

# Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S LAMPEL

*The Beginning of*



*Forever*

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.



# *Too Much*

## *Prelude, part one*

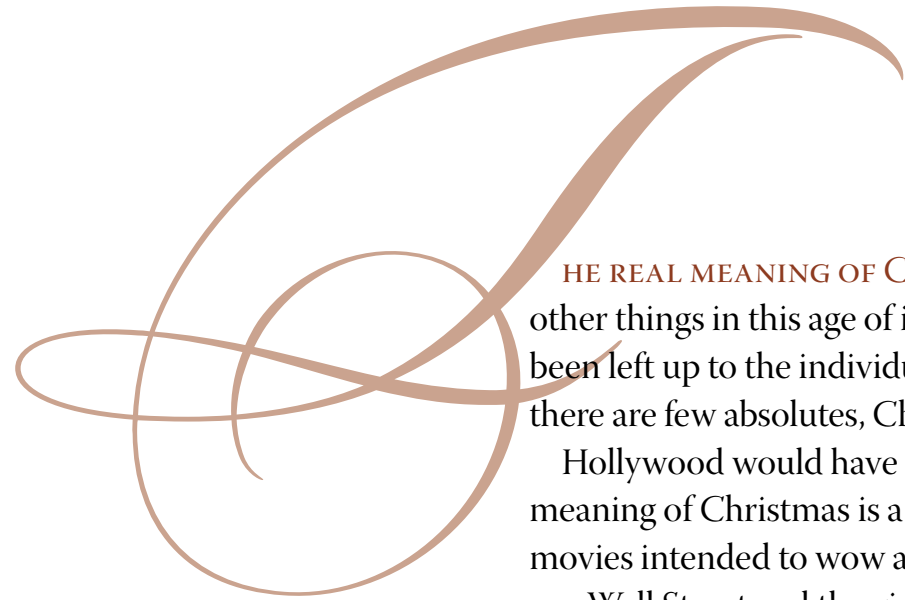
Christmas Eve, 1969  
U.S. Naval Amphibious Base  
Norfolk, Virginia

The fresh-faced lad—just out of high school and then boot camp, too young to vote or do much of anything but serve his country—stood staring out the darkened barracks window. The huge building was quiet with a heavy stillness that only fed the empty melancholy in his heart.

Earlier that day the barracks had slowly emptied out as those fortunate enough to have family or friends nearby took off for a day or two of celebration. The boy wondered whether they had left to celebrate Christmas—or just to celebrate a few days away from the navy. He guessed that it was a little of both.

One man at a time the building, with its endless rows of six-man cubicles, had lost most of its population, until finally the only signs of life heard were the muffled echoes of rock-and-roll music played from a few portable cassette players.

A chill hung over the Navy School of Music as early dusk draped itself across the Amphibious Base. The east coast was a long way from Iowa, and right now the boy felt as if he may as well have been on the moon. So this is it, he thought. “Well—merry Christmas,” he said bitterly to the empty cubicle.



THE REAL MEANING OF CHRISTMAS, like so many other things in this age of insipid relativism, has been left up to the individual. In a world in which there are few absolutes, Christmas is up for grabs.

Hollywood would have us believe that the meaning of Christmas is a roster of block-buster movies intended to wow and entertain theater-goers. Wall Street and the giants of commerce would have us believe that Christmas is the opportunity to make all the money that will make up for 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 have not.

On a certain level, they all are correct. There is nothing inherently wrong about entertainment, making money or, of course, giving things to the needy.

Sadly, however, Christmas has become something far more than what it truly is. Like a squalling, demanding brat whose body has too-

soon outgrown his little play suit, the Christmas of our time has outgrown its original intent. The holiday has become something bursting at the seams, an annual occurrence in which every hope, every expectation, every escape from disappointment is invested. Christmas has become the climax to our year—the bright celebration meant to erase from our memory every sad moment that has come into our lives during the previous eleven months. If Christmas turns out to be everything we expect, we declare it to have been a good year; if Christmas is a disappointment, our year has been something less than it should have been.

For this reason people today rush to celebrate the yuletide. Houses get draped in brilliant, multi-colored sparkles well before Thanksgiving—that envious second cousin in the family of holidays, now just a sad, impatient foundling standing in the way of its more grand and better-dressed relation. Christmas decorations and wrappings line the aisles of department and discount stores long before the ghouls of Halloween have finally been put out of our misery.

