

A THRILL OF

Hope

25 Days to Focus Your Heart On Jesus

Day

1

REFERENCES

JEREMIAH 10:1-4

JOHN 10:22-30

O Christmas Tree

Skip Heitzig

I read somewhere that in a recent Christmas season Americans used 28 million rolls of wrapping paper and 17 million packages of tags and bows, sent out 372 million greeting cards, and set up 35 million Christmas trees.

Some of our Christmas traditions are just that, traditions. Jesus was probably not born on December 25, for example. And the Christmas tree is based on the celebration of the reincarnation of Nimrod. The ancient Babylonians burned a “Yule” log (the Chaldean word for infant) in the fireplace, and the next day a symbolic evergreen tree was placed inside the house.

This pagan ritual is hinted at in the Bible, in Jeremiah 10:1-4. But before you get worried, I want you to know that if you come to my church, you’ll find a very large Christmas tree in the foyer! And you know what? Most people born in this country don’t know the origins of these things, and we aren’t worshipping Babylonian gods and goddesses. It’s not about that. (And it’s good to remember that Martin Luther was the first guy to put a Christmas tree inside the home.)

At the same time, what are we to do with some of these traditions? Let’s look at what Jesus did when He was faced with a festival that had a lot of tradition, some of which may have been true and some not. In John chapter 10, He was in the temple for the Feast of Dedication, also known as the Festival of Lights, or Hanukkah. You won’t find it in the Bible anywhere; it dates from the period between Old and New Testaments. But Jesus was celebrating Hanukkah, and He used the Festival of Lights to shine the light on who He really is (John 10:22-30).



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And I suggest that's what we do with Christmas. You can say, "Bah, humbug!" You can get "Santa Claustrophobic." You can run from it. Or you can use it to shine the light on who Jesus really is.

People are singing the words we preach in evangelical churches every week: Christ by highest heaven adored, Christ the everlasting Lord. Veiled in flesh the Godhead see! Hail, incarnate deity! Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel. Hark, the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn king!"

At least some of them don't know what they're singing, but that's where we come in. We can redeem it by reminding them. Does it matter when He came? No, it matters THAT He came. Since the celebration is already ongoing, I say let's use it to remind them of Him.



Day 2

The Essential Message of Christmas

Greg Laurie

REFERENCES
MATTHEW 1:23

At this time of the year, we say, “Merry Christmas.” I prefer that to “Happy Holidays,” but I don’t get confrontational about it. Instead, I want to be gracious. After all, Christmas isn’t always a happy time for everyone. For someone who has lost their job, this is not the most wonderful time of the year, because so much emphasis is placed on a merry Christmas being a materialistic one.

There are also those who have lost loved ones. I am one of those people, and things that once made me happy at this time of year now make me sad. Those things that once brought happiness are now things that bring sadness, because they evoke memories of times we spent together. Therefore, Christmas becomes a difficult time for some.

There are many who are in need of encouragement at this time of year. They don’t need a Christmas present; they need His Christmas presence. They need to be reminded of what this season is all about. It is not about things. It is not about presents.

These things have their place, but we need to remember the essential message of Christmas, which is Immanuel—God is with us. And for the hurting person, the lonely person, the sorrowing person, this is the time of year to bring the gift of encouragement to them and say, “The message of Christmas is: God will be with you. God will help you. God will strengthen you.”

So look for opportunities to share the love of God during this season, because it is a time when we seem to be more open to engaging in conversation with others. Now is a great opportunity for you to bring encouragement to someone who is struggling. Who needs your encouragement today?



Day 3

Star

Rebecca Barlow Jordan

FROM THE FATHER'S HEART

My child, search for Me daily with as much diligence as the wise men on the night of My birth. My “star” still shines. I still bring hope. I continue to light the way for anyone who seeks to worship Me. And as long as you keep Me on the throne of your life, you won't have to look far to find Me.

A GRATEFUL RESPONSE

In search of the star, I journey far to see my heart's delight. There, all along, in the day or the night, You wait to receive my gifts of praise and adoration. I have seen the light; I have found love wrapped in a manger. You, Lord, will always be the star of my life.

SIMPLE TRUTH

At the center of Christmas is the heart of God.

REFERENCES

MATTHEW 2:10



Day 4

The Real Reason for Christmas

Rick Renner

REFERENCES

PHILIPPIANS

2:5–8

HEBREWS 12:2

Do you plan on taking the time this Christmas to tell your children or friends about the purpose of Christmas? If so, what will you tell them?

Although we usually meditate on the birth of Jesus at this time of the year, His purpose in coming to earth was not to give us the sweet picture of a baby in a Bethlehem manger. That little baby was born to die for you and for me and thus pay for the forgiveness of our sins. He was born to die on the Cross that we might be reconciled to God.

For this reason, I always told our sons when they were young, “Don’t just think of a baby in a manger at Christmastime. Christmas is about much more than that. It is about God coming to earth in human flesh so He could die on the Cross to pay for your salvation and destroy all the works of the devil in your lives! That is what Christmas is all about!”

People rarely think of the Cross at Christmastime because it is the time set aside to celebrate Jesus’ birth. But in Philippians 2, Paul connects the two thoughts. As Paul writes about God becoming a man, he goes on to express the ultimate reason God chose to take this amazing action. Paul says in verse 8, “And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.”

Philippians 2:8 says that Jesus was “...found in fashion as a man...” That word “fashion” is the Greek word *schema*. This is extremely important, for this was precisely the same word that was used in ancient times to depict a king who exchanged his kingly garments for a brief period of time for the clothing of a beggar.

How wonderful that the Holy Spirit would inspire the apostle Paul to use this exact word! When Jesus came to earth, it really was a



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THE REAL REASON FOR CHRISTMAS

BY RICK
RENNER

moment when God Almighty shed His glorious appearance and exchanged it for the clothing of human flesh. Although man is wonderfully made, his earthly frame is temporal dust and cannot be compared to the eternal and glorious appearance of God. However, for the sake of our redemption, God laid aside all of His radiant glory, took upon Himself human flesh, and was manifested in the very likeness of a human being.

This is the true story of a King who traded His kingly garments and took upon Himself the clothing of a servant. But the story doesn't stop there. Jesus—our King who exchanged His royal robes for the clothing of flesh—loved us so much that He "...humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross"!

