

# Introduction

It's that time of year again. Sleigh bells. Christmas carols. The winter 'holidays,' or, as Christians call it, 'Christmas.' What's all the fuss about? How can I make the most of Christmas this year if I am Christian? And why should I think about Christmas—and not just the winter 'holidays'—if I'm not a Christian?

This little book is designed to help you answer those questions in practical, as well as in intellectually satisfying, ways. It can't get to every question you might have: the book is too short to attempt to have a rigorous theology of the incarnation (for instance). But it can do what it is designed to do: be a good give-away to friends and colleagues, and a stimulus to fresh inspiration to live for Christ this Christmas.

As you start to read the book, let me give you some initial pointers or words of direction. You can start from the beginning if you want, but you don't have to. You can dive in pretty much anywhere to any of the questions and find it helpful. Also, why not pray before you read the book? Ask God to help you find the real meaning of Christmas this year. Another idea is to take this book and use it to do a series of studies about the real meaning of Christmas in your small group. They can be a good starting point for conversation. You might (preachers alert!) even like to use it as the

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basis for a sermon series. If you want to use it as the basis for a sermon or Sunday School series, then pick four of the questions that seem particularly meaningful to the people you are speaking to, and use those as the basis for a study. You'll obviously still have to do your own work for that teaching as this book is (again, by design) brief and to the point. If brevity is the soul of wit, it is certainly in the spirit of Christmas not to load you down with too much heavy theology.

So, dismiss the ghost of Christmas past (good or bad) and welcome the real meaning of Christmas: Christ is born this day, King, Lord, Immanuel, the Savior!

## QUESTION 1



# **Can Christmas Help Me With My Problems?**

As a pastor the most common question I am asked about Christmas has nothing to do with Christmas as such. It has to do with the feeling that people have at Christmas that everyone else's life is perfect, and they are more aware that there is some difficulty in their own life. When they look around at the TV programs—*It's a Wonderful Life, A Christmas Story, etc.*—they seem to be presented with a view of life where everyone is doing just fine. And Christmas then has a bittersweet feeling: sweet because of all the festive spirit; bitter because they do not feel very festive on account of their own difficulties or problems.

The answer to this is that actually in Christmas there is help. Christmas is not a message about how everyone has perfect lives, and how we need to attain the same level of material success, or emotional happiness, or 'live the dream.' Christmas is a message about how all of us can find help from Jesus to overcome our problems and live in a way that pleases God, honors Him, and is ultimately and eternally satisfying.

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The message of the angels at the first Christmas was, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!' It was not, 'Look at all those other people with their cool lights, parties, fun, family, and feel really bad about what you have by comparison.'

How can Christmas help me? We probably don't think of Christmas as 'helping' as such. Christmas is more something 'out there,' something that just happens to us—like a nice movie, or a sunset that we can watch with a smile on our face. But Christmas can really change our lives. And in this first chapter we are seeing how it can really help us, make a difference, set our lives on a new trajectory. There are many ways that it can do this, but in this chapter I just want to suggest four. Can you think of others? Here are those four ways:

### **1. Christmas takes me out of me**

The biggest problem most of us have is that we think too much about ourselves. Of course, there is nothing wrong—and much right—about considering how we can gain a good esteem of who we are in Christ. The problem with the so-called 'self-esteem' movement is not its laudable goal (to ensure that people feel good about themselves) but its ineffective method. If I look at myself too carefully it is very unlikely I will feel good about myself. I am liable to end up with a strange kind of self-deceit, whereby in order to gain more self-esteem I lose much genuine authenticity. The truth is that there is much that is not esteem-able about each of us. We are, as the Bible tells us, and as our consciences confirm, sinners, unable to live up to our own standards, let alone God's standards. We need something

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more than mere assertion, against the evidence, that we really are very very special people. What we need is solid ground, a firm foundation, upon which we can design the architecture of our lives.

And here is where Christmas, indeed the Christian story as a whole, helps so much. The greatest story there ever was is not about me at all. It is not about you either. It is about *Him*. This is actually a profound help. The story of my life is not my story; it is His story. Think of how satisfied, completed, joyful you are when you are lost in admiration of a beautiful sunset, or painting, or listening to your favorite music. Like that, but much more, Christmas helps us by encouraging us to worship, to lose our self-focus, and be lost in sheer wonder at the scale of the universe, the humility of God, the sacrifice of Jesus. It is such a relief to be immersed in a story whose hero is not me. Where the main character is not a foil for really marketing something to us that makes us feel that we are the center of the universe. Where the thrust of the narrative is to take us out of ourselves, to transcend our failings and faults, by being soaked in gospel grace in this story. Think on Christmas. Reflect on it. Spend time in the narrative and the story together: an advent calendar, a set of Christmas Bible readings, church attendance, conversation with friends, family traditions. All these and more can release us from what C. S. Lewis called our 'solitary conceit.' The greatest story that was ever told gives us relief from navel gazing by inspiring us to think about, and rejoice in, something else—Someone Else—other than me.

## **2. Christmas tells me my life has meaning**

If one young pregnant girl, out of wedlock, can play such a significant role in the salvation of the world, how can I really think that my life is too small to be important? Mary's role is never to be repeated. But the pattern that God here identified is ongoing: He loves to use the weak things of this world, the things that are not; in our weakness His power is made perfect. His grace is sufficient. How encouraging is this! Look at Mary's vulnerability. Look at her lack of power and status. Look at her observing all the ways that people around her would easily have sneered at her. Can you hear the accusations from the relatives, or so-called friends, who thought that her pregnancy was a sign of her sexual sin? She was just one young woman. There was nothing (apparently) special about her. In a culture that prized the masculine, and the status of hierarchy and institutional authority, God chose to pick a young woman—with nothing to commend herself to anyone else, with no great resources or residual inherited authority—and use her to bring about the salvation of the world. This is how God worked through Mary. It is how God worked through the apostle Paul in his weaknesses. It is how God delights to work, ultimately through the apparent foolishness of the cross of Jesus Christ. How encouraging is this! Your life, whether famous or not, is not thereby defined as meaningless. All God requires is faith and faithfulness. Look at Hebrews chapter 11! What distinguished all these individuals so mightily used by God was not their charismatic personalities, but their willingness to be used by God, and to trust Him despite the evidence around them or the accusations against them. Would you, Christian, therefore be encouraged: God can use you for

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great things! Remember the great phrase coined by D. L. Moody to inspire him in his commitment to Christ: 'the world has yet to see what God can do through one man fully committed to him.' Moody determined to be that man. Perhaps you do not feel that you are a clever person, a beautiful person, a fashionable person. But you can be *that* person, like Mary, a person committed to God! Christmas helps us to see the lie that significance has to do with bank balance, gender, size, strength, fame, beauty, wealth, large houses, or big new shiny cars. God used Mary, not a 'Queen Precious with perfect hair and mascara.' He can use me; He can use you. My life has significance. So does yours.

### **3. Christmas persuades me that no problem is too big for God**

We have heard that line before: no problem is too big for God. But it can seem so fake. Really? Is it really true that no problem is too big for God? What about *my* problems? What about the very real problems of the world around us? And anyway what does that *really* mean—no problem is too big for God—in practice? If we do admit that no problem is too big for God, are we then saying that, when faced with a problem, all we need to do is pray? That Christians should simply be passive in the face of adversity, and never stand up for themselves or counteract slander or accusations? It is easy to say from a pulpit that no problem is too big for God; it is much harder to believe it in the trenches of the First World War. Or out on the high seas when it's blowing a gale. Or when your marriage is falling apart. Or when you don't get the grades you need to go the college or university that you

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had set your heart on. It is not helpful to believe pious ideas if they cannot translate into practical reality.

But here comes Christmas, and Christmas persuades me that it is true. Christmas, the story of Christmas, has the ability to (once again) show me that no problem is too big for God. That it is really true that we can trust God even in the midst of our most trying circumstances, or most difficult challenges. Imagine a people under foreign occupation, whose line of kings has been cut off, who are forced to pay taxes to hated conquerors, who feel like they have failed to live up to all the promises of their founding fathers. They are suffering the indignity of national disaster—and with it all the very real problems that go along with not having political freedom. Their voices have been marginalized. They must curry favor with the Romans to get anything done, or to protect themselves. A foreign set of ideas and ideals is increasingly seeping into their mindset, and shaping the worldview of their children. If any people were facing very real problems, it was the first century Israelites. It would have been a bit like living in the Vichy Regime in France during World War 1, or living as a Christian in a country where the powers that be persecute Christians for their faith—a very real scenario faced by very real Christians today. But not only this existential despair, it would have also been easy for the Israelites at this time to despair *theologically*. God's prophets had spoken to them of their exile. And of their return from exile. But now what kind of return was this? Where was the God of their fathers? Were they still in 'exile'? Or had they now come back—and this, living under Roman occupation, was as good as it was going to get? It must have felt a very far distance from the glories of the realm of King David! What would Abraham, Moses or Isaac say about

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what happened to Israel, and how they went into exile? What hope was there for them now? All these insecurities, doubts, and very real sufferings were in the atmosphere in those days in Israel. And so Christmas tells us God took that problem and turned it into a solution!

