

*CLASSIC READINGS FOR CHRISTMAS*



*P E A C E*

*S T E P H E N   J .   N I C H O L S*

## FOREWORD

NO HOLIDAY STIRS THE HEARTS of millions as does Christmas. Indeed Christmas is not celebrated for a single day but usually involves a month's season of celebration and contemplation. We've all heard of the lamentations about the commercialization of Christmas and the secularization of Christmas and even those protests from within the Christian community that Christmas is a pagan holiday that should not even be acknowledged. Nevertheless the significance of this time of celebration refuses to go away. No number of Grinches are sufficient to steal it from our culture and from the Church. That's because it is the day among all days when we celebrate the entrance into this world of our Redeemer. In the final analysis, the celebration of Christmas is not so much about the delivery of a baby but is rather the celebration of the incarnation of God (though that incarnation came by means of the bearing of a baby). That baby's birth is of singular importance and significance for the whole of human history, not only for religious considerations, but it is of cosmic significance because the whole explanation of the meaning of creation is found in His person and in His work. Indeed as the Scriptures teach us this baby who was born, was in His pre-incarnate state, the Creator of the world. He is the One in whom, through whom and by whom all things are made. If we travel the world, particularly to the countries of the West, we see the multiple traditions that have arisen by which Christian people celebrate this moment in time. Each of these traditions gives us something to savor and contemplate about the sweetness of our Savior's incarnation.

This book, *Peace*, brings refreshing and profitable insights into the meaning, purpose and the significance of Christmas. It is a valuable book for all of us to have and read as we contemplate this glorious moment of human history.

— R.C. Sproul  
Chairman and Founder of Ligonier Ministries  
Sanford, Florida  
April 2013

In the Christian story God  
down from the heights  
down into humanity; down  
recapitulate in the womb  
down to *the very roots and*  
But He goes down to  
ruined world with Him.  
stooping lower and lower  
complicated burden. He  
*disappear* under the load  
and marches off with the

descends to reascend. ¶ He comes down;  
of absolute being into time and space,  
further still, if embryologists are right, to  
ancient and pre-human phases of life;  
*seabed* of the Nature He has created.  
come up again and bring the whole  
One has the picture of a strong man  
to get himself underneath some great  
must stoop in order to lift, he must *almost*  
before he incredibly straightens his back  
whole mass swaying on his shoulders.

— C.S. Lewis



conflict, fighting with the Serpent, the great spoiler. But Genesis 3 promises that the Seed would overcome the Serpent, securing the final victory and ushering in wave after wave of peace.

The Seed, however, would be a long time coming.



Adam and Eve had Cain and Abel, and neither turned out to be the Seed. When Cain slew Abel, God gave Adam and Eve Seth, a little grace in a very troubled world. But Seth was not the Seed. More sons followed. Generations came and generations went.

Then Abraham appeared on the world's stage. God called this man from ancient times to make from him and his wife, Sarah, a great new nation that would be a beacon of light to a lost and hopeless world. Again, God made a promise to this couple of a Seed, a son. They thought it was Isaac. But Isaac died.

This story was repeated from generation to generation, building anticipation of the One to come who would make all things right, who would bring peace. A widow named Naomi and her widowed daughter-in-law, Ruth, even entered into this story. They were in desperate circumstances. There were no social nets to catch the fall of such marginalized people in the ancient world.

Without husbands and sons, without rights and means, widows lived from meal to meal. They lived on a thread of hope. Then came Boaz and the classic

*What human being could know  
all the treasures of wisdom and  
knowledge hidden in Christ and  
concealed under the poverty of  
His humanity?*

*~ Augustine*





CHAPTER II

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**THE  
STORY OF  
CHRISTMAS**

IN THREE ACTS

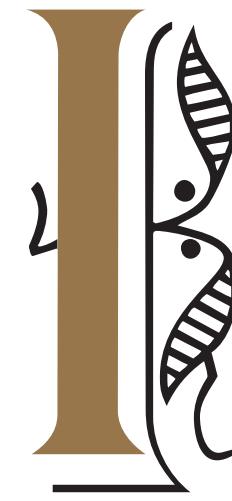
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THE STORY OF CHRISTMAS  
**REFLECTION**  
ACT III



IN THE THIRD AND FINAL ACT, the writers of Scripture reflect on the meaning and significance of the birth of Christ. His was no ordinary birth, no ordinary life, and no ordinary death.

