

The High Calling

a bimonthly publication of The Francis Asbury Society

Why Christmas?

By Stan Key

As the season of Christmas descends upon us in all its chaotic beauty, we often tend to get so caught up in the What that we forget the Why. The star, the manger, the wise men, the shepherds, and the mother and child remind us of the historical fact: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. So, we'll sing a few carols, attend a few worship services, and throw a party to celebrate that incomparable event that happened 2,000 years ago. That's what Christmas is all about, right? This issue of *The High Calling* intends to remind us that if our festivities go no further than celebrating that Jesus came, we will have missed the true reason for this blessed season.

The New Testament emphasizes not only the *fact* of Christ's coming but the *purpose!* Jesus had a mission to fulfill. The

emphasis in the Gospels is not only on *who* Jesus is but, just as importantly, *why* he came. No one was more conscious of this missional priority than Jesus himself. The New Testament repeatedly underscores the reason Christ came:



- “I have not come to abolish [the Law and the Prophets] but to fulfill them” (Mt 5:17).

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Because He Loves Me

By Brent Curtis and John Eldredge



John Eldredge

Brent Curtis and John Eldredge describe the meaning of Christmas in terms of a sacred romance. Jesus came as a mighty prince to rescue the one he loves from the clutches of the evil one who had kidnapped her. This article has the potential for changing completely the way you think about the coming of Christ into the world. Abridged and slightly edited, the article is taken from *The Sacred Romance* (Thomas Nelson, 1997), Chapter 7, “The Beloved” (83–98).

Helen of Troy must have really been something. Two kingdoms went to war over her; thousands of men gave up their lives so that one might have her. Hers was “the face that launched a thousand ships.” Helen was the wife of Menelaus, King of Greece, in the ninth century BC. Their home was a peaceful kingdom until the arrival of Paris, Prince of Troy. Paris fell in love with Helen and, under cover of night, took her back to Troy. It was the beginning of the Trojan War. Menelaus and Agamemnon amassed a mighty Greek army and set off in one thousand ships to lay siege to Troy, all to win Helen back.

Few have ever felt so pursued as Helen. We might think of her as Helen the Fought Over, Helen the Captive and Rescued, Helen the Pursued. Though we don't know what Helen may have felt about being the center of an international crisis, she must have known beyond a shadow of a doubt that *she mattered*.

The gospel says that we, who are God's beloved, created a cosmic crisis. It says, we, too, were stolen from our True Love and that he launched the greatest campaign in the history of the world to get us back. God created us for intimacy with him. When we turned our back on him, he promised to come for us. He sent personal messengers; he used beauty and affliction to recapture our hearts. After all else failed, he conceived the most daring of plans. Under the cover of night, he stole into the enemy's camp *incognito*, the Ancient of Days disguised as a newborn. The Incarnation, as Phil Yancey reminds us, was a daring raid into enemy territory. The whole world lay under the power of the evil one and we were held in the dungeons of darkness. God risked it all to rescue us. Why? What is it that he sees in us that causes him to act the jealous lover, to lay siege both on the kingdom of darkness and on our own idolatries as if on Troy—not to annihilate, but to win us once again for himself? This fierce attention, this reckless ambition that shoves all conventions aside, willing literally to move heaven and earth—what does he want from us?

We've been offered many explanations. From one religious camp we're told that what God wants is obedience, or sacrifice, or adherence to the right doctrines, or morality. Those are the answers offered by conservative churches. The more therapeutic churches suggest that no, God is after our contentment, or happiness, or self-actualization, or something else along those lines. He is concerned about all these things, of

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Christmas: Marvel of Nature, Wonder of Grace

