



What is Christmas?

by Reverend Wayne Palmer

Finally—a chance to sit down, catch her breath and nibble on that Christmas biscuit. She stared right through the Christmas tree running through her mental checklist for tomorrow. Everything had to be perfect. The slices and sweets were packed up; the pies were boxed and ready to go, and the presents were all stowed in the car. At least it looked like the weather would be mild for the drive back home, but who could be sure?

She regretted not having gotten more done this Christmas, but didn't she always? It was never all finished, and every Christmas Eve she faced those same nagging thoughts: 'Why did we buy all these decorations when we never get around to putting them all up? - As though we were here to enjoy them on Christmas Day anyway!' If just for one year she could get all the decorations up, all the cards sent out, all the biscuits and slices made, then maybe Christmas would be perfect.

That's when it caught her eye. A strange circle of light she hadn't noticed on the tree before. What was it? It couldn't be any of the 13 Santa Clauses, none of the multi-coloured snowmen, or the lacy white angels, or the movie characters she couldn't remember anymore, none of the icicles, balls and beads. She walked across the room to the tree. Oh, it was that ornament Mum and Dad got her when she was little—that tiny baby lying in the hay. Somehow the light was reflecting off the halo around the baby's head. She took the ornament off the tree and sat back down with it.

Soon she was thinking about the long drive and how the family would arrive at Mum and Dad's house through the day tomorrow. She wasn't sure there'd be enough seats if they all showed up, but knowing Mum, there would be plenty of Christmas sweets and other food. Would everyone get there this year? That would be a first!

Christmas was so much happier when she was younger. It was perfect every year. Oh, to be a child again! But for more years than she cared to count the holiday left her feeling empty inside. She had spent a long time trying to put her finger on it. Maybe it was just being a grown-up and having all those preparations to make. Still, she thought if she could just get everything done, and if everyone would be home for Christmas, she'd have that elusive perfect Christmas again.

Her eye caught that little golden circle of light again. The baby. As she gazed across the room at the tree, she wondered what Christmas was like for his parents.

Actually, it wasn't a whole lot different for them. The same hustle and bustle, the long, dreaded trip back home to family and friends. But it wasn't a holiday; it was a business trip: Rome's business. The emperor had ordered a census so he could charge a new tax. So they grudgingly left their home in the north and travelled to their family's hometown of Bethlehem to be counted for that census.

That's why that baby was laying in the manger's hay and not in a nice crib. The little village of Bethlehem was packed with Jews who had also dutifully returned to their family's hometown to register.

It seemed like everyone got there before them. Every guest room was full. Joseph had frantically checked, but there was no room left for them. So here they huddled, sheltering with the animals. And without a crib, they made do with the feeding trough and its hay. Christmas—the first Christmas—seemed like another story of poverty and need.

She thought about her brother losing his job a month ago. Why does that always seem to happen at Christmas? He thought he wouldn't be able to afford to bring his family home for Christmas this year. But since the doctors said this would be Dad's last Christmas, and she wanted it to be perfect, she paid their airfare to come home. Poverty, illness, death—was that going to be all they'd remember from this Christmas? Is that why she dreaded it so much?

The very first Christmas was all about poverty and need. But it wasn't just about the poverty of Joseph the husband or his young wife Mary or even that tiny newborn. It was about the poverty of humanity living in a world filled with pain, sorrow, and tragic death. And it was the desperate need of every man, woman, and child who ever lived or would ever live that brought this baby to the manger.

The young mother, Mary, had wrapped him in cloths and laid him in that manger. Her husband was there by her side, even though he wasn't the baby's father. It was something of a wonder that he was there. Actually, it was a wonder any of them were there.

Nine months earlier she had been the young betrothed wife of Joseph the carpenter. He was preparing a place for them to live together.

When he was finished, they would have the marriage feast. Then he would take her home to live with him. That was the way she thought her life would go, that is, until the day her whole world turned upside down.

'Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you' (Luke 1:28b). Out of nowhere the angel had appeared.

Mary was troubled and agitated, so the angel reassured her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.'(Luke 1:30b-33).

