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The universal gift

IF CHRISTMAS HADN'T COME

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PERSONALLY SPEAKING

Christmas itself can be likened to a Christmas gift, where the giver is God, the gift is Jesus, and the recipient is both the whole world and each of us personally. The analogy is based on what is probably the best known and most important verse in the Bible, John 3:16. I'd heard the analogy many times over the years and even used it myself, but the following email to the editor from Paloma Sridhar in Bangalore, India, added a surprising twist:

One day I set out to teach John 3:16 to my youngest sister, Rosie, six, but instead came to a milestone realization myself. Our conversation went something like this:

"Did you know, Rosie, that it only takes one verse from the Bible to explain to people how they can be sure they'll go to Heaven when they die?"

"Which one?" Rosie asked.

"John 3:16. It goes like this—'For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.'"

"I know that one!" Rosie proudly exclaimed.

"You do? Can you say it for me?"

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only forgotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. John 3:16."

"Very good! But God doesn't have an only *forgotten*..."

I stopped myself mid-sentence. How easy it is to get so caught up in the rush of daily living that we don't give Jesus so much as a passing thought!

How true—and how sad, especially on His birthday! Just think how you would feel if on your birthday everyone partied and gave one another gifts, but left you sitting alone in a corner unnoticed. This Christmas, let's all remember to thank God for His incomparable gift to the world, Jesus. And let's all give Jesus the gifts that will mean the most to Him. If you can't imagine what He could possibly want or need, the articles on the following pages should give you some ideas.

Merry Christmas from all of us at *Activated*.

Keith Phillips

Keith Phillips
For *Activated*

VOL 9, ISSUE 12 December 2008

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DESIGN Giselle LeFavre

PRODUCTION Francisco Lopez

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www.auroraproduction.com

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BY VICTORIA OLIVETTA

Once Upon a Christmas

CHRISTMAS WAS GOD'S BIG SPLASH, the greatest miracle ever—His love in the form of His only Son, Jesus, sent down to our earthly plane to lead us back to Him. And Christmas is still a time for miracles. Like ripples traveling out from that splash, little Christmas miracles remind us of God's unfailing love.

One Christmas my husband Daniel and I planned to take Christmas presents to the children of many of the poorest families in Goiânia, Brazil, where we were living at the time. The previous year, a friend who owns a toy shop had given us hundreds of toys to distribute, but this year he was only able to contribute five large plastic trucks.

What good could five toy trucks accomplish? We mulled this over for days, until one night the answer came to Daniel in a dream. "I know what we can do with those trucks," he told me the next morning. "Pedro recently had heart surgery." (Pedro was

a vendor at the central market, who donated fruit and vegetables to our volunteer work whenever he could.) "He and his wife, Maria, used their entire savings to pay his hospital bills, so they probably weren't able to buy Christmas presents for their children this year. They have five boys."

The trucks were so big that they filled a large plastic sack. Daniel slung it over his shoulder and set out for the bus stop and the other side of the city, where Pedro and his family lived.

Pedro and Maria's children were playing in the street as Daniel, who is graying and happens to have a beard, approached, the bag still over his shoulder. One of the boys saw him coming and ran inside yelling, "Mommy! Daddy! Santa is here!"

So Santa spent the afternoon with Pedro and Maria and their boys. When he got home that night, Daniel's face still shone with joy as he described the children's happiness. "Pedro and Maria had felt terrible that they didn't have money for presents for their children, but God took care of that! Five boys, five colorful trucks!"

VICTORIA OLIVETTA IS A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL IN ARGENTINA. ●

THE TRUTH ABOUT SANTA CLAUS

The modern tradition of Santa Claus (aka Father Christmas, Saint Nicholas) is based in part on the life of a historical character. Saint Nicholas of Myra (in present-day Turkey) was born in the 4th century to wealthy parents who died when he was a child. As a young man, Nicholas dedicated his life to God, obeyed Jesus' admonition to "sell what you have and give to the poor,"¹ and used his inheritance to assist the needy and the suffering. He was eventually promoted to the office of bishop, and became known for his love and generosity.

¹Matthew 19:21



MY WIFE HAS A FONDNESS FOR MINIATURE NATIVITIES, or manger scenes, as they are sometimes called. Twenty-five years ago she made small Nativity figurines as gifts for her family. She sculpted them from clay, painted them at the kitchen table, and then baked them in the oven. Her sister still displays her set every Christmas.

