

Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S. LAMPEL



THERE HAD TO BE

CHRISTMAS

There has to be a first chapter before there can be a last.

There has to be a start before there can be a finish.

There has to be life before there can be death.

There cannot be Easter without Christmas.

And there cannot be Christmas without Easter.

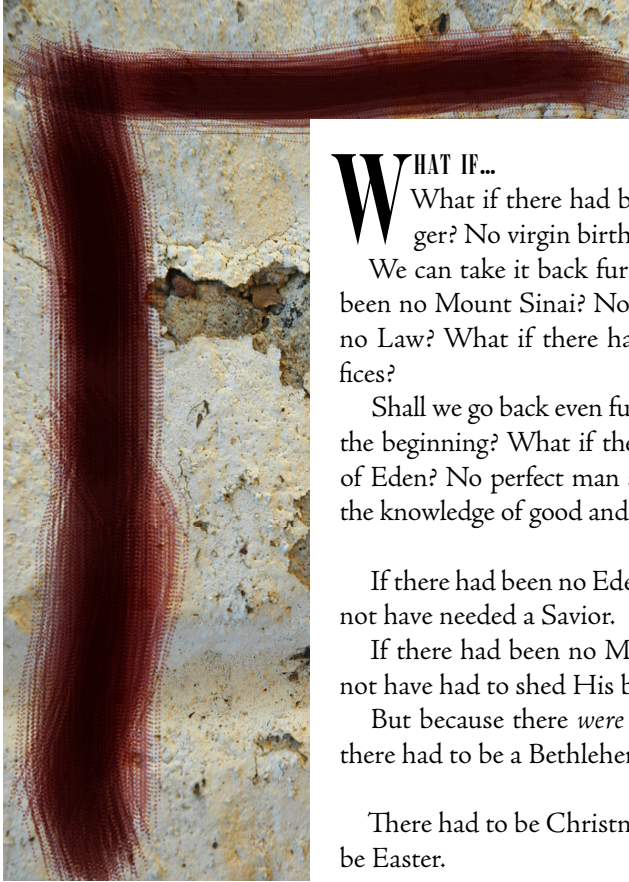
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LIFE IN THE BLOOD



WHAT IF...
What if there had been no Bethlehem manger? No virgin birth? No baby?

We can take it back further: What if there had been no Mount Sinai? No Moses? No tablets and no Law? What if there had been no temple sacrifices?

Shall we go back even further, all the way back to the beginning? What if there had been no Garden of Eden? No perfect man and woman? No tree of the knowledge of good and evil, no serpent, no Fall?

If there had been no Eden and no Fall, we would not have needed a Savior.

If there had been no Mount Sinai, Jesus would not have had to shed His blood and die.

But because there *were* Eden and Mount Sinai, there had to be a Bethlehem, and a baby.

There had to be Christmas because there had to be Easter.

THE INVENTION

God did not invent Christmas for decorated evergreens, candy canes and mistletoe, or presents under the tree. He did not invent Christmas for wall-to-wall shopping, carols being sung in the mall, or eggnog. God did not invent Christmas for pageants or choirs or cantatas or miniature and life-sized nativity scenes.

God invented Christmas to supply the sacrificial Lamb for Easter.

The sacrifice for sin would require the shedding of blood. Spirit could not bleed; only flesh could bleed. So the sacrificial Lamb was sent as flesh.

The eternal, uncreated Godhead put everything in motion, according to Its plan, set irretrievably before there was an earth, before there was a universe, before there was even such a thing as time. Before there was anything else in existence the Godhead knew that man would sin, that he would require a Savior, and that blood would have to be shed for his atonement.

We need not bother to ask *Why?* A colonel in the army need not explain his orders to a noncom, and God need not explain Himself to mere humans. This is how He planned it, and that is enough.



The solution to man's sin was initiated—not *resolved*; just initiated—during his second generation, when Yahweh blessed Abel's offering, but not Cain's.

And Abel was a keeper of flocks, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the LORD of the fruit of the ground. Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell.

Genesis 4:2b-5

Later, once the ark carrying Noah and his family came to rest, and they all emerged onto dry ground, God gave them permission, for the first time in the history of man, to eat meat. But God specified they were not to consume the blood.

"The fear of you and the terror of you will be on every beast of the earth and on every bird of the sky; with everything that creeps on the ground, and all the fish of the sea, into your hand they are given. Every moving thing that is alive shall be food for you; I give all to you, as I gave the green plant. Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood."

