

What Can Christmas Mean? Part I

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The Heavenly Dimensions of Christmas

Christmas time! Every year as the season approaches, I am sure we all feel a stirring of our hearts! There has been the baking of cakes and the making of gifts, the addressing of cards, and the planning of family reunions. We are expecting to call on friends and have our friends call on us, and we have already set the dates for certain parties. Of course there will be church activities with pageants, cantatas and tableaux. There will be scenes out in the yard at night, portraying the Bethlehem story. There will be the singing of carols and it's a sweet thing to hear, especially when young people go out singing carols. We all love them. There will be special music in the church, and here and there some community project will render "The Messiah." All the way through the happy season we can have in mind that, of the whole year, perhaps there's no time when we as human beings behave so well as at Christmas time.

All the world knows the Bethlehem story; at least, that is what we would like to think. Does the world really know the Bethlehem story? Are you and I really conscious of the meaning of the actual story of what happened at Bethlehem so long ago? Of course there was a Baby, and the Baby was laid in a manger. Right away our hearts are touched, because all the world loves a baby. Because of the artists' conception and imagination in the pictures we have seen, we think of humble circumstances, poor people, a stable with its cattle, sheep, and a donkey or two. Many remember three kings who came from afar, riding on camels and following a bright and beautiful guiding star.

The true story of that first Christmas Day has been covered with overtones of folklore and the cultural ideas of many nations. There is Santa Claus, and there is the Christmas tree. Christmas has become for all in the social community a cultural symbol of generous and kindly good will.

If someone asks, "Isn't there something else?" people will respond with uncertain tales of the Christ Child, or the Wise Men, far removed from the simplicity and blessedness of the true story.

We can get the general impression that all men are actually nice people, underneath what may be a somewhat gruff exterior. They are basically good folks, and mean to be kind, and we should bring this natural sweetness to the surface by being hopefully sweet to everybody we meet. But this line of reasoning, carried out, brings us to the point of glamorizing mankind and you will hear some Christians, among others, saying with great earnestness that "Christmas restores my faith in human nature."

I do not want to belittle this yearning for the spirit of good will, for I think there is a sort of homesickness on the part of mankind for simpler, happier days. I am sure many people are honest in longing for this sort of conduct from their friends and neighbors.

But I want to suggest that for our own understanding, we lift off this heavy layer of folklore, leave Santa Claus, with all of his wholesome fun, aside, forget the story of Scrooge and Tiny Tim. None of these things have anything to do with what happened at Bethlehem.

The whole incident that we commonly call *The Bethlehem Story* occurred among a people known to the world as the Jews. A good many things can be said about the Jews, but nobody is going to doubt one thing. . . that they are the people of the Old Testament Scriptures. They believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; they believe in the God of Daniel; they believe in the God of Elijah. It is the Jews who have Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Micah and Hosea. They have a religious message, and they have religious tradition. Among the Jews there was this expectation, that a deliverer would come. There would

be sent from God a Savior and He would come from heaven. They called Him the *Messiah*, which is the Hebrew name for *Christ*, and they believed that Messiah would come.

The story of what happened at Bethlehem *nearly* two thousand years ago is told with great clarity in the book of Luke. It begins at Luke 1:10. This initial section of the Christmas story tells of what happened to the parents of John the Baptist, because he was to be the forerunner of the Lord Jesus Christ, and was born just six months before Jesus was born.

"And the whole multitude of the people were praying without [that is, outside] at the time of incense" (1:10). This is an ordinary, normal religious service among the Jewish people at the temple. "And there appeared unto him [this is referring to Zacharias who is talked about as being "a certain priest"] an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense." (1:11).

You need to understand at the very beginning that this is something that the living God had a hand in. This is not something that happened by chance, and that mankind made a great story of it.

"And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shall call his name John" (1:11-13). And then Zacharias was told about how great John would be, and something of the ministry he would have.

In verse 18 we read, "Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years." In other words, "What you are promising just now doesn't seem to be possible. I am too old, my wife is too old, and we haven't had any children during all our married life. Why should we expect this now?"

"And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel." Would you in your mind and heart know that this Gabriel, this angel sent from God, actually had a part in the significance of this whole story?

"I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to show thee these glad tidings. And, behold, thou shall be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season" (1:19, 20).