Oh, the thoughts that had raced through her mind. Surely, it must have taken those nine full months for his words to really sink into her heart. She was the woman God had chosen to do something wonderful—bring his Son into this world to save his poor, needy, broken creation. She knew as well as anyone how terrible this life could be. She and Joseph knew poverty. Not that Joseph was homeless or unemployed—a carpenter would always be able to find work and be able to provide for her. It's just that they would always struggle to make ends meet during their lifetime.

Looking at Joseph by the manger, she recalled the question she had asked the angel: 'How will this be, since I am a virgin?' (Luke 1:34b). Were they supposed to end the betrothal period, have their marriage feast, and move in together to start their family?

The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God' (Luke 1:35b). So, no, this Child's father would not be Joseph. He would not have an earthly father because he already had a Father—God himself. That's when she almost lost Joseph.

When Joseph learned Mary was pregnant and knew the child was not his own he couldn't stay with her. He was a man of integrity who honoured his God too much to marry a woman who was pregnant with someone else's child. But he was also a man of honour and 'because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly' (Matthew 1:19).

If he had stuck by his decision, Mary would have been a single mother.

'But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:20). The Lord stepped in and Joseph took Mary as his wife.

And now, in a little town called Bethlehem, that mighty Son of God was a tiny human baby wrapped in cloths and lying in the manger. As she looked at the ornament of the baby, the sound of voices through the front window shook her from her reverie:

'Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn king! Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled. Joyful, all ye nations rise, join the triumphs of the skies, with angelic hosts proclaim Christ is born in Bethlehem." Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn king."

The carolers' voices faded as they continued down the street. She looked at the ornament again and, sure enough, there were the shepherds gathered around the manger with Mary and Joseph. One even had a lamb draped over his shoulders. And an angel hovered over the roof of the stable.

'Peace on earth,' that would be great, but if her family couldn't even have a peaceful gathering for the holidays, how could there be peace on earth? 'God and sinners reconciled.' That was her only wish for this Christmas. If she could just get along with her brother who was always preoccupied with his career and his business dealings, and if her sister could be reconciled with the family she left so many years ago—if they could just all be together again as one happy family it would be a perfect Christmas. That would be the perfect present to give Dad. Growing up, her sister had been her best friend. Now she had to think hard to remember what had driven them apart, but many, many Christmases had passed since they had been together to celebrate their favorite holiday.

The Christmases of her childhood were great. They'd wake up early and lie in bed, whispering excitedly about the presents stacked under the tree. There was so much laughter, joy, and anticipation in those days. And she longed for those perfect Christmases to be back again—to have a Christmas again filled with peace and light and joy. That's why God's own son, the baby Jesus, was laying in the manger. He had come to bring reconciliation, to remove the hostility that had separated people from God and from each other. Life in this world hadn't always been this way. Poverty, sickness, suffering, death, hostility, suspicion, resentment, natural storms and manmade disasters—these things didn't exist when the world was newly created. When God made the first humans, Adam and his wife, Eve, the world was filled with laughter, joy, and anticipation. They were excited to learn more about each other, to have children, and raise them, to get to know the creatures all around them. Most of all, they looked forward to the times God came to be with them.

That was the best time of the day, when they could sit and bask joyfully in their Creator's presence. Just like that first Christmas night when the young wife and her husband sat in wonder basking in the presence of the son of God as he lay sleeping in the manger.

Being in God's presence had become a distant memory to mankind. It seemed like a small thing that separated our first parents from God—eating a fruit he had forbidden. But God is holy and perfect, and their disobedience drove them far away.

He had solemnly warned them, 'On the day you eat of it you will surely die' (Genesis 2:17b), but they were eager to gain a knowledge of evil God wanted to spare them. When they ate that fruit, the thrill of disobedience quickly turned to shame and dread and fear. They didn't know how strong that fear was until God came to meet them in the Garden.

Not unlike that December she and her sister found the hidden Christmas presents. Even though they were already wrapped, a little steam made it easy to pull aside the tape without ripping the paper. When they first peaked at their presents they were overjoyed, but that excitement quickly turned to disappointment when they realized they had spoiled the thrill of opening their presents under the tree on Christmas morning.