Genesis 9:2-4

Much later, before the children of Israel departed Egypt, there came a terrible night when the Lord went throughout the land killing the firstborn of every man and beast. Israel could avoid this death not by relying on their lineage, but by killing an unblemished, year-old lamb or goat, and smearing some of its blood over and around the doorway to each family's home.

"For I will go through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments—I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live; and when I see the blood I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt."

Exodus 12:12-13

Later still, when the Lord through Moses gave the details and nuances of the Sinai Law, He explained more fully what He had meant in His instructions to Noah.

"And any man from the house of Israel, or from the aliens who sojourn among them, who eats any blood, I will set My face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people. 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.' Therefore I said to the sons of Israel, 'No person among you may eat blood, nor may any alien who sojourns among you eat blood.' So when any man from the sons of Israel, or from the aliens who sojourn among them, in hunting catches a beast or a bird which may be eaten, he shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth. For as for the life of all flesh, its blood is identified with its life. Therefore I said to the sons of Israel, 'You are not to eat the blood of any flesh, for the life of all flesh is its blood; whoever eats it shall be cut off.'"

Leviticus 17:10-14

"The life [or soul] of the flesh is in the blood." That is not just good theology, that is good science. Flesh of any kind cannot survive without blood. So if the transaction is "life for life," as illustrated in the Law's requirement that something—bull, sheep, goat, bird—must lose its life to atone for the sin committed by someone, then blood must be shed.

FRUITLESS REPETITION

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Luke 2:10-11

We need not discard the joy and wonder that are traditionally part of Christmas. If the angel brought news of "great joy" to the shepherds, then surely we, too, may celebrate our Savior's birth. There can be

no greater excuse for rejoicing than the arrival of the One who will remove for all time, for every one who places their trust in Him, the once-immovable enmity between God and man.

For century stacked upon century the blood of innocent beasts flowed to remove the fact and the guilt of sin.

For a while.

Until the *next* sin.

For all those centuries—and, sadly, for many still today—adherents believed that this was as good as it could get: To atone for sin, make a sacrifice, physical or verbal, and be renewed. Rinse and repeat as needed.

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

And now *His* blood, the blood of God's Son, born in Bethlehem so that He might shed that blood upon the altar of the cross, would suffice. No more the nauseating, fruitless repetition; now once and for all time the Son's blood would cover *all* sin—past, present, future—for those who believe.

Happy Christmas indeed.

For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.

Colossians 1:19-20

MADE COMPATIBLE



It is true that man was made in the image of the Godhead.

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness..."

Genesis 1:26a

That does not mean, however, that man is of the same "species" as God. Man is flesh-kind, and God is spirit-kind. As Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well,

"God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

John 4:24

We struggle to find the right words to describe either the similarities or differences between eternal Deity and temporal man. There are certain qualities man possesses that set him apart from animals and plants, and these qualities reveal our likeness to God—among them speech, morality, shame and, not least, spirituality. Only man has the ability, not to mention the impulse, to commune with God. It is our likeness to God that causes us to yearn for Him and, once we have found Him, to communicate with Him. Had we not been created in His likeness, we could not worship Him "in spirit and truth."

Nonetheless, while we have been made in such a way that we may communicate on a spiritual level with our God, we do not *look* like Him. We are flesh; He is spirit. Beyond that, we do not know what God looks like, if He even *has* a corporeal presence. In the rare Bible passages in which individuals such as Ezekiel grasp for words to describe Him, they can only reference earthly imagery to paint a picture of God's heavenly, radiant, overpowering *glory*.

Now above the expanse that was over their heads there was something resembling a throne, like lapis lazuli in appearance; and on that which resembled a throne, high up, was a figure with the appearance of a man. Then I noticed

from the appearance of His loins and upward something like glowing metal that looked like fire all around within it, and from the appearance of His loins and downward I saw something like fire; and there was a radiance around Him. As the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell on my face and heard a voice speaking.

Ezekiel 1:26-28

So if we seek a convenient one-word description for just how we are made in Their image, according to Their likeness, that word would not be "twins," or "identical," or even the "same." Perhaps the best word would be that we were made *compatible* with the Godhead.

This compatibility would explain how we, of disparate kinds, are still able to communicate with each other; how He can love us and we can love Him; how, though the Bible describes His physical appearance only in fantastical, blinding, impenetrable imagery, we still yearn to be in His presence, to sit at His feet, to adore Him.

TO PROVE GOD'S LOVE

Thus when God in the person of the second member of the Godhead came to earth that first Christmas, He came not as a rhododendron, not as a fern, not as a chimpanzee or collie, but in a form compatible with His mission: to save man from his sin. In form He came as a baby, born to a virgin; in purpose He came as a spotless Lamb.