Do you see how serious it was for Zacharias to doubt? I tremble when I think of how easy it is for me to doubt. The only thing I plead for before my Lord is to remember that I was an unbeliever before I came to know the Lord Jesus Christ, having no faith at all, and to remember that I had very little knowledge of these things. This would help to account for the fact that I was so unready, unwilling and unable actually to believe when I first heard this story. But Zacharias? All his life he had been ministering in the temple. Suddenly he was confronted with the actual person of Gabriel himself, the angelic messenger of God, bringing him word of what God is going to do. Zacharias could not believe it, and because his faith failed, he had to undergo punishment. He should have been able to accept the angelic presence. Believing in God as he had done all his life long, he should have been able now to accept this experience as true.

And that is what makes *me* tremble! If, knowing about God what I do know about Him, how great is my responsibility and how definite should be my experience in accepting the reality of God and His presence! But let us read on.

"And the people waited for Zacharias, and marvelled that he tarried so long in the temple. And when he came out, he could not speak unto them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless" (1:21, 22).

I do not want to degrade this whole story by making any unsuitable comments, but do you know what I am wondering? I am wondering, if such a thing should happen today, what would be the general

reaction of the Christian public, to say nothing of the world which knows not God. If it were said that there was a minister over there in the church, and when he came out he could not talk, he was dumb, how many people would think this was a case of mental aberration, and recommend a psychiatrist? We know that such an explanation would miss the mark entirely in the case of Zacharias. We have the truth of the matter right here before us.

"When he came out . . . he beckoned, and remained speechless. And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house" (1:23).

The story goes on to tell of how Elisabeth conceived, even as God had promised. When John the Baptist was born, *then* the tongue of Zacharias was loosed, and he was able to speak. This story of Elisabeth and Zacharias is the beginning of the Christmas story, and I wanted you to get the feel of this introductory portion before we begin to consider the actual story of Gabriel's visit to Mary, and all that followed. We continue now at Luke 1:26.

"And in the sixth month [that is, the sixth month after Elisabeth had conceived] the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary" (1:26, 27).

These verses speak of a specific place, persons, and times. This is actually an historical fact.

"And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be" (1:28, 29).

Let us remember that when Zacharias saw the angel, he was disturbed. And when Mary saw this angel, she was disturbed. What I am trying to convey is that this is not the story of "ordinary" dealings with God. This was an exceptional instance.

The story is beautiful in its simplicity, as the angel said, "Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God" (verse 30). Then the announcement came of the only immaculate conception, and the promise that ". . . The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (1:35). Note also the simple faith of Mary's reply: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. . ." (1:38).

May I suggest that before Christmas comes, you read and re-read this story upon which our salvation is based, for there is the beginning of the ministry of Jesus Christ on this earth. This is what makes Christmas meaningful - what happened there in Bethlehem so long ago - not the bells, the bright wrappings on gifts, the carols and holiday songs heard everywhere. This is the celebration of the birth in human form of the Son of God, our Savior!

The next portion of the story is very human as it tells of Mary's seeking out Elisabeth. Mary was, after all, only a young girl. She had gone through a tremendous experience, and in verse 39 we read that ". . . Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Judah; And entered into the house of Zacharias, and saluted Elisabeth. And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost: and she spake out with a loud voice . . ." (1:39-42). Then followed the glorious predictions made by the Holy Spirit through the lips of Elisabeth.

Mary's song of trust and praise follows, in verses 46 to 55. Again I want to draw attention to the fact that God was making His will known; He was dealing with His people in all of these happenings.

Let us come now to the consideration of the second chapter of Luke, which brings a full account of the actual birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We all know the story so well, but repetition never

wearies us. Let us set down Luke's account. (And by the way, everything we read in the beginning of Luke's second chapter about the birth of Jesus under strange circumstances is actually just a normal, human experience. This Baby was born as all other babies have been born. He was wrapped in swaddling clothes, because that was the custom of the country, and was laid in a manger, because there was no other place for his mother to stay).

"And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night [just the way shepherds still do in that ancient land]. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them: and they were sore afraid" (verse 8, 9).

I feel like stopping right here and asking a question or two of you, my readers. Do you believe this? Is it *real* to you? The reason I am asking is because this is what Christmas really was. That is the tremendous truth I am trying to make clear. This is not just some ordinary, prosaic celebration some good people arranged because a baby had been born. This event has dimensions to it, that go far beyond the human. There is truly a heavenly dimension to Christmas! The birth of this Baby is the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, God is coming into this world in a human body. This is no ordinary child; this is the Son of God.

"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 Saviour, 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" (2:10-12).