The word "humbled" is the Greek word *tapeinao*, and it means to be humble, to be lowly, and to be willing to stoop to any measure that is needed. This describes the attitude God had when He took upon Himself human flesh. Think of how much humility would be required for God to shed His glory and lower Himself to become like a member of His creation. Consider the greatness of God's love that drove Him to divest Himself of all His splendor and become like a man. This is amazing to me, particularly when I think of how often the flesh recoils at the thought of being humble or preferring someone else above itself. Yet Jesus humbled Himself "...and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."

The word "obedient" tells me that this was not a pleasurable experience that Jesus looked forward to in anticipation. To humble Himself to this extent required Jesus' deliberate obedience.

As preexistent God, Jesus came to earth for this purpose. But as man dressed in flesh, He despised the thought of the Cross (Hebrews 12:2) and could only endure its shame because He knew of the results that would follow. For Jesus to be obedient as a man, He had to choose to obey the eternal plan of God.

The word "obedient" that is used to describe Jesus is the Greek word *hupakouo*, from the word *hupo*, which means under, and the word *akouo*, which means I hear. When these two words are



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compounded together, they picture someone who is hupo, under someone else's authority, and akouo, listening to what that superior is speaking to him. After listening and taking these instructions to heart, this person then carries out the orders of his superior.

Thus, the word hupakouo tells us that obedient people are 1) under authority, 2) listening to what their superior is saying, and 3) carrying out the orders that have been given to them. This is what the word "obedient" means in this verse, and this is what obedience means for you and me.

You see, even Jesus had to come to this place of obedience. Although He knew that He was the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world, that didn't mean His flesh was excited about dying as the Lamb of God on the Cross. According to this verse in Philippians 2:8, Jesus had to humble Himself and become "obedient" in order to follow God's plan. He wasn't looking forward to the experience of death on a Cross; He made a choice to humble Himself and to go to any measure in order to accomplish the Father's plan.

Part of the Father's plan was for Jesus to humble Himself "...unto death, even the death of the cross." The word "unto" is from the Greek word mechri, which is a Greek word that really means to such an extent. The Greek word mechri is sufficient in itself to dramatize the point, but the verse goes on to say that Jesus humbled Himself unto death, "...even the death of the cross." The word "even" is the Greek word de, which emphatically means EVEN! The Greek carries this idea: "Can you imagine it! Jesus humbled Himself to such a lowly position and became so obedient that He even stooped low enough to die the miserable death of a Cross!"

Just think of it. Almighty God, clothed in radiant glory from eternity past, came to this earth formed as a human being in the womb of a human mother for one purpose: so that He could one day die a miserable death on a Cross to purchase our salvation! All of this required humility on a level far beyond anything we could ever comprehend or anything that has ever been requested of any of us. Yet this was the reason Jesus came; therefore, He chose to



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be obedient to the very end, humbling Himself to the point of dying a humiliating death on a Cross and thereby purchasing our eternal salvation.

So as you celebrate Christmas, be sure to remember the real purpose of Christmas. It isn't just a time to reflect on the baby boy who was born in Bethlehem so long ago. That baby was God manifest in the flesh. He was born to die for you and for me. Jesus was so willing to do whatever was required in order to redeem us from Satan and sin that He humbled Himself even unto death on a Cross! That is what Christmas is all about!

MY PRAYER FOR TODAY

Lord, I thank You for coming to earth so You could redeem me. When I think of the extent to which You were willing to go in order to save me, it makes me want to shout, to celebrate, and to cry with thankfulness. You love me so much, and I am so grateful for that love. Without You, I would still be lost and in sin. But because of everything You have done for me, today I am free; my life is blessed; Jesus is my Lord; Heaven is my home; and Satan has no right to control me. I will be eternally thankful to You for everything You did to save me!

I pray this in Jesus' name!

MY CONFESSION FOR TODAY

I confess that Jesus Christ loves me! He demonstrated His love to me by leaving behind Heaven's glory and taking upon Himself human flesh. And He did it for one purpose: so that one day He could go to the Cross and die for me and thus reconcile me unto God. There is no need for me to ever feel unloved or unwanted, because Jesus went the ultimate distance to prove that He loves me!

I declare this by faith in Jesus' name!



Day 5

The Thrill of Hope

Shawn McEvoy, Crosswalk.com Managing Editor

“A thrill of hope; the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.” O Holy Night

Does Christmas thrill you?

Children get excited at the coming of the season, and often we might feel a bit of a charge through experiencing their amazement, but the chores we go through to provide that for them are often the very things that rob us from knowing the wonder for ourselves. Plan the party, trim the tree, max out the MasterCard, wrap, ship, take a trip. And that’s assuming we aren’t one of the multitudes who find themselves with a case of the Holiday Blues.

So if Christ’s coming into this world offers hope, and hope, as the song says, provides a thrill, how do we locate that experience amid the distraction and disillusionment of December?

Well that’s the cool thing about Hope. Just as total darkness can’t hold back the light of a tiny flame, so does even the smallest increment of Hope provide joy and purpose.

Here are a few scriptures I’ve been mulling over on the subject:

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).

Notice the parallel between “things hoped for” and “things not seen.” Talk about a paradox; try applying “assurance” to something your five senses can’t detect. It’s a challenge. The plus side is that hope, through Christ, is available to you no matter what you see, hear, or feel. It’s above your circumstances.

“We also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance [brings about] proven character; and proven character [brings about] hope; and hope does not disappoint because the love of God has

REFERENCES

ROMANS 15:13

HEBREWS 11:1

ROMANS 5:3–5

1 CORINTHIANS
13:7,13

HEBREWS 11:6

ISAIAH 9:6–7



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THE THRILL OF HOPE BY SHAWN MCEVOY

been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Romans 5:3-5).

Do you ever hear people say, “I don’t want to get my hopes up” because they’re afraid of being disappointed? What would you make of Paul’s claim that “hope does not disappoint”? Might the disconnect have something to do with what we’re hoping for or expecting? Max Lucado thinks so:

“Hope is not what you’d expect; it is what you would never dream. It is a wild, improbable tale with a pinch-me-I’m-dreaming ending... Hope is not a granted wish or a favor performed; no, it is far greater than that. It is a zany, unpredictable dependence on a God who loves to surprise us out of our socks and be there in the flesh to see our reaction.”¹

“Love... hopes all things...but now abide faith, hope, and love; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:7,13).

Ever wonder why faith, hope, and love are the greatest virtues, and apparently in that order?

Maybe hope isn’t actually something we do, but something we receive, like grace. If it’s true that “without faith it is impossible for us to please Him” (Hebrews 11:6), perhaps it’s conversely true that without Hope it would be impossible for Him to please us. The same verse says that God is a rewarder of those who seek Him. Is hope that reward?

