

“Read and pray your way through this Advent book, and your Christmas may be very different from previous ones. Or rather, you may be a very different person this Christmas, which is rather more important. Of course, it’s not all about you; it’s all about Jesus Christ. But if you are *in* Christ, then actually it is all about you too. Tim Chester fills out the wonderful words of Paul in Philippians with delightfully written, short reflections, full of fresh images and comparisons, and in a style that is very easy to read, though these truths are less easy to live. You’ll feed on some very rich biblical theology, bite-sized but deeply nourishing.”

Chris Wright,

International Ministries Director, Langham Partnership

“The Christmas season can often be marked by a time of increase: a frenzied pace, material splurges, and even personal grumbling. What often gets drowned out is a quiet and refreshing contemplation of timeless truth. In this short but accessible series of Advent devotions, Tim Chester invites us to go from muttering to marvelling this Christmas by considering the most compelling man who ever lived: Jesus Christ.”

Erik Raymond,

*Senior Pastor, Emmaus Bible Church, Omaha,
and The Gospel Coalition blogger*

“Tim Chester’s writing is clear and fresh, and allows the light of God’s word to shine brightly. I am looking forward to using Tim’s book in Advent and I hope many will too. Advent focuses on true gifts which we neglect at our peril; there is accountability, there is a God who cares, there is a universe in which the kingdom of God has come and will come. Don’t let Advent be taken over by Christmas; use Tim’s book to discover more of the one true gift.”

The Right Reverend Keith Sinclair,

Bishop of Birkenhead

“Rich in biblical truth and robust in its theology, *The One True Gift* is a treasure you’ll want to enjoy this Advent season (or any time, really). Tim does a magnificent work in lifting our eyes to the God-man, Jesus Christ, helping us apply his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and glorious return to our daily experience. Take this devotional slowly; there’s so much to see and appreciate in its pages!”

Kristen Wetherell,

*Ministry Content Manager, Unlocking the Bible,
and co-author of Hope When It Hurts*

“Use this brilliant book for the 24 days leading up to Christmas and the season might be very different! Life-changing insight into the true person of Jesus will also be yours as you read.”

Peter Maiden,

*International Director Emeritus, Operation Mobilisation,
and Minister-at-large, Keswick Ministries*

“It’s impossible not to be profoundly moved as Tim Chester unwraps layer after layer of Paul’s most famous Christmas carol. Makes you wish it was already tomorrow to get on with the day’s reading. Simply wonderful. (And a great resource for planning carol services too!)”

Dave Gobbett,

Lead Minister, Highfield Church, and Word Alive trustee

“This is not the book you give for Christmas—it’s the book you give before Christmas, to get you through Christmas! *The One True Gift* is a series of 24 readings that work in the same way as an Advent calendar, except this is much more nutritious. With reflections on Philippians 2, Tim Chester takes us thoughtfully into bite-sized verses to meditate in such a way that truth goes into us, when normally energy and goodwill drain from us. Christmas is for giving—but draw first from the wells of Philippians 2 with Tim, and you will have much more to give. A really nourishing resource that keeps the focus on Christ.”

Steve James,

Rector, Holy Trinity Platt, Manchester

Tim Chester

The
One True
Gift

Daily Readings for Advent
to Encourage and Inspire

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Introduction

The One True Gift

Christmas is supposed to be a time of “peace on earth and goodwill to all men”.

And we all fondly imagine our family gathered round a roaring fire. The children giggle as they play their board game. Your teenager is making a cup of tea for her grandmother. Your elderly neighbour is sitting happily in his new hand-knitted jumper. Then someone asks Grandad for an old story. You look across at your spouse and smile a smile of contented satisfaction. Peace and goodwill.

But the reality of Christmas can be very different! The children are fighting over the television remote. Your teenager only left her room after dire threats and is now sulking in the corner underneath her headphones. Your elderly neighbour isn't there because he and Grandad refuse to be in the same room together. And you and your spouse are still not talking after last night's argument. There's little goodwill around and your only moment of peace comes when you take the dog for a walk.

Or perhaps these are problems that you'd love to have. But your Christmas will be tinged with grief and loneliness, not peace and goodwill, as you remember the relationships you've lost.

All too often Christmas descends into grumbling or arguing. You mutter under your breath about the shameless commercialisation, the competing crowds of shoppers, the dark, cold evenings. Your wife grumbles about the extra chores or your husband grumbles about visiting his in-laws. And you can't get the children to do anything without an argument.

And then in Philippians 2 v 14 Paul says:

Do everything without grumbling or arguing.

Can you imagine a grumble-free Christmas? An argument-free zone? Not me.