Please note that the angel of the Lord did not give the shepherds the simple information that a baby had been born in Bethlehem. The shepherds were given word from heaven that a Savior was born! Almighty God had sent His Son into the world to save those that are lost.

"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" (2:13, 14)

Wait a moment! *Do you believe that?* Do you believe those shepherds on that hillside actually had this experience? Again, my reason for asking these pointed questions is that if you and I are not able to accept that part of this story, we have very poor ground upon which to stand in acceptance of the rest of the story. We can go ahead with the usual round of Christmas festivities - Santa Claus, the stockings hung with care, the beautiful tree, the carols in all the department stores and on every secular radio program, the parties and other special festivities - all the human aspects of Christmas can go on as usual, but if that is the emphasis in your case, you have missed the whole point. You have failed to catch God's view of Christmas, the heavenly dimension of this special day, when God sent His Son. (And let it be said now that "Christmas" is a manmade holiday. As Christians we have chosen to celebrate the birth of Christ, but actually Christmas - as such - is not found in the Word of God.)

"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 is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child" (2:15-17).

Let it be noted in passing that the shepherds had no doubt. They said "Let us *now* go," and "they came with haste, and found . . . the babe." Oh, that men and women would come with haste today, seeking the truth of the Christmas story, and find that Babe, the Savior of the world, of whom John wrote, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (3:16).

There is much more to be told . . . about Simeon who took the little Lord Jesus into his arms and said "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation" (Luke 2:29, 30) . . . and Anna, the prophetess of great age, "gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that look for redemption . . ." (2:38).

Matthew's Gospel has other aspects of the same wonderful story, and we commend a careful reading to you. The Bible story of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ is surrounded with the glow and glory of heaven itself. As we think of these things, let us be wise beyond the children of the world, and celebrate Christmas for what it truly is: Almighty God Himself reached down into this world to make contact with sinful human beings, that whosoever believes in Jesus Christ as Savior may have life eternal! That is the true glory of Christmas!

Heaven's View of Christmas

It is an interesting and perhaps a strange fact that only two of the four Gospels give us any record of the birth of Jesus Christ. Luke sets it forth in great detail, as we have noted, and Matthew in less detail. It is an actual fact that Bethlehem is not nearly as great in the pages of the New Testament as Calvary, nor does it carry anything like the impact of Pentecost. Nevertheless, it does have a very deep significance, for it was the beginning of God's redemptive purposes as He sent His Son to be the Savior of the world.

There have grown up around the birthday of Jesus many strange customs. Some Christian people feel that as servants of God, redeemed by the precious blood, we ought not to enter into any of the festivities or gaiety of the Christmas Season. But in our modern civilization Christmas has come to be the chief family holiday, when everybody who can do so, goes "home for the holidays."

I do not wish to intimate, in what I am about to discuss, that I do not enter into the natural joy of the Christmas Season, for it has come to be very meaningful in our lives, as families, all across America. It is an established custom, with happy events in which the children predominate for the most part. It is really their holiday. They will be thinking of Santa Claus, hanging up their stockings, making plans to surprise Mom or Dad with gifts, and looking forward to the gifts their eager little hearts expect to find under that magic tree on Christmas morning. Christmas dinner is a special time, and blessed is the family that can gather in children and grandchildren and praise God for His faithfulness to the family group.

Communities celebrate too, and while we may think the tendency is to over-commercialize Christmas, yet it is good to see the bright lights, and the lovely decorations which make the night glow at this special time of the year. Churches will have special music, concerts will emphasize all the beautiful music of Christmas, and this is one feature of Christmas which is to be thoroughly commended.

In every neighborhood there will be baskets filled to the full with good food, "goodies" for children, toys and warm clothing, which many organizations prepare and distribute, so that children in very poor and unfortunate homes may share in the joys of the season.

But none of this mirrors Heaven's view of Christmas! Not for one moment does Heaven bend to these matters which are, after all, developed from purely human ideas.

Here is what God has to say about the coming of the Son of God in human form: "But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons" (Gal. 4:4, 5). This is a clear statement of the reason why the Babe was born that night in Bethlehem, so long ago. This is Heaven's

view of the great event; this is what it meant to God. What must it have cost God to give up His beloved Son, to send Him to certain death, to sorrow and suffering!

Jesus Christ came into this world for the express purpose of seeking the lost. This was why the conception and birth of Christ was different from that of any other child born into this world. This was not "of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." No man planned to have this baby come. This was God's plan and "God sent forth his Son." This is the first great fact of Christmas.