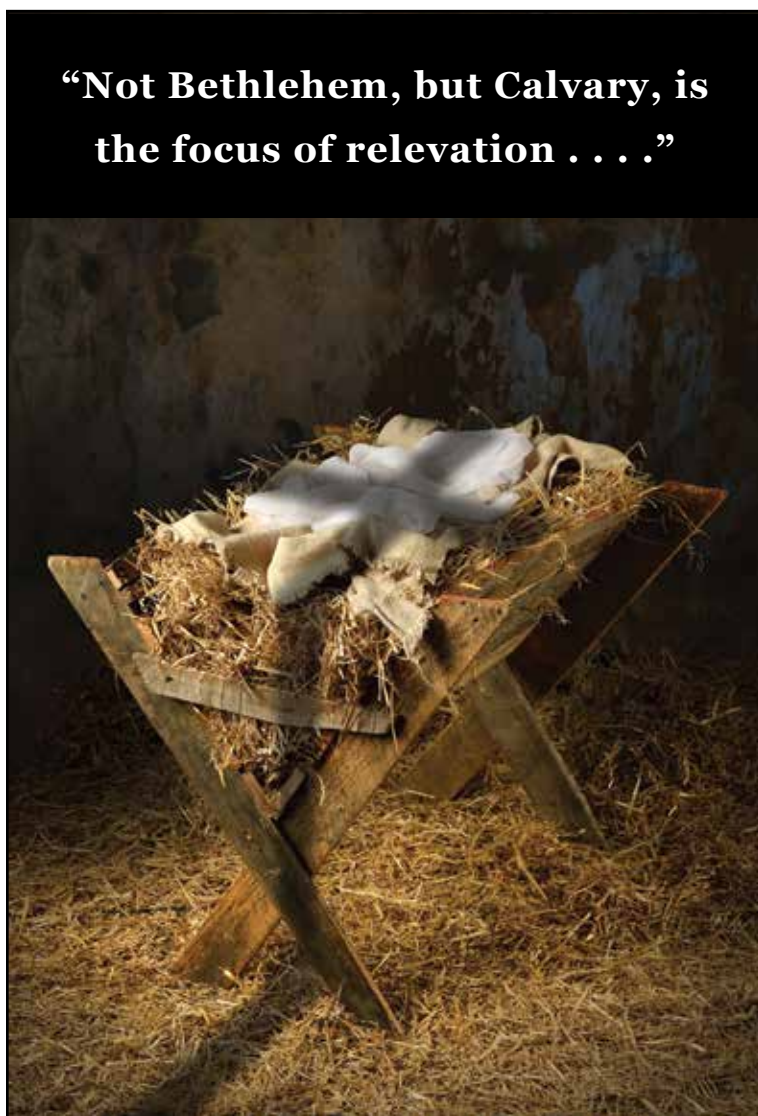
By J. I. Packer



In his classic work *Knowing God* (IVP Books, 1973), J. I. Packer explains that the gospel can only be fully grasped when we understand both the historical fact of the Incarnation and the redemptive purpose for which Jesus came (the Atonement). Jesus' birth in time and space is indeed a miracle of nature, but his death on the cross is a wonder of grace! This article is taken from Chapter Five of Packer's book, entitled "God Incarnate," and has been abridged and slightly edited (53–54, 58–59).

The supreme mystery that confronts us in the gospel lies not in the Good Friday message of atonement, nor in the Easter message of resurrection, but in the Christmas message of Incarnation. The really staggering Christian claim is that Jesus of Nazareth was God made man—that the second person of the Godhead became the "second man" (1 Cor 15:47), determining human destiny, and that he took humanity without loss of deity, so that Jesus of Nazareth was as truly and fully divine as he was human.

Here are two mysteries for the price of one—the plurality of persons within the unity of God, and the union of Godhead and manhood in the person of Jesus. It is here, in the thing that happened at the first Christmas, that the profoundest and most unfathomable depths of the Christian revelation lie. "The



"Not Bethlehem, but Calvary, is the focus of revelation"

Word became flesh" (Jn 1:14); God became man; the divine Son became a Jew; the Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, unable to do more than lie and stare and wriggle and make noises, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child. The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as is this truth of the Incarnation.

This is the real stumbling block in Christianity. It is here that Jews, Muslims, Unitarians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and many of those who feel the difficulties concerning the virgin birth, the miracles, the atonement, and the resurrection have come to grief. It is from misbelief, or at least inadequate belief, about the Incarnation that difficulties at other points in the gospel story usually spring. But once the Incarnation is grasped as a reality, these other difficulties dissolve.

If Jesus had been no more than a very remarkable, godly man, the difficulties in believing what the New Testament tells us about his life and work would be truly mountainous. But if Jesus was the same person as the eternal Word, the Father's agent in creation, "through whom also he created the world" (Heb 1:2), it is no wonder if fresh acts of creative power marked his coming into this world, his life in it, and his exit from it. It is not strange that he, the Author of life, should rise from dead. If he was truly God the Son, it is much more startling that he should die than that he should rise again.

