

Prelude,

Christmas Eve, 1969

U.S. Naval Amphibious Base

Norfolk, Virginia

part two

For all of the lad's life, Christmas had been a time for family and church. Standing there, staring blankly into the glass that reflected back his reflection, he recalled childhood Christmases in the old church of hardwood floors and even harder wood pews. He remembered standing before the Christmas Eve congregation, one of several in the Children's Choir perched precariously atop rickety risers, singing the simple carols that told of the baby Jesus in the manger. Lights were kept low, and the scent of burning candles brought a joyous—even mysterious—solemnity to the occasion.

After the service there would be packages of candy distributed to the kids, and at home, fruit breads and oyster and potato soups, and the privilege of opening just one small gift before heading off to his bed.

Those times now seemed a million miles away as the boy listened to the silence of Christmas Eve spent alone.

Then the silence was broken by an announcement over the loudspeaker: All those remaining behind were to get their instruments and board the bus parked outside. They were to spend the evening playing carols around the base.

The Beginning of Forever



The Gift of Life

Like a great wheel with spokes

radiating out from its hub, any celebration of what we call Christmas—the night the Son of God was incarnated—must focus upon the child, and God's purpose in revealing Him to mankind.

HOW SILENTLY, HOW SILENTLY,
THE WONDROUS GIFT IS GIVEN!
SO GOD IMPARTS TO HUMAN HEARTS
THE BLESSINGS OF HIS HEAV'N.
NO EAR MAY HEAR HIS COMING,
BUT IN THIS WORLD OF SIN,
WHERE MEEK SOULS WILL RECEIVE HIM STILL,
THE DEAR CHRIST ENTERS IN.

(PHILLIPS BROOKS)

Immanuel

It is not necessary, for the sake of righteousness, for us to ignore the celebration of Christmas, nor is it necessary to conduct wholesale removal of all pagan-oriented traditions. An unholy origin can be found for virtually any Christmas tradition practiced in the most orthodox Christian homes. Yet the true test for any tradition is not what it meant hundreds of years ago, but what it means in our hearts today.

I think all Christians would agree with me if I said that though Christianity seems at first to be all about morality, all about duties and rules and guilt and virtue, yet it leads you on, out of all that, into something beyond. One has a glimpse of a country where they do not talk of those things, except perhaps as a joke. Every one there is filled full with what we should call goodness as a mirror is filled with light. But they do not call it goodness. They do not call it anything. They are not thinking of it. They are too busy looking at the source from which it comes.
(C.S. Lewis)

It is entirely appropriate for us to give gifts on the occasion of Christ's birth, since the practice was initiated by God from the beginning. As we let our gaze rest upon the Christ child, we find there in His person all the compassionate generosity of the Father. Here we have the *ultimate* gift, the gift of eternal life through the sacrifice of His only Son.

By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. 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 4:9-10)

It is impossible to remove the cross from the manger; the shadow of Christ's death darkens perceptibly the moment of His birth. But this ominous shadow does not remove the joy, the thanksgiving, from the moment. Indeed, it is what supplies it. God's purpose in sending His Son was not for us to tickle the chin of a cute baby, to watch Him grow into manhood, then to watch Him stride off majestically into the sunset. He was sent as our gateway into eternity,

and that would only happen if He sacrificially died.

It is true that one purpose behind the incarnation of the Son was to make tangible the "humanity" of the Father. How easy it would be to see only the unapproachable holiness and righteousness of God, His all-powerful wrath, if we did not have Jesus to incarnate Him—to "flesh Him out" for us.

But Jesus came to save us. *That* was the gift: not a baby, but salvation by way of the cross.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

(Ephesians 2:4-7)

An Uneven Trade

The tradition of exchanging gifts also began at the Nativity, for when God gave the initial gift of His Son to the world, the wise men represented the gratitude of the world in their adoration of the Child and the tangible gifts they brought.

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him." After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshipped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

(Matthew 2:1-2,9-11)

The three kings of the story—or, more properly, *magi*—were apparently non-Jewish religious astrologers from Persia or Arabia who had inferred the birth of a Jewish king from astronomical observations and the ancient Jewish texts. What is remarkable is

not their curiosity, which would have been part and parcel of their occupation, but the reverence with which they approached both the mission and its goal.

These men were not part of the system. They had no religious connection to the birth of Christ—neither from a Jewish or, certainly, gentile perspective. Neither did they have a cynical political reason for seeking out, then showering favor upon such humble folk as Jesus and His parents. On the contrary, what drove these men to Bethlehem could only have been a search for truth—and when they found it, they worshipped it.

The narrative by Matthew is a curious inversion, a rotated glance into reality—as if the story were being played out behind Alice's looking glass. It *would* be, that is, were we to remove the supernatural element.

These were men of standing, of reputation. Why would they have displayed such reverence toward a peasant girl's child? While it was not uncommon for visitors in the orient to proffer gifts, these would normally have been for someone considered a superior. Why would the magi have considered Jesus a superior?

There is an almost cinematic feeling to this episode in which three strangers travel from a distant land to kneel before a new and foreign king. It is as if Jesus, while still in His mother's womb, exerted some powerful force that drew the wise men to where He would be. Traveling possibly hundreds of miles, across desert and alien terrain, they came in search of someone of whom only the stars and prophetic texts spoke.

What was their purpose? Beyond simply confirming their quest, what was their purpose in coming to the child Jesus?

To give. Oh, but to give so much more than what they held in their hands. They came to give what they held in their hearts. It was their *worship* that became the true exchange for God's precious gift of salvation.

And that is to be *our* most precious Christmas gift: our adoration of the One who has given us life. Every year—indeed, every *day*—we exchange gifts with the Father. He, out of His gracious heart, gives us eternal life with Him through the blood of His Son. In exchange we, out of a grateful heart, give in return, our eternal devotion and praise.