

The
Spirit
of
Christmas

from Reflections by the Pond
by David S. Lampel

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MID-DECEMBER 1997



Twenty years of living in the bland climate of Southern California left me with a desperate hunger to experience something from my childhood, something that had never left the recesses of my memory: a white Christmas.

Now, after seven years of living where it does indeed snow in the winter, I find myself longing for the same. As the temperatures have risen in the last few days, melting away the six inches of snow that had settled upon the land, I find myself fretting that, as a result, Christmas this year may be brown instead of white.

How sad, I think to myself, to stand at the window on Christmas eve, staring out upon a dull brown landscape. How spoiled and unChristmas-like it will all be without the glimmering blanket of clean snow.

But then I remember something Jesus said in the gospel of John.

"But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." John 4:23-24

My relationship with God is a spiritual one. It has nothing to do with the externals of either my person or the world in which I dwell. It is my spirit communing with His that establishes and determines the quality of my relationship with Christ.

When the plastic tinsel and hollow tunes of the season become a distraction; when the pressing crowds and oppressive traffic in the streets cause my blood to boil; when even the religious activities of the season become a tiresome nuisance, extinguishing the little bit of joy I had before—I must

realize that these small things are not ultimately responsible for my peace of mind.

My God is spirit, and it is my spirit that communicates with Him. The true joy of Christmas is a spiritual joy that transcends any human laughter, smiles or happiness. The true joy of Christmas is to be found in a dank, smelly stable where I kneel before a tiny child swaddled and lying in a feeding trough. There, worshipping the eternal Son of God, just come down to dwell for awhile in human form—this is where I find Christmas.

It is not the land that must be clean and white, its dull earthen tones covered over by the pristine snow; it's not the rolling hills and wooded glen, or the lawn around the house, that must be blanketed in the beauty of snow, masking the brown ugliness lying beneath; it's nothing external that must be prepared before I can experience the joy of Christmas.

It is, instead, my own spirit that must be clean and white before I may enjoy the privilege of kneeling before the small child that has come to be my Lord.





CHRISTMAS EVE 1997

Gifts

ack in the fifties in Marshalltown, Iowa, when this writer was living out the innocent childhood that today's cynical pundits claim never existed, Christmas was a time of uncluttered, simple joys.

Children experience life at a more exaggerated pace; they take time for the small things that adults haven't the time or patience to notice. When December rolls around the small child catalogs the marvelous sights, the powerfully fragrant smells of the trees, the sharp bite of the cold winter air, the sweet aromas wafting from the kitchen doorway.

And children enjoy especially the presents. Oh, certainly, there is no small measure of greed in their excited opening of the gaily wrapped gifts bearing their name; their first motive is the fun they'll have playing with that new toy. But just as they are exquisitely aware of everything else going on about them, a child also understands that each gift represents a measure of love: they understand that another person cared enough to make or purchase a gift especially for them.

It has become too easy for adults to miss the Christmas spirit entirely. Occupied with all the responsibilities of the season, the days become monotonous, if not sheer drudgery. Tempers show their ugly face as traffic queues form where once there were free-flowing arteries, parking spaces vanish in thin air, and high prices create aching vacancies in the bank account.

While the child happily inhales the rich aromas emanating from the kitchen, it is the adult who is out there laboring over a hot stove to create them. It is the adult who must clean the house and make all the preparations for the visiting relatives. And the adult wakes one frosty morning realizing the ache in the belly is for all those simple pleasures from childhood that once made Christmas a time of joy.



Yesterday in the midst of household drudgery in preparation for visiting relatives I suddenly experienced a small oasis of old-fashioned joy. Realizing I had not yet wrapped Linda's gifts, I called for the girls to join me downstairs.

Rousing themselves from afternoon naps, they gathered around as I collected the rolls of paper, Scotch tape, and bows. While I measured and cut, Gilley tried to fit herself into each empty box, and Donovan quietly munched on the enticing ribbons and bows. Curious whiskers got in the way of scissors, and more than once Amelia thought she spied a mouse in the wastebasket.