But Paul doesn't merely taunt us with an unattainable ideal. He wraps it up in a wonderful description of the one true Christmas gift—the Lord Jesus Christ. The one true gift radically alters our perspective on our grumbles and arguments. So over the next 24 days, we'll peel back the layers on this passage from Philippians, and enjoy afresh God's gift to us at Christmas.

Philippians 2 v 6-11 was probably an early Christian hymn. Whether Paul himself wrote it or whether he's quoting lyrics familiar to his readers is unclear. Maybe he quotes an existing hymn, but adds his own tweaks for extra emphasis. We can't be sure. What matters is that Paul and the Holy Spirit thought these were the words the Philippians needed to hear. And these are still words we need to hear.

Philippians 2 invites us to step into the Christmas story in a way that radically reshapes our attitudes.

You may not be able to change the behaviour of your family. There may still be arguments fizzing around this Christmas. But *you* can encounter Christ afresh this Christmas in a way that will make you a bearer of peace and goodwill.

Born to set an example

“Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.”

Philippians 2 v 1-5

Everyone loves Jesus. Church attendance is falling. It’s common to hear people say they have no time for organised religion. Plenty of people despise Christianity. But still they like the person at its heart.

Jesus is respected as a good man. After all, he was concerned for the poor and associated with outcasts. He told us to love our enemies and turn the other cheek—which sounds good, even if most of us don’t do it very much.

In reality most people have a Christmas-card version of Jesus. It's all rather sanitised and safe. Christmas-card Jesus wears a permanent smile, and only ever says nice things that make us feel good about ourselves.

But the real Jesus that we meet in the Gospels is not quite so tame. For one thing, he could be rude. He said it straight. Much of what he said—about his uniqueness, about sexuality, about judgment—cuts right across the grain of our culture.

And yet... Jesus remains a compelling figure. When he was rude, it was to confront the injustice of his day. When he said it straight, it was to warn us in love.

In Jesus we see the epitome of love and goodness. He is the perfect man. He is perfect in his mercy, perfect in his justice, perfect in his speech, perfect in his attitudes, perfect in his anger, perfect in his love. His life is compelling and attractive.



Christians are people who want to be like Jesus. That's what Paul says here in verse 5:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.

Jesus was born to set an example. There is so much more he came to do. Indeed, if he had just come to set an example, then the message of Jesus would be bad news. For his example would only condemn us. None of us could live up to his standards. So there is much more to say about Jesus.

But there isn't less to say: he *is* our example.

Paul picks out one idea in particular here in Philippians 2 (or a cluster of related ideas): "Value others above yourselves, not looking

to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others” (v 3-4). He’s writing to a church and describing the life that should characterise a church community. But the same principles apply in your family, your workplace or your neighbourhood. We need to put others first. Think about how Jesus did these things.

☺ **“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.”**

(v 3) Jesus left the glory of heaven to share our pain. He came to a context where no one recognised his status as the Son of God. Jesus wasn’t a social climber! He wasn’t clambering up the greasy pole. He wasn’t dreaming of his next big promotion. He didn’t have his eye on a bigger house. His trajectory was in the opposite direction. His “ambition” drove him *down* to earth.

☺ **“In humility value others above yourselves.” (v 3)**

The attitude of Jesus was epitomised in the moment when a group of mothers brought their children to Jesus. His disciples tried to send them away. As far as they were concerned, Jesus was far too important to hang out with little children. But that’s not how Jesus saw it. “He was indignant” when he saw what was happening (Mark 10 v 14). He was happy to spend time with children—those people that his culture thought had little value.

☺ **“Not looking to your own interests but each of you**

to the interests of the others.” (v 4) This is why Jesus was born—because he put our interests before his own. And this is why Jesus was crucified. He was willing to bear the judgment we deserve so that we might be acquitted. Our interests before his interests. Putting others first.



You may not have to die for your family or colleagues today. At least, not literally. But there may be moments when you need to die to self. Your status and interests are quietly executed as you put others first.

Now why would you do that? Paul gives us some reasons in verse 1: the encouragement of being united with Christ; the comfort of his love; our common sharing in the Spirit; and the tenderness and compassion the Lord Jesus gives.

But the most surprising reason is in verse 2: the prospect of making our “joy complete”. What gives Paul joy? It’s *shared* joy. That’s the goal of his ministry (1 v 25). In a strange upside-down sort of way, putting others first leads to joy. It’s the joy of being like Jesus. His life is so attractive and so compelling that we’re glad when we sense that in our small way we’re becoming like him—and that others are too.

One day I was feeling gloomy—got-up-on-the-wrong-side-of-the-bed gloomy. And then my friend told me how God had been at work in his life, how he had overcome temptation, how my words had helped (something I’d forgotten ever saying). It turned my mood upside down—or rather, the right way up. You only get that—complete joy, shared joy—when you’re investing in the lives of other people. When you’re looking to *their* interests, and not your own.