When we lived in other countries as Christian volunteers, my wife began collecting small Nativities made in those places. She has a Russian Nativity and one from the Holy Land, carved from wood from an olive tree. She has a snow globe Nativity that also plays “Away in a Manger,” and some others.

Last year we saw a private collection of about 100 Nativities from around the world. Among them, we saw the Holy Family depicted

OUR JESUS

BY MARTIN McTEG

as African tribespeople, as Orientals, in Indian garb, and as Latin American farmers. We saw a finely detailed Nativity once used in a grand cathedral in Europe. We saw a Nativity made by Eskimos, in which Mary and Joseph were wearing parkas and snow boots, and one made in a South Pacific island, where the figures were dressed as the island people dress and arranged in a hut made from coconut palm fronds.

The people who made those Nativities in so many different countries all had something in common. It was *their* nativity and *their* Jesus. It wasn't some other nation's Jesus or another race's Jesus; it was *their* Jesus. So they portrayed Him and those at His birth like themselves, wearing their type of clothes and living as they did.

In the early 1800s, before slavery was outlawed in the U.S., a skeptic once asked a slave, “How can you believe in Jesus and pray to the same God that your slave masters pray to?” And the slave wisely answered, “He's not

just their Jesus. He's *my* Jesus too!” That slave had found Jesus and learned to draw the strength and comfort that he needed from Him.

This is still true today. Jesus relates to everybody of every race and in every land: rich and poor, rural people and city folk, the highly educated and the illiterate, the strong and the weak. He loves us all, and each of us can claim Him as our own and find in Him forgiveness of sins, salvation, and supply of our deepest needs. He's my Jesus, and He's your Jesus too.

MARTIN McTEG IS A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL IN THE U.S. ●

Occasion to Love

BY MARIA FONTAINE

CHRISTMAS IS NOT ONLY A TIME TO ENJOY THE BLESSINGS of friends, family, and loved ones. It's also the greatest opportunity of the year to tell others how they can experience the wonderful love that comes through knowing Jesus. It's a chance to give the very best gifts this Christmas, not only to the ones we know best and hold dear, but also to neighbors and strangers who share our world.

There are those around you whose hearts are weary or sorrowful, who yearn for love, acceptance, and peace of mind, who are beset by problems too big for them and cry out for a Savior. Jesus loves them and wants to take them in His arms, wipe away their tears, and fill their hearts with peace and reassurance. But He who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving must have your help. You are His eyes to see their need and love them, His ears to hear their cry and His heart to respond, His

voice to comfort them, His arms to embrace them.

You can make a difference this Christmas! Even the humblest attempt to share the little you may have will shine as a bright light in someone's life. Your little "candle" can be seen and reflected in the lives of others as a ray of hope and faith to penetrate discouragement and fear.

Reach out to others with deeds of love and words of hope. Show them by your example how Jesus came to love them. Celebrate with them the birthday of a living Savior, born into our world that He might die in order to rise again to rescue us from the burden of sin and death and fear and loneliness.

Let's not stop with Christmas. Let's keep sharing and giving and loving just as much throughout the year to come. Let's make each day a celebration of Jesus' birth, His death, and His resurrection that promises new life for all. ●

FEEDING READING

God's Christmas gifts to you

God's gift of love; His Son, Jesus

Luke 1:26-35

John 1:1-4,14

1 John 4:10

The gift of joy

Luke 2:8-10

John 15:11

The gift of peace

Isaiah 9:6

Luke 2:13-14

John 14:27

John 16:33

The gift of eternal life for all who believe

John 3:16

John 10:27-28

Romans 6:23

Titus 3:5-7

1 John 5:11

Jesus didn't only come to earth and live among us; He had to temporarily renounce His citizenship in Heaven to become one of us.¹ He came as a meek and quiet, weak and helpless baby, and conformed Himself to our human ways of life, that He might better reach us with His Father's love.—*David Brandt Berg*

¹Philippians 2:6-7



Brandy's Christmas

BY DARRYL TERHUNE

TWENTY YEARS AGO ON CHRISTMAS EVE, I got off work, went home, and packed my car for the long drive to my parents' house, where I would spend Christmas with my family. Brandy, my blonde cocker spaniel, jumped into the front seat. As we were about to drive off, Helen, my elderly upstairs neighbor, stopped us. "Wait! I've got something for you." Surprised and a little embarrassed, I apologized that I didn't have a gift for

her. "I didn't go out to buy something for you, either," she said, "but I saw this and thought you might enjoy it." And she handed me a small package.

