

God Rest Ye Merry

God Rest Ye MERRY

Why Christmas is the Foundation for Everything

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This book is for Gordon and Meredith,
and family—all you guys!
Merry Christmas!

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PREFACE

This small book is broken up into five lessons, or sections. The first deals with the foundational doctrines that are connected to the Christmas story. If Jesus Christ is the cornerstone—and He is—the Christmas story tells how the first preparations were made to lay that stone. The second section addresses a fact too commonly overlooked, which is the inherently political nature of the Christmas story, a fact that Herod understood better than we frequently do. The third lesson brings up some historical considerations—is it possible to really celebrate Christmas in a robust fashion, and yet honor our Puritan heritage? Didn't the Puritans have a Scrooge-like approach to Christmas? Well, yes and no. The fourth section concerns the much lamented “materialism” of Christmas, and addresses the problem by suggesting that the chin-pulling laments over “consumerism” are actually more of a threat to the true meaning of Christmas than all the plasma televisions are. And last, the final section is a series of daily meditations for the Advent season, accompanied with a prayer—suitable for use as family readings during the Advent season.

Lesson One

TO GAIN HIS EVERLASTING HALL

If the history of the world is a story, then theology is a type of literary criticism. We do not just read the story and go with the flow of it, we are also to reflect on it as we read. What is the meaning of the story? We do not just want to know that the infinite God was born as a baby at Bethlehem, we should also want to know what that staggering reality might mean. Of course we must include the great events—creation, fall, the flood, the exile to Babylon. And when we include them, we must rank them, and if we do that, the birth of the Christ in Bethlehem is one of the greatest plot points ever. In this first section, we will give ourselves to reflections on what an odd thing the Incarnation was. How so?

Lesson Four

HOW SHALL WE THEN SHOP?

One of the most common laments we hear at Christmas is that the holiday has gotten way too commercial, that everybody is selling holiday junk, that materialism is rampant, and that consumerism is rampaging loose at the mall. But is this concern legitimate?

To raise this question is not to say that greed and so on are actually good. It is not to say that there are no sins of the marketplace, or that such sins are somehow not present during the Christmas rush. It is simply to acknowledge that “received wisdom” like this is often not thought completely through. Christmas is a celebration of the time when the infinite God took on a material body. Should this not have ramifications for how we think about material things? So part of our duty as Christians has to do with how we purchase things. How so?

JOY TO THE WORLD

In this world, joy is a bedrock sort of thing—and not the froth at the top of a wave. Joy is deep satisfaction in the will of God, and this must be coupled with recognizing the reality that God’s will is everywhere and in everything. There is no place where we may go and be allowed to murmur or despair because God’s will is somehow “not there.” In the carol we sing about joy to the world, we are dealing with the reality of sins and sorrows that grow, of thorns that infest the ground, and nations that need to have the glories of His righteousness *proved*. That proof will be found in our faith.

Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ: Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory: Receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls. (1 Pet. 1:6–9)

The apostle Peter is exhorting believers who are facing significant trials. We still live in a world filled with trouble, and so what he says to them will apply to us also. When confronted with the weight of manifold temptations, our response should be that of “greatly” rejoicing (v. 6). When we are tried, our faith is tried

(v. 7). Our faith is tried because God is a goldsmith. When the goldsmith plunges gold into the fire, it is not because he hates the gold, but because he loves the gold enough to want to purify it of its dross (v. 7). When the goldsmith beats the gold, it is not because he has contempt for the gold. He has a crown in mind. This analogy applies more to your faith than to gold (which ultimately perishes), and the goal is to have a faith that praises, honors, and glories at the coming of Jesus Christ (v. 7). You have not seen Him, Peter says, but you love Him (v. 8). You have not seen Him, but you nonetheless believe, and you rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory (v. 8). You are striving to obtain the end of your faith (which is constantly being purified by troubles), and that final purpose is the salvation of your souls (v. 9).

