

Prelude,

Christmas Eve, 1969
U.S. Naval Amphibious Base
Norfolk, Virginia

part three

It was a dark humor that pervaded the interior of the bus; sullen, depressed sailors scrunched down into the collars of their pea coats, keeping the mouthpieces to their instruments warm inside their pockets. After awhile the routine became monotonous: file off the bus in front of some high-ranking officer's quarters; get the selection to play from the leader; raise the cold instrument to the lips, and make a half-hearted attempt to sound jolly for a few minutes; file back onto the bus, then do it all over again.

Eventually, at one house their playing was rewarded. The line officer whose home had just been serenaded, emerged to donate a full bottle of whiskey to the band. Expressions of gratitude were mumbled, and the band members shuffled back onto the bus.

On the way to the next stop, the bottle was passed around, and eventually made it to the boy from Iowa. Every Christmas before it had been hot chocolate and potato soup offered to him; now it was bourbon whiskey. After a few seconds pause, however, he decided that whiskey—not steaming cocoa—was somehow more appropriate to this Christmas Eve, and he took a swig.

The liquor burned on the way down, but it failed to remove the chill of his melancholy. As he huddled back into his pea coat, he muttered to himself, "So—Merry *Christmas*," and he passed the bottle along to the next guy.

The Beginning of Forever



Everlasting Life

Twenty years of living in the bland

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

Now, after thirteen years of living where it does indeed snow in the winter, I find myself, once again, longing for the same. As the temperatures have remained moderate, and the skies have remained dry, 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 onto a dull brown landscape. How spoiled and unChristmas-like it will all be without the glimmering blanket of clean snow.

But then I am reminded of 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)

A Spiritual Relationship

It has now been thirty-five years since I stood forlornly staring out a barracks window, longing for a Christmas Eve beyond my reach—thirty-five years since my Christmas “cheer” was found in an alien, burning sip from a communal whiskey bottle, rather than in the warmth and fellowship found around my family’s table. And now, once again, I catch myself wishing for some external to brighten my outlook for this holiday.

But 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 already have—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 will find Christmas.

A Clean Spirit

It is not the land that must be clean and white, its dull earthen tones covered over by the pristine snow; it is 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 is 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.

We must keep our eyes on Jesus Christ. We must resolve to understand Him, to know Him intimately. Christmas must focus upon the person of Christ. Christmas trees and presents and miniature Nativity sets mean nothing without the person of Jesus in attendance.

His birth in Bethlehem meant that we—all of us, regardless our bloodline, heritage or nationality—would have the opportunity to enjoy eternity with Him.

But it is only an opportunity; the decision is still ours. It is up to us to join our spirit with His—first in that singular moment in which we confess our need for His salvation, and then in the daily, hourly communion of the redeemed with the Lord. It is up to each of us to focus our longings and aspirations on the only one able to fulfill them. Only then will we discover and embrace the true joy to be found in Christmas.

Celebrate!

Every aspect of our Christmas has to contain some part of the Savior. Otherwise, it is just another pagan holiday.

At Christmas time we all celebrate something. For some, it is the chance to spread good cheer and happiness; it is a time for generosity and compassion. For some, it is a time for office parties, small trays of cookies or candy, and sharing bottles of spirits. For many, it is a chance to receive gifts from friends and family, as well as to give in return.

For others, the celebration is a solitary vigil filled with the pain of loneliness—something grabbing in the pit of the stomach, an awful memory that comes crying back into a suffering consciousness.

What we celebrate at Christmas, however, is so much more than just another excuse for a party—so much more than tinsel and garlands and electric lights on a harvested evergreen. And the only pain that should be present is the pain of realization when one has no relationship with the Child at its center.

Who can add to Christmas? The perfect motive is that God so loved the world. The perfect gift is that He gave His only Son. The only requirement is to believe in Him. The reward of faith is that you shall have everlasting life.
(Corrie ten Boom)

AS WITH GLADNESS MEN OF OLD
DID THE GUIDING STAR BEHOLD;
AS WITH JOY THEY HAILED ITS LIGHT,
LEADING ONWARD, BEAMING BRIGHT,
SO, MOST GRACIOUS LORD, MAY WE
EVERMORE BE LED TO THEE.

AS WITH JOYFUL STEPS THEY SPED
TO THAT LOWLY MANGER BED,
THERE TO BEND THE KNEE BEFORE
HIM WHOM HEAV’N AND EARTH ADORE,
SO MAY WE WITH WILLING FEET
EVER SEEK THE MERCY SEAT.

AS THEY OFFERED GIFTS MOST RARE
AT THAT MANGER RUDE AND BARE,
SO MAY WE WITH HOLY JOY,
PURE AND FREE FROM SIN’S ALLOY,
ALL OUR COSTLIEST TREASURES BRING,
CHRIST, TO THEE OUR HEAV’NLY KING.

HOLY JESUS, EV’RY DAY
KEEP US IN THE NARROW WAY;
AND, WHEN EARTHLY THINGS ARE PAST,
BRING OUR RANSOMED SOULS AT LAST
WHERE THEY NEED NO STAR TO GUIDE,
WHERE NO CLOUDS THY GLORY HIDE. AMEN

(WILLIAM C. DIX)