I mean, if faith is what we give to God, and hope is what He gives to us, then we have the dynamic of a relationship. With that in place, we can love. So love is built on hope, which is built on faith.

For hope to exist, unfortunately it looks like there has to be hopelessness first. A perfect world wouldn’t have any need of hope. Deliverance arrives undeservedly and perhaps unexpectedly, just as in the unlikely way God came to earth to provide a once-and-for-all substitute for the sins of all men on the first Christmas. That’s why things can look bleak, but that’s where hope lives.



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BY SHAWN
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The good news is: you simply can't hope big enough, which goes back to the idea of our minds and senses being inadequate to judge God's design and methods, and hope being more a function of God's involvement than our desires. I readily acknowledge I could not have conceived of the plan of salvation or the virgin birth. I couldn't have imagined the plan for the walls of Jericho to crumble, for hungry lions to turn into Daniel's pet kittens, or the Red Sea to part and offer up dry land. So neither do I know how my problems will be solved, or what miracles I'll be blessed to see this Christmas.

Isaiah 9:6-7 concerns the hope of the prophecy being fulfilled that brought us a "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, and Prince of Peace." The last sentence of verse seven says it's "the zeal of the Lord" that will accomplish this. God is excited! He's zealous (enthusiastic, passionate, obsessive even) to bring us this hope!

Romans 15:13 is my Christmas prayer: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

Why is there hope? Because Jesus was born. O holy night. What a thrill. God is at work.



Day 6

Has the Grinch Stolen Your Christmas?

Dr. Jeff Schreve

REFERENCES

LUKE 2:10-11

ACTS 10:15

Without a doubt, Christmas is to be a time of GREAT JOY. On that first Christmas night, the angel announced to the shepherds “good news of a great joy.” The Savior has come!! WOW!! Those shepherds were so excited. That announcement changed their lives forever. They were filled with joy and wonder and praise.

At Christmas time, are you filled with joy and wonder and praise? Or has the devil, the original Grinch, the thief who comes only to steal and kill and destroy, stolen those things from you? If so, there is still time to get it back!

Think about the angel’s announcement, “There has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” What does that really mean for you and me?

1. The Savior has come to save you from a dark past. So many people are suffering with intense guilt over bad things they have done in the past. The devil beats them to death with shame and guilt. But be beaten no longer! All the terrible, horrible things you have done are no match for the Savior’s blood that He shed for you on the cross. The moment you confess those sins to God and repent of them, you are forgiven!! Remember what the Savior said to Peter, “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy” (Acts 10:15).

2. The Savior has come to save you from an empty present. Many people are surviving and not really living. Jesus came at Christmas not to fill your empty stocking, but to fill your empty life! He has a purpose and a plan for you. Come to Him. Surrender to Him. Let Him lead you. He wants to bring you joy and peace, regardless of your circumstances. He wants to use your life to make a difference in others, a difference that will last



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REFERENCES

LUKE 2:10-11

ACTS 10:15

for all eternity. It makes life worth living to know that everyday is an exciting adventure with the Lord, an opportunity to touch another person with the love and joy of Jesus.

3. The Savior has come to save you from a hopeless future.

Everyone without God is without hope. No one comes to the Father without the Savior, Jesus Christ. But now He has come, and we can really know Him personally, and we can be assured of His presence and provision while we live ... and His heaven when we die. Paul said, "Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him" (1 Cor. 2:9). WOW! What a future is in store for the child of God!

My friend, do not let the devil steal from you and your Christmas time any longer! The Savior has come, and He has come for you! Receive the good news and rejoice in the truth!



Day 7

Tell Everybody!

Anna Kuta

REFERENCES

LUKE 2:15–18

Every December my church puts on an event called Bethlehem Walk, an interactive living nativity of sorts that takes people through a recreation of first-century Bethlehem and then through scenes of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Thousands of people from the community and even all over the state come each year to hear about the real meaning of Christmas. I've been a cast member almost every year, but this year for the first time I played the part of a guide, who leads groups of people through the city and from one drama scene to the next.

If I thought it would get monotonous saying the same lines, hearing the same story and seeing the same things acted out on repeat for 20 hours in one weekend, I could not have been further from the truth. One of my favorite parts was seeing the reactions of people in my groups to each of the scenes, especially the kids.

After the group watches the angels appear to the shepherds in the field and tell them of Jesus' birth, we hurry with the shepherds to the stable to see it for ourselves. After we learn that this baby really is the Messiah, the guide is supposed to tell the group, "Come, let us go tell others what we have seen!" (From there, the group stumbles upon the three kings and points the way to them.) One night, however, I had a group of kids who were as enthralled with the whole story as anyone I'd ever seen. When we got to the manger, they crowded in close, eyes wide, like they'd never seen anything like it. They watched with awe as Mary sang "Silent Night" and rocked the baby Jesus in her arms. And just when she finished and I opened my mouth to speak my lines, I was upstaged—one little boy in the front jumped up and shouted, "It's Jesus! We gotta tell everybody!"

Sure, we all crack a smile, but the little boy had it absolutely right. Tell everybody! The shepherds did just that after the angels pointed



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REFERENCES

LUKE 2:15–18

them to baby Jesus—they made it “widely known,” according to Luke 2:17. How could they keep quiet, having seen what they had seen? How can I keep quiet, having been redeemed by Christ?

If you, like me, ever feel unqualified or unworthy to share the Gospel, remember the shepherds. They were the most unlikely messengers of the Messiah’s birth—rough, poor, dirty; outcasts of society. God could have sent the angels to proclaim the news to anyone, but he chose the shepherds. He used them as the first-ever preachers of the Gospel.

Just as the shepherds could not keep quiet about what they saw when they found Jesus, so it should be for us. This Christmas season, share the good news—not just of Jesus as the baby in the manger, but of Jesus who came to save us from our sin.



Day 8

Turning Christmas Chaos into Joy

Mary Southerland

REFERENCES

LUKE 2:1-20

According to the American Institute of Stress, more than 110 million Americans take medication for stress-related causes each week. During the holiday season, another one million people battle what experts refer to as the holiday blues.

I am very familiar with depression and the pain it holds and must constantly battle to stay out of that pit.

To deal with depression, we must first come to a place of total surrender to God and His plan of healing, even if we cannot see or understand that plan. The bottom line of God's heart toward His children is always restoration and healing.

While I am not a big fan of television, I do enjoy watching home improvement shows. On a recent program, an interior decorator and homeowner were discussing a list of changes that needed to be made in order to update the home.