The problem is not so much that something has been left *out* of Christmas, but that far too much has been put *in*. The occasion of Christmas—liter-

ally, the “Mass of Christ”—has become cluttered with so many events, so much eye-candy, so many things that have nothing to do with the day commemorated, that we can no longer make contact with—or even find amid the chaff—the person at its center: the Christ child.

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.

*Isaiah 9:6 KJV*

Some Christians quarrel with the heritage or terminology of our common “Christmas” holiday and, as a result, choose to ignore it. The venerated 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 birth, He could not have died.

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*

I imagine that if God had intended for us to disregard the event of Christ's earthly birth, then the early chapters of Matthew and Luke would not have dwelt on it so. Perhaps they would have begun much like the gospel of Mark, with John's baptism of Jesus, or the gospel of John, with the more mystical beginnings of the Word of God.

Instead, the gospels of Matthew and Luke include rather detailed narratives of the night He was born (Luke) and the succeeding days in Bethlehem (Matthew), describing the birth itself, as well as the subsequent visits of the shepherds and magi. Here is the evidence that God would have us remember the occasion—indeed, to approach with reverence and to consider for a while this first night, when Jehovah made physical contact with mankind.

He would have us feel the lonely chill of the shepherds' night, inhale the acrid musk of the dried weeds that became the infant's bed, to understand the hearts of His earthly parents, and to experience the reverent adoration of a group of strangers who knew in their hearts that this child was, truly, God. ♦

*Come, Thou long-expected Jesus,  
Born to set Thy people free;  
From our fears and sins release us;  
Let us find our rest in Thee.  
Israel's Strength and Consolation,  
Hope of all the earth Thou art;  
Dear Desire of every nation,  
Joy of every longing heart.*

*Born Thy people to deliver,  
Born a child and yet a King.  
Born to reign in us forever,  
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.  
By Thine own eternal Spirit  
Rule in all our hearts alone;  
By Thine all sufficient merit,  
Raise us to Thy glorious throne.*

Charles Wesley

# *The Gift of Life*

## *Prelude, part two*

Christmas Eve, 1969

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 own visage, 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 mystical—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.

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.

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*

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 worshiped 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 worshiped 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. ♦

*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



# *Everlasting Life*

## *Prelude, part three*

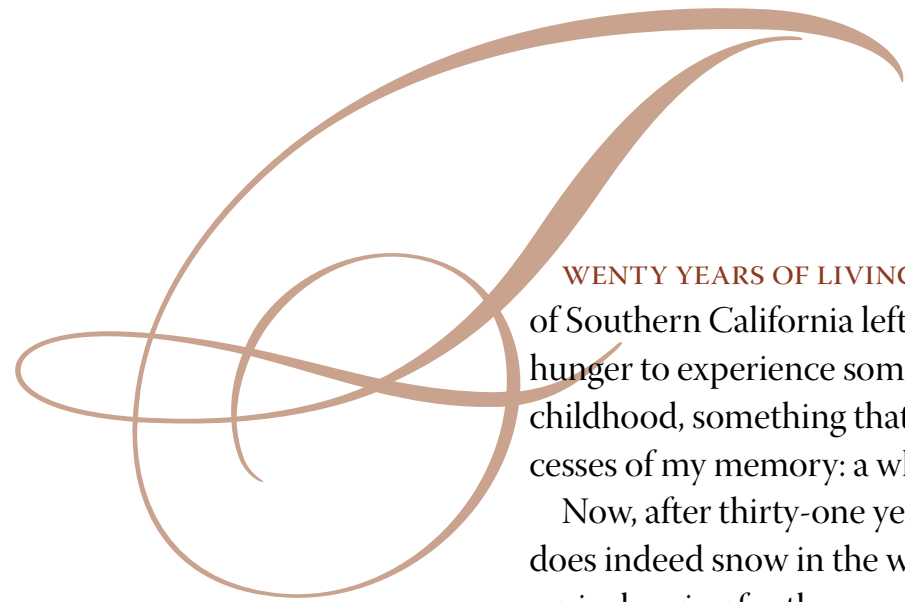
Christmas Eve, 1969

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 a while 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 halfhearted 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 passed the bottle along to the next guy.



WENTY 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 thirty-one 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 un-Christmas-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

It has now been fifty-three years since I stood forlornly staring out a barracks window, longing for a Christmas Eve beyond my reach—fifty-three 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 something 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, worshiping the eternal Son of God, just come down to dwell for a while in human form—this is where I will find Christmas.

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.

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.*

*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