It was almost midnight by the time Brandy and I arrived at my parents' house, but my parents had waited up, and mother had fixed me something to eat. The three of us were talking at the kitchen table, when Brandy came in from the living room with a Christmas gift that she'd found under the tree. She had it in her mouth, and was shaking it from side to side. I started to take it away from her, but my mother said, "Let her have it. It's hers—from Dad and me." Brandy tore it open, and inside was a red rubber ball that quickly became her favorite toy.

The next morning, when we exchanged the rest of our Christmas gifts, my sister had gotten me a small ceramic cocker spaniel, which she said reminded her of Brandy. When I finally got around to opening the present from Helen, it turned out to be a small framed picture and quote to hang on my wall or put on my desk. The picture was of a little blonde cocker spaniel, down on her haunches, stalking a red ball, and the quote was a verse from the Bible: Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart.—*Psalm 37:4*.

Now you might think the connection between those three gifts was just an elaborate coincidence, but I believe God engineered it. It was like He was saying, "If I knew what Brandy would like, and if I cared enough to give it to her, don't you know how much *more* I care for you? I know your heart's desires too. This is just a little example of what I want to do for you. When your desire is to please Me, My desire is to please you."

DARRYL TERHUNE IS AN ACTIVATED READER IN THE U.S. ●



The True Christmas

BY VIRGINIA BRANDT BERG

SOME PEOPLE CANNOT UNDERSTAND how God could have come down and been wrapped in human flesh, but He came. That isn't strange to me. In fact it is quite easy for me to believe, because I see Jesus born in human hearts every day. He comes and lives in hearts and transforms lives, and to me that's a great miracle—that He can be born in your heart and my heart and live there in our hearts, identifying Himself with us that way.

God's Word says that Jesus shall be called "wonderful." "Unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."¹

Wonderful His name because He was wonderful in His life, going about everywhere doing good and healing all that were oppressed.² Wonderful in His death; because He died for you and me, we can have eternal life.³ Wonderful in His resurrection; because He rose from the dead, we will also be resurrected.⁴ And wonderful now in His life after death, because He lives to intercede for us.⁵

But it is not enough that Christ, the King of kings, was born in Bethlehem beneath the star that heralded His coming; He must be

born within your heart before He finds His throne. Won't you let Him come into your heart?

Perhaps you've seen the famous painting by William Holman Hunt in which Jesus is seen standing before a closed door, with a lantern in hand. It is said that some time after Hunt had finished what was to become his most famous work, someone came to him and told him that he'd made a mistake: There was no doorknob. "I didn't make a mistake," Hunt answered. "The door must be opened from the inside. The doorknob is on the inside."

Jesus, the Savior, can never enter a door unless it is opened from the inside. God's Word says, "As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God."⁶ Receive Him this Christmas! He will transform your life. Welcome Him into your heart! ●

If you haven't yet received God's most wonderful gift, Jesus, you can right now by praying the following prayer:

Thank You, Jesus, for coming to our world and living like one of us, for suffering all the things that we go through so I could know my heavenly Father's love. Thank You for dying for me, so I can be reconciled with Him and have eternal life in Heaven. I receive You as my Savior now. Please forgive me for all the wrongs I've ever committed, and help me to get to know and love You in a deep and personal way, so that my life may be filled with Your love. Amen.

¹Isaiah 9:6

²Acts 10:38

³Romans 6:23; 1 Peter 2:24

⁴1 Corinthians 15:20-21

⁵Hebrews 7:25

⁶John 1:12

ALL THAT GLITTERS

IF THERE'S ANY TIME OF YEAR when consumerism goes into overdrive, it's Christmas.

When the very first Christmas card was printed in December 1843 at the request of Sir Henry Cole, an Englishman living during the reign of Queen Victoria, who would have ever imagined that 165 years later an estimated 5 billion Christmas cards would be sent each year worldwide?

It's not only greeting card sales that have increased exponentially. The billions spent on Christmas shopping makes it the top profit-making period in the year for many retailers. In fact, "Christmas" seems to start earlier each year, reflecting the ever-increasing drive for profits. In some countries it's now not uncommon to find Christmas items on sale in September.