"First, we have to do something about those windows," the decorator announced. I was surprised that she listed this task first—until I saw the house.

The existing glass was not only an ugly shade of gold, but it was thick and chunky as well. The windows let in no light and made it virtually impossible to see in or out. The result was a dark isolated home. The distressed homeowner protested, "But I like my privacy. And if I thought anyone could see in, I would feel totally exposed." When it comes to dealing with depression, many people feel the same way.

We construct walls over which no one can climb because the cost of friendship is too high. We fill the windows of our soul with emotional excuses in order to avoid dealing with pain. The result is



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BY MARY
SOUTHERLAND

darkness, loneliness, and missed opportunities for restoration. We don't want to understand depression or find the treasures of that darkness; we simply want to be rid of it.

Many people try to understand and deal with depression on a surface level—refusing to face painful experiences, difficult relationships, and the broken places where darkness lives. We look for the nearest exit, hoping to bypass transparency because the price is just too high to pay.

Emotional integrity is an essential step to dealing with depression. We must be real before we can be right. Until we are willing to risk being transparent, we can neither understand nor effectively deal with depression during the holidays or any other time of the year.

The holidays seem to tug at the masks we carefully hold in place and push the emotional buttons we desperately try to hide. The arrival of certain family members can resurrect painful issues that have never really been resolved. Financial pressure opens up like a sinkhole, waiting to steal our joy and destroy our peace. Schedules demand every ounce of energy, and false expectations leave us empty and hollow. The dark slimy pit waits for us to fall in.

We can choose to make this Christmas different. Choose to give God praise. Choose to focus on the victories and joys you have experienced during the year, and then find ways to share that victory and joy with others.

Christmas can be a true celebration of fresh starts and new beginnings if we choose to focus on a tiny baby born in a manger, come to save us and give us true life. The darkness can be destroyed if we choose to face and deal with whatever it holds.

Right now, choose an attitude of joy by focusing your mind on the things of heaven—not earth, and by fixing your heart on Jesus Christ. Your Christmas chaos will turn into Christmas joy!



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TURNING
CHRISTMAS
CHAOS INTO JOY
BY MARY
SOUTHERLAND

Let's Pray

Father, I want this holiday season to be filled with light instead of darkness. Please help me discard my emotional masks and be real before You as well as my family and friends. Father, help me make this holiday season an offering of praise to You.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Now It's Your Turn

Read Luke 2:1–16. Answer the following questions after reading the Christmas story.

What was the attitude of Mary and Joseph as they traveled to Bethlehem?

How did the shepherds react to the news of Jesus' birth? What did they do?

How would you describe the emotions and thoughts of Mary?

How can your choice to “ponder” the miracles of Jesus' birth change your perspective of the holidays?

Write a letter of commitment to Jesus, asking Him to empower the choices you have made. Make a plan or a list of “dos” and “don'ts” that will help you experience the best holiday season of your life. Include your family in making this plan, and make the commitment to hold each other accountable.



Day 9

Why Bethlehem?

John Piper

REFERENCES

MATTHEW 2:6

ROMANS 11

MICAH 5

Bethlehem is scarcely worth counting among the clans of Judah, yet God chooses to bring his magnificent Messiah out of this town. Why? One answer is that the Messiah is of the lineage of David and David was a Bethlehemite. That's true, but it misses the point of verse two. The point of verse two is that Bethlehem is small—not that it is great because David was born there. (That's what the scribes missed in Matthew 2:6). God chooses something small, quiet, out of the way, and does something there that changes the course of history and eternity.

Why? Because when he acts this way we can't boast in the merits or achievements of men but only in the glorious mercy of God. We can't say, "Well, of course he set his favor on Bethlehem, look at the human glory Bethlehem has achieved!" All we can say is, "God is wonderfully free; he is not impressed by our bigness; he does nothing in order to attract attention to our accomplishments; he does everything to magnify his glorious freedom and mercy." ...

God chose a stable so no innkeeper could boast, "He chose the comfort of my inn!" God chose a manger so that no wood worker could boast, "He chose the craftsmanship of my bed!" He chose Bethlehem so no one could boast, "The greatness of our city constrained the divine choice!" And he chose you and me, freely and unconditionally, to stop the mouth of all human boasting. This is the point of Romans 11 and this is the point of Micah 5.

The deepest meaning of the littleness and insignificance of Bethlehem is that God does not bestow the blessings of the Messiah—the blessings of salvation—on the basis of our greatness



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or our merit or our achievement. He does not elect cities or people because of their prominence or grandeur or distinction. When he chooses he chooses freely, in order to magnify the glory of his own mercy, not the glory of our distinctions. So let us say with the angels, “Glory to God in the highest!” Not glory to us. We get the joy. He gets the glory.

REFERENCES

MATTHEW 2:6

ROMANS 11

MICAH 5



Day 10

Christmas Lights

Ryan Duncan, Crosswalk.com Entertainment Editor

REFERENCES

JAMES 1:12

1 CORINTHIANS

9:24–27

When I was still a child living in Illinois, my father drafted me into his yearly Christmas decorating. Every December, with the snow heavy on the ground, the two of us would bundle up and tramp outside to begin putting up the Christmas lights. I hated putting up Christmas lights. The process always took forever, robbing me of my well-deserved break from school. To make matters worse, my father had a fondness for those icicle-styled lights that were supposed to drip down from the rooftop in merry “winter-wonderland” fashion.

Except the high winds always blew the strands of light up into the gutters, so once again we would have to go outside and set them right. It got to the point where I would do anything to avoid putting up Christmas lights. I hid, I threw tantrums, I’d sulk, and eventually my father decided dealing with both me and lights was too much work and set me free. Looking back now, I regret how short-sighted I was. I was so upset at having to do a few hours’ work that I never realized how beautiful our house looked when it was all lit up, or how fulfilling it was to know I had helped my father make it that way.

It’s funny how our Christian walk can mirror the experience of setting up holiday decorations. At times it can be difficult, and we can resent what we believe we’re being denied, but take a look at what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my



Day 10

REFERENCES

JAMES 1:12

1 CORINTHIANS

9:24–27

slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.” 1 Corinthians 9:24–27

Life offers us plenty of easy roads, and when it comes to living out the Christian life, these paths can be especially tempting. The world will tell us to go with the flow of the current of culture, to follow the path of least resistance, but God calls us to do differently. Christians are meant to reflect Christ’s glory on Earth, and this cannot be done without hard work, sacrifice, and grace. So whether you serve God through ministry, or simply through your everyday life, remember to live in a way deserving of the prize.