In past years I have often dismissed the exchanging of gifts at Christmas as little more than crass commercialism. But yesterday my spirit was revived through the simple act of wrapping gifts for someone I love. Oh, the contents of each package were nothing special; just inexpensive necessities that more normal people wouldn't even bother to wrap. But somehow the family project of wrapping Linda's gifts brought back the simple joys of a childhood Christmas.

And just imagine how God felt that night, as He carefully wrapped His gift, and placed it gently down into the cradle of that Bethlehem manger.

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. 1 John 4:10



LATE DECEMBER 2000

*A Symphony
with Many
Movements*

*There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under heaven...*

Ecclesiastes 3:1

Powdered hoarfrost, dislodged from the trees by the warming sun, drifts down through the brilliant morning air like diamond dust exhaled from a blue sky. Everything around is white, and each tiny branch is frosted—as if God woke us to dawn by exhaling His warmed breath against the frigid black skeletons of winter's trees.

Autumn's dried grass and dying weeds lie buried beneath a deep, downy comforter of snow. Cold temperatures have kept it there for weeks, only added to and made deeper as more layers have come blowing down from the even colder north.


The full force of winter has settled in upon us. For many, what seems fresh and festive before Christmas is reduced to inconvenient drudgery after. Cute, reddened cheeks acquired during holiday shopping sprees become only irritating wounds once the day has past—and by February the delightful fluff outside the window will have become a claustrophobic barrier to the freedoms enjoyed in other seasons.

Yet the more snow we get now, the better will be next year's crops. Early thaws will let what is frozen now become much needed moisture that will seep down into deep levels of the soil, bringing life and nutrients to the seeds sown in the spring.

Life is a symphony with many movements. It holds within its grasp lyrical beauty, inconvenient sorrows, inexpressible joy, pain, discomfort,

and embracing warmth. We are serenaded by bliss as we encounter trials; we pass through sadness on our way to joy.

The snow is both beauty and ugliness. It makes life hard, even as it brings life and potential for future growth. It kills quickly the fallen sparrow, but insulates the burrowing mouse. It holds everything in its icy grip, yet reflects and intensifies the sun's brilliant warmth. It is curse and blessing in one.



*He changes times and seasons;
he sets up kings and deposes them.
He gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to the discerning.
He reveals deep and hidden things;
he knows what lies in darkness,
and light dwells with him.*

Daniel 2:21-22

*But when the fullness of the time
came, God sent forth His Son,
born of a woman, born under
the Law, so that He might
redeem those who were under
the Law, that we might receive
the adoption as sons.*

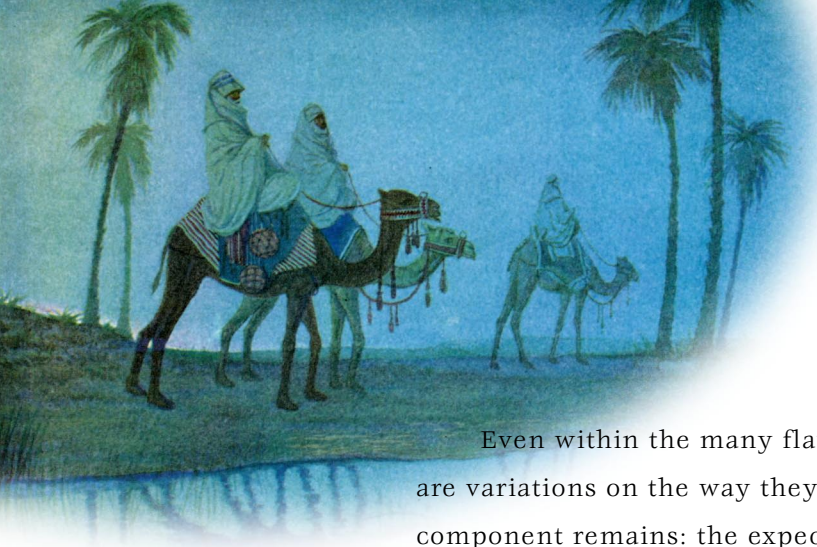
Galatians 4:4-5 nasb

EARLY DECEMBER 2001

One:
The Expectation

Right about now, churches the world over are in final preparations for their Christmas musical. The choir members are putting the final polish on the songs, the actors are adding last-minute nuances to their characters, and the director is tearing out his hair over irritating details that people keep bringing to his attention. From simple narrated cantatas to spectacular, surround-sound extravaganzas, music and drama departments of every stripe are readying their presentation of adoration.