The One True Gift

Meditate

*O little one sweet, O little one mild,
In thee love's beauties are all distilled.
Then light in us thy love's bright flame,
That we may give thee back the same,
O little one sweet, O little one mild.*

(Traditional German carol)



Prayer

*Father God,
may I, at least a little,
follow my Lord and Deliverer
as a token of my gratitude.
Lord Jesus,
I am nothing and can do nothing.
All I have is through you,
out of the grace of the Father.
I will keep nothing for myself
but with joy will put all I possess
at the service of my brethren.
May I be obedient in death,
even in the death of the cross;
that is, may I accept
all sufferings and disgrace.
Amen.*

*(Adapted from a prayer of German Reformer
Martin Bucer, 1491-1551)*

Born to unite us to him

*“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours
in Christ Jesus.”*

Philippians 2 v 5 (ESV)

So how have you got on since you read the last chapter? Have you been putting others first? Have you been valuing others above yourself?

I'm sure you've had many good moments when you've been humble, generous and sacrificial. But our proud, selfish selves have a habit of gate-crashing the party. We set out with good intentions, but life never quite works out the way we intend. *We* never work out the way we intend.

My wife always makes the table look wonderful for our Christmas meal. The white tablecloth makes its annual appearance. Every place is set with the nearest thing to matching cutlery and glassware we can manage. The centre is decorated. Candles are lit. But by the end of the meal everything is in total disarray. The children have played with the candle wax. There are gravy stains all over the tablecloth. The once beautifully folded napkins are all in a crumpled heap.

That's how every day feels to me. Everything is beautiful and clean in the morning. I wake to fresh mercies from God. But all too quickly there are stains and crumples. On a meal table this mess is a sign that everyone had a good time. But that's not true of the mess in my life.



The example of Jesus attracts us and inspires us. But, as we saw yesterday, on its own it also taunts and accuses us. Who can measure up? Compared to Jesus, we are stained and crumpled.

But Jesus is not just our example. Verse 5 says, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus” (ESV). Fundamental to Paul’s point is this reality: *we are in Christ Jesus*.

Jesus was born so we could be “in him”. He came to unite our humanity to his divinity—our humanness to his “God-ness”. He came to be one with us so we could be one with him. We describe followers of Jesus as “Christians”. But the Bible only uses that term three times (Acts 11 v 26; 26 v 28; 1 Peter 4 v 16). Much more often it describes believers as those who are “*in Christ*”. When you turn from sin and entrust yourself to Jesus, you become “in Christ”.

But what does it mean to be in Christ? Think what it means to be *in a car*. If you’re *in a car*, then what happens to the car happens to you. If the car starts moving, then you start moving. If it goes round a corner, then you go round the corner.

It’s the same with Christ. If you’re in Christ, then what happens to Christ happens to you. He bore the judgment of God, and that judgment is borne for you. He rose again, and you rise with him to eternal life.



The One True Gift

Later on in Philippians, Paul highlights one of the benefits of being “in Christ”:

What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. (Philippians 3 v 8-9)

Did you spot the “in him” in the middle of this quote? Paul says that everything is rubbish compared with being “found in him”. Why? Because, by being in Christ, Paul shares the righteousness of Christ. “Righteousness” means being *right with God*. Jesus is right with God, and if we are in Jesus, then we are right with God. And nothing matters more than that.

So being good enough for God is not something we achieve. Instead it “comes from God on the basis of faith”—it’s by trusting in Jesus that we’re made right with God.

Which brings me backed to my stained and crumpled life. It’s as if God whips off the tablecloth of my life and gives it to Jesus to deal with. And then he throws over my life the beautiful, pristine, whiter-than-white tablecloth of Jesus. The Bible doesn’t use the image of a tablecloth. But it does use the image of clothing. Galatians 3 v 27 says, “All of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ”.



Sometimes people have feared that this free gift of righteousness will make Christians careless about sin because any “spillages” get

covered up by Christ. But that's not how it works. Which are you careful to keep clean? A clean tablecloth or a dirty tablecloth? A clean dress or a dirty dress? "Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh" (Romans 13 v 14). You have been forgiven by God. You have been united to Christ. Let that truth shape how you live today.

Meditate

*He deigns in flesh to appear,
Widest extremes to join;
To bring our vileness near,
And make us all divine:
And we the life of God shall know,
For God is manifest below.*

*Made perfect by his love,
And sanctified by grace,
We shall from earth remove,
And see his glorious face:
Then shall his love be fully showed,
And man shall then be lost in God.*

(From "Let earth and heaven combine" by Charles Wesley, 1707-1788)



Prayer

*O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray.
Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell.
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel.*

(From "O little town of Bethlehem" by Phillip Brooks, 1835-1893)