Day 11

I'll Be Home for Christmas

Alex Crain

REFERENCES

HEBREWS 13:14

EPHESIANS 6:10

MATTHEW 28:20

Recently, I got my parent's old Christmas records out of storage and began making mp3 files of them so that we could play them again around the Christmas holidays. Bing Crosby's classic rendition of "I'll Be Home for Christmas" came on. Its melancholy sound filled the air.

I pictured the war-weary allied troops hearing this song the year it was recorded in 1943, listening to it on their radios at night, spellbound by the sound; longing to be back at home with their loved ones.

I'll be home for Christmas, you can plan on me.
Please have snow and mistletoe, and presents on the tree.
Christmas Eve will find me, where the love light gleams.
I'll be home for Christmas... if only in my dreams.

Does any other version of the song capture the sense of sadness to the same degree that he did?

Believers in Christ are soldiers engaged in war (Ephesians 6:10). And deep within us there is a longing that nothing can suppress. We want to be home. It's great to know that we are on the winning side, but we often get weary of the fight.

Hebrews 13:14 encourages us to remember and find strength in the fact that "we seek the city that is to come." It's a losing battle to pursue lasting satisfaction in this life. The words "Here we have no lasting city" drive us to only source of contentment: the promise that Christ is always with me (Matthew 28:20) and that He's bringing me home to a place where love, joy, and satisfaction never end.



Day 12

REFERENCES

LUKE 2:8-12

The Seduction of Christmas

Nicki Koziarz

It's just a few days before Christmas and I'm reminded of my love/hate relationship with this holiday. Over the past few weeks I've done the shopping thing [love], the baking thing [hate], the decorating thing [love], the party thing [hate] and even the church play thing [love].

I've been stressed over money and disillusioned by the idea of a perfect family get-together. But more than anything, I feel like my entire identity has been controlled by this [almost sickening] need to achieve the ultimate Christmas. If I keep this up, by Christmas Eve, I will be perfectly exhausted from chasing after something that seems so deceptively good.

My confession: I've been seduced by a manufactured idea of Christmas.

But today, I am working through this. I'm realizing that:

I **can** abandon this desire for the ultimate Christmas.

I **can** flee from the greatest temptations this season throws at me.

I **can** still have an amazing Christmas by setting my desires in the right direction.

The first thing I'm doing is reminding myself that Christmas is not about traditions and doing. While as a culture we have convinced ourselves that in order for Christmas to look like Christmas - we have to do certain things. But there was nothing traditional about the birth of Christ. It was a miracle. While it's great to do for others, the greatest thing I can do is point people to what was done for each of us through the birth of that child.

The second thing I'm doing is realizing the best moments of Christmas are when I choose to stop the busyness and focus on being grateful. Gratitude is one of the best ways to take our eyes



Day 12

REFERENCES

LUKE 2:8-12

off ourselves and give the credit back to Jesus. When gratefulness is flowing from my heart, it will be almost impossible to allow these seasonal stressors to compete with that.

While Christmas seasons past have fed me lies of what it means to have an incredible Christmas, I want this year to be different.

With that determination in mind, this Christmas will be so much more than exhaustion, mediocrity and empty promises from TV commercials. In this present moment, the idols that rival my heart for God's place are in check. The manufactured idea of Christmas may tempt me to want many things, but the awareness of Jesus in my heart will help me keep Christmas in its rightful place.



Day 13

Christmas Giving

Pastor Mike Fabarez

REFERENCES

1 JOHN 3:16-17

The relationship of Christmas with gift-giving may be bemoaned by many, but the connection is a biblical one. I am not referring to the crazed run through the mall in late December or the White Elephant gift exchange at the office party, but the concept of generously and freely giving gifts because God gave us his Son to redeem us; this is the association that cannot and should not be avoided. The Bible says that our love for each other, and thus our love for God can be measured, at least in part, by our generosity and the willingness with which we give tangible gifts to one another (see 1 John 3:16-17).

Being the targets of God's love necessarily implants a desire to be the kind of person who meets the needs of others. Knowing what it is to be loved by God is an experience that the Bible says should drive us to give as freely as we have received. A redeemed heart will find increasing satisfaction in reaching out, even at great personal cost, to enrich and enhance the lives of others through the giving of time, talent and resources. So while the world may be giving gifts for all the wrong reasons (and complaining about it a good part of the time) we can piggy-back on this "gift-giving season" and give to help, benefit and encourage as a reflection of Christ and for the glory of God.



Day 14

REFERENCES

JOHN 3:16

Don't Miss Christmas!

Mary Southerland

The Christmas rush is on! I know many of you are still looking for the perfect gift, wrapping presents, baking your famous sugar cookies, packing the car for a long trip and wrestling with overly excited children. Ho! Ho! Ho!

Stop right where you are! Take a deep breath and travel back with me to a time when there was no hope and no celebration. I can't imagine a world without Jesus and yet, many times I live my life as if He doesn't even exist. A trial comes and I try to handle it on my own. Loneliness floods my heart and instead of reaching out to Him, I withdraw into the darkness.

He then interrupts my life and fills each black corner with Light. His love flows over the pain like a soothing balm and once again, I experience the manger. Once again, He steps into the smelly, unlikely and very ordinary existence that is mine to change everything—everything!

Jesus could have come to us in many ways, but He chose to interrupt the very ordinary with the most extraordinary. He could have chosen to be born in a palace. After all, He was a King. Yet His life on earth began in a manger housed in what amounted to little more than a dirty, smelly barn. The simplicity of His birth is one of His most precious gifts to me, and one of my most profound life lessons.

I often wish I had been there that holy night when Jesus was born, but then He reminds me that I have my own manger; my own holy moment when God became a reality to me, and I worship Him!

Every year I am reminded of the very heart of Christmas—Emmanuel, God with us. God wants to be involved in the simple, ordinary happenings of daily life: where we go and what we do, the smile we give the harried stranger and the patience we exhibit in the crowd of impatient shoppers, the love that prompts the secret



Day 14

**DON'T MISS
CHRISTMAS!**

*BY MARY
SOUTHERLAND*

gift and the heart that constantly celebrates His birth through every sparkling light, every beautifully wrapped gift, each special meal, every card, phone call and visit.

Join me in this quest to celebrate Him and His birth in everything we do. Have a birthday party for Jesus. Bake Him a huge cake and invite neighbors to join in the celebration. Adopt a family in need. Reach out to the lonely. Look for Him in the crowd. Emmanuel, God with us! Wow!