There is no shortage of ideas for presents for our children, parents, sweethearts, spouses, friends, colleagues ... and ourselves, of course. We are barraged by advertisements. Corporations carefully time the release of their newest gadgets, limiting supply to ensure high demand.

Some people argue that consumerism, which is prevalent throughout the year but reaches its zenith at Christmas, is necessary for the economy. If we didn't keep buying so much, factories would close and jobs would be lost. Others argue that it's only reasonable to take advantage of the wide array of items that have been designed to

improve our standard of living.

On the other hand, while consumerism may be a fixture of modern life, it shouldn't rule our desires and attitudes or overly influence the way we spend our time and money—or holidays. "Things" shouldn't become so important that they distract or take away from the things that give true meaning to life.

"One's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses."¹ "Do not love the world or anything in the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the [person] who does the will of God lives forever."² "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, but lay up treasures in Heaven."³ "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things [the necessities of life] shall be added to you."⁴

To many of us, what we buy, where we shop, how often we shop, how much we have to spend, and how

our buying affects others' perception of us means a great deal—in many cases probably too much.

According to British psychologist Oliver James, "We have become addicted to having rather than being and confusing our needs with our wants. Studies show that if you place high value on those things, you are more likely to suffer depression, anxiety, addictions, and personality disorders. We cannot carry on consuming in this manner and feel confident our great-grandchildren have any future."⁵

The issue is not whether we have one car or three, or whether or not we own the latest 3G mobile phone, laptop computer, or iPod. Nor is it whether we shop at a designer store or hunt for used bargains on eBay. What matters is not the content of our closet or garage, but the content of our lives. Are we laying up our treasures on earth or in Heaven?

In this season of glittering enticements, let's keep our priorities straight and remember that the most worthwhile gifts we can share with others are our love, time, and concern.

ABI F. MAY IS A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL IN ENGLAND. ●



¹Luke 12:15

²1 John 2:15,17 NIV

³Matthew 6:19–20

⁴Matthew 6:33

⁵James, Oliver (2007). *Affluenza*. Vermillion.

THE PERFECT GIFT

BY GABE RUCKER

I RECEIVED THE PERFECT GIFT
LAST CHRISTMAS—THE LOVE OF A
LITTLE CHILD.

On Christmas night, when it seemed that all of the gift-giving and festivities were over, I was tucking four-year-old Jade into bed and praying with her for the night when out of the blue she said, “Daddy, I love you more than all my toys and things!” My heart skipped a beat.

A few nights later, we were visiting relatives when I needed to check my email. I found a place to hook up to their network, but there wasn’t a chair handy. No problem. This would just take a minute, I told myself as I sat on the floor and started up my laptop computer. Just then Jade came running through the room, tripped, and fell right onto the computer, sending a million colored lines across the screen.

As each person present assessed the damage, I heard comments like, “*That’s* going to be expensive to fix!” and “Too bad it’s no longer under warranty!” When Jade realized what she had done, she started crying. I picked her up and hugged her. “Don’t worry, Baby,” I whispered in her ear. “I love you more than all of my things!”

No matter what happens this year, what things may come and go, just remember that Jesus loves you more than anything.

GABE RUCKER IS A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY
INTERNATIONAL IN MEXICO. ●



A mother’s love for her baby boy
A sacrifice to bring others joy
A father’s care for one not his own
A message sent from a royal throne
A seeming wrong that was turned to right
An angel’s song in the dark of night
A prophet’s vision at last fulfilled
A miracle because God had willed
A gift of love from a caring heart
A bringing together what was apart
A reaching out to comprehend
How another felt by a sincere friend
A seeking soul that journeyed far
To find a dream, to follow a star
A bridegroom claiming a bride as his
All these things are what Christmas is.

—Ian Bach

AT LAST! The dishes were all washed, dried, and stacked in the cupboard, and I put the leftover food in the fridge as the last of our visitors' cars pulled away from our volunteer center and made their way down the street. It was after eleven.

Wearily I trudged down the hallway to my room, where I yanked out the pins that had been holding back my hair and collapsed onto the bed, my mind too tired to remember what came next.