Christmas should not be treated by us as the “denial season.” One of the reasons why so many families have so many tangles and scenes during the “holidays” is that everybody expects sentimentalism to fix everything magically. But Christmas is not a “trouble-free” season. We want the scrooges and grinches in our lives to be transformed by gentle snowfall, silver bells, beautifully arranged evergreens, hot cider, and carols being sung in the middle distance. But what happens when you gather together with a bunch of other sinners, and all of them have artificially inflated expectations? What could go wrong? When confronted with the message of sentimentalism, we really *do* need somebody who will say, “Bah, humbug.”

When referring to joy unspeakable, Peter is not referring to someone living in the back of a cave, having mystic fits. That is not what is meant by “joy unspeakable.” It is not “cloud of unknowing,” or an orgy of pseudo-enlightenment in the back of your eyeballs. These words are written to believers in the midst of persecution and trial. Pain concentrates the mind. Pain tethers you to *this* world, and the rope is a stout one. But at the same time, the grace of God enables you to look *along* the pain, to look down

the entire length of the trial, and to see the purpose and point of it all. For the unbelieving observer off to the side, watching you, there is no explanation that can make sense of it. This is how God works. It is His way. “And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:7). The peace of God is an invisible shield, one which others cannot see. This is why it passes their understanding. They see *that* your hearts and minds are protected, but they cannot see *how*.

Note that your hearts and minds are not the shield, and they are not set up to protect the peace of God. The peace of God is no frail thing, needing your help to keep it from being smashed. The peace of God is an impenetrable helmet, and *your* contentment is your head. It protects you, not the other way around. Faith is like refined gold, and faith can do this, even though it may do it imperfectly. Gold is gold, even with dross in it. The first round purifies the faith, so that you can see and understand the process. That faith thus purified is prepared for the next round—even if the fire is more intense, or the difficulties more severe. The point is not to avoid the process. So the message of Christmas is not a delusional message. This is joy to the world. We are not pretending that we live in a world that is not struggling under a curse. The doctor who applies medicine to a wound is not pretending the wound is non-existent. The craftsman who repairs a smashed piece of expensive furniture is not denying the damage. His presence presupposes the damage. The refiner’s fire does not exclude the reality of dross—it is excluding the dross in another way. The Incarnation is God’s opening salvo in His war on our sins. The presence of sin should no more be astonishing than the presence of Nazis fighting back at Normandy. View the world with the eye of a Christian realist. The turning of seasons makes no one better. The gentle fall of snow removes no sin. The hanging of decorations only makes a living room full of sin sadder. As Jesus

once put it, “Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold? (Mt. 23:17). Which is more important, the hat or the cattle? The foam or the beer? The gift or the altar? The gold paper stamp on the Christmas card or the gold coin of your faith? If our hearts are decorated with the refined gold of a true faith, we may therefore decorate everything else. If they are not, then what’s the point? Joy is fundamentally realistic—which is why unbelief thinks of it as insane.

GETTING DRESSED FOR CHRISTMAS

Holidays are frequently times when people get trapped by the expectations game. Because everyone around you assumes that the day is going to be “really good,” “special,” or “fantastic,” and is constantly telling you to have a “merry” one, it is easy to assume that having a merry Christmas is an actual possession of yours, and if not a possession, at least a birthright. Consequently, the tendency is to sketch out in your mind what you would like that possession to be like. But it turns out, metaphorically speaking, that you get socks instead of the shotgun, or cookware instead of pearls, and the expectation lost is a set-up for real disappointment. This is one of the reasons why holidays can be such an emotional roller coaster ride for so many, and Christmas is no exception.

Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,

singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him. (Col. 3:12–17)

The text obviously deals with how we as Christians are to live all the time, and not just during the holidays. But the holidays are nothing other than what we normally do, ramped up to the next level. And so as we prepare our hearts for this celebration, ramp this up as well. Problems arise when we exert ourselves physically, emotionally, financially, and so on, and we don't exert ourselves here. Think of this as getting dressed for the season—here, put this on. What should you put on? Tender-mercies, kindness, humility of mind, meekness, patience (v. 12). *That* is holiday garb. When you are clothed this way, what are you dressed for? Snow pants are for going out in the snow, right? What is this clothing for? It is getting dressed for forbearance and forgiveness (v. 13). You are all dressed up and therefore ready to drop a quarrel, and to forgive as you were forgiven (v. 13). But that is not enough—you need to put on another layer. Over everything else, put on charity, which is the perfect coat, the perfection coat (v. 14). When you have done that, what are you ready for? You are ready for peace with others, and that peace is saturated with gratitude (v. 15). You are also ready for some music, and particularly the music of grace and gratitude (vv. 15–16). And then, to crown all else, you are dressed for everything—whatever you do, whether in word or deed, you can do it in the name of Jesus, giving thanks to the Father (v. 17).

Given the nature of the case, we must get dressed beforehand. Many Christians know what they are supposed to be doing, and so they try to do it. And they feel bad when they fail. But for some reason they don't prepare themselves beforehand for what they know is coming. They don't know that how they are dressed for the task is affecting their performance of the task itself. Now, let us suppose that for the last seventeen Christmases in a row

you have gotten out of fellowship about something—for gifts you didn't get, for lack of adequate enthusiasm for gifts you gave, for lack of adequate help with the meal, etc. Seventeen years in a row. Now, is it possible to tell which day this will happen the *next* time? Sure, it is this next Friday. The twenty-fifth. It is marked right there on the calendar, leering at you. So started getting dressed for it now. You don't really want to be surprised *again*. When you are clothed as you ought to be—in kindness, humility of mind, and charity—you will be able to take more delight in gifts you give freely, than in the gifts you receive. You delight in both, of course, but what does Jesus teach us? “I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). There are two basic things to remember here. First, giving is better than receiving. Second, this truth is so obviously clear that many people have had to work out complicated ways of receiving—i.e., receiving credit for being so giving (Mt. 6:2–3). As you give, you need to avoid running a trade deficit, with all categories—emotional, physical, and spiritual—taken into account. Remember that gifts are gifts, and gifts are also symbols. And symbols are also layered.

“For even in Thessalonica ye sent once and again unto my necessity. Not because I desire a gift: but I desire fruit that may abound to your account” (Phil. 4:16–17). Or this: “For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming?” (1 Thes. 2:19). What is our crown? Is it not *you*?

In giving a gift, *you* are attached to it. In receiving a gift, the blessing that comes to the giver is *your* chief delight. And the *you* that is attached to the gift that is given is either a gift just like the physical gift, or it is a booby-trapped box full of hidden emotional expenses. Do not be like the woman that C.S. Lewis said lived for others—and you could always tell who the others

were by their hunted expression. We give gifts, but the gifts also give us, and that is sometimes not nearly so much fun. You give the gift, certainly, but the gift also gives *you*. And it will always give the “you as you are” and not the “you as you appear in your daydreams.” And this is why you must prepare yourself for the giving. You don’t want the gift to give you, and have that “you” be a cheap toy that doesn’t make it through the afternoon of Christmas day.

This is why you must get dressed for the day.

A THEOLOGY OF CHRISTMAS GIFTS

One of the most obvious features of our Christmas celebrations is the gift-giving. How are we to understand this as Christians? What are the pitfalls? Are all the pitfalls obvious? Because our lives are to be lives of grace, and because *charis* means grace or gift, this is something we have to understand throughout the course of our lives, and not just at Christmas. But it has to be said that the machinery of our consumer racket does throw the question into high relief for us at this time of year.

And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. (Mt 2:11)

Gentile wise men from the East sought out Jesus and they worshiped Him. The established rulers in Israel did not—in fact, Herod played the role here of a treacherous Pharaoh, going on to kill the young boys in the region of Bethlehem.

So the first Christmas gifts were given by the magi to the young child Jesus. This happened sometime within the Lord’s first two years of life. Because three kinds of treasures are