I don't know what problems you are facing—perhaps they are personal; perhaps they are national or political. But Christmas tells us in no uncertain terms that no problem is too big for God. Turn to Him; turn from your sins and trust in Him. Israel's problems, their history, were all used by God to bring salvation through Christ to the globe. And your problem right now, whatever it is, could also be God's means of bringing salvation to many people! For no problem is too big for God.

### **4. The real Christ of Christmas saves me**

We think of Christmas as a nice story, sweet, mild, tinkling little jingle bells. It is almost inevitable that we do—it is a story about a baby, and babies speak to our real if sometimes sentimental hopes for the future. I have no desire to remove from Christmas that feeling of hope and expectation. That is what Christmas is about, at least in part! We are looking forward to Christ's return, as well as celebrating His first coming. And so we have, rightly, a story that does have a sense of sweetness to it. Long may we be able to say with joy (and tears) 'Merry Christmas Everyone!' But while there is an inevitable, and not wrong, aspect of Christmas that might at times verge on the sentimental, even among the most theologically resolute of Christians, it is important to ensure that we have the real Christ of Christmas at the forefront of our minds. And Christmas, the more we understand it,

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shows us how this real Christ of Christmas saves us. We tend to forget but actually at that first Christmas time, or at least soon thereafter there was a massacre of babies under the aegis of the jealousy of wicked king Herod. That threat hangs in the background even over Bethlehem, as the wise men escape his conniving and then are warned to go back by a different route to avoid Herod. Christmas, and its joy, is not diminished by this sense of the spiritual battle around Christmas; it is heightened by it, we have more joy because of it. Christmas is not a story of the living room, the perfectly dressed, or the politely attired; it is a story of jealousy, hate, anger, death, mayhem, accusation, disaster—and how God saves sinners to bring life, hope, healing, joy, now and forevermore. How encouraging is this for those of us who are from time to time facing not the sweet quietness of a church late at night one Christmas Eve, but the mayhem of the Operating Room or the Emergency Room, or the cut throat world of business or politics. This real Christ of Christmas is the one who saves and gives us joy as He overcomes the enemies of God and brings us into His kingdom of joy now and forevermore.

### **A story**

*Brian was unsure how he'd get through this Christmas. Frankly, while he used to look forward to Christmas when he was a child now all he could do was pray to survive. Even the music annoyed him. All that upbeat slush, he said to himself. Over and over again. Everywhere he went there were reindeers and sleigh bells. It made him feel terrible—because it said he was supposed to be especially happy at this time of the year. Except he didn't feel in anyway*

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*happy whatsoever. In fact, he felt like an elf who'd got out of bed the wrong side, mislaid the presents he was working on, broken his tools, and got lost on the way to Santa's grotto. He felt terrible. It all began when he went through his divorce some years back. Before then he'd at least enjoyed some of Christmas. But now when he heard those Christmas songs coming, it made him feel sad. Sad for the family that he had lost, and annoyed that—if he was really honest with himself—everyone else was having such a good time.*

*The idea that Christmas could actually help him with his problems seemed a strange one to Brian. He was asked by a work colleague to come along to a Carol Service and while he was there he started to listen. Could it be that he was loved that much? Could it be that the answer lay not in a gift in a store but in The Gift in the manger in Bethlehem? Brian started to explore in his own mind and heart the real meaning of Christmas. And as he did so those songs that at first had seemed so annoying begun to take on new life. Especially the ones that were actually about Christmas, rather than just about sleigh bells. He especially liked Silent Night:*

*Silent night, holy night  
Son of God, love's pure light  
Radiant beams from thy holy face  
With the dawn of redeeming grace*

*That 'dawn of redeeming grace' was shining light on Brian's path too now.*

## **Questions for discussion**

- 1.** We don't like to think of our problems—much less discuss them with other people, unless we feel very safe in their company. But could you take a moment to think in your own head about what some of the challenges are that you face? This Christmas could you ask God to help you with those problems?
- 2.** The Bible tells us that the root of our difficulties is sin. We are rebels against a holy God. We tend to think of sin as a very small thing, a light thing, a thing of no consequence. But to God sin is deadly serious. Would you confess any known sins to God and ask Him for forgiveness?
- 3.** Perhaps you have a relational problem with another Christian believer. What does the humility of Christmas—and the forgiveness that is found for sinners at the cross of Jesus—teach us about the necessity of us forgiving other people?
- 4.** How could you share the meaning of Christmas with a colleague or family member this Christmas? Is there a special event at church that you could invite them to?
- 5.** When you look into the 'pure light', the 'dawn of redeeming grace', do you find that it puts your problems into a different

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perspective? How could you start to weigh your difficulties in the balance not of the supposedly better lives of other people, but instead in the balance of the eternal weight of glory that is for those who believe in Jesus?