"Long day?" my roommate asked from across the room. Apparently she wasn't as worn out as I was. I managed a faint smile, which she returned. I knew she understood. Christmas is always like this at our center. As Westerners living in a Buddhist country where Christmas is still somewhat of a curiosity, we are always in high demand to demonstrate the proper fashion in which to celebrate the holiday. It is a good opportunity to share God's love, but one that also means weeks of planning and decorating, endless streams of visitors, Christmas performances with the children, carol

IF CHRISTMAS HADN'T COME

BY CHRISTINA ANDREASSEN

singing, Nativity-storytelling, organizing gift distributions for needy children ... and the list goes on and on. I usually enjoyed the activity and excitement, but too many late nights and being stretched thin day after day had taken a toll.

"I wish Christmas didn't have to come," I moaned as I rolled out of bed and began flipping through clothes in my closet, trying to find something to wear for yet another show that we were booked for the following day.

My roommate's eyebrows rose at my outburst, but she waited a moment or two before answering. "Now that's something to think about," she replied thoughtfully. "What if Christmas had never come?"

I shrugged it off, my mind a blur. It wasn't until later, alone in the Christmas tree-lit living room, that the thought sunk in.

What if Christmas had never come? No star, no shepherds, no stable. No angelic visitations and no extraordinary happenings. An ordinary Nazarene girl would have lived out her obscure life. The shepherds would have passed the night like any other, keeping watch over their flocks, with no reason to hope for a better life, no Savior, no personal experience with a God who loved them. Those wise men in the East would have continued their exploration of the night sky, marveling at the wonders of creation but never knowing the Creator.

The years would pass, the ages would roll on by, the Ebenezer Scrooges would continue to grouch their way through life, and the Bob Cratchits would continue to eke out a living. No hope, no joy. Two thousand times, December 25th would come and go like any other day—no family reunions, no gift giving, no quiet reflection. No one would miss Christmas, because no one would realize what they were missing.

And then there would be the end, that mysterious, dreaded moment that comes in every life. No atonement, no assurance of forgiveness. No babe in a manger would mean no cross on a hillside and no empty tomb. Life would be a hollow existence, day-to-day drudgery, with no constant companion to give it

meaning and no Savior from death.

What if Christmas had never come?

Suddenly I found myself smiling. Christmas *had* come! The lit-up Christmas tree before me came to life. The star at the top shined like a beacon of hope. Lovingly wrapped presents peeked out from behind the tinsel. The tiny figurines in the nearby manger scene echoed the angels' proclamation: "Joy to the world!" It was all a celebration of the most wonderful gift possible—God's love in the form of a Savior.

How could I have dreaded that?

I headed back to my room with renewed energy and joy in my step. Tomorrow was another day to celebrate Christmas and help others do the same. I could hardly wait.

CHRISTINA ANDREASSEN IS
A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY
INTERNATIONAL IN THAILAND. ●

POINTS TO PONDER

Constant Christmas

The angels who sang praises to God the night Jesus was born still sing today. If you listen carefully, you can hear them over the hustle and bustle of life. Join in.

Jesus was God's gift to the whole world, and not just for Christmas, but for every day, our whole lives through and beyond, for all eternity. It was the perfect gift, because Jesus can meet every need and make every dream come true.

The Christmas story tells us that it's okay to start small. Jesus started as a tiny baby born in a stable, but He ended up at the right hand of the throne of God. And because of Him, our small beginnings will have greater ends in His eternal kingdom.

As you enjoy all the blessings of life this Christmas, stop and think about what meager circumstances Jesus was born into. He had had so much, yet became so little. He became nothing so that we could have everything. All that we have, we owe to Him.

Christmas is a state of mind. It's happiness, thankfulness, love, giving. Do those things, and every day can feel like Christmas.

Christmas comes and goes, but Jesus never leaves the heart. ●

CHRISTMAS CANDY

CHRISTMAS IS APPROACHING, and I've been thinking about colorful lights, Christmas trees, presents, Christmas carols, church bells, and most important, the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. And for some reason, I've also been thinking about the colorful hard ribbon candy, chocolate drops, candy canes, chocolate-covered cherries, and little square hard-candy treats of my childhood Christmases.

I won't be enjoying any of those this year. My entire stomach was removed last year, due to disease, and that has ruled out such sweet treats for me forever. I am not discouraged, though, because I have found something even sweeter. I savor my friends and family. I am thankful for my renewed health and for being able to travel without fear of needing an emergency transfusion or having my oxygen supply suddenly cut off. Each day I taste the goodness of God as I experience His mercies, miracles, and blessings. Those things satisfy my sweet tooth now. I don't miss candy at all.

