

*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.*

### **Prelude, part one**

Christmas Eve, 1969

US 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.

### Prelude, part two

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.

### Prelude, 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 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.

It has now been fifty-five years since I stood forlornly staring out a barracks window, longing for a Christmas Eve beyond my reach—fifty-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 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.

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.

### Epilogue

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 candle-lighted 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 gamy 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 preincarnate 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 cows) 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 also came 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.

Jesus came not only 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.

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.

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