The next day [John] saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He on behalf of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.' I did not recognize Him, but so that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water."

John testified saying, "I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He re-

mained upon Him. I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, 'He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.' I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God."
John 1:29-34

There were, of course, other reasons the Son of God came, but all required Him to come in flesh. He came out of obedience to the Father. He came to personify, to reveal the personality of an invisible God. He came to fulfill the Law. He came so that He could become man's high priest and advocate. He came so that an all-knowing God could *experience* flesh; the Godhead had never been tempted to sin, but Jesus was.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry. And the tempter came and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God..."
Matthew 4:1-3a

For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.

Hebrews 4:15

Most of all, the Son had to come in a form compatible with His primary mission: to die on a cross for the sins of man. Spirit, the Son of God's native state, cannot be nailed to a cross. Spirit cannot suffer the agony of iron spikes driven through flesh. Spirit cannot swoon from the pain of thorns digging into scalp. Spirit cannot take a spear into the side. Spirit cannot struggle for air against the fluid filling his lungs. Though spirit-kind, the Son of God had to come as flesh, for only as flesh could He die. And only dead flesh could be raised to life.

• • •

All of this adds up to one thing: The Son of God came down in flesh to personify and prove God's love for man.

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him."

John 3:16-17

Abraham, too, was willing to sacrifice his only son,

but his motivation was obedience and faith: obedience *to* God, and faith *in* God. What then is the Father's motivation in sacrificing *His* only Son? He owes no obedience to a higher being, for there is no one higher. He has no faith in a higher being for the same reason. So why?

Love.

But why does He love us? You might well ask. And He has an answer to that, as He explained to Israel through Moses.

"For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt."

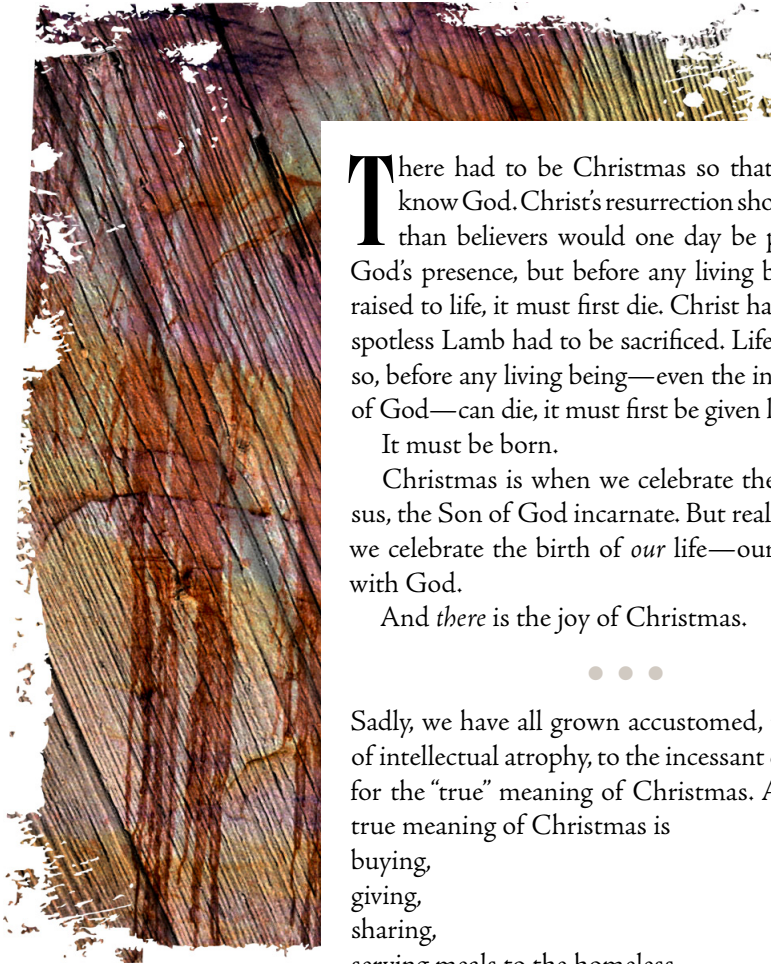
Deuteronomy 7:6-8

Why does the Lord love us?
Because He loves us.

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power.

Hebrews 1:1-3a

TO LIVE WITH GOD



There had to be Christmas so that man could know God. Christ's resurrection showed, proved than believers would one day be physically in God's presence, but before any living being can be raised to life, it must first die. Christ had to die, the spotless Lamb had to be sacrificed. Life for life. Just so, before any living being—even the incarnate Son of God—can die, it must first be given life.

