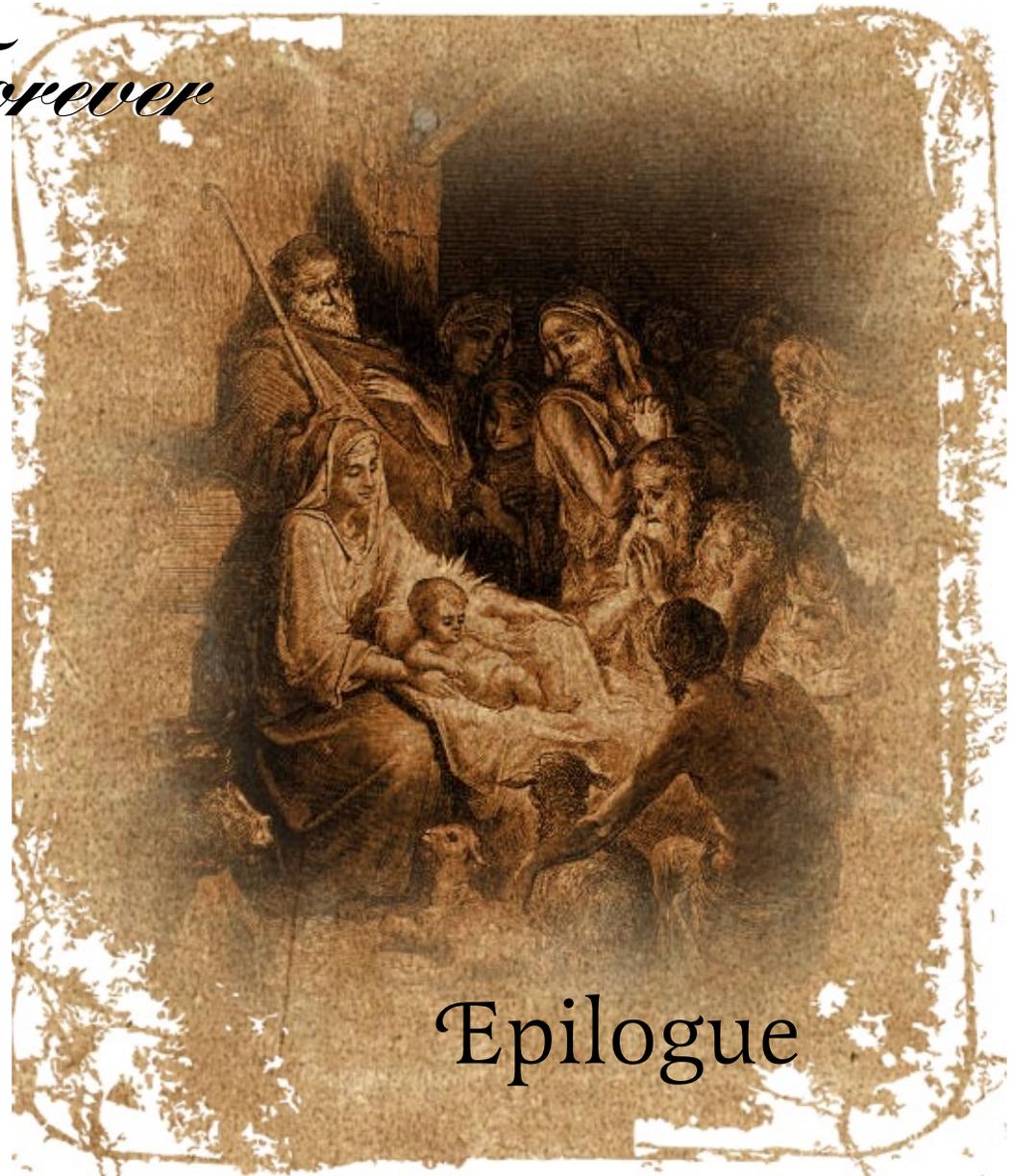


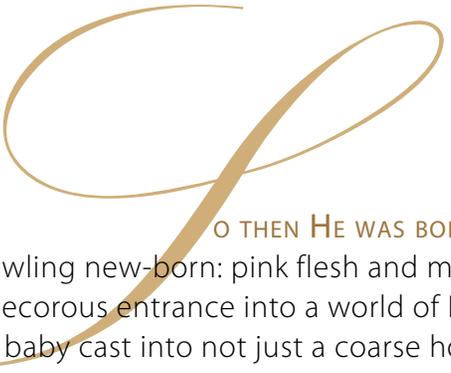
The Beginning of Forever

“This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Luke 2:12



Epilogue



SO THEN HE WAS BORN—the Son of God as a helpless, mewling new-born: pink flesh and matted dark curls still wet from His indecorous entrance into a world of His own creation. A little Jewish baby cast into not just a coarse home for beasts, but the coarse environment of the day: hate and injustice, pain and inequities that comprised the Roman world of the first century. But there He was nonetheless. It was the time—the time of God’s own choosing. No matter what anyone else might think, it was the right time and place for Him to enter the world.

So what do you think? What do you see lying there in the manger, in the dim light and fetid atmosphere of the stable? Do you see the impotence and unformed inabilities of a baby, and wonder what all the fuss is about? Do you see a charming fairy tale and little more?

Do you see, perhaps, the ponderous bulk of the Church, the high and the low, the vast and torturous hierarchy of Christendom? Do you see layer after layer of man-created obstacles keeping the commoner a safe, but insulating distance from God? Do you see the darker elements that have become, by rank traditionalism, barriers to simple intimacy with a Savior?

Do you see the face of child-like innocence, of little boys and girls perched awkwardly on risers, struggling through their memorized Christmas ditties? Do you see the candlelighted fantasies of church vespers, glowing visions beheld through tears of appreciative joy?

Do you see, instead, injustice that sneers at a child meant to bring

“peace and goodwill”? Do you see the inequities of pain and poverty, and consider that maybe Bethlehem was just a cruel lie—a joke played out by a cynical God.

The Real Jesus

The original “Christmas” nativity—that gamey home for Jewish livestock—was a holy place. Imagine, it was the first time that pure, undiluted deity had ever come to this grossly fallen earth as one of us. God and the pre-incarnate Christ had been here before; the Holy Spirit had been in and out, out and about for centuries, whenever needed. But never before had any of them come in this form: flesh. Real flesh; flesh that required food and sleep, occasional bathing; flesh that grew weary from time to time.