"'Tis mystery all! The Immortal dies," wrote Charles Wesley; but there is no comparable mystery in the Immortal's resurrection. And if the immortal Son of God did really submit to taste death, it is not strange that such a death should have saving significance for a doomed race. Once we grant that Jesus was divine, it becomes unreasonable to find difficulty in any of this; it is all of a piece and hangs together completely. The Incarnation is in itself an unfathomable mystery, but it makes sense of everything else that the New Testament contains.

Perhaps the mystery of the incarnation has never been formulated better than in the words of the Athanasian Creed. "Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man . . . perfect God, and perfect man . . . who although he be God and man: yet he is not two, but one Christ; one, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh: but by taking of the manhood into God." Our minds cannot get beyond this. What we see in the manger is, in Charles Wesley's words,

*Our God contracted to a span;
Incomprehensibly made man.*

Incomprehensibly. We shall be wise to remember this, to shun speculation and contentedly to adore.

The New Testament does not encourage us to puzzle our heads over the physical and psychological problems raised by the doctrine of the Incarnation, but to worship God for the love that was shown in it. For it was a great act of condescension and self-humbling. "He, who had always been God by nature," writes Paul, "did not cling to his privileges as God's equal, but stripped Himself of every advantage by consenting to be a slave

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Cur Deus Homo?

By John R. W. Stott (1921–2011)



In his book *The Cross of Christ* (IVP Books, 1986), John Stott gives a “layman’s introduction” to the monumental work *Cur Deus Homo?* (“Why Did God become Man?”), written by Anselm (1033–1109), the archbishop of Canterbury. Perhaps no book in history made the connection between Christmas and Good Friday, the Incarnation and the Atonement, more strongly than this one! Stott reminds us that though Anselm’s scholastic reasoning caused him at times to wander beyond the boundaries of the biblical revelation, his ideas continue to be of great importance for serious Christians today. The following article is taken from pages 118–120 of Stott’s book and has been slightly abridged and edited.

In the eleventh century, Anselm of Canterbury offered a fresh approach to understanding the atonement. In his important book *Cur Deus Homo?* he made a systematic exposition of the cross as a satisfaction of God’s offended honor. James Denney called Anselm’s book “the truest and greatest book on the atonement that has ever been written.”

Anselm was a godly Italian who first settled in Normandy and then in 1093, following the Norman Conquest, was appointed archbishop of Canterbury. He has been described as the first representative of medieval “scholasticism,” which was an attempt to reconcile philosophy and theology, Aristotelian logic and biblical revelation. His overriding concern was to be “agreeable to reason.”

In *Cur Deus Homo?* Anselm’s great treatise on the relationship between the Incarnation and the Atonement, he agrees that the devil needed to be overcome, but rejects the patristic ransom theories on the ground that “God owed nothing to the devil but punishment.” Instead, humans owed something to God, and this is the debt that needed to be repaid. Anselm defines sin as “not rendering to God what is his due,” namely the submission of our entire will to his. To sin is, therefore, to “take away from God what is his own,” which means to steal from him and so to dishonor him. If anybody imagines that God can simply forgive us in the same way that we are to forgive others, he has not yet considered the seriousness of sin. Being in inexcusable disobedience of God’s known will, sin dishonors and insults him, and “nothing is less tolerable than that the creature should take away from the Creator the honor due to him, and not repay what he takes away.” God cannot overlook this. “It is not proper for God to pass by sin thus unpunished.” It is more than improper; it is impossible. “If it is not becoming to God to do anything unjustly or irregularly, it is not within the scope of his liberty or kindness or will to let go unpunished the sinner who does not repay to God what he has taken away.”

So what can be done? If we are ever to be forgiven, we must repay what we owe. Yet we are incapable of doing this, either for ourselves or for other people. Our present obedience and good works cannot make satisfaction for our sins, since these are required of us anyway. So, we cannot save ourselves. Nor can any other human being save us, since “one who is a sinner cannot justify another sinner.” Hence the dilemma with which Book One ends: “man the sinner owes to God, on account of sin, what he cannot repay, and unless he repays it he cannot be saved.”

Near the beginning of Book Two, the only possible way out of the human dilemma is unfolded: “there is no-one who can make this satisfaction except God himself. But no-one ought to make it except man.” Therefore, “it is necessary that one who is God-man should make it.” A being who is God and not man, or man and not God, or a mixture of both and therefore neither man nor God, would not qualify. “It is needful that the very same Person who is to make this satisfaction be perfect God and perfect man, since no-one can do it except one who is truly God, and no-one ought to do it except one who is truly man.” This leads Anselm to introduce Christ. He was (and is) a unique Person, since in him “God the Word and man meet.” He also performed a unique work, for he gave himself up to death—not as a debt (since he was sinless and therefore under no obligation to die) but freely for the honor of God.