After resealing the presents they were putting them back away when their father walked in on them. Now the disappointment turned to fear. Their hearts leaped out of their throats when he turned on the light. They couldn't deny what they had done. Even after all these years, she felt a pang of guilt when she recalled the disappointment she had seen in her father's face.

That was a horrible Christmas memory, but nothing like the Christmas her sister grabbed her children and stormed out of the house in anger. She had always been stubborn—the kind of person who would hold on to a hurtful memory and refuse to let it go. From that day on she refused to come home and cut herself off from the family. Her sister's stubbornness made her fear she would stay away this Christmas too when they needed to share this last Christmas together as a family.

Her mind drifted back to the ornament. 'God and sinners reconciled.' Mum and Dad had taught them the story: this baby grew up to be a man—a man who showed all people how much their God loved them by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, driving demons out of helpless people, even raising the dead and giving them back to their grieving families. He even suffered on the cross—not for wrongs he had done, but to pay the price for the bad things we had done. His injuries bring us healing. His punishment satisfied God's wrath against us. His death gives us new life.

That's why this baby was born. The mighty son of God had become human and entered our broken world to restore the shattered relationship between God and the people he had made, the people he still deeply loved—the people he would live and die for.

Tears ran down her cheeks as she looked at the ornament again. The words of a Christmas anthem she once sang with her sister in choir came to her mind: 'From paradise to earth he came, that we with him might dwell.' This son of God shared our poverty, our hunger and thirst, our cold and heat. He knew the insults; he experienced the hatred of people who didn't understand the good he was doing for them. He even knew what it was like to lose someone who was so near and dear to his heart, a friend named Judas who turned against him and betrayed him to his enemies.

The baby in the manger made the distance between her and her sister meaningless. He took away her bitterness and hurt and the pride she felt. If God's son could humble himself to be born in a feeding trough and love us enough to submit to a cross on which he would bring us back to God—and back to each other—she could humble herself to pick up the phone and call her sister. Her heart raced and her fingers trembled as she held the receiver to her ear and dialed the telephone. She should have made this call years ago, but every time she tried her pride made her stop and hang the phone back up again. This Christmas she wouldn't hang up. This Christmas she couldn't hang up.

It was the longest drive of her life. She was going home to spend the last Christmas with Dad. How could she tell him his own daughter would not be there? When she called, her sister met her heart-felt invitation with a list of hurts and complaints. She had begged and pleaded with her to forgive the past and come home one last time because it was Dad's last Christmas, but after mumbling another lame excuse her sister hung up on her.

She drove slowly through the familiar streets of her hometown. Every driveway was filled with cars and she could picture the joy, smiles, and laughter of those families as they gathered together. Why couldn't her family be like that? It almost made her sick inside to think that despite her best intentions her family would never have that kind of Christmas.

Finally, she pulled up to the house. The kids jumped out and ran up to the front door screaming and laughing, leaving her to unload the car alone. But that didn't really bother her, she needed a few seconds to herself to wipe away the last of her tears and put on that brave face for Dad. When her brother came out to help her, she could see he was clearly shaken. 'Dad looks terrible! He's just a shell of himself. His cheeks are sunken and his lips are so thin I can see his teeth through them. When I bent down to hug him I could feel every bone of his shoulders and back.'

'That's because you live out of state and haven't seen him since last year. Since I see him every week I guess I don't always notice how bad he's getting.'

'I thought the doctors were exaggerating when they said this would be his last Christmas. I guess they weren't.'

'Just don't talk about how bad he looks, or mention this is his last Christmas. If we pretend everything's fine, maybe we can get his mind off of dying and make his last Christmas happy!'

When she walked into the family room her Dad was sitting in his favourite old recliner in the corner. With a smile and a frail voice he said, 'Merry Christmas, darling!'

Thinking of what her brother had said, she noticed for the first time how bad he really looked. But pretending everything was fine she cheerfully answered, 'Merry Christmas to you, Dad!'