And the body of Christ stands in the wings, waiting for its cue.



Even within the many flavors and sects of the Christian faith, there are variations on the way they celebrate Christmas. But the essential component remains: the expectation of His birth, and the subsequent adoration of the Christ child. No matter the color of our skin or the traditions into which we have been born, Christmas means the incarnation of our salvation. No matter our denomination—evangelical, charismatic, high-church, low-church, reformed, Protestant or Catholic, premillennial or postmillennial—we all come together to proclaim that, in Christ, God has come down to man.

So about this same time every year, we can all feel the rush of expectation that soars in our spirit as we contemplate the Child, and the circumstances of his miraculous yet human birth: miraculous because Jesus had no father but the Holy Spirit; human because, by all appearances, His mother gave birth in a perfectly normal way.

But those in attendance knew that this was no normal birth. From the shepherds to the tardy magi, to Mary with her espoused—without knowing

all the details, they all knew that life on earth had forever changed.

In their arms and in their gaze lay salvation from sin and death, freedom from the oppressive law, and the traditions of a religious system run amuck. In that filthy manger, in a poor and conquered land, lay the hope for all mankind—both Jew and Gentile. In that manger lay God Himself.


For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Colossians 1:19-20

"For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement."

Leviticus 17:11 nasbu

MID-DECEMBER 2001

Two: The Sorrow



Just as we cannot consider Bethlehem without contemplating the cross that would follow, so we cannot look upon a God who would graciously gift us with His only Son without considering the pain He experienced in the gifting.

At least as long ago as the beginning of man's existence on earth, God ordained that communion with Him would come only by atonement: man was too far from God's holiness and purity to approach Him without a covering—without a pardon for his impurities. God also ordained, early

on, that this atonement would require blood. Man could not commune with God without paying the price of shed blood.

Thus when mankind reached a certain age, God set into motion the plan that would, once and for all, make ultimate atonement for all mankind: the sacrifice of His own Son. Any other sacrifice would fall short; only the death of God Himself would sufficiently cover over the sins of the entire world. But for this blood to be shed, God must first become flesh, for only as flesh could He die.

And so we come to that moment nine months prior to Bethlehem—that singular, shattering moment in which the Spirit of God joined with flesh to create a unique individual: the God/Man called Jesus. It was, indeed, a moment of joy for man and, in a way, a moment of joy for God, for this was the beginning of His plan to pave the way for His creation to commune with Him.

"My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

John 10:29-30 nasbu

But it was also a moment permeated with sorrow, for God the Father knew what that baby would ultimately suffer—which meant that *He* would suffer as well. For as Jesus would later explain, He and the Father are one. In ways mere mortals will never comprehend, the Son and the Father are one.

And the Child that would rest in that Bethlehem manger would grow into a man who would take upon Himself the weight of every sin committed, the sorrow of every broken heart, the pain of every pierced side. As the baby took His first breath, the Father and Spirit were at once there, in the stable, and beneath a hard wooden cross bearing the blood of the sacrificed Son.

"All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day." John 6:37-40 nasbu



MID-DECEMBER 2001

Three: The Joy

o there He was: God in the person of a newborn child, wrapped in uncomfortable flesh and breathing in the earthy scent of a humble beginning. And beating in the child's breast was a heart bigger than time itself, for before time began He had set out to draw man to Himself.

In that moment of incarnation in a Bethlehem stable was the joy-filled beginning of a wondrous new relationship between God and man. As a newborn forever changes the lives of his or her parents, the newborn

Christ Child forever changed how God considered man, and how man would look to God.

No more would there be dizzying layers of minute regulations, intricate gateways to trap man in his own inconsistencies. No more would there be intermediaries to represent common, unschooled man before a righteous God. No more would there be penalizing inner sanctums where soiled and sinful man was locked out, kept from the presence of holy God.