Let's Pray

Father, today I celebrate the reality of Your presence in my life. I celebrate Your birth, Your life, Your death and Your resurrection. And as I celebrate, Lord, help me to be "God with skin on" to those in need around me. Open my eyes and let me see them as You see them! I love You. Happy Birthday, Jesus!

In Jesus's name, amen.

Now It's Your Turn

Put your faith in action by making a step-by-step plan to keep Jesus at the heart of your Christmas season. Give a gift to someone you don't know. Invite a needy family into your home for a special "Friends" dinner. Go through your closet and give the clothes you don't wear to those who have no clothes.



Day 15

REFERENCES

ISAIAH 12:4-5

Bigger Than a Stable

Katherine Britton

My felt Advent tree gains one velcro ornament each day until Christmas. I love this calendar, because each unique ornament tells a little bit more about the story of redemption from Genesis onward. A grey felt heart stands for the Fall into sin. A beaded crown reminds of the Prince of Peace and Wonderful Counselor foretold in Isaiah. A fuzzy lamb represents John the Baptist's announcement of Christ's purpose.

The calendar is paired with devotional readings for children, which have surprised me in their simplicity and breadth. Like the ornaments, these readings tell a continuing story, in which Christ's life is not the beginning or the end, but the event that makes sense out of both. With this bigger context, an otherwise chaotic history becomes simple enough that a child can understand.

How often do we take time to contemplate the magnitude of this story, which began in the Garden of Eden and won't finish until Christ's second coming?

I think my Christmas cheer is too often confined to the stable. To use a loose analogy, I'm a bit like the dwarves in C. S. Lewis's *The Last Battle*, who convince themselves that their dingy stable-prison could not possibly hold the miracle of a whole new Narnia. And so, the dwarves get left behind in their imaginary confinement with nothing to celebrate when everyone else begins to explore the beautiful new world. Like the dwarves, I can put my little Christmas story in a little room, and forget to see the whole miracle of redemption.

Sunday's sermon about Herod's massacre in Bethlehem reminded me why the grander picture is so vital. You'll remember the story - only a short while after the angels announced "peace on earth," Herod's blazing temper led to the mass murder of baby boys in Bethlehem. The arbitrary deaths of these little ones seems so disconnected from what we celebrate, so outside the realm of God's



Day 15

REFERENCES

ISAIAH 12:4-5

grace. That event—like so many other injustices—seems to overwhelm the baby sleeping peacefully.

We can compartmentalize Christmas so it remains untainted by such events, can't we? But that's just it - as the grey heart on my felt Advent tree me, Christmas has to begin with an understanding of sin. We have to see the world's desperate need for grace before we understand why a baby requires such a hullabaloo, and we have to look back at God's plan to see how a baby can redeem even those situations. Therein lies the astonishing glory of what happened at Christmas, and the beauty of what we proclaim to the world.

As the days go by and my calendar grows fuller with symbolic ornaments, I get more and more excited about Christmas Day. Into this world with so much baggage came a child who remained in it and not of it, who knew what we are and loved us anyway. By God's grace, my understanding of Christmas keeps getting bigger—and with it, my reasons to “let [it] be known to the all the world” what he has done, is doing, and will continue to do!



Day 16

An Advent Prayer to Our Prince of Peace

Lisa Appelo

REFERENCES

ISAIAH 11:1–2

Isaiah 11:1–2 talks about stumps and shoots. We have several big oak trees in our yard and when one of them started endangering the house, we had it cut all the way down to a stump. A few months later? New green shoots with glossy green leaves began growing right out of that stump.

That's the picture that the prophet Isaiah uses. Seven hundred years before Jesus was ever born, Isaiah prophesied that a Messiah would come from the root of Jesse. Jesse was the father of King David, an ancestor of both Mary and Joseph. While nearly all of King David's royal line would be wiped out, God promised a Messiah would come from the stump of Jesse.

Out of what looked like a dead royal line—when a pagan, Roman government rather than a Hebrew king ruled over Israel—God brought about that new shoot: the Messiah—Jesus.

Jesus, didn't rule like King David with an earthly palace or majestic throne or royal robes conquering enemy nations through a mighty army. Instead, Jesus came in poverty and humility, to reveal a heavenly kingdom and to conquer the curse of sin through his own death.

Advent Prayer:

O Father, we praise you that before the foundation of the world
You chose Jesus, our Messiah, to come to earth and show us the
Way to the heavenly kingdom and to be the Way to the heavenly
kingdom. We thank you for making room for us who are
redeemed in Your heavenly Kingdom.

Jesus, we worship you as King of Kings and Lord of lords. You



Day 16

REFERENCES

ISAIAH 11:1-2

are my King. You have rule over my heart and my life, my thoughts and time and goals. I bow to You only and give you full and free reign over my life. Help me not to grip anything so tightly that I am unwilling to release it to You. You are a just King; our Prince of Peace. Help me to desire Your kingdom above that of my own making and bow to Your will above my own.

Holy Spirit, lead me in the ways of the heavenly kingdom. Teach me wisdom from above and guide me in truth. Help me to have eyes that see and ears that hear all that God has for me. Help me to know the Lord, to fully understand His might, to fear turning away from Him and to know His grace.

We love you Lord. With all of our heart, all of our soul, all of our mind and all of our strength we love you. We lavish you with our worship. We come to adore You today. Amen.



Day
17

What Christmas is About

Greg Laurie

REFERENCES

ISAIAH 9:6-7

As we look at our world today, we realize that part of the promise of Isaiah 9:6-7 has not yet been fulfilled. The Son has been given. The Child has been born. But He has not yet taken the government upon His shoulders. We do not yet have peace with judgment and justice. But the good news is that there will come a day when Christ will return. He will establish His kingdom on this earth. And it will be the righteous rule of God himself.

Before Jesus could take the government upon His shoulder, He had to take the cross upon His shoulder. Before He could wear the crown of glory as King of Kings, He had to wear the shameful crown of thorns and give His life as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. The first time, a star marked His arrival. But the next time He comes, the heavens will roll back like a scroll, all of the stars will fall from the sky, and He himself will light it.

Christ came to this earth. God came near to you so you can come near to Him—to give your life purpose and meaning, to forgive you of your sins, and to give you the hope of heaven beyond the grave. Christmas is not about tinsel or shopping or presents. Christmas is not about the gifts under the tree. Rather, Christmas is about the gift that was given on the tree when Christ died there for our sins and gave us the gift of eternal life.



