ascended, the Holy Spirit is here in this

world as the messenger of God to our hearts.

As we well know, Christmas is only the beginning of the amazing life our Lord lived here in the human body God had prepared for Him. It is but the beginning of the glorious witness which has won millions to a saving faith in Him.

As you wish friends a "Merry Christmas!" remember all that is wrapped up in that simple, happy phrase which we have all heard from childhood. Praise God for all the significance of that birth, life, death; and triumphant resurrection. Thank Him for His goodness to you, and make a day of dedication out of Christmas, giving to Him that gift which He desires above all others - your heart, and your life.

Merry Christmas! And to God be the glory!