God did not send His Son into the world that we might all enjoy a celebration embodying kindness, mercy, goodness, sweetness and light. Jesus came to "redeem them that were under the law." to seek and to save lost sinners, to hunt out the wayward and bring them to God.

You will recall, when the Lord Jesus had reached manhood and, at about the age of thirty, was baptized by John the Baptist, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). That was the testimony of God.

The Father knew that His Son would be rejected, abused, insulted, and maltreated; He knew that men would ignore His message and despise Him. God knew that His beloved Son would one day climb Calvary's mountain to suffer death, the just for the unjust - but that is why He came! Oh, the blessed truth of it - Christ came to suffer and take our place. Let us keep that fact in mind as we celebrate Christmas this year, and then we shall understand the true meaning of this most holy season.

We can never fully grasp what it meant to the Father to send His Son, but have you ever thought what it must have meant to the Lord Jesus to leave the Father, to leave that heavenly home and come down to this dark and sinful world?

There is a passage in the epistle to the Philippians which conveys deep truth about this. "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:5-8). The Lord Jesus was in the "form of God" as the second Person of the Trinity. He had always been God by nature, but He was willing to give up all such privilege, and let us remember that He died the death of a common criminal. When Jesus Christ came into this world as a tiny Baby, this was what He and the Father had in mind - He came for this purpose! He declared it in His own words: "And I, if I be lifted up [on the cross] will draw all men unto me. This he said, signifying what death he should die" (John 12:32, 33).

Again, the book of Hebrews gives us the words of our blessed Lord: "Wherefore when he cometh into the world, he saith . . . a body thou hast prepared me . . . Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me) to do thy will, O God" (Heb. 10:5-7). "A body thou hast prepared" - "I come to do thy will, O God" - what a perfect picture of the beginning and end of the good news we celebrate at Christmas! The Lord Jesus, living in the human body of Jesus of Nazareth, yielded Himself unto the will of His Father, showing us once and for all what the will of God is for this world.

Matthew sets this great truth clearly before us in one verse, "Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (20:28).

The Lord Jesus sets forth His own heart of love in the tenth chapter of John, where we read, ". . . I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly. I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep . . . As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep" (10:10-15). This, then, is what the Lord Jesus thought of His coming to earth, into a prepared human body.

When Jesus of Nazareth was born in that little town of Bethlehem one clear, starlight night, the whole course of His life was already pre-determined and ordained by His Father in heaven. When the Lord Jesus was here upon the earth, He did only the things which pleased His Father. He walked only in the ways His Father prescribed, and He moved into the experience of death that He might conquer it and rise triumphant from its clutch.

We are told very little about the boy Jesus. We have the account of His being found in the temple, ". . . sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers" (Luke 2:46, 47).

We have that beautiful picture of His mother who, although she did not understand, yet ". . . kept all these sayings in her heart" (Luke 2:51); and the description of Him, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with god and man," (Luke 2:52). Then, silence until the Lord reached the age of thirty, and His public ministry began.

We may be sure, however, that during all those so-called "silent years," He was ever in the will of God, and always before Him was the purpose for which He had come, to bring redemption to mankind.

At the time of the wedding in Cana of Galilee, when His mother came to him, He was clear in his statement that ". . . mine hour is not yet come" (John 2:4). But there came a time, we are told ". . . when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world [the disciples], he loved them unto the end" (John 13:1). From that point on, He moved directly forward to the appointed end.

On one occasion He had said, "I am the light of the world . . ." (John 8:12), and upon another, "I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work" (John 9:4). He knew the night was coming, when He would be hanging on the cross, but He pressed forward in the will of God, for the whole course of His life had been God-ordained.

When Peter tried to defend Him, the Lord Jesus said, ". . . Put up thy sword into the sheath: the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?" (John 18:11). And Matthew adds to this account the following words to Peter, "Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matt. 26:53).

Our blessed Lord could easily have evaded the soldiers as they came to arrest Him, but He knew He was not only obeying His Father, but fulfilling the prophetic words about Himself.

Let us think about this, so that the warm, glowing truth of it may light our Christmas into blessing we have never known before! The Babe of Bethlehem came to suffer and to die. The circumstances of His birth were in God's control; everything surrounding His life was in the hands of His Father; He was presented to the world when the Holy Spirit descended upon Him like a dove, and the voice of God spoke. He was continually surrounded by the providence of God, never left alone, guided and strengthened day by day in His human life, and He lived out that life to the glory of God. He had one thing in mind, and that was to glorify His Father in heaven, and work the works His Father had commanded.