The greatest merits of Anselm’s exposition are that he perceived clearly the extreme gravity of sin (as a willful rebellion against God in which the creature affronts the majesty of his Creator), the unchanging holiness of God (as unable to condone any violation of his honor), and the unique perfections of Christ (as the God-man who voluntarily gave himself up to death for us).



Anselm of Canterbury at
Canterbury Cathedral

To Seek and to Save the Lost

By Jack Key (1922–2017)



“Brother Jack” served for over 50 years as a United Methodist minister in the South Georgia Conference. In retirement, he and his wife Ruthanne became even more active in ministry as they served in such places as Mongolia, China, Mozambique, Russia, and Ecuador. The following article is a sermon reproduced as an evangelistic tract by one of the churches he pastored in the 1980s.

An elementary school teacher asked her class to name some symbols of Christmas. The children responded enthusiastically with things like Santa, holly, candles, trees, reindeer, etc. Finally, one little girl said, “the Baby Jesus.” The teacher shot back, “Oh, I didn’t mean things like *that!*”

It seems there has been a concerted effort to make Christmas into something it was never meant to be—a holiday. Look at all the trinkets, trimmings and decorations; it is next to impossible to find the true meaning of this holy season in them. One does not have to get drunk or blaspheme God to observe Christmas in the wrong way. When we let shopping, cooking, vacationing, partying, and family reunions occupy all our time and thought, we have already missed the real meaning of Christmas. When we leave Christ out of Christmas, we are guilty of sacrilege of the worst sort.

Words in Luke’s Gospel tell us the deeper meaning of Christmas: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Lk 19:10). The *fact* of Christmas is revealed in the first part of the verse: “the Son of Man came.” The *meaning* of Christmas is explained in the second part: “to seek and to save the lost.” It isn’t enough just to observe the *fact* of his coming. We must especially remember the *reason* he came and the mission that drove him.

First, notice his title: “the Son of Man.” Not “a” but “*the*” Son of Man. Appearing at least eighty-five times in the Gospels, this is the title Jesus preferred for himself. Other names were given him. He was called the Son of Abraham, but there you have a racial limitation. He was called the Son of David, and there you have a limitation of office, a designation of the descendent of an earthly ruler. He was called the Son of Mary, but that is a family limitation. These titles are not big enough, broad enough—they are exclusive rather than inclusive.

Confucius was a son of China, Plato a son of Greece, Hugo a son of France, Bach a son of Germany, Shakespeare a son of England, and Lincoln a son of America. But Christ is the Son of *Man!* He belongs to us all. He is the universal one.

This name points out the humanity of Jesus. On Christmas morning, a little boy surrounded by all his gifts, longed to share this magical day with his soldier father who was fighting on

a distant battlefield. The little fellow stood before his daddy’s picture and said, “I wish he would just step out of that frame and join us here.” That is what happened at the first Christmas. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14). God stepped out of the picture and became one of us.

Christ was perfect in his manhood. He knew the pangs of hunger, the hurt of being misunderstood, the craving for companionship, and the taste of death. He was “tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15).

But the fact of his humanity is only half of the story. He was and is the Son of God. Not only was he truly man; he was, and is, truly God. He is not the pale, puny, anemic Jesus of some modern theologians, but the mighty, exalted, incarnate God of the New Testament. That little baby left on the doorsill of an unfriendly world was none other than God himself!