Replacements for my usual Christmas treats this year also include petting a tail-wagging

dog; the sweetness of my little granddaughter's face as she looks into mine; holding my husband's hand and hearing him say he's so glad he married me; my daughter saying she appreciates me; friendly neighbors; good doctor visits and good test results; the beauty of the sapphire winter night sky; and the innocence of the graceful deer, wild turkeys, and other wildlife that flourish here.

I used to love my Christmas fudge! I made it every year, and ate my share. But instead of acquiring the "Christmas spread" that comes with abundant eating, this year I will spread Christmas cheer. When I think about my renewed energy and treasures that were overshadowed for years by bad health, I know God is giving me new chances in life. I won't let those gifts go to waste. I'll use that energy to pass out some "Christmas candy" of my own.

We all want good things in our lives. And we have them. We just need to look around and appreciate them. "Taste and see that the Lord is good!"¹ Indulge yourself this Christmas! Love life and the loving God who created

BY CONNIE CALLENDER LINDSAY



it. Give Him thanks and praise. It won't make you fat or rot your teeth. It will do your heart more good than bypass surgery, and it will take more years off of your face than Botox injections or plastic surgery. It won't raise your blood sugar levels, but will raise the hope in your soul.

Better yet, be a "candy maker"—an instigator of little deeds of thoughtfulness and kindness, the things that sweet memories are made of. Let "good will toward men" sweeten your Christmas season. Savor it and share it.

May you have a blessed, healthy Christmas, and may the New Year fill you with dreamy delights!

CONNIE CALLENDER LINDSAY IS AN INSPIRATIONAL/MOTIVATIONAL AUTHOR AND AN ACTIVATED READER IN THE U.S. ●

¹Psalms 34:8

New Year Reflection

A SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

AS THE NEW YEAR APPROACHES, it's a great time to take stock of the past year and set goals for the next. Here's a spiritual exercise to that end. (You will need one large candle and one small one.)

Begin by lighting the large candle, which represents Jesus, the light of the world. Read and think about these verses from the Bible:

"I [Jesus] am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life."¹

"You will light my lamp; the Lord my God will enlighten my darkness."²

Light the small candle, which represents you.

Take a few minutes to reflect on the past year. Take into consideration these three areas of your life: your work or studies, your home life and relationships with family and friends, and your personal life, which includes your physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing. What in the past year, in each of those areas, are you most thankful for? Don't limit yourself to only one or two things in each area. Thank God for them. You may want to jot them down for future reference.

Then take a few more minutes to reflect on the coming year. In terms of those three areas of your life, what are your prayers or aspirations for the coming

year? Write those things down, either as a prayer or in point form, so you will have them to refer to as the year progresses and be reminded to thank God as He answers your prayers (and for your next New Year reflection).

With a few simple modifications, this exercise can also be done with family or friends. (You will need one small candle for each participant.)

Light the large candle, read the Bible verses aloud, and briefly discuss them.

Take a few minutes for everyone to think about and write down the things they are most thankful for from the past year, then a few more minutes for everyone to formulate their prayer for the coming year. (Or with advance notice, everyone could prepare their list ahead of time and take as much time for reflection as they like.)

Then, as you go around your circle, each person lights their small candle and reads or explains to the others what they are most thankful for in the past year and what their prayer is for the new one. ●

AT THE GATE OF THE YEAR

By *Minnie Louise Haskins (1875-1957)*

I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year,
"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."
And he replied,
"Go into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God.
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way!"
So I went forth and finding the Hand of God
Trode gladly into the night.
He led me toward the hills
And the breaking of day in the lone east.
So heart be still!
What need our human life to know
If God hath comprehension?
In all the dizzy strife of things
Both high and low,
God hideth His intention.

¹John 8:12

²Psalms 18:28



Joy to the world

—IN DOUBLE MEASURE!

BY MARIAN MEROUR

“JOY TO THE WORLD” IS ONE OF THE BEST KNOWN and most loved English-language Christmas carols, but there’s more to its message than most people realize.

The first verse captures the overwhelming joy and excitement at the birth of the Messiah, Jesus, 2,000 years ago.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing.

But now take a close look at the second verse.

Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns!
Let men their songs employ...