Day 18

How You Can Have 'A Wonderful Life'

Dr. Jack Graham

REFERENCES

ACTS 17:26-27

One thing I love about this time of year is the traditions we have in our family. One of them is sitting down to watch the Jimmy Stewart movie, *It's A Wonderful Life*. You may have seen it, but it's about this fellow named George Bailey who grows up in a small town and has great dreams and aspirations of seeing the world and making lots of money.

But through a series of circumstances that he couldn't control, George never could get out of that little one-horse town. Every time he tried, something happened to keep him there. And to top it off, through a mistake one day it appeared that he would be sent to jail.

He was ready to end it all when an angel came to show him what the world would be like if he'd never been born. And George Bailey came to understand that even though he didn't get to achieve his dreams, he did have a wonderful life that impacted many more people than he realized.

I'm convinced there is a little George Bailey in all of us. We want to achieve significance on a huge scale and often forget the small ways that our lives have deeply impacted those around us. Thank God for where He's placed you and the people you've been able to impact. And one day when you meet the Lord, you'll realize you really did have a wonderful life.



Day 19

Christmas: A Time for Giving

Dr. Charles Stanley

REFERENCES

LUKE 2:1–20

LUKE 1:30–38

MATTHEW
1:18–25

MATT. 2:1–11

Christmas is one of the happiest holidays because during this season, people are more generous than at any other time of the year. The practice of giving is not a recent innovation—it began on the first Christmas when Jesus was born. Everyone in the story had something to give.

- When Mary submitted to God’s plan, she gave her body to be the first home of the incarnated Savior (Luke 1:30–38).
- She also surrendered her good reputation in order to fulfill the Lord’s calling for her life.
- Joseph offered his love and protection to Mary and the child who was not his own (Matt. 1:18–25).
- An angel gave an announcement of the Messiah’s birth to some lowly shepherds who were watching their flocks at night.
- A heavenly host of angels offered praise and glory to God.
- The shepherds shared the first personal testimony about the Messiah.
- The wise men relinquished the comfort of home to seek the newborn King and give Him gifts worthy of royalty (Matt. 2:1–11).

At first glance, these gifts may seem to pertain only to the first Christmas, but they each have application for us today. Believers are called to give of themselves to the Lord and to one another in similar ways.

Look at this list again. What gifts could you give to Christ today?



Day 19

Maybe you need to submit to His will in a difficult area or endure misunderstanding in order to obey Him. And how about others? Who needs your protection, love, or perhaps the good news of salvation in Christ?

REFERENCES

LUKE 2:1–20

LUKE 1:30–38

MATTHEW
1:18–25

MATT. 2:1–11



Day 20

The Strains of Christmas

John UpChurch

Christmas at my house meant preparing for the worst. The worst didn't always come, but you couldn't be too careful.

You see, the thing about holidays is that people tend to be together, pushed into the same room by tradition and baked turkey. My family spent most of the year avoiding such things, as we hurried off to school or work, buried ourselves in music and books, and generally enjoyed the comfort of a closed door.

We could usually navigate the raging Scylla and Charybdis of Thanksgiving because it only meant a day together before we scattered again. But while we chewed stuffing, my father would chew on his disappointment over his life and his family. My older brothers would try not to notice. The tryptophan made us all too sleepy for much more—at least, that's what I like to think.

But then Christmas came lumbering into the UpChurch household with all its vacation days. We had too much time off, and too many unspoken issues. We were like a pot of boiling potatoes with the water sloshing out on the stove. There'd be some sizzling over a lack of job, a splash or two over how much something cost, and then boom... the lid blew off.

An hour and two new holes in the wall later, we surveyed the wreckage of the yuletide cheer. My brothers would fume back into the basement, my father would escape to his computer, and my mom would try to figure out what to do. Usually, the anger just sunk back into the pot for another year.

When I moved out of my house, it took years for Christmas to reclaim its festive atmosphere. Even when the war ended, the shellshock didn't. There were too many things unsaid, too many things not dealt with. The embers of home-fought battles wouldn't die down.



Day 20

THE STRAINS OF CHRISTMAS

BY JOHN
UPCHURCH

Then, Christ.

Describing salvation couldn't be better summed up than in those two words set apart in their own paragraph: then, Christ. There was no choir of angels singing (audibly to me, at least) or a special star shining light down on my apartment, but it was a moment that clearly separates time into two epochs. That separation is for both BC/AD and OJ/NJ—Old John and New John.

As this New John, though, I noticed something that might as well have been as miraculous as angels breaking out the tunes over my head. When Christmas came, the dread didn't. I'd plucked the Christ off Christmas, and the mass didn't seem so heavy. In fact, I even looked forward to it.

No, the tension didn't suddenly melt away. The tempers weren't all snuffed out. There were still moments that stretched tightly across our gatherings. But I now knew something just slightly flip-the-world-upside-down, mind-blowingly awesome: A baby, born poor and away from home, had taken the worst this world had to offer. A king wanted Him dead, and His country had no place for Him. But still He came... for me.

For you.



Day 21

A Prayer for the Merry and Not-so Merry

Steph Raquel

REFERENCES

LUKE 2:10-11

Father God,

We thank You and praise You today for the miracle of Your Son's birth. Thank You for bringing great JOY to the whole world!

Thank You for giving us the assurance that because You came to us in the form of a human, we who believe in Jesus can know with absolute certainty that we'll spend eternity with You.

We thank You, Lord, for the many reasons we have been given a merry Christmas. And we rejoice for each blessing. New life. New love. A home. A job. New opportunities. Second chances. And more.

We know, Lord, that You bring the sun and the moon and set the stars in motion. You tell the ocean where to stop and the snow when to start. And we thank You for the mighty gift of Your creation.

Thank You, Father, for spiritual leaders and faith-filled friends who keep encouraging us when we are close to giving up.

And although we have many reasons to rejoice today, Lord, we also know December 25th can be not-so-merry for a whole host of reasons. We pray for those who are experiencing loss this Christmas: relational, financial, spiritual and physical.

We pray for those who are coping with loving a prodigal and our friends and family members whose hearts are far from You. We pray for those dealing with unemployment and addictions and chronic sickness ... and unending pain and frustrations of all kinds. Thank You, Lord, that You are The Wonderful Counselor and Prince of Peace, even in the midst of our not-so-merry circumstances.



Day 21

REFERENCES

LUKE 2:10-11

Finally, Lord, we ask You to grant us peace. Peace in our homes, peace in our churches, and peace in our hearts, when the world all around us spins out-of-control.

Help us to stay focused on You, this Christmastime and always. Thank You for loving the whole world enough to send the greatest gift, Your Son, so that we might truly have a very merry Christmas.