She put the presents under the tree and worked hard to make everything just perfect for their Christmas. She avoided speaking about the future, or her father's health or her brother's unemployment. Instead, she talked about everything the kids were doing, and reminisced about Christmases past. That's when she slipped. She mentioned that night Dad caught her sister and her peeking at the presents. At first they all laughed, but then her father grew silent and got a far-off look in his eyes.

She just knew he was thinking about his missing daughter. She berated herself for bringing up that painful subject. She blurted out, 'I'm sorry Dad! I wanted this Christmas to be perfect; I tried really hard to convince Sis to come. When she hung up, I told myself not to talk about her, but I let it slip. I'm sorry for ruining your Christmas.'

'You haven't ruined anything, Sweetie. I do wish your sister was here, but that doesn't keep me from being overjoyed that both of you are here with your families. That's enough to make it a perfect Christmas to me.' Looking at her brother, he said, 'When I heard you lost your job I was afraid you wouldn't be able to make it out for Christmas.'

Looking at her brother she felt her perfect Christmas crumbling into dust. The last thing he needed to think about was being unemployed at Christmas time! He turned to her and said, 'I'm so grateful I have a sister who loves me enough to pay for our airfare to fly in for Christmas, we never could have come without her!'

She answered, 'Please, don't think about it. I wouldn't dream of having Christmas without you. And I don't want to ruin this day by dwelling on your job problems. Christmas is a time to forget our troubles and just be happy together!'

He laughed and said, 'I certainly can't say I was happy when I learned I would be unemployed this Christmas, but it really turned out to be a blessing for me. In the past I spent all of December making year-end trips, signing contracts, and lining up business trips for January. I blew right past Christmas. But this year God gave me the chance to stop and really think about the meaning of this season. I've come to realise that as good as it is to have a successful career, there are more important things in life. It took losing my job to slow down and realise the true meaning of Christmas!'

He continued in a calm, joyful voice, 'At first I felt sorry for myself, but then I started thinking about Joseph and Mary on that first Christmas. I realised that when they moved, Joseph was in the same boat as me: he was unemployed too! And since Jesus ended up sleeping in a feeding trough instead of a cradle it's clear Joseph didn't have a lot of money either.

'And they couldn't afford baby clothes. They had to swaddle him in pieces of cloth torn from their old worn-out clothes. It wasn't the job, or the money, or the place that made the first Christmas—it was the baby—God's own son coming down to live with us. And think about it, God could have chosen a different family for his son—one that was rich, powerful, and important. Instead, however, he chose an unknown poor family in a strange place without a decent shelter. And that was good enough for God.

'Maybe the temporary setback of my being unemployed is God's way of making me look at this holiday from a different perspective. After all, if Joseph and Mary had enough to get by, I'm sure God will make things work out for us too.'

He impressed her. She never dreamed a person could be happy when they were unemployed. Maybe hiding from life's problems for a day didn't make Christmas perfect like she used to think. Maybe life's problems show us the reason there was a Christmas in the first place. When Dad got tired and laid down for a nap, they spent the rest of that Christmas afternoon remembering, laughing, and talking together—basking in the joy of Christ's birth. But every now and then she looked out the window at the drive. Maybe Jesus would work another Christmas miracle: wouldn't it be great if they saw their sister pulling up for Christmas dinner?

When they did gather around the dinner table, they celebrated their last Christmas meal together. It almost hurt to look across the table and see Dad so weak, tired and frail—and to notice her sister's place was still empty.

Then in his quivering voice Dad told them, 'I've been looking forward to this Christmas, because I know it's the last one we'll share together here. Now don't cry, there's no sense hiding from it. When the doctors told me there was nothing more they could do I was just hoping to live long enough to see you all again this Christmas. I consider myself a lucky man to be here with you today.

'I'm not bitter about this being my last Christmas because I know it won't be. By the time next Christmas rolls around, I'll be celebrating the most tremendous Christmas of all.

'You'll be stuck here on earth, but I'll finally be home for Christmas—home with my parents, my sister, and brothers, Grandma Jones, and Grandpa Bart. Even better, I'll be home with Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and wise men, and I'll get to hear those angels singing for myself, I've been looking forward to that for a *long time*. And best of all, I'll be with Jesus—the best part by far. Really, you are the guys who will be away from home next Christmas, and I'll look forward to the day when your job here is done and we can be together forever in a Christmas that really is perfect!'

