

Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S LAMPEL



Born...Again

a Christmas story

...for you have been born again
not of seed which is perishable but
imperishable, that is, through the
living and enduring word of God.

1 Peter 1:23

It was **Christmas Eve**. He sat in the second pew from the front, on the right-hand side of the cavernous sanctuary. From the outside the old church was of a Spanish mission design, with lofty bell towers on either side of the porticoed entrance. To the young boy the sanctuary, with its broad, semicircle choir loft and high-sided, freestanding baptistery did not seem Spanish at all. The dramatic ceiling, a dome with encircling stained glass windows seemed to be more like pictures he had seen of the dome of St. Peter's in Rome, in a huge book through which he had browsed during one particularly boring sermon, when he and his dad had been stuck in the church's tiny alcove of a library for a crowded service.

But it was Christmas Eve—and the young boy had a cold. Through the congregational carols he mostly just snuffled and coughed, and the many candles that had been peppered around the vast room made his eyes water. Like waking up in a strange bed in a strange place and not knowing where one is, the flickering shadows thrown by the flames created a dreamy, disorienting atmosphere. Even so, it was magical. For such things are indeed magical to the young on Christmas Eve.

The other children in the choir were each one attired the same as the next: a white shirt topped with a silly paper collar intended to make each singer look their part in the children's Cherub Choir. Those near him cast nervous glances at the boy, wondering why he was there if he had such a bad cold. But the choir director had asked him to sing with the choir anyway. So there he sat, miserable with his stuffed nose, but entranced by the mystical atmosphere of the evening service.



The boy did not yet know Jesus as his Savior, but he had already heard a lot about him. Between his family life and Sunday School flannel graph stories, he had heard much about the Son of God who came to earth as a baby born in Bethlehem, a car-



penter who became a teacher, who healed the sick and even raised the dead. He had heard that Jesus was arrested and died on a cross for the sins of mankind, and he hadn't known a time when he didn't believe it all.

Even at such a young age, God was a pervading part of his life. There had never been a time when He wasn't. The boy did not know any other way. Sunday breakfasts included a brief devotional out of the family's copy of *The Upper Room*. His mom was in the choir; his dad taught the junior high boys and was an usher. Most of his friends were from their church; he was growing up with them, they shared a common bond that could not yet be called faith.



A little later, standing on the back row of the risers, the boy sang his part as best he could in the Cherub Choir's set of Christmas songs. With his scratchy throat and stuffed up nose he could not sing very well, and, anyway, his mind was elsewhere. The sanctuary, its old wooden pews filled with beaming families, seemed to possess a special glow this night. Christmas was not just a date on the calendar. Christmas filled a special chamber in the heart of every boy and girl raised in the church. Somehow, in ways the young boy could not yet put into words, it was far more than just, as his Sunday School teacher said, "Jesus' birthday." Seeing pictures of the baby Jesus in the manger brought home for him the reality of God in flesh—that Jesus had a beginning much like his own: a helpless baby wrapped in the caress of new life and a mom's kisses.

The candles glowing in the reduced light of the evening service, the old familiar carols, the words of the pastor and the reading of the story from Scripture—all

combined to create a mystical and unfamiliar mood that fed the boy's imagination—and wonder: wonder about a God who would choose to do such a thing, about a God who would choose to come down and mingle with His creation. He felt something new happening inside, a fresh warmth coursing through him that he had never experienced before.



On the ride home after the service the boy hunched down inside the collar of his winter coat. He shared the back seat of the family car with his older brother, and in the deep shadows of the evening ride he was feeling more miserable from his cold than even before. His dad said he must really be sick, since his bag of colorful hard candy, distributed to all the kids after the Christmas Eve service, sat still unopened between the two brothers.

The family tradition for Christmas Eve was to return home from the service to a light repast of oyster stew and Mom's sweet breads. The boy's favorite was the nut bread she baked in a round soup can. Because he didn't care for the oyster stew—or oyster *anything*, for that matter—Mom always fixed some tomato soup just for him. And it was just the right medicine for his scratchy throat.