In Jesus' Name,

Amen.



Day 22

Why a Manger?

Skip Heitzig

REFERENCES

ISAIAH 9:6

MATTHEW 19:14

LUKE 8:43–48

A few years ago my Mom gave me the Nativity scene that was in our house when I was a kid. It evoked wonder in my early years, and it's still wonderful, but there's something not quite right about it. For one thing, the figure of Jesus looks more like a two-year-old than an infant. For another, He has blond hair and blue eyes—and from what I know of the Middle East, I have kind of a problem with that. Obviously, this Nativity set was crafted by a European!

And the manger is made out of wood. Of course, that's how most of us think of it. But the word in the Bible translated “manger” could mean either a feeding trough or an enclosure for animals. In that part of the world animals were kept in caves, and feeding troughs were made out of stone, so Jesus was probably born in a cave around Bethlehem somewhere, and laid in a stone trough.

Now, I know I've probably destroyed a lot of your mental pictures of Jesus' birth. But the important question is “Why a manger?” Why wasn't He born in a palace, and His birth heralded in the Jerusalem Post?

The answer is in two words, humility and accessibility. His mother wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, like any peasant of the time. This great gift came in simple wrapping. The one who would be called “Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father” (Isaiah 9:6)—the Creator—became an embryo, and then a baby. It's amazing, and the more you think about it, the more staggering it becomes. This humility would depict His entire life and ministry. And when He died He was buried in a borrowed grave, another cave similar to the one He was born in.

Because He was humble, He was accessible. Going into a throne



Day 22

REFERENCES

ISAIAH 9:6

MATTHEW 19:14

LUKE 8:43–48

room to see a king would be intimidating, but there's nothing intimidating about going into a cave and approaching a feeding trough. You don't need special credentials, you don't need to have to have an appointment. The shepherds could just come in.

And again, this marked not only His birth but His entire life. Jesus was always accessible to people. He said, "Let the little children come to Me" (Matthew 19:14). He also welcomed the woman with the incurable disease because of her faith (Luke 8:43–48).

So it's not really important what your Nativity scene looks like. The important thing is what you think about the Child who was laid in that manger. In the words of an old Christmas carol, "Infant holy, infant lowly, for his bed a cattle stall; oxen lowing, little knowing, Christ the babe is Lord of all."



Day 23

Keeping it Simple

Melanie Chitwood

REFERENCES

ISAIAH 9:6

My excuses for not decorating my home, not cooking a big meal on Christmas day, and not shopping till I dropped were valid ones. Our new business would be opening two weeks after Christmas, and I was working furiously to meet a book deadline. My husband and I had more to do than we had hours in the day.

When December approached, my neck stiffened and my heart skipped beats as I anticipated the stress more activities would bring to our already overstuffed lives. The thought of more clutter, even my favorite Christmas decorations, in our topsy-turvy home with all the undone laundry and crowded kitchen counters about sent me over the edge. So I began to think about how we could eliminate some stress to have a peaceful Christmas.

“Keep it simple” became my catchphrase. With my family’s assurance they’d join me with the simple Christmas idea, I gave myself permission not to do it all. I wouldn’t say yes to every invitation or fill the calendar every night, and I didn’t even send the annual Christmas photo and newsletter. These choices brought me a large measure of peace.

Each family member named some traditions they wanted to keep. We included a live Christmas tree, a wreath on the front door, reading the Christmas story from the Bible, Christmas Eve church service, limited gifts, helping with a toy drive, favorite Christmas movies, and a few get-togethers with good friends. Being more selective about our Christmas traditions brought us less stress and more peace. In addition, because we weren’t caught up in the seasonal frenzy, the activities we did include became more meaningful. We were able to focus on what really mattered: time with our family and hearts centered on the birth of Christ.



Day 23

REFERENCES

ISAIAH 9:6

At the end of Christmas day we agreed that despite the stressors of a new business and meeting my deadline, and despite giving up some of our usual Christmas activities, we hadn't missed out on a thing. Simplicity had given us breathing room and fresh hearts to celebrate the Prince of Peace.

Dear Lord, don't let us miss You this Christmas season. Help us to simplify our activities and traditions so we can focus our celebration on Your birth. Thank You for being the Prince of Peace, and I ask You for that supernatural peace to reign in our hearts. Thank You for the simple but life-changing message of Your love for us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.



Day 24

REFERENCES
MATTHEW 2:2
ISAIAH 7:14

Let Us Worship!

Greg Laurie

The very word “Christmas” has been emptied of its meaning, drug through the gutter, and given back to us, minus its power. Some prefer to use the more politically correct terminology at this time of year, like “Happy Holidays,” “Merry Xmas,” or even “Happy Winter Solstice.” But I actually think those things are not as bad as the person who says, “Merry Christmas” with no idea whatsoever of what Christmas really means.

I think we should cancel the version of Christmas that is filled with hype and endless activity leading to exhaustion, the version that gives little to any thought of Christ. We should cancel Christmas and instead celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. I still believe in Christmas, but not in the holiday as our culture celebrates it. I believe in the real message of Christmas, which is the birth of our Lord.

Maybe you are bracing yourself for a tough Christmas. Maybe you think Christmas won’t be as good this year as it was before. But what if this Christmas were better than any Christmas you have ever experienced, because you have been freed from the pressure of having to get stuff? That could be a really good Christmas. It could actually be the most wonderful Christmas of your life.

The primary message of Christmas is this: God is with us. Isaiah 7:14 tells us, “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.” Immanuel means, “God is with us.”

So the message of the season is not, “Let it snow” or even, “Let us shop.” The real message of Christmas is, “Let us worship.” That is what the wise men came to do. And that is what we should be doing as well.



Day 25

The Greatest Gift of Love

Pastor Adrian Rogers

REFERENCES

JOHN 3:16

Christmas is spelled L-O-V-E. What is the Christmas message? John 3:16. God gave us the gift of love on Christmas Day.

It is truly said, “What the world needs now is love.” I need it. You need it. Your spouse needs it. Your child needs it. An elderly man or woman sitting alone in a nursing home today needs it. A child abandoned and alone in a children’s home needs it, too.

God sent His one and only Son as the Savior. He knew we couldn’t save ourselves. So He sent His Son to be born in a manger, to die on a cross, to rise again into glory, and to come again to redeem His church.

ACTION POINT

Where are you spending your Christmas day? Maybe you can spare a few minutes with your family and friends to share His gift of love with someone who is all alone today.