The Jesus that was born in a Bethlehem manger didn’t reign over all the earth, or even part of it. To the contrary, He was rejected, betrayed, ridiculed, and crucified. “He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him.”¹ All of the prophecies in the Bible about the Messiah ruling the world in love—“He shall judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with His truth,”² for example—refer to Jesus’ *second* coming.

While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
Repeat the sounding joy.

These lines echo another Old Testament prophecy about the Messiah: “For you shall go out with joy, and be led out with peace; the mountains and the hills shall break forth into singing before you, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.”³

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.

¹John 1:10–11

²Psalms 96:13

³Isaiah 55:12

That prophecy about the mountains and trees rejoicing goes on to say, “Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree; and it shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”¹ Thorns and thistles were part of the curse God put on the earth after the fall of man,² and they continue to this day, so clearly these lines are also about Jesus’ return.

Another prophecy, this one from the final chapter of the New Testament, which is about Heaven, says: “There shall be no more curse [of sin], but the throne of God and of the Lamb [Jesus] shall be in it [the Heavenly City, New Jerusalem], and His servants shall serve Him.”³

He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders, of His love.

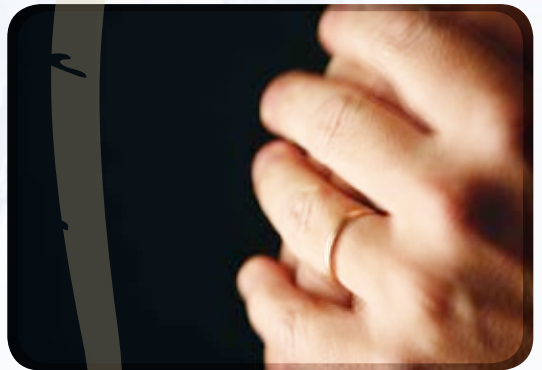
Although His blessings are plentiful and wonderful now, when He comes back to live among us as “King of kings and Lord of Lords,”⁴ we will experience His blessings in an even more tangible way. Now He lives *in* us, but then He will live *among* us, for all the nations to see and everyone to know. “No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord.”⁵ “The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” “The God of Heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed.”⁶ “You [Jesus] shall judge the people righteously, and govern the nations on earth.”⁷

When Jesus came the first time, He showed us what God was like, taught us how to live, and paid for our salvation with His own blood. That certainly gives us reason to rejoice. But we can be joyful in double measure, in advance, for His promised return, when He will lift the curse, restore peace and harmony to this world, and rule it in love. He didn’t bring joy to the world once, but He keeps giving and giving and giving, now and forever! ●

PEACE PRAYER

Dear Jesus, I want to see the world the way You see it. I want to understand Your will, and I want to do my part to fulfill Your will. I want to stand up for truth and justice. Give me strength to do so. Show me what I can do to change the world around me for the better. Show me how to love my fellow man, how to help and care for others as You would help and care for them if You walked on earth today. You are the Prince of Peace. Show me what I can do to promote peace. Amen.

Blessed are the peacemakers:
for they shall be called the
children of God.—*Matthew 5:9*
KJV



¹Isaiah 55:12

²Genesis 3:17–18

³Revelation 22:3

⁴1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 17:14

⁵Jeremiah 31:34

⁶Daniel 2:44

⁷Psalms 67:4



The Essence of Christmas—Love

Christmas is best enjoyed when it isn't centered on decorations, gifts, or festivities, but on love. Love is the essence of Christmas. Christmas is about taking quality time with your family and friends; it's about cherishing and celebrating the love you share. Sadly, love can get lost amid the Christmas hustle and bustle. Sometimes it's covered up by the decorations and gifts, the endless shopping, and the Christmas dinner and parties.

Christmas is a time for festivities, but there's much more to it than that. Christmas is My birthday. Can you spare a moment for Me on My birthday? Can you take a minute to let Me tell you how much I love you? It was love for you that brought Me to your world, to live and die for you. Love was, and still is, the core of My being. Everything I have done has been out of love for you. I did it for everyone who has ever lived or ever will, but I would have done it for you alone. You mean that much to Me!

Do you want to know what I would like most from you on My birthday? I would like for you to take time for love. Enjoy the festive decorations, the scrumptious food, and the gift-giving, but don't let those overshadow or distract you from the best and most important thing, the only thing that will last for eternity, the essence of Christmas—love.

FROM JESUS WITH LOVE