It must be born.

Christmas is when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Son of God incarnate. But really it is when we celebrate the birth of *our* life—our eternal life with God.

And *there* is the joy of Christmas.



Sadly, we have all grown accustomed, to the point of intellectual atrophy, to the incessant declarations for the “true” meaning of Christmas. At turns the true meaning of Christmas is

buying,
giving,
sharing,
serving meals to the homeless,
children,
the baby Jesus,
good will to all—and, of course,
love.

Hollywood would have us believe that the meaning of Christmas is a roster of block-buster movies intended to wow and entertain theatre-goers. Wall Street and the giants of commerce would have us believe that Christmas is the opportunity to make all the money that will cover their losses during the rest of the year; therefore, to them, Christmas is when the *hoi polloi* are reminded of all those things without which they cannot live even one more day.

Local news programs and charities want us to think that the real meaning of Christmas is brotherly love, charity, giving, and caring about each other. For them, Christmas is when the people who have, give to those who do not have.

If you want to “deck the hall with boughs of holly”; if you must decorate your house inside and

out with the most enormous, titanic, resplendent profusion of flashing lights and dancing reindeer; if you grow teary-eyed over every rendition of “Jingle Bells,” then have at it. No harm, no foul. If your fondest moment of Christmas takes place around the bowl of eggnog on the eve, or with the family around the tree on the morning, or giving to a charity, or seeing your little girl in the annual pageant, then you can be forgiven. Earthly pleasures as part of the celebration of Christ's birth are not necessarily an offense.

But if such temporal moments are to you the be all and end all of Christmas; if the Child in the manger is to you just a cute and cuddly newborn; if, like a child, Christmas to you is lying in your bed dreaming about the goodies that sit neatly wrapped under the tree, then that *is* an offense.

Against God.

Christmas is all about Life—life with God and His Son. Christmas is indeed about love—not horizontal, person to person, but *vertical*, *descending* love. It is not about being nice to one's neighbor, about spending lots of cash on a family member. It is about the Creator of the universe loving us enough to die upon a cross.

And His dying began in Bethlehem.

THE BEGINNING OF FOREVER

For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;

And the government will rest on His shoulders;
And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:6

The eternally existent Son of God was born on earth so that He might die for our sins. He died for our sins so that we might have eternal life with the Father in heaven. His incarnation, then, was the beginning of our forever.

Some Christians quarrel with the heritage or terminology of our common “Christmas” holiday and, as a result, choose to ignore it. The venerable English preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon held to such a position:

We do not believe in the present ecclesiastical arrangement called Christmas. First, because we do not believe in the mass at all, but abhor it. And second, because we find no scriptural warrant for observing any day as the birthday of the Savior. Consequently, its observance is a superstition.

While I am loathe to disagree with the late, great Puritan pastor and writer, I can imagine no great sin in celebrating the moment at which my Salvation showed Himself to mankind. We can easily question the date of December 25, which has no relation at all to the actual date of His birth. We can certainly take issue with the layering on of tradition, superstitious calendar-watching, and almost idolatrous high-holiness; we can detest the rabid commercialism that smothers the holiday each year. But were we to disregard totally the remembrance, we would be ignoring an important part of Christ's gospel. For without His physical death, we could not enjoy eternity with the Father, and without His physical incarnation, He could not have died.

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.

FINDING CHRISTMAS

When the plastic tinsel and hollow tunes of the season become a distraction; when the pressing crowds and oppressive traffic in the streets cause our blood to boil; when even the religious activities of the season become a tiresome nuisance, extinguishing the little bit of joy we already have—we must realize that these small things are not ultimately responsible for our peace of mind.

Our God is spirit, and it is the individual's 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 we kneel before a tiny child, swaddled and lying in a feeding trough. There, worshiping the eternal Son of God, just come down to dwell for a while in human form—this is where we will find our Christmas.

The child we celebrate every year 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.

By our small standards the child lying in the feeding trough, Jesus the Christ, will pass through many changes. But in essence He remains what He always has been: God. Jesus came not just to bring God down to man, but to lift man up to God. He came so that we might participate every day in His abundant and enriching life. He came so that we may know God, know Him in a personal, intimate way—not as a fierce, wrath-consumed deity who is perpetually angry at us, but as a loving Father willing to inconvenience Himself on our behalf.

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. ●

By this will we have been
sanctified through the offering
of the body of Jesus Christ
once for all.

Hebrews 10:10