Have we wandered far afield from Christmas? No, beloved, no! This is the heart and glory of the Christmas story, God's unspeakable Gift to you and to me, the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is offering eternal life, and only one thing remains for us to do, accept it!

Because we love Him, we will feel uneasy and unhappy about the commercial uses to which unregenerate men put this season of the year, as it were, taking advantage of Christmas. But we can unite our hearts to pray, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," and ask that in His own infinite mercy, the Lord may speak to some of these careless and indifferent hearts, and woo them to

Himself.

As we go to church and rise to sing "O Come, all ye faithful," may we have hearts filled to the brim with praise and thanksgiving! Then Christmas will be merry indeed!

What Can Christmas Mean . . .

If I Am Not A Christian?

Christmas Day and all of its attendant festivities can present a serious problem to a non-Christian individual who gives thoughtful consideration to the things he hears and sees. It is possible to treat the whole season as if it were a gala social affair, on a level with the folk customs of other countries, something in which the whole community joins, but that is hardly sufficient to explain away the religious significance of the holiday period.

It is hard for anybody residing in this country, who can speak and understand our language, not to give some thought to what is depicted in the pageants, sung in the carols, portrayed on television, and read on Christmas cards. In all of these avenues are found certain elements which carry any thinking individual back to the source, to the very heart of the Christmas Story, to the birth of a Babe unlike any other baby ever born.

Now, if I were not a Christian, I would have to face the fact that this story is either true or untrue. If the story is not true, I would be faced with the further fact that a good many people must be fools. If you look around you, you will have to admit, as I would, that the majority of the citizens of any given community celebrate Christmas in one way or another. They must either be a bit foolish, or liars: there is no middle ground. If they accept the story, they must be foolish, simple-minded folk. On the other hand, if they reject the whole basis, and feel that the foundation upon which the story rests is false, then their very celebration of the event amounts to their confessing to a lie!

Another problem would then have to be met. If this is all a lie, a well-planned hoax, it has inspired the most noble element in our culture. No season of the year touches the human heart as does Christmas. I doubt if many people are inspired at any other time to act as they do at this season. As an intelligent and rational person, I must face this dilemma, that if this whole story is false, a lie, a hoax, it has somehow inspired the most noble acts in our culture.

To suggest that people are deliberately promoting a lie would be to insult all the worthy citizens of the community. The insinuation would be that all church members were collaborating in and perpetuating the hoax. This would be a terrific indictment on the community.

The other side of the question is this: can I accept the fact that this beautiful story is true, but refuse to accept the Christ who makes Christmas a time of joy and glory? Many people are in this state of confusion, either unsure of the truth, or thinking it probably is true, but hardening their hearts against the message they hear on every hand. If this is my condition, Christmas will thrust a challenge into my face, for day after day I am confronted with the Christmas story, the simple glorious message of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ into the world, and I have turned my back upon Him. I turn my back on the Babe in the manger, the Man to whom children flocked, and who blessed them as He took them in His arms. I refuse to think through this challenge, for fear it might be true, and down deep in my heart, I know I am a fool, and in a very real sense of the word, I am a wicked individual.

The word *wicked* really means *off course*, going in the wrong direction. And if I continue on this course, if I go on living my life year after year without turning to the Lord Jesus Christ, it shows that

basically I care nothing about my family or my fellow man, or my own soul. I am living solely to please my lower nature.

So another problem confronts me. I say to myself, I cannot accept this nonsensical and preposterous story. But if I were not a Christian, when Christmas comes, how shall I act? Shall I join in the festivities? Shall I join in the Christmas party where carols are sung, when I think the whole thing is a lie? If I sing them, I am a hypocrite; if I don't sing them, I seem churlish. Shall I simply keep away from a pageant, or any other Christmas program, and turn off the television when such a program is shown? How about Christmas cards? The themes, the pictures, everything about many of the cards suggest that which I consider a tremendous hoax. Therefore I cannot enter into the custom of my community and exchange cards.

Let us go a step further. It would seem to me that such a state of mind would be mine at almost any time of the year, if I follow through to a logical conclusion. As one looks around this country, there is plenty of evidence of the blessing and benefit brought upon our land by the gospel. Either I must cynically give the credit to human nature, by claiming that basically folks are nice, or I will have to admit that Christian influences have had a tremendous effect upon us. How can I dismiss benefits to individuals, blessing upon families and communities, the very laws that govern us when so much that is good and just and right in our society had its origin in the teaching of the Word of God, and the witness of the gospel? Can I really think that Santa Claus would account for all the glow in the faces of little children?