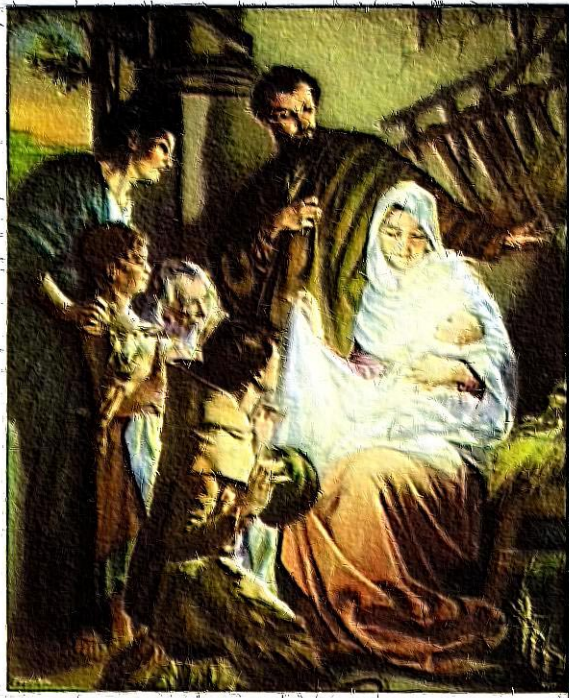
As an awestruck parent looks down upon her new child, imagining the soon and coming days of wonder and delight, so God the Father looked down from heaven, filled with the joy of what was to come in His new relationship with creation. Just as the obstructing veil would be coming down for small man, so too would God Himself now have new access to those He would call His own.

And because God lives outside of time, dwelling at once in the beginning, the end, and every milestone in between, at the moment of His birth in a village of Judea, He was already living out the exquisite joy of

having drawn man to Himself through the person—the birth, the life, the death and resurrection—of Jesus, the Christ.



...fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. Hebrews 12:2-3 nasbu



LATE DECEMBER 1999

Epilogue

For He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

Colossians 1:15,17 nasb

Already the glow is fading from the Christmas decorations. Just a few days after the day itself, and already we are turning our gaze from the nativity to the approaching new year.

Even the nativity itself; just a few days ago it was aglow with

expectation, but now the small porcelain figures gather dust, and we wonder when to put them all back into their box for next year.

But the child remains. Oh, by our temporal perceptions He has changed—and will continue to change. What was once spirit has now been born upon the earth of His creation. He will grow into childhood, adolescence, youth, and adulthood. He will continue to mature, and grow in wisdom, until He begins His public ministry. Then He will die terribly upon a cross and be entombed, but will miraculously rise out of that tomb with a new and different form, one not bound by the physical laws. Then He will return to the heavens, to reign forever.

By our small standards the child lying in the feeding trough, Jesus Christ, will pass through many changes. But in essence He remains what He always has been: God.

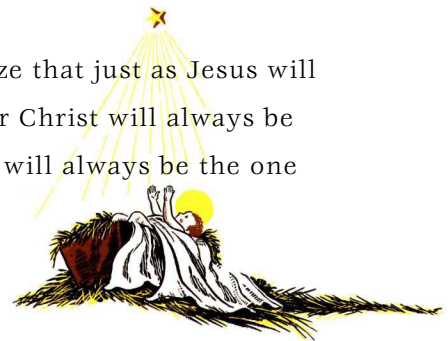
As I gaze upon the scene one last time, before carefully wrapping each figure and storing it away for another year, I look again at the small Child with tiny arms upraised. He seems to be reaching up toward me—for

me. He's not a baby at all, but simply God in a different package. And He reaches up out of the hay to draw me closer—to draw me tighter into His arms and His life.

"I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." John 10:10b nkjv

Then I understand that Jesus came not only to bring God down to man, but to lift man up to God. He came so that I might participate every day in His abundant and enriching life. He came so that I may know God, know Him in a personal, intimate way—not as a fierce, wrath-consumed deity who is perpetually angry at me, but as a loving Father willing to inconvenience Himself on my behalf.

As I place the figurines in their box I realize that just as Jesus will forever be God, He will always be the Child. For Christ will always be ready to reach out and draw me closer. And He will always be the one willing to come in flesh, to die for me.



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