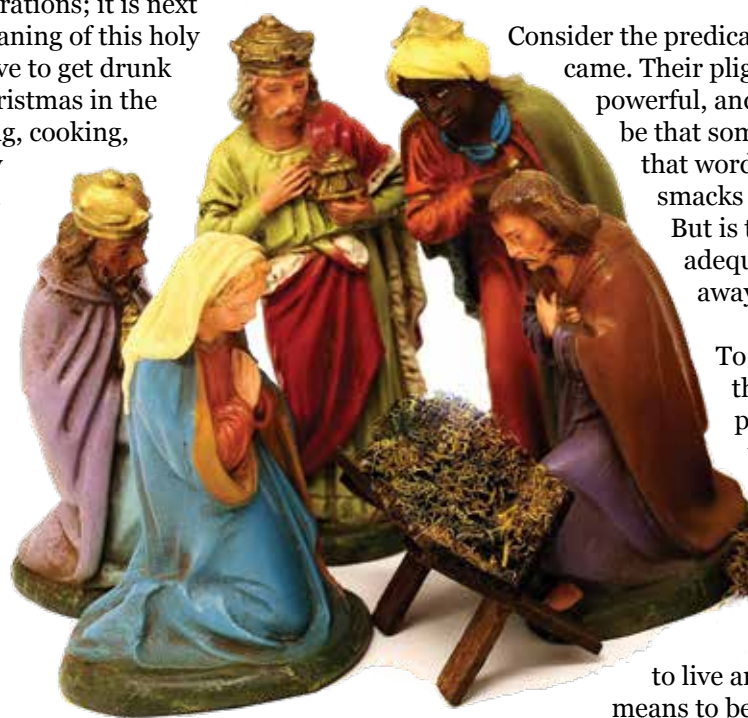
Consider the predicament of those to whom he came. Their plight is described in one graphic, powerful, and tragic word: “lost.” It may be that something within us recoils from that word. It is a bit old-fashioned and smacks of revivals and campmeetings. But is there any other word that can adequately describe the state of men away from God?

To be lost means something more than a child getting lost from its parents, a hunter getting lost in the woods, or even a ship getting lost at sea. Its meaning is infinitely more tragic than that. To be lost spiritually is to have lost one’s sense of values, to have sold one’s birthright for a mess of pottage, to have no reason to live and yet to have to go on living. It means to be estranged from God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit for time and eternity.

If we are honest, many of us will have to admit that we’ve lost our sense of direction. We’re very much like the pilot in a small aircraft who radioed, “I am making excellent time, but I’m lost.” But take heart, if a man confesses that he is lost, he is eligible to be found. If he admits he is a sinner, then he can be saved. And what a Christmas it would be for you this year if you were found by Christ!

The real meaning of Christmas is told in these words, “to seek and to save.” Ah, now we know *why* he came! He did not come as a great philosopher, to usher in a new religion or to set up a new social order. He did not come as a brilliant teacher. He came primarily and profoundly as a Savior, to rescue those who have lost their way. The mystery of the gospel lies not in the fact that we seek God but that he seeks us! Long before we start looking for him, he has already been searching for us.

Jesus’ mission is the same today as it was when he was born in Bethlehem: “to seek and to save the lost.” Times may have changed but the message of the gospel is eternally the same. ✦



When Peace Becomes Obnoxious

By Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968)



At Christmas, most of us think of Jesus as coming to bring peace on earth, goodwill toward men. But Jesus shocked his listeners by stating just the opposite! “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” (Matthew 10:34). On March 18, 1956, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered a powerful sermon from the pulpit of his Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. The occasion of the sermon was growing racial tension and unrest, caused, in part, by the boycott he was promoting against the city buses. He also spoke about the volatile situation at the University of Alabama where a black student, Autherine Lucy, had been barred from attending classes. Charged with promoting civil unrest, Dr. King faced trial on Monday, the day after the sermon was preached! Dr. King wanted people to understand that some forms of peace are intolerable. The following article is slightly edited and first appeared in *The Louisville Defender* (March 29, 1956).

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A few weeks ago, a Federal Judge handed down an edict which stated in substance that the University of Alabama could no longer deny admission to persons because of their race. With the handing down of this decision, a brave young lady by the name of Autherine Lucy was accepted as the first negro student to be admitted in the history of the University of Alabama. This was a great moment and a great decision. But with the announcement of this decision, “the vanguards of the old order began to surge.” The forces of evil began to congeal. As soon as Autherine Lucy walked on the campus, a group of spoiled students led by Leonard Wilson and a vicious group of outsiders began threatening her on every hand. Crosses were burned; eggs and bricks were thrown at her. The mob jumped on top of the car in which she was riding. Finally, the president and trustees of the University of Alabama asked Autherine to leave for her own safety and the safety of the University. The next day after Autherine was dismissed, the paper came out with this headline: “Things are quiet in Tuscaloosa today. There is peace on the campus of the University of Alabama.”



Yes, things are quiet in Tuscaloosa. Yes, there was peace on the campus, but it was peace at a great price: it was peace that had been purchased at the exorbitant price of an inept trustee board succumbing to the whims and caprices of a vicious mob. It was peace that had been purchