

STAYING FOCUSED
THIS CHRISTMAS

Decorations are being dug out of the garages, trees are getting purchased from temporary lots set up in empty fields (or perhaps just being assembled like at our house), lighted trims and inflatable decorations are starting to illuminate our neighborhoods at dusk, and therefore the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season has begun. So for the next few days as we approach this most joyous of celebrations, it seems if we don't want to lose the "Christ" in Christmas we need to find ways to take a little time and focus on Him. So this short run devotional series is being shared with you to hopefully brighten your day, or at least keep you pointed in the right direction.

When does the Christmas story actually start? A lot of folks might answer that it all began in the manger in the little town of Bethlehem because this is when Jesus' earthly life began. However if we see this as our starting point, we actually place a huge limitation on the significance of Christ and Christmas.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1) In this verse, the Greek phrase *in the beginning* is more accurately rendered *beyond or outside of the beginning of time*. This means that Jesus, as the Word, has always been in existence. Bible scholars refer to this attribute as the eternity of Christ. His earthly life may have begun in Bethlehem, but His divine life has always been and has no beginning.

Numerous witnesses in the New Testament point out the eternal nature of Jesus. While John the Baptist was about six months older than Jesus, he makes the amazing statement that Christ's life actually preceded his own (John 1:30). This is an obvious allusion to the eternal existence of Jesus. The apostle Paul takes this thought even further when he wrote that Christ is before all things (Colossians 1:17). As if this weren't enough, the Lord Himself made reference to His preexistent state on multiple occasions:

And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was. (John 17:5)

Father . . . You loved Me before the foundation of the world. (John 17:24)

Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM." (John 8:58)

The Christmas story doesn't begin in the manger because Jesus' existence didn't start there. God's act of giving His precious Son to mankind was actually initiated before time even began, as the Bible tells us that Jesus was offered on behalf of our sins before the foundations of the world (1 Peter 1:20; Revelation 13:8). That silent night in Bethlehem was simply a matter of time catching up with God's eternal desire to provide us with His salvation.

The Inconvenience of Christ

December 2

I believe it was comedian Gallagher who once joked, "And Christmas...it comes right in the middle of the holidays...so we don't have anytime to enjoy it." Have you ever felt that way? One can get so wrapped up in the activities this time of the year brings that they can struggle to find time for Jesus. But lets face it...we were not the first ones to be put upon by finding time for Jesus.

Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:4-7)

Have you ever noticed what an inconvenience Baby Jesus was? If it had been me, I can only imagine the questions that I would have been asking if I had been in Mary or Joseph's shoes. "Come on God, don't we have enough to deal with? Why does this baby need to be born here in Bethlehem? Can't you hold things off until we get back home to Nazareth? Or at the very least secure a motel room for us?"

Let's face it, our culture has done a great job of conditioning us to expect convenience. We've come to believe that it's some sort of entitlement that each of us deserves. Everything is advertised as being more convenient, and therefore anything that poses an "inconvenience to our lives" is by default negative. Enter Jesus. As the Christmas account shows, the Lord does not make life more convenient for us. In fact, as you read through the Bible you find that those who were closest to the Lord were those who were most inconvenienced. Jesus is many things, but He isn't always convenient.

We struggle with this because we want life to fit in with our own plans and expectations. This is painfully evident during this time of year as we make our plans to celebrate and enjoy the Christmas season. We strive to make our agendas precise and airtight. But God's agenda will often conflict with ours, and at these moments we have to make a choice. We can either fume at the fact that we've been inconvenienced, or we can surrender our expectations to God and ask Him to fill us with His agenda for our lives. When we choose God's choice, we find the joy of obedience in the midst of being inconvenienced.

An Excellent Example

December 3

When we think of Christmas the Christmas story, we think of the wisemen, the shepherds, Mary, Jesus of course, but one of the "minor" characters in the story seems to be Joseph. I know as a kid when I finally got to play that part in the church school pageant...I was excited. My job...walks in with and just stand next to Mary. But his part is certainly much more significant than just "be there." And from it we learn some important things.

Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS. Matthew 1:24-25

Now the fact is that we don't have much written about Joseph. We do, however, learn that he was the one to name Jesus. It may seem simple to us, but Joseph's act of naming Jesus involved three things that make for an excellent example.

Probably the first thing one notices is that Joseph's act involved was faith. Think about it. It had to be a pure act of faith to believe what the angel had told him concerning Mary and her unusual pregnancy. He simply could have turned his back on the entire scene, and the Bible even tells us that Joseph was certainly leaning that way (Matthew 1:19). However, Joseph chose to look at the situation through the eyes of faith, and he trusted the testimony that he had been given, even down to the very name that the child should have.

But it didn't stop there as Joseph's act also demonstrated obedience. In verse 21, the angel gave him the command to do something. He was charged with the task of naming the child. As we can all attest, belief in something and obedience to something are two entirely different things. By naming Jesus, Joseph took his example to the next level and proved himself obedient to the call of heaven.

Finally, Joseph's act involved ownership. You see in that particular culture, you claimed a child as your own when you named them. Therefore when Joseph named Jesus, he was officially adopting Him as his legal heir. Of course, this form of ownership was insignificant compared to Joseph adopting God's Son into his heart.

So while we don't have a lot of knowledge about the life of Joseph, what we do know serves as a great example for all of us. His life includes three things that we all need to emulate: We need to be people of faith. We need to be people of obedience. And we need to be people who personally and completely identify ourselves as Christ's own.

At Christmas time, it is fun to get out all the decorations we have collected over the years and place them on our Christmas tree. Each one is a tiny work of art and all together they make a beautiful tree. Some are store bought, some hand made, all mixed together. This is an important thing for our family. We gather and do this together. There is laughter as stories about some of the ornaments are shared. But when it is done, if a person that is visiting and looks at the tree for just a moment, they can't possibly take it all in. They can understand the significance of each treasure.

I have found that when I have read the Christmas story in the Bible in the past, there are lots of small details that can be easily overlooked. You see there is significance behind everything that we see in Scripture. Even the minutest detail is filled with meaning, and this includes the baby Jesus being wrapped in swaddling cloths at His birth.

And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. Luke 2:12 (NKJV)

There was nothing particularly fancy about swaddling cloths. Anyone who knows anything about babies knows that you can't get too attached to the pristine appearance of what they wear. Swaddling cloths were never expected to look impressive; they were just expected to fulfill the function of keeping an infant bundled up. In this sense, these swaddling cloths represent the humanity of Christ. As the eternal Word came to earth, He wrapped Himself in the lowly swaddling cloths of human flesh. There was nothing particularly fancy about the human form that Christ assumed, but it was needed in order to enable Him to fulfill His mission.

This isn't of course the only time what Jesus was wearing had a special meaning. Moving ahead, we see Jesus wrapped in something else. The occasion is no longer the dawn of His birth but the dusk of death. Just prior to Jesus' crucifixion, the Bible tells us that the Roman soldiers, who were entrusted with His execution, mockingly cloaked Him in a scarlet robe (Matthew 27:28). Again, there is a deep significance here as we consider that the Bible compares our sins with scarlet (Isaiah 1:18). How appropriate for the suffering Savior to be robed in something that represents the sins of humanity as He carried them to the cross.

Finally, we look ahead to the time when the entire world will see Jesus wrapped in the dazzling vesture of His infinite glory (Matthew 24:27; Revelation 19:13). Everyone will finally see Jesus as the glorious King that He truly is, and 2 Thessalonians 1:9 tells us that Jesus' appearance will be so brilliant at this point in time that His mere radiance will consume His enemies.

These three different wrappings represent the three mountain peaks of Christ's life: His incarnation, crucifixion, and glorification. But before we can appreciate Jesus as either Savior or King, we must first acknowledge Him as the Babe who willingly wrapped Himself in the swaddling cloths of human flesh.

Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. (Philippians 2:6-7 NLT)

Have you ever been given a task and thought, or perhaps even expressed out loud, “Why me?” Perhaps the assignment was to do something that you were absolutely positive no one would take you seriously if you attempted it. Well, get used to it. God does that to His faithful a lot. And that isn't a new thing with Him at all. He has this tendency to recruit unique individuals to get His message out. And don't forget...He knows what He's doing.

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Luke 2:8-9

Now if we proceed with the assumption that everything that the Lord does is deliberate, His choice to involve shepherds in Jesus' birth must be no exception. Now in one's basic Christmas pageant, we find they tend to glamorize the shepherd's life. Therefore a bit of cultural perspective is clearly in order here.

Shepherds typically weren't the type of people that you would want to have around at a gathering. Sheep are naturally smelly and dirty, and this had a powerful carry-over effect on the men dedicated to spending their lives alongside of them. “Respectable” people typically treated shepherds as outcasts, and shepherds pretty much found themselves at the bottom of the social ladder.

I find it amazing that the Lord chose to reveal His plan to these men (Luke 2:11). The most glorious announcement in human history was given to a few grimy guys who wouldn't earn a second look from another human being. It's even more amazing to me that God actually invited these shepherds to come and see the Christ-child. These men, who were undoubtedly unaccustomed to receiving invitations, were suddenly summoned to see the Creator in His cradle (Luke 12:2).

Finally, I realize how amazing it was that God choose to use these men to proclaim His message to the world (Luke 2:17). Of all the eloquent statesmen that the planet had to offer, the Lord chose to use a ragtag gang of outcasts.

The fact is God prefers to use those who are outcasts because it underscores His glory and grace. 1 Corinthians 1:27 tells us that we weren't chosen because of our strengths but because of our weaknesses. Our weaknesses act as a dark backdrop against which God's glory and grace brightly blaze.

Whether we want to admit it or not, we have a lot in common with these shepherds. By the amazing grace of God, we too are the recipients of God's incredible plan, we too have been invited to the Savior's side, and we too have been entrusted with the task of proclaiming Christ to the world!

For a few years when I was young, my mother, in an attempt to keep my younger sister and I from rummaging through all the Christmas presents under the tree, she numbered them. So instead of a package saying "TO: _____" it might say "4." However a couple of days before Christmas she put the tags on and on Christmas morning when we turned over a package that had our name on it, we were excited. Nothing like finding out a gift is for you.

God's gift of His Son is like that. When we first realize that it was a gift for us and we accept it, what joy we feel. And it is for everyone, just as the angel proclaimed.

Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people." Luke 2:10

We can sing, "Joy to the world . . ." because Jesus is available to all people. God's heart toward humanity is inclusive, not exclusive. The Scriptures teach us that He wants everyone to receive the salvation provided in His Son (John 3:16; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9) and that absolutely no one falls beyond the scope of His love.

This wonderful truth is represented by the amazing diversity of those first few lives that were touched by the Christ-child. In terms of social status, the shepherds were typically regarded as the despised outcasts of society. And yet we see that Jesus came for them (Luke 2:8-9).

In terms of race, the wise men that traveled from the east certainly were not Jewish but were probably from Babylon and, therefore of Chaldean descent (Matthew 2:1). Most would have naturally assumed that non-Jews would have nothing to do with the Jewish Messiah. But we see that this wasn't the case by their inclusion in the account of Jesus?

In terms of age, we're told that Anna was very aged and that she had just as much of a share in the joy of Christ's birth as anyone else (Luke 2:36-38). We see Jesus spending time with people from all walks of life, regardless of their social status, race, or age.

At this point, we can see how far our flesh is from the heart of God. The fact is that our fallen natures usually create barriers and restrictions. If a person is different from us socially, racially, or even in age, sometimes in our hearts we disqualify them from having the same right to Jesus that we do.

As we've seen, nothing could be farther from the heart of God, and we need to understand that Jesus is for everyone. As we celebrate the gift of God's Son, let's remember that He has a heart for everyone and so should we. And what a gift that is.

An Unlikely Introduction

December 7

Being a performer, one of the things I am always confronting is “How will I be introduced.” In the past I've had folks do a great job at it and I've also experienced some where it would have been better for me to just walk out on to the stage cold. The introduction helps establish the first impression on the audience. And it has been said by my good friend Victor Broski that in the first seven seconds the audience decides if they are going to like you or not. So that first impression is key.

Now I can't imagine a better intro than what the shepherds received to tell them to go and see Jesus. But when they saw Jesus for the first time, He didn't have a "star quality" look. He was just a baby.

And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. Luke 2:12

Have you ever stopped to wonder why Jesus came as a baby? Of all the possible scenarios, it almost seems like a mistake was made somewhere in Heaven! However, far from being a mistake, the infancy of Christ was an important part of God's unfolding drama of redemption.

The infancy of Christ made Him completely relatable. None of us can complain that Jesus doesn't understand. From conception to resurrection, there is no possible phase of our existence that Jesus hasn't already experienced. As a baby, He came into this world just as all of us do. No shortcut was taken in His preparation and presentation as the ultimate representative of humanity (Hebrews 4:15).

The infancy of Christ made Him completely vulnerable. God loves to use weak things to overthrow the mighty 1 Corinthians 1:27. The amazing truth is that a kicking, gurgling, cooing Baby would eventually go on to obliterate the demonic forces of darkness that held humanity captive. How incredible that the Ultimate Warrior would arrive as the weakest and most vulnerable of all living creatures!

The infancy of Christ also made Him completely recognizable. The prophet Isaiah had foretold centuries earlier that the Messiah would come as an infant (Isaiah 7:14; 9:6). By being born as a baby, Jesus perfectly fulfilled the prophetic word and was, therefore, recognizable to anyone who was watching for His coming.

There are certain things in life that simply inspire awe and wonder, and this is definitely one of them. Take a moment out of your day to bask in how infinitely wise our God was in sending Jesus to us as a baby and how worthy He is of all praise and glory!

Heaven in earth, and God in man. Great little one! Whose all-embracing birth lifts earth to heaven, stoops heaven to earth.- Richard Crashaw

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says the LORD. Isaiah 55:8

Anyone who's ever been near a Nativity or seen a Christmas pageant has probably seen the wise men kneeling before Jesus in the manger. But at the risk of sounding like a Christmas Grinch, keep in mind that this beloved image of the three wise men didn't technically occur at the time of Christ's birth. The biblical record reveals that this encounter took place about two years after the manger scene.

And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Matthew 2:11

As a matter of fact, the Bible doesn't even tell us that there were three wise men. This assumption has been made over the years based on there being three gifts. Realistically, there was probably a large caravan of wise men, as it would have been wise for safety's sake to travel in a larger number in those days.

But the fact that these gift-bearing wise men have become synonymous with Christmastime is somewhat appropriate since they sum up the true spirit of Christmas. I'm not referring to the presents they gave, but to their preoccupation with Jesus' presence. Notice how the Bible tells us that they fell down and worshiped Him. It was purely Jesus' presence that prompted their journey as well as their generosity.

In contemporary terms, we might say He wasn't as far as they were concerned. So much so, that there was nothing left to do in their minds but worship Jesus once they were face to face with Him. They don't strike up a conversation with Mary and Joseph, they don't build a memorial to commemorate their trip, they don't even seek to have their own needs met (and we can be sure that after a long journey they had some). They simply fall down and worship Jesus for who He is.

That's the true spirit of Christmas: coming to the realization that Jesus, just Jesus Himself, is the end of our journey and that worship is the only fitting response to His presence.

We all know that this is the season of giving. It's safe to say that all of us will engage in some sort of gift-giving this month. But I wonder how many of us have considered the fact that there's a right way and a wrong way to give.

There are a few things that prompt us to give for all the wrong reasons. Sometimes, we give because we want to make ourselves feel better, and we know that giving can produce a short-lived rush of positive feelings. Other times, we give with the expectation of receiving something tangible in return.

I don't need to explain the disappointment that follows when this doesn't go down as anticipated! We also give out of guilt. In fact, I've personally tried to use my act of giving to God as a way to cover up the fact that I'm feeling guilty about my lack of communion with Him. All of these motivations will leave us empty and immature.

So what is the right kind of giving? Well we need to look no further than probably the most famous verse in the Bible, the sixteenth verse of the third chapter of the Gospel of John, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Let's face it. If we need to model someone when it comes to giving, God must be our model and there's no better example than the way that He gave His Son to the world.

The first thing that we notice is that God gave charitably. "For God so loved the world..." means that His gift was preceded by a loving attitude. Loving people is an amazing way to refine your motives for giving to them!

We also notice that God gave freely. The gift of God's Son was unconditionally given, and there weren't any strings attached.

We find that God gave thoughtfully. He didn't just give something arbitrarily, but He gave according to what our need was . . . salvation!

Finally, He gave something of value . . . His only begotten Son.

The next time we pick out a present to give to someone, we should ask ourselves a few questions. Do I already love this person as I should? Am I expecting anything in return or am I giving freely and unconditionally? Have I taken the time to think through what this person needs? Am I giving something of value? By following these guidelines in our giving, we're walking in the footsteps of God.

December 10

You probably have heard the expression, particularly this time of year, “It is better to give than receive.” However, keep in mind that wherever there is a giver, there must also be a receiver. And just as there are right and wrong ways to give, there are also right and wrong ways to receive.

Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that abounds to your account. Philippians 4:17

There are several subtle snares however to receiving well. For some, pride prevents them from receiving something graciously, as they begrudgingly accept something that they believe to be beneath them. For others, bitterness can be a barrier to accepting a gift that is from someone they are holding a grudge against. Still others can have a hard time with false humility: “Oh no, I couldn't possibly accept that from you.” We need to understand that all of these tendencies can get in the way of being the type of receivers that the Lord wants us to be.

As always, Jesus is our perfect example. Have you ever noticed the ways in which Jesus received things? The Bible tells us that He received the hospitality of several different people. Zacchaeus is the most notable, and it's particularly striking that the Lord basically invited Himself over for dinner at his place (Luke 19:5). Jesus also accepted financial assistance from a few faithful women who wanted to help fund His public ministry (Luke 8:30).

And, in perhaps the most striking example of receiving an extravagant gift, Jesus allowed Mary to anoint His head with an alabaster flask, which was worth about a year's wages. Even the disciples were taken aback by the fact that Jesus accepted such a gift (Matthew 26:8).

But what made Jesus such a ready receiver? Here's what we need to remember this holiday season: Christ knew that by receiving, He was actually helping those who were giving. Zacchaeus needed to have an outlet to give in order to express the new nature that God had given him. It was also good for those faithful women to give to Jesus because it became an opportunity for them to build a relationship with Him. As for Mary, her ability to adore Jesus in a meaningful way was important for her spiritual growth.

In similar fashion, we can be good receivers this year by recognizing that by receiving, we're actually helping others to grow in their giving.

The First Christmas Carol

December 11

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, goodwill toward men! - Luke 2:13-14

Webster's Dictionary defines a "Christmas carol" as "a song of praise and celebration." In the verse above, we learn about the very first Christmas carol to have ever graced planet earth. Interestingly enough, angels delivered this inaugural carol. This should strike us as very interesting since angels have a very unique perspective on things. They have the ability to see not only the earthly realm, but the heavenly realm as well. Their joyous song of celebration reflects this awareness because it speaks of Jesus' birth as being momentous, to not only Earth, but Heaven as well.

In Heaven, Jesus' birth brought Glory to God in the highest. More than 35 centuries of divine promises were finally fulfilled in the birth of this Babe. From the beginning of Genesis (3:13) to the end of Malachi (4:2), God sent promise after promise that a Deliverer would come to save humanity from its sin. Jesus' birth ushered in a new era that glorified God as He lay in the manger. From now on, no one could ever question God's goodness or faithfulness to keep His promises.

On Earth, Jesus' birth also brought peace, goodwill toward men. Prior to Christ's coming, the Bible depicts mankind as being at war against God (Ephesians 2:1-3). But through the birth and eventually the death of Jesus, a cease-fire was proclaimed between God and man.

Do you remember the images captured in Times Square on V. E. Day? Sailors and soldiers embraced their sweethearts, mothers and fathers wept tears of gratitude, and every American citizen was overflowing with joy at the fact that the war was finally over. On an infinitely grander scale, this is what happened at the moment of Jesus' birth. The long war between fallen humanity and a holy God was finally over.

No wonder the angels sang that night, and it's a wonder that we don't sing more often. May we allow these truths to penetrate deep within our hearts, and may our lives be full of praise as we celebrate Christ's birth this season.

The Perfect Present

December 12

Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift! II Corinthians 9:15

Are you still shopping? Are you somewhat stuck in finding that perfect present, that ideal item, that greatest of gifts? I don't think you're alone in the crowd of consumers. In fact, I'm convinced that the greater portion of people pushing a shopping cart this month are doing a lot more browsing than buying, more pondering than purchasing. Why? Because everyone is hunting and searching for a perfect present that proves practically impossible to find.

In my case, I want to find something that's very practical and meets a need, but at the same time I want it to be something that's enjoyable and fun to have. I'm looking for something very sophisticated and engaging, yet it needs to be simple and it can't be too complicated. I'm looking for something that is very traditional, but I also want it to be timeless. I want to find something that's unique and very personal, but I also want something that can be universal for everyone from every walk of life. I'm looking for something that is priceless in value, but at the same time it has to be absolutely free.

Now at this point you're probably thinking, hey, we hate to burst your browsing bubble, but what you're looking for doesn't exist! Honestly, you'd have to be God to come up with a gift like that!

Exactly! Because when it comes to the perfect present, the ideal item, the greatest of all gifts, it's none other than God's Son, Jesus Christ. He is practical yet enjoyable, sophisticated yet simple, traditional yet timeless, and uniquely personal yet universally available to all. His gift of salvation is priceless beyond all worldly wealth and yet absolutely free.

As people buzz about searching for the perfect present, we ought to pray that God would give us the opportunity to point them to what they're looking for. Let's lead them to Jesus, who is the perfect present and the only one who enjoys an eternal lifetime guarantee.

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life. John 6:47

"Which list are you on?" That was a question I heard posed yesterday on Radio Disney as my youngest daughter and I were driving home from her Christmas Play practice. The radio personality was asking kids which of Santa's lists they were on: Naughty or Nice. As this legend goes, the only way Santa was going to bring a nice present to someone was if they had been nice, and therefore somehow deserving. Aren't you glad God isn't like Santa? His greatest gift to us has nothing to do if we are deserving or not, because we would all come up short there.

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:6

This verse carries a special significance at this time of year because it's the announcement of God's perfect gift to mankind. However, have you ever considered the atmosphere when this promise was given? In order to understand this, we need to go back a few chapters and see the moral condition of Israel in those days:

So why are you trying to find out the future by consulting mediums and psychics? Do not listen to their whisperings and mutterings. Can the living find out the future from the dead? Why not ask your God? "Check their predictions against my testimony," says the LORD. "If their predictions are different from mine, it is because there is no light or truth in them. My people will be led away as captives, weary and hungry. And because they are hungry, they will rage and shake their fists at heaven and curse their king and their God. Wherever they look, there will be trouble and anguish and dark despair. They will be thrown out into the darkness." Isaiah 8:19-22

The perfect stage had been set for the perfect gift. The people of Israel had become so spiritually darkened that they were seeking psychics for divine direction. In the process, they were growing all the more empty and burdened by the effects of their sin.

It's at this moment in time, not when they are all seeking God, that He revealed the promise of His perfect gift because He knew it would command their attention as well as their appreciation. Why? One can only suppose it was because their darkness would now be contrasted with His light, and appreciation because God's gift was all the more amazing considering how undeserving they were to receive it.

We need to remember that we were just as lost and undeserving when God's gift came to us. Our sin created the perfect atmosphere for the perfect gift of Jesus Christ to shine in our hearts. And therefore commands our attention and appreciation.

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:8

For unto us a Child is born . . . -Isaiah 9:6

Yesterday we looked at how God gave the promise of His perfect gift in the perfect atmosphere. But today let's take it a step further and consider how this gift also holds a perfect attraction. The verses that precede the promised gift reveal that its attraction is three-fold:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined. You have multiplied the nation and increased its joy . . . For You have broken the yoke of his burden and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian. Isaiah 9:2-4

First of all, we see that God's gift is very attractive because it brings glorious light. What happens when you're in a room and the lights suddenly go out? We tend to freeze because darkness can make us fearful and intimidated. Many people spend their lives fearful and intimidated by the unknown. But Jesus' light gives us the assurance and security that we need to navigate through this life.

God's gift is also attractive in that it brings universal joy. This sometimes is mixed up with the concept of happiness. Happiness is temporary, and it depends on what is happening around us. Joy, however, is eternally everlasting, and it's based on the work that God is doing deep down inside of us. Come what may, a Christian can always stand strong because the Lord's joy is supporting them through every outward circumstance (Nehemiah 8:10).

And finally, God's gift is so attractive because it brings everlasting liberty. Everyone is enslaved by his or her own sinful desires. Apart from God, people are forced to obey their urges whether its drugs, alcohol, greed, etc. But Jesus has the power to set someone free from the power of sin and set him on a path to freedom as they follow after Him.

Glorious light, universal joy, and everlasting liberty. Who wouldn't want a gifts like these? However before people can receive it, they need someone to give it to them. May the Lord help us to give the gift of Him to those who are searching for His light, joy, and freedom.

The Appeal of God's Gift

December 15

An appeal is an urgent plea for something, and in this world we're constantly being confronted with them. From the infomercial that tells us that we need a particular product to the doctor who writes us a prescription, everyone seems to be calling our attention to our need for something. But what about God? Has he presented us with an urgent plea concerning our condition here on planet earth? He certainly has:

Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation. II Corinthians 6:2

God has an urgent appeal for mankind, and that appeal is that we must be saved. But the power of this appeal is found in the manner by which He provided our salvation. God didn't open up the heavens and shout with a loud voice, "YOU MUST BE SAVED!" That would have gotten our attention, but it would have also frightened and distanced us from Him. Instead, God came in the most approachable manner possible . . . as a newborn child.

No one is intimidated by a baby. They lack power and strength, and we tend to be more comfortable around things that we're stronger than. But consider what this cost Jesus. It left Him completely vulnerable and helpless as He came into this world. Yet He was willing to put Himself in this position because He knew the magnitude of our need to approach Him. So when He appeals to us to receive the gift of salvation found in Him, it carries all the more weight because we understand what He went through. The weakness of His infancy makes His appeal all the more powerful.

As stated in previous emails, Jesus is the perfect gift. He came to us in the perfect atmosphere of our need. His attraction is positively perfect in every way. And His coming to us as a newborn babe was the epitome of the perfect appeal.

Of all the instructors I had in school, the one who had the greatest impact was my seventh grade teacher, Tri Robinson. I was blessed with being able to share a story about him in the book *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul* a few years ago thanks in great part to another teacher who was my speaking coach, Jack Schlatter. These two men were more than teachers. They were also counselors who guided me to being a better student and ultimately a better person.

...And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor... Isaiah 9:6

As we have explored in previous devotions, Jesus Christ is God's perfect Christmas present to mankind. And as God's perfect gift, Jesus is also the perfect Counselor, for John writes in his gospel:

And the Word became 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 NKJV)

Over the years I've discovered that godly counsel needs to have a healthy balance of both grace and truth. If someone is all grace then they tend to enable a person to stay in the very condition that they were seeking counsel for. A lot of accountability partners are more than willing to listen and pray with their friends, but shy away from sharing the truth when they need to. But if someone is all truth then they will have the effect of condemning and discouraging a person instead of helping them change.

What we need are counselors who can share the standards of God's truth in a way that is saturated in His gentle grace. This describes Jesus' conduct as a counselor. He never shied away from spelling out the truth about man's sin and his need to change. But He always shared the truth with enough grace to leave His listeners with the hope that they could change.

This is God's perfect gift. And yet many of us have never come to the place of letting this gift into our lives. We haven't opened our hearts to God's grace or allowed His truth to change us. We can get so caught up in the busyness of the Christmas season that we miss out on what matters most. Take some time today to access the grace and truth of God's perfect gift.

What was the first thing you did when you were a kid on Christmas morning? Did you hang out in the kitchen, play out on the front porch, or take the opportunity to sleep in? Of course not! We all woke up early and made a beeline for the Christmas tree because we all knew that the tree is where the gifts were.

I find it fascinating that the Bible refers to the cross as a tree. As Jesus hung and died for our sins, He experienced the curse of God's wrath on our behalf. And as He became a curse for us, He fulfilled the Scriptures that declared in Deuteronomy 21:23, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree."

The cross and the tree are one and the same from God's perspective.

Which leads us to an interesting question, "Where do we go in order to get God's gift of salvation?" We must go to the tree if we want to receive this incredible gift. It cannot be found anywhere else.

Sadly some folks want to adopt Jesus as their moral guru or motivational coach, but not their Suffering Savior. They enjoy the substance of His sermons but ignore the severity of His sacrifice. They almost seem offended when it is pointed out that their sin necessitated His death. But in order to have Jesus at all, a person must accept the fact that He bled and died for their sin on the cross. They must go to the tree:

I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved . . . that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. I Corinthians 15:1-3

Don't Let Blessings Become Burdens

December 18

See! For the LORD has given you the Sabbath...Let every man remain in his place; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day. So the people rested on the seventh day.
Exodus 16:29-30

The Sabbath Day was God's way of making a statement. His message to the children of Israel, "I love you, and I want to bless you. Take a day to rest, regain your strength and get refreshed." What a blessing this must have been to a weary and worn out nation of nomads! The Sabbath was something for the Israelites to celebrate, but we see that by Christ's time they had turned this blessing into a burden:

Now it happened on another Sabbath, also, that He entered the synagogue and taught. And a man was there whose right hand was withered. So the scribes and Pharisees watched Him closely, whether He would heal on the Sabbath, that they might find an accusation against Him. . . . And when He had looked around at them all, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he did so, and his hand was restored as whole as the other. But they were filled with rage, and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus. Luke 6:6-11

The Jewish leaders had become such sticklers about the Sabbath that they even had a hard time seeing someone healed on this special day. Through time and tradition, they had totally lost perspective on God's original intention for the Sabbath. It was meant to be a blessing, not a burden.

I occasionally find that I am guilty of doing the same thing when it comes to Christmas. Getting so caught up in the program and totally missing the heart of the holiday. But I find myself not alone. I hear others, especially those with children saying, "Stay away from the that! Don't go near those presents! Let your mother finish shopping! Leave me alone! Oh, and by the way . . . Merry Christmas!"

So if you sense yourself falling in to Phariseeism, you need to take a step back and see that the big picture isn't about how immaculately decorated your tree is or how perfectly your presents are wrapped. It's about God loving us enough to wrap His Son in human flesh and give Him to us so we all could be with Him in Heaven.

Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift! II Corinthians 9:15

Have you ever received a gift that was such a joyous thing that you couldn't express yourself appropriately? Maybe a surprise award for something you did you thought no one knew about or perhaps just the immense generosity of a friend. Now take that feeling of being so tied up in emotion you can't find words to thank them and multiply it by the grains of the sand on the earth and you might begin to approach the appreciation and awe we should have for what God has done for us.

Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift! -2 Corinthians 9:15

How do you describe the indescribable? You don't, really. You can do your best to get as close to the truth as possible by using this or that expression. But in the end, the description falls short. As powerful of a force as human communication is, there are some things that are infinitely more powerful and beyond its reach. Such is the magnitude of the Gift that God gave to us.

When we consider the everlasting and eternal Son of God, the One who hurled the countless solar systems into existence by simply speaking them forth (John 1:1, Hebrews 11:3), the One for whom all creation was created (Colossians 1:15), the One who is so majestic and glorious that the mighty angels before His throne don't even dare to look upon Him (Isaiah 6:2), was wrapped up in a package of human flesh and presented to you and me. How can you adequately describe that? It's almost embarrassing to even try. There is such a great gap between our words and God's reality.

The ancient Hebrew scribes had a profound sense of this gap. As they meticulously made copies of the Scriptures, they would eventually come to God's name. His personal name was so sacred to them that they would omit the vowels in the name and only write down the consonants: JHVH. God is so indescribably awesome that they felt unworthy to describe or refer to His actual name.

Such reverence should be kept in mind when it comes to the way we view the birth of Jesus Christ. Understand that it is an indescribably awesome gift that we've been given. Words are incapable of capturing the depth of it all. So much so that sometimes we need to spend some time in His presence simply meditating on how awesome it was. Not petitioning Him, or even thanking Him, but allowing it to impact us so that all we can do is worship Him with our silent awe and wonder.

Here

December 20

I will never forget those moments as long as I live. It happened twice in my life when I was at hospitals experiencing the birth of my daughters. Their births were more than eleven years apart, but they both stand out in my memory so well. Those moments when I got to hold them in my arms the first time and realizing those little lives had entrusted to me by God.

Words cannot do justice to the emotions that swallowed me as I stared in awe at those baby girls that I was now responsible for. Here were immortal beings with eternal destinies, whose futures would be partly shaped by me and the choices that I made.

Both times I remember asking God if He was sure about this, if He was absolutely certain that I was the one He wanted to entrust with His delicate and incredible creations. The immensity of the responsibility has only been surpassed by the profound sense of the Lord's goodness in allowing me to be a part of their lives. And as those little eyes looked up, blinked and stared at me the first time in fascinated wonder, my heart wondered at the amazing grace of God.

Like I said, I will never forget those moments as long as I live.

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given. Isaiah 9:6

However as incredible as this is going to sound, God gave me an even greater gift than my daughters. It was another Child, a Son, but it wasn't mine, it was His. Be very careful. Don't slide into the cozy slippers of familiar thinking that would rob you of the power in this unfathomable fact.

Pull back and look at it afresh. God gave His Son to us. It's so incredible that it can be a bit uncomfortable. I don't deserve the children of my own, much less His! And yet there it is in black and white, His black and white: Unto us a Child is born; unto us a Son is given.

Christmas commemorates the moment that God handed His Son over to us and said "Here." May we never forget it as long as we live.

December 21

Here is a commercial that won't be up out by the credit card company that made the ending expression so popular: "One foot construction paper Christmas tree with hand drawn ornaments taped to it, one dollar. Home made presents under the tree, ten dollars. Being content with the love of one's family, not worrying that this is all you can afford for Christmas and giving thanks to God for what you do have . . . priceless."

Now godliness with contentment is great gain. 1 Timothy 6:6

The Christmas season brings a very real danger to us: the sin of covetousness. Experience has taught all of us that coveting always leaves us disappointed, self-centered, and anxious. Coveting something will also compel you to make some of the worst decisions of your life.

It's no wonder that God has included this sin in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:17). Fortunately, God has also given us three "anchor points" in the passage following the above verse in Timothy that will enable us to be content and protect us from covetousness.

First of all, we need to bear in mind that the things we covet are temporary, The Bible says that "We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out" (1 Timothy 6:7). Understanding the passing nature of things protects us from investing our heart and soul in them.

Secondly we must remember that the things we covet are unnecessary. The world is quick to capitalize on our confusing needs and desires. Scripture says: "Having food and clothing, with these we shall be content" (1 Timothy 6:8). When we realize that we just don't need most of the things in life and that God graciously gives us what we do need, it produces a sense of peace and contentment in our hearts.

Lastly, we need to understand that the things we covet are destructive. God's Word warns: "Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition" (1 Timothy 6:9). When we truly see the destructive nature of covetousness, it will have a healthy effect of motivating us towards contentment.

Someone has described covetousness as being up to your chin in water and yet dying of thirst. This is an apt picture of what our hearts can be like this holiday season if we don't cultivate a heart of contentment.

When we're content, we're bound to be grateful, others-centered, and patient. Not to mention the fact that a spirit of contentment will lead us to make some of the best decisions of our lives. By following God's guidelines, we can be content in the midst of a covetous culture.

“Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division.” Luke 12:51

How does that verse sound as the theme for a Christmas carol? Seem a bit odd does it? In the secularized version of Christmas that we all deal with, Jesus is depicted as a benign baby, not a divider of humanity.

But Jesus' description of Himself is quite true, and this verse will be fulfilled countless times before this Christmas season is over. Be it a family gathering or an office party, the divisions will become apparent when people are asked to give an account of who Jesus is to them.

This has always been the case, even from the earliest days of Jesus' existence. Matthew 2:1-11 demonstrates this by introducing us to two types of hearts. On the one hand we have the wise men who traveled a long and dangerous journey from their native land in order to see and honor the Christ-child. Once they're brought face to face with Jesus, we see them bowing before Him in worship.

On the other hand, we have King Herod who was already paranoid of losing his position, prestige, and power. Historians tell us that this man actually killed three of his own sons in order to ensure that they could never succeed him. When Herod got word from the wise men that the “King of the Jews” had been born, he went all out in an attempt to have the Child slaughtered. The contrast is striking. In one case you see adoration, and in the other you see animosity.

There is no middle ground. You will either be like the wise men or Herod. You will either love or loathe Jesus. Some might say, “I don't have strong feelings either way towards Jesus.” You will once you understand what Jesus requires and demands of you. He demands your total submission, and you will either bow with a heart filled with gratitude or fight Him tooth and nail. He will not settle for being half-appreciated or partially respected by anyone.

Jesus is the great divider. What side are you on? Does He inspire your adoration or animosity? As the saying goes, “Wise men still seek Him.”

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. -Matthew 1:18 (NKJV)

When was the last time you really thought much about the Holy Spirit during Christmastime? Well considering both Matthew and Luke draw our attention to the fact that God's Spirit played a very important role in the Christmas story, it seems appropriate to keep this part of the Trinity of God in remembrance as well. Let's face it, there wouldn't have even been a Christmas had it not been for the Spirit's work within the virgin womb.

And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you. (Luke 1:35 NKJV)

This is fitting because the Scriptures reveal to us that the Holy Spirit is always an integral part of God workings. This is evidences by the Spirit having had an active role in creation as He hovered above the waters (Genesis 1:2). God's Spirit also had a crucial role in the act of salvation as He would supernaturally empower those who were chosen to deliver God's people from bondage.

Let's not forget that the source of Samson's strength was the Spirit's anointing upon his life and not his hair (Judges 15:14). Most importantly, the Spirit is active in the work of regeneration as our new life in Christ is produced within us by the powerful working of God's Spirit (John 3:5, Titus 3:5).

So it is easy to conclude that it's only right to acknowledge the Spirit's place in the Christmas account. Likewise it's equally fitting to acknowledge His place in our lives during Christmastime. As we look around it is easy to attest to the fact that true spirituality is in short supply during this time of year. But we can change this by allowing the Spirit's birth within us to bring forth His love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Just as the Spirit produced a work within Mary that changed the world, He's willing to do something within each of us that can also have a spiritual impact. May this understanding cause us to have a Spirit-filled Christmas.

But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law . . . Galatians 4:4

It is often asked, “If Jesus wasn't really born on December 25, then when was He really born?” The passage above tells us that Jesus was born “when the fullness of time had come.” The word there for “fullness” can also mean “complete” and “perfect.” And when we do a little investigating, we discover that Jesus' birth came at the perfect time.

For one thing, it was perfect from a practical standpoint. Rome ruled at the time of Christ's birth, and they had achieved an incredible feat by bringing the civilized world under one common language: Greek. This is the language that the New Testament was written in, and it had an incredible impact because most of the world's population could understand it. The Romans had also built an extensive roadway system that made it possible to travel from Palestine to virtually anywhere else in the Empire. This helped aid the swift spread of the gospel message as the first apostles and prophets used Rome 's roads for God's glory.

It was also perfect from a political standpoint. Luke 2:1 tells us that Caesar Augustus was the Emperor when Jesus was born. Originally, this man's name had been Gaius Octavius, but he was so filled with pride that he changed his name to Caesar Augustus, which literally meant “Caesar of the gods.” It was at this very moment in time when God decided to come and set the record straight.

Lastly, it was also perfect from a prophetic standpoint. The Hebrew scriptures foretold that the Messiah would come under some very specific conditions. Numbers 24:17 stated that His coming would be signaled by a star in the sky. Isaiah 7:14 declared that He would be born to a virgin. And Micah 5:2 prophesied that the Coming One would be born in Bethlehem. Each of these prophecies was perfectly fulfilled as Christ's first cries as an infant were heard in an unassuming stable.

When was Jesus born? He was born at just the right time because God's timing is always perfect. May we remember this when it comes to His timing in our own lives.

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift. II Corinthians 9:15

This is and isn't a Christmas passage. Here's what I mean. It definitely is from the standpoint that this verse is referring to the gift that God has given to us in the form of His Son, Jesus Christ. And as we all know, we have decided and determined to set this day aside as a special day of celebration and commemoration of His birth.

But it isn't a Christmas passage from the standpoint that the original context of this has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the Babe in Bethlehem or with the scene at the stable. When we look this verse up as it appears in the Bible, we discover that it actually appears in the middle of a letter of correction and rebuke that Paul wrote to the Christians at the Church of Corinth. This is about as far removed from the imagery of Christmas as you can possibly get.

But I find this fascinating because it shows that being thankful for God's gift is something that can and ought to occur in every season of life. We shouldn't just pull out our gratitude for Christ's birth along with our holiday decorations and ornaments. Instead, it's something that should be at the foremost of our lives all the time. Even when it comes to things that would seemingly have nothing to do with Christmas, there's always a precedent and a purpose to be thankful for God's indescribable gift.

This is significant because our natural inclination is to make a big to-do list about baby Jesus and then become less mindful of Him tomorrow, next week, next month, until Christmastime eventually rolls around next year. Being thankful for God's indescribable gift does not depend on a particular day or season. It ought to be a condition of the heart that starts the moment we are born again and extend on into eternity.

So let us celebrate this day and everyday the life of Jesus Christ and how He lives in us.

WISHING YOU A VERY BLESSE AND CHRIST CENTERED CHRISTMAS

One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. Romans 14:5-6

You know the feeling. You're might be experiencing it right now. Christmas with all of its special attention on Jesus has come . . . and is now gone. Can you see the danger? The passing of Christmas Day can also produce a passing when it comes to our focus on Christ.

Sure, we still believe in Him and love Him, but for some strange reason, part of us wants to think a little bit less about Him today than we did yesterday. Obviously this is not right, and we need to go to God's Word to find a remedy.

Now honestly, the passage above is not specifically referring to Christmas; however, it is presenting a principle that can be applied to days like today. As this passage says, "every day rightfully belongs to the Lord," whether we choose to celebrate it or not. We serve a risen Christ who is eternal in nature. This means that every single day of our existence is a day in which He is alive, and we can rightly celebrate this joyous truth.

It is pretty much accepted that Jesus wasn't actually born on December 25 and that this is just the day that we have chosen to set aside to commemorate the significance of His birth. But this special attention should never result in a lack of attention to Jesus after the Christmas season has passed. Let's not be guilty of making Jesus' significance conform to the calendar. Let's focus on the fact that we can celebrate the birth that He has accomplished within our hearts each and every day.

The truth is that Jesus Christ is just as real, glorious, and special today as He was yesterday. Actually, today is even better than yesterday because His coming is nearer now than it was then. Take a moment to celebrate this fact today!

I've got to agree with Mary Ellen Chase who wrote, "Christmas is not a date. It is a state of mind."

But those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

Isaiah 40:31

It's that time of year again. You know, the time of year that finds us standing in ridiculously long lines, waiting to return or exchange those thoughtful, yet unwanted gifts that we've received for Christmas. Chances are, you've already been in a few of these lines, and I don't need to elaborate on what a hassle they are. Have you noticed that it seems every store has its own unique return or exchange policy that usually requires the one thing I don't have.

Did you know that God has an exchange policy and that you can always count on it being the same? In the verse above, the original Hebrew word for "renew" is a word that means "to exchange; as in the ancient custom of swapping of garments." Now take another look at those who wait on the Lord. It says that they will return or exchange their own strength, which has come to its natural end, for God's limitless power. Having made this exchange, they are then enabled to mount up like the mighty eagles, rising high above the hassles of life. What could be more welcome or more necessary at this time of year?

God has an amazing exchange policy, and notice what the only requirement is. He doesn't ask that we produce a gift receipt, garment tag, or sealed cellophane wrapping. Instead, He simply asks us to wait upon Him. The Hebrew word used here for "wait" carries the idea of bundling or binding a group of sticks together. The Lord wants us to bind ourselves to Him and to keep a tight sense of closeness with Him. As we do so, He exchanges our weakness for His strength, and we are then enabled to soar above the hassles of life that would normally wear us down.

What an incredible exchange! God is willing to take all that wearies us and replace it with all that strengthens and invigorates us. Take the Lord up on His offer. Return the weariness brought on by this time of year with the strength of our almighty God!

Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.
Philippians 2:4

You've probably been in several situations this month where you've had the chance to put your own interests ahead of the interests of others. Whether you're jockeying for position as the department store opens or eyeing that last item in stock, the opportunities to put yourself before others are endless. And why not? After all, this is a dog-eat-dog world, and you're bound to get devoured unless you have that all important "me first" mindset this world seems to be pushing on us.

However the verse above reveals to us that God desires us to have a "you first" mentality as we interact with other people. Nothing could be more foreign to our flesh, which one could conclude is why the verses from that lead up to this admonition contain vital instructions to having a "you first" attitude:

Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.
Philippians 2:1-3

First of all, we need to be consoled in Christ. This means that we need to derive our security and our identity from our position in Christ. By understanding where we stand "In Him," we won't feel the rushed panic to put ourselves first.

Secondly, we need to be connected to the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the One who fills us with God's strength so we can be like Him. If we're not connected to the Spirit, we have no chance of changing our hearts.

Lastly, we need to be convinced about ourselves. Our flesh screams to us that we're superior to the person next to us. But we need to be convinced by the testimony of Scripture that we aren't . . . and that we're actually to think of others as better than ourselves.

This Christmas season has presented us with unparalleled opportunities to demonstrate a "you first" attitude that will make our lives naturally stand out in this "me first" world. Let us carry that same attitude forward for the upcoming year.

I find this verse is summed up in the chorus to a song I learned many years ago in church school:

And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love
Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.

Undaunted by Disappointments

December 29

And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me. Matthew 11:6

For many of us, this time of year brings more burden than blessing and more grief than glee. The reason is simple. Something has happened over the course of the year that has left us broken, baffled, and bewildered. Perhaps it has been the painful loss of a loved one. Maybe we're at the brink of our breaking point because we find ourselves unemployed despite months and months of searching and submitting resumes. Or it's possible that the doctor's diagnosis came back, and it's exactly what we didn't want to hear.

It could be very easy to get angry and frustrated with the Lord under those circumstances. After all, He being so powerful and so loving, why does it seem like He is just letting my life is falling apart? Our minds can come to the conclusion that He either forgot about us or that He enjoys seeing us in such a state of struggle. If we allow ourselves to get to this point, we will find it impossible to celebrate this season because deep down we're having a hard time celebrating who God is.

Jesus understood that life would be like this. Contrary to what some in their pulpits might preach, Christ never painted us a painless picture of reality, and He knew that there would be events in life that would tempt us to doubt His goodness and be offended by Him. But notice what He does in the midst of all this. He provides a promise that appeals to our faith: "Blessed is he who is not offended because of Me."

That's it! He simply tells us that we will be blessed in the long run when we choose to trust in His goodness, even when life doesn't seem good here and now. We are called to set aside our current circumstances and fix our focus on the yet unseen promises of God, because that's what faith really is:

What is faith? It is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen. It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see. (Hebrews 11:1)

Don't allow the disappointments of this past year deter you from trusting in God's amazing goodness. And don't allow your heart grow hard towards the spirit of this joyous season. Remember that Jesus has come to carry away our cares and burdens, and He will if we trust in His goodness and turn to Him.

...And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:6

As we wind down the this year, it seems wise to focus on the last portion of Isaiah's prophecy concerning Christ. It is here that Jesus is identified as the "Prince of Peace." What does this mean, exactly? It doesn't mean that Jesus is a peaceful prince (although He is). It means that He has complete command and control over peace, itself. And because Jesus is the Prince of Peace, He has the power to impart it to those who receive and trust in Him.

This is a timely truth, because if there's ever been a time of the year when peace is needed, it's now! Think about it. A lot of people are asking themselves questions like, "What did I just spend?" "Why did I spend it?" "Who did I spend it on?" and "How am I going to pay for it all?" Sound familiar? Unfortunately, the days immediately after Christmas find a whole lot of folks filled with panic instead of peace. And those who are stressed come to the realization that they have a greater need for Jesus after the celebratory excitement over His birth has subsided.

But here's what's so great about our God, His provision in our lives does not correspond to our celebration of Him. He's the Prince of Peace before, during, and after Christmas, and it's a good thing for our sake. We need Jesus and the peace He provides all year round, especially during these post-Christmas days.

You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You. Isaiah 26:3

But He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold. Job 23:10

“Happy New Year!” Really? How can you be so sure that this upcoming year will be a happy one? Take a moment to look back at last year. Were there any trials? Of course there were, and you can be equally certain that there will be trials in this upcoming year as well.

It's interesting that in describing the storms of life, Jesus always assumed that they would have a place of prominence in our lives. He said “when the storms came” not “if the storms come” (Matthew 7:24). You can mark it down in that brand new calendar that you just got: 2008 will be a year of trials.

Regardless of this fact, we can still have a happy New Year when we recognize that our God is all-knowing. There isn't a single bump in the road that will take Him by surprise this year. Before time even began, He knew all that this year would hold for each of us.

This truth is a harbor of security in a sea of uncertainty because as we understand that God foresaw everything, we also understand that He allowed it to happen. The Bible further assures us that nothing happens to us unless it is for our ultimate good (Romans 8:28). So no matter what trials you go through this upcoming year, you can be certain that they will actually complete your character in Christ.

This is the truth that sustained Job as he went through unparalleled trials in his own life. When things seemed like they couldn't get any worse, Job took comfort in the knowledge that God knew the course of his future and that His ultimate purpose in allowing these things was for him to “come forth as gold.” The place of trial became the place of blessing as Job's trials perfected his patience and faith.

Now if you think many people get lost in Christmas leading up to the 25th and miss the blessing this time of year brings, I suggest more so after the holiday festivities are over because they don't have Job's patience and faith. How easily folks forget the “reason for the season” or more specifically the “reason for everything.” One night as a young boy was saying his prayers before going to bed misspoke praying, “And God, thank you for sending your only forgotten Son.” Never let Him be forgotten.

It has been a joy to share these devotionals with you this month and pray that in them you found some hope, encouragement, or at least something to think about. And as the month ends, so do these daily messages. And so I bring this devotional series to an end with the lyrics of a great song that I propose be a theme for us all as we approach this coming year. If ever there is a New Year's Resolution, this would be it.

Jesus To The World
by Newsong

A little girl who's hungry
Prays for something she can eat
A single mom doing all she can
Finds herself out on the street
Will we see their need and hear their cries
Look at our watch and just walk on by
Or will we stop and take the time
To be Jesus in their lives

We need to be lambs that roar
We need to be eagles that soar
We need to be salt
We need to be light
We need to be Jesus to the world
We need to take love into the streets
Be willing to turn the other cheek
We need to be strong
We need to be weak
We need to be Jesus
Jesus to the world

Jesus came with a message
That would change the way we live
He showed us all by example
What the heart of heaven is
He saw our need and He heard our cry
He loved us so much that He gave His life
He taught us by his sacrifice
How we should live our lives

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