I might ask myself the question, if the goodness and justice we see is the result of human nature, of folk lore, of tradition, why does it not appear in non-Christian societies around the world? The glow and glory of Christmas reaches its height only where the Christian gospel has been honored and taught.

If I have children, what do I tell them? They ask about the Christmas story, and I say there is no Santa Claus, there was no Baby in a manger in Bethlehem, putting both on the same level, and then must go on logically to say they will one day find out there is no God, either. Do I tell my children this? I turn my back on all the joy and happiness there is at the holiday season, and I take my family with me on the dark and dreary path I have marked out for myself. I turn my back on all the love of God in sending His Son to redeem the world, and on all the kindness and generosity manifested by people who have been influenced by that greatest of all Gifts. And I have nothing left to substitute, for myself or my family.

I am reminded of the Last Supper, and of one of the men who were present. As the Lord Jesus had His last time of fellowship with the twelve, this man was one of that number. He got up from that holy table, and went out to betray his Master and Lord. There is a line in the book of John which is very descriptive. It says that Judas went out, and then come the words, ". . . and it was night" (13:30).

If I were in such a state as I have outlined above (and praise God, I am not, for my heart and life are His!), then I think I would be conscious of the utter darkness and night into which I was plunging. Is there someone reading this page who is facing night, no ray of gospel light to brighten the gloom? Why not make this Christmas a time of homecoming on your part? Why not turn to the Father and accept the Gift He has so freely offered, finding in Jesus Christ a Savior from sin, and a daily Companion to bring joy, strength, and peace of mind - not just in December, but all year 'round!

If I Am Not Well?

We think of Christmas as a time when everyone is happy, when all hearts are gay, and we tend to forget that illness, suffering, accidents are the portion of many people - Christians and non-Christians - at this season as well as all during the year. I want to think with you about this particular aspect of life, as we consider the Christmas message.

Perhaps you are a shut-in, never able to share in the normal activities of the household or the church. You may have met with an accident, and be laid aside for weeks or months, or you may have been afflicted with severe illness, and are still weak and feeble as a result.

If this illness is temporary, if you are laid aside for a definite period of time which spans the Christmas Season, you can be sure that friends will be kind. You may not be able to enter into your usual activities. There may be no "shopping sprees" with a list of dear ones to remember; you may not be able to attend the family dinner, or the parties or church events; but you can be sure your family and friends will try to bring Christmas to your bedside or your sick room. You will certainly have a rich harvest of cards, for in this country we do have a remarkable custom of sending cards for every conceivable occasion, and most of all for Christmas.

As I have called on many different people, it has been wonderful to see the displays of cards, some pinned on curtains, some hung from specially made holders, all displayed to bring joy and happiness during the season. There will be gifts, probably suitable to your particular needs, for although you cannot get out to shop, many of your friends and dear ones will see that you are remembered.

In addition to these personal favors, you will have the added blessing of radio. The air waves are filled, day and night for a short time before Christmas, with the gay and glad music of the season. Special programs will be heard, many of them of true Christian significance; and if you have a television set in your sick room, that will also bring a share of Christmas programs to make glad your heart.

Of course it is entirely possible that you may find yourself overlooked. It has happened! Sometimes people become so busy with their preparations for the holidays that they tend to forget those who are laid aside. Should this happen to you, it will be a real test for you. It will show you whether or not you are self-centered, selfish, allowing yourself to give way to self-pity. It may be true that other years you have been able to participate freely in the celebrations, but even if the expectation of Christmas brings no joy, there is still the truth of Christmas to comfort and sustain you!

But perhaps you are one of the group of shut-in friends who can never again expect to share in family and community and church joys again. You have been out of the center of events for so long that many people have forgotten you, and Christmas only brings you distress and sorrow, and a feeling of loneliness. There will be testing and temptation. You will be tempted to allow your heart to become hard with bitterness, with envy of those who go about in full health and strength, and you will look up into the face of God and ask, Why? You may be tempted to criticize and hate those who no longer remember to come and bring you Christmas cheer. You can let this spirit grow until you will doubt even the goodness and mercy of God, question His providence and kindness, and blame Him for permitting you to be in such a place of sorrow and suffering.

Change may have been necessary, and you have had to move with your family to a new locality, where nobody knows you. There is perhaps no loneliness worse than that of the sick room, not only at Christmas, but at other times. You can hear people having a good time - your family and friends - in the living room, the dining room, all over the house, but you are shut up within four walls, with no fun or

joy, and as you hear the laughter, it seems you cannot stand the despair which fills your heart.

But beloved, I bring you a Christmas message of joy. *Now* is the time for you to turn to God. If you are already a believer, and have allowed the bitter circumstances of life to rob you of peace and joy in companionship with the Lord, you can be sure of one glorious fact: you may have turned your back on Him, but He has never, never turned His face from you, nor taken His hand out of reach. Look up into the face of Jesus Christ, and let Him flood your heart and life with His joy. Perhaps He has a ministry for you, as one of His tried and tested children, but you have hindered His purpose because of your own sinful attitude. The door of prayer is always open, and many a shut-in friend has found unspeakable joy and blessing in a life of intercession.

But you may not be a Christian. If not, I beg of you, ask for and read a Bible, seek help and guidance from someone who does know Christ, and enter into joy which will fill your heart and life, no matter what your circumstances.

You may know that there is no cure for your illness, and although you do not know the day, you know that this earthly house, this tabernacle in which you live, is going to fail you one of these days. You don't know how much time you have left, but use it to good advantage. You cannot be present at the Christmas dinner? Then as you lie on that bed of pain, think of others who can, and wish them a happy time. Make your Christmas gift to your family your unselfish interest in their joy and happiness. When you hear them having a good time, ask the Lord to give you grace to say blessings on them!

You will remember the famous story by Charles Dickens, *The Christmas Carol*. There was a *Scrooge* in that story, but there was also *Tiny Tim*, the tiny crippled lad. Do you remember his contribution to the Christmas festivities? "God bless us, every one!" You are bedfast, in pain, lonely? Lift up your heart to God, and then join in that word of Tiny Tim's, and ask for God's blessing upon your dear ones and friends.

You have time to think now. You may not like your thoughts, but let the light of God's grace shine through, look up into the wonderful face of Jesus, turn your eyes upon Him, and you will soon begin to count your blessings. You may not have much longer to live in this sad and sinful world? Then remember how good God has been to you, and thank Him that He has a place prepared for you.

Be sympathetic with those who do not come very often to see you. They have their lives to live, and each one has problems and heartaches. Try to be thoughtful about your own routine, so that your family or friends who come to help can be released for their own holiday pleasures. And leave you alone? Yes, for if you practice such unselfishness, God will make it up to you. He is constantly loving and caring for you, He answers prayer, and He waits only for you to open your heart so that He may flood it with His own peace and joy. Turn your eyes upon Him, and as the old hymn has it, "the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace."

What Can Christmas Mean . . .

If I Am Forsaken In A Broken Home?

Christmas is essentially a family festival. We think of young and old together, aged friends, grandparents, sometimes a great-grandmother or father, uncles, aunts, and the immediate family group - father, mother and brothers and sisters. How blessed are those of us who cherish such a family and count upon a grand and joyous reunion each Christmas Season. True, the numbers do tend to grow smaller, and some are called Home as age creeps on apace. But they are held in loving remembrance. Christmas

belongs to the children, but somehow it belongs to grandparents, too, in a very special way.

The light of God's love seems to glow more brightly, even in the humdrum daily tasks of the homekeeper, as Christmas draws near. Heaven's door seems to be standing just a bit ajar, as though there is a bright light flooding through the crack, the very presence of God Himself. It is a time of mutual fellowship and sharing. But oh, how hard it is when the home has been broken up, and a father is missing, a mother is not there. The children cannot understand, and Heaven's light is not shining down in blessing!

A broken home can be caused through death, which must be accepted and courage sought by the remaining parent to make the holiday season as happy as possible for the children, even though a heart is breaking.

When, however, a home has been filled with strife and dissension for many months, and the children have heard unseemly bickering, and things their little ears should never have had to listen to, their minds are keen to recognize that something is wrong.

We are told that lack of love and a feeling of insecurity accounts for much of the juvenile delinquency we see on every hand today. When parents quarrel, they forget little listening ears and wondering eyes. Or they do not care. There are occasions when the children themselves are the bone of contention, either unwanted, or used as a pawn by one parent or another. The Word of God has expressed condemnation along this line: "But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt. 18:6).

It has been my experience to deal with many such problems, and I can think of a friend of ours, a mother with two children, but no father to assume the responsibilities which are rightfully his. He is around the town somewhere, but he left his home and lives a life of sin and shame. I am also thinking of a father with two children, but the mother has fled away. And sadly, I can remember a child who lives largely with strangers. Nobody seem to care; the father and the mother could not get along one with the other, and neither of them show any interest in caring for the child, let alone showing love toward it. How tragic such conditions are! And when Christmas time comes round, the very joy and happiness and "togetherness" of normal families seem to make the lonely and forsaken, sadder and lonelier than ever.

If I were facing such a situation (and I admit that it is difficult to imagine myself in such a case), there are certain things I would say to myself. Let me share them with you, trusting they will prove of help to anyone who is lonely at Christmas.

You will need to accept the fact that we live in an evil world. There is no gainsaying that. You face the problem and heartache of a broken home, and these things happen again and again in this sin-cursed world, for "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9.) Perhaps you need to take a new view of mankind. Possibly your heart and mind should have been more prepared for the tribulation which has engulfed your life. The lightning does not strike every house, but you know it is certain to hit some, and so often human nature thinks, "It can't happen to me!"

One thing is entirely profitless, and that is to attempt to assign the blame. It doesn't really make any difference who was at fault. Be fair, and face up to this.

Most homes are founded on promises. When a young couple come to the marriage ceremony, they make promises, each to the other. The man promises to be a faithful and good husband, and the woman promises to be a faithful and good wife. They plan to do things together, and homes are blessed when husband and wife keep those sacred vows. But the tragedy is that in America today so very many fail in this respect. Both girl and boy break their vows, and slowly but surely the rift widens. It is well to

remember that, for such a situation does not occur in a week or a month. It comes slowly, with little failures growing into situations which seem unbearable.

There is a slang phrase, not very nice, but most descriptive of what you are probably feeling if you face this Christmas from the sad and lonely walls of a broken home. You feel you have been given "a dirty deal!" There is no way in which you can put Christmas decorations on it, and there is no use in looking for joy, for none is there. When your home was broken, it was as if a mirror was shattered into tiny fragments, and you sit desolate among the pieces.

But wait! There are some things about Christmas which matter, and you can *reach for them*. There are still some things that are true. Even if you have been unkindly dealt with, deceived, disappointed and disillusioned, this treatment has come to you from an individual, from people. This tragedy is the result of the conduct of human beings. Lift your eyes! Look straight up, for God has sent His Son to die for you and to give you peace of mind and heart in any circumstances in which you may find yourself.

This is the true meaning of Christmas, for God sent His Son into the world to save you. "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). "For God *so loved the world* [and you are a part of that world of human beings,], that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish [eternally, and also perish now from heartache and tragedy], but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

In spite of the ache in your heart, the tears in your eyes blinding your perspective, look at the Babe of Bethlehem. Look into the story of the coming of the Lord of Glory to dwell in our poor human hearts, sinful as they all are, bringing forgiveness of sin, peace and joy, and know deep down in your heart that God does care for you!

When God sent His Son into the world to suffer and die for us, He did not evade one iota of the pain or the shame. He suffered as no man has ever suffered, for you and for me. If you are being hurt, remember that He is not One who cannot be ". . . touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). God is not unsympathetic about your suffering, for as the old and beloved hymn has it, "His eye is on the sparrow and I know He cares for me."

Another source of help and strength for you is the fact that there are some friends still in your circle of acquaintances, some who think well of you and would want to wish you well. In spite of the fact that your pain has come at the hands of a fellow human being, look about you at a time like this. Be ready to respond to your friends' good will, and to their cheerful manner. To be sure, some people are bad, and would exploit even Christmas to their own gain. As you look about you at any Christmas season, you will see people who are simply making money out of Christmas. You are so downhearted, your spirit is so discouraged, your heart is aching, and it is enough to make you feel worse. Business men give gifts to their good customers, not because of their own feeling of holiday spirit, but because they want to keep on receiving orders. Some companies give a Christmas bonus to their employees to keep them contented, to keep up their morale.

You will notice, too, if you are out on the streets on the afternoon of Christmas Eve, office parties are breaking up, and men and women going home drunk. Oh, how this must hurt the heart of God! This sort of thing is a travesty on the real spirit of Christmas, and on the very name of the Lord Jesus, who came into human form that glorious night, that He might die, rise again and redeem the world. You do not take part in such festivities, but to know about such things or think about them only makes you feel sadder.

But "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face; and the things of the earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace."

Look up! God *does* care; Heaven *is* real; God is gracious; and if you will let Him, He can and will make your Christmas a time of joy and peace. The choice is yours.