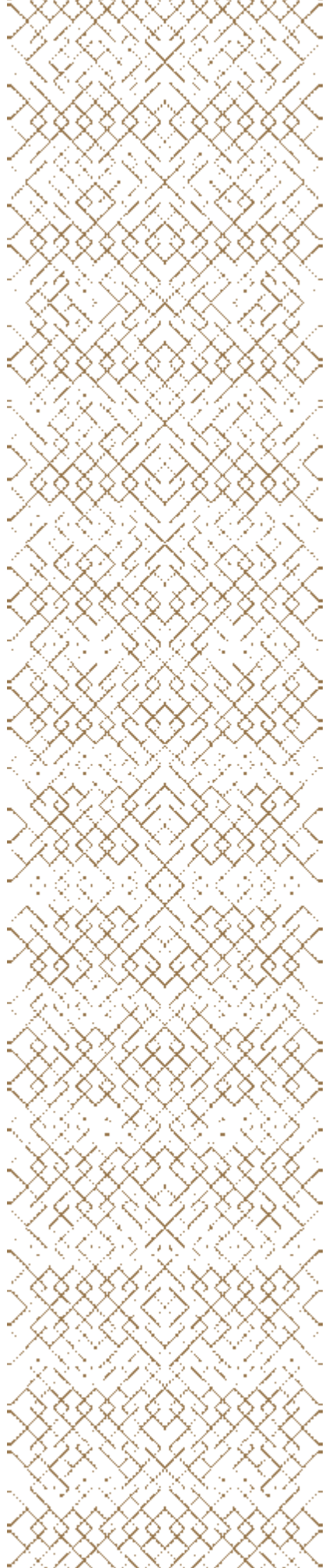
In these reflections, we come to find the ultimate meaning of Christmas.







FAMILIES HAVE A WAY OF establishing traditions over the years as a means to celebrate Christmas. The same is true for the church. Over the centuries, various traditions have come about as a means to keep Christmas, to celebrate it as a time of reflection on the meaning of the birth of Christ. Two traditions in particular are the Festival of Nine Carols and Lessons, and Advent and the Advent Wreath.



## KEEPING CHRISTMAS

### NINE LESSONS & CAROLS



For the Christmas Eve service of 1880, E. W. Benson, who would become the archbishop of Canterbury, drew up an order of worship around nine Scripture readings and nine Christmas carols. Ever since, the Nine Lessons and Carols has been a meaningful service for many on Christmas Eve. The most famous version is broadcast annually as it takes place in the breathtaking cathedral of King's College, Cambridge.

The Nine Lessons and Carols, however, does not need to be exclusively sung by renowned cathedral choirs. This format for worship may be used by families wishing to celebrate the whole story of Christmas. Families with young children might want to better ensure a merry celebration by singing only the first verse of the carols. Below is the order from the service at the King's College Cathedral, utilizing a number of medieval carols. These hymns are set at a rather high degree of difficulty—especially if you forgo the English translation for the Latin original. That would be for the diehards. Others may prefer to use different hymns that prove more suitable.

*T h e*  
*F i r s t*  
*S u n d a y*  
*i n*  
*A d v e n t*

**PRAYER**

*Almighty God, give us grace that we may put away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light now in the time of this mortal life, in which Your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when He will come again in His glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal, through Him who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, now and ever. Amen.*

The first Sunday readings remind us of the promise of the Savior in the writings of the Old Testament prophets.

**ISAIAH 9:2-7**

READER 1: The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders.

READER 2: And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over His kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

FAMILY: The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.







## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



STEPHEN J. NICHOLS is research professor of Christianity and culture at Lancaster Bible College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, a teaching fellow for Ligonier Ministries, and an adjunct professor at Reformation Bible College and Reformed Theological Seminary. He holds a PhD from Westminster Theological Seminary.

He has written fifteen books, including *The Reformation: How a Monk and a Mallet Changed the World*; *Welcome to the Story: Reading, Loving, and Living God's Word*; and *Jesus Made in America: A Cultural History from the Puritans to "The Passion of the Christ."* He is also the teacher on the audio/video series *Reformation Profiles*, produced by Ligonier Ministries.

Dr. Nichols lives in Lancaster with his wife, Heidi, and their three children.