The second part of the family tradition for Christmas Eve came right after supper. Each person could select just one small gift addressed to them and open it that very night—the rest under the tree would have to wait until Christmas morning. When it came his turn the boy carefully studied the collection of modest presents clustered around the base of the tree. His family didn't have much money, so there would be nothing expensive found in the collection under the branches of the small tree. And there would surely be something handmade by his dad, or bought used and refurbished by him. Even the family Nativity set was old, worn, with a stable made of cardboard.

He first looked for those bearing his name, then checked the weight of each one. He was not so terribly ill to forget his primary rule about presents: heavy was good; light was often disappointing. Heavy could mean a new toy, while light could be a new pair of socks.

Toys good; clothing bad.



He settled on a rectangular package, about eight inches long, five inches wide, and about an inch thick. The box was too heavy for a pair of socks, but most toys were not this shape. He was intrigued. The package was labeled: "From Mom and Dad." He looked to them for permission to open this one. Silently, in unison, his parents nodded their permission.

Inside the colorful wrapping paper was a well-used greeting card box. It was probably the fifth or sixth Christmas for this same box, each year holding something different, anything that would fit its dimensions. Inside was a layer of white tissue paper, and inside that was a slightly used Bible, its black binding made of pressed cardboard made to look like leather. He stared at the unexpected gift lying in his hands. For most kids his age, books belonged in the clothing category: a disappointment. But not for him.

"Just for you, son, when you're ready," his dad said with surprising solemnity.

"I can read *now*," he reminded his dad.

"I know, but the King James English can be a challenge even for adults."

His mom added, "That's why we got you one that helps with pronunciation of names."

He stared at the treasure in his hands. He thought it a *fine* Bible.



The boy was still holding his new Bible, leafing through its pages, when his dad sat down next to him on the sofa.

"Treat it with care, son."

"It's holy, isn't it."

"Not the book itself, but the words *in* it. They're God's words to us—to live by and to know Him better."

"And to know about Jesus."

"That's right."

"I know a lot about Him already."

"Yes, you do," his dad said with pride.

He stared again at the pages of his Bible. "Are *these* words the same as in yours?"

"What do you mean?"

“Well, they seem different to me.”

“In what way?”

“I’ve read some in your Bible—I read it with you during sermons, and during our breakfast devotions. This morning we read those verses from Isaiah 9—I have it here, I found it in my new Bible:

‘For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.’”

“That’s a prophecy about Jesus,” his mom said, joining them.

“Yes, but every time I read it before, it was just—words. But when I read them now in *my* Bible, they weren’t just words. There’s something new about them—as if I had never read them before.”

His mom and dad looked at each other. Carefully, cautiously his dad spoke.

“Did something happen tonight at the service?”

“Like what?”

“Well, did you *feel* different tonight?”

“I have a *cold*, Dad,” he said with a mischievous glint in his eye.

His parents chuckled along with him, but his dad persisted.

“I mean did you *experience* anything—anything you haven’t before?”

The boy grew suddenly serious, and there was a protracted silence. Just when his mom was about to repeat the question, he spoke.

Pensively the boy began, “At first I thought it was just my cold, and the candlelight inside the sanctuary. *Something* was different—but I didn’t know what. Then, at the end of the service, we sang a familiar hymn. It’s the chorus I remember—that’s when I knew that something inside me had changed.”

“What was it, son?”



He didn’t recite it, but sang, with a voice unhindered by the emotion coursing inside him, “O come to my heart, Lord Jesus. There is room in my heart for Thee.” He stared at the floor for a moment, then looked up at his parents. “I had sung those words before, and they were just—words. But tonight I sang them because they told what had just happened inside me.”

Without a word his parents, as one, embraced the boy.

“You *are* different now,” his mom said.

“And that’s why the words in your Bible seem different to you,” his dad said. “The words aren’t different. *You’re* different. You now have the Holy Spirit in you, and He is revealing God’s word to you. Now it will mean much more. Now you will be better able to understand.”

And then the boy realized that the wonder and magic he experienced that night had very little to do with the Christmas holiday itself. It had little to do with the glowing candles, and the carols, and the bag of hard candy handed out to each child there. The wonder was all of God, and if one wanted to call it magic, well, it was *God’s* magic—His mystery—handed down to us through His Son.

Yes, now the boy understood. Now he didn’t just know *about* Jesus; he knew Jesus Himself.

The Savior was his—and he was the Savior’s. 卍