That night in a Bethlehem stable, the real Jesus had no halo—nor did his parents. There was no other-worldly glow about any of them. The cows (if there were any) did not stop chewing their cud to gaze lovingly upon their new tenant. Mary, a teenage girl who had just given birth for the first time—in an animal’s stall—was surely not the fresh-scrubbed, immaculately attired figure in most modern renditions of the scene.

The real Jesus (as opposed to those man goes out of his way to conjure out of his own self-serving imaginings) was every bit as human as His mother and her husband, yet He was also every bit as holy

and pure as the Father who sent Him. The real Jesus may be many things, but He is never anything less than those two seemingly contradictory aspects of His being: God and flesh—not *fallen* flesh, as we, but flesh in every other way. As such, He is that most intimate expression of God's love: God willing to become something less than what He is.

The child we celebrate every year—the real one—rises above the many layers of man's invention and odd response. Christ came as both a blessing and an offense. He came into the world as the bringer of life, of unclouded joy, of escape from inevitable death. But He came also to prick the conscience, to be someone and represent something uncomfortable—even galling to some.

To gaze upon the child in the manger is to look upon the one dependable hope in a hard and unforgiving world. To look upon Jesus is to see the piercing, forgiving light of God bringing salvation to a people in desperate need of His love.

*Forever God,
Forever the Child*

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

Already the glow is fading from the Christmas decorations. The day is not even here and already we are turning our gaze from the nativity to the approaching new year.

Even the nativity set itself; just a few days ago it was aglow with expectation, but now the small porcelain figures gather dust, and we wonder when we will 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 manger 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 just 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.

*Jesus all the day long
Was my joy and my song:
O that all His salvation might see;
He hath loved me, I cried,
He hath suffered and died,
To redeem even rebels like me.*

Charles Wesley