She looked at her father in a new way. His body still looked worn out and frail, but there was an unmistakable glow in his eyes. She saw an incredible joy, confidence, and peace that she never dreamed she would have seen this Christmas Day. Even more, she was feeling this joy and peace herself. She had come to realise Christmas isn't about presents and decorations and cards and cookies, it isn't about filling every seat around the dinner table.

It's about God's gift of his son. It's about the forgiveness, peace, joy, and hope that his life, death, and resurrection brings for this life and the next.

They spent the rest of dinner talking, laughing, and enjoying being together. For some reason—actually a pretty clear reason—her Dad couldn't stop talking about the Christ Child and the heavenly home waiting for him.

'What's sad to me, thinking of that Christmas feast in heaven, is how many people are just like your sister, refusing to return and be reconciled. They don't want to have anything to do with their heavenly father or their wonderful brother Jesus. They don't know what they are missing. Well, at least not yet. Don't ever give up on your sister; you never know when her time will come and she'll finally see how much she needs her Lord. And always remember, the most important thing for her is to understand how much she needs her Lord—even if she never comes to see she needs her family too. I know God sure won't give up on her.'

'Glory to the newborn King! Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.' The words ran through her mind as she slowly looked around Mum and Dad's Christmas table.

Her sister's place was still empty, but for the first time that was okay. She had tried. And she would keep trying and maybe one of these Christmases the wall between them would come crashing down. But even if that never happened in this world it would be okay. She would still find the true joy of Christmas by remembering *this* Christmas.

And deep in her heart she treasured one more hope of a perfect Christmas—a future Christmas when she would be together again with her father and mother, her brother and sister, and her whole family celebrating the never-ending Christmas feast with Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and wise men, and the angel chorus sitting together in heaven basking in the glow of their Lord and saviour Jesus Christ, the baby of Bethlehem and saviour of the world.

Where do you find yourself this Christmas?

Are you so busy preparing for Christmas that you never stop to enjoy what it is truly all about?

Remember Christmas is about the arrangements God made to send his Son to restore your relationship with him and with your family and friends.

Are you trying to shut out the problems and pains of life so you can enjoy Christmas?

Remember Jesus came to carry our problems and pains in this life and will remove them forever in the next life.

Are you so caught up in your life and career that Christmas passes by in a blur?

Slow down and consider your future. You won't work forever. Jesus came to share our earthly life and earned a place for you as God's own child living with him forever in his perfectly restored creation.

Are you cut off from your family because of past hurts and pains?

Jesus was born to suffer and die for our hurtful words and deeds. He empowers us to get past the pain and make a new beginning.

Do you find you can't spend a single Christmas Day together without fighting?

Jesus will help you be patient and appreciate each other. This year you may need to limit your time together, but that can improve. In the next life He will remove the faults that cause us to get on each other's nerves, and we will enjoy being together forever.

Are you grieving about an empty place at your Christmas table this year?

Jesus was born to conquer death through his own death and resurrection. Whether life or death separates you from loved ones this Christmas, nothing will be able to separate you from Jesus. In the next life he will unite you with all your believing loved ones forever.

Heavenly Father, you know my many dysfunctions—my selfish thoughts, hasty words, and foolish actions that separate me from you and from all the people around me, even those I love the most. You know the things that make my life less than I would like it to be. You know the time and energy I waste trying to cover my dysfunctions and how I attempt to shift their blame to someone else. But doing that only leaves me feeling empty inside. I see that emptiness very clearly during this busy Christmas season.

I don't know why, but you loved me enough to send your only Son to repair those relationships and make my life everything I could ever want it to be—both in this earthly life and in the life to come.

This Christmas when I look at your Son laying in the hay, remind me of the man he grew up to be. Remind me of the great exchange he was born to make as he sacrificed himself on the cross—taking my dysfunctions upon himself and giving me his complete perfection. Remove my stubborn heart and mind and give me a mind and heart like his, that I may rejoice in your presence and be a joy to my family, my friends, and to you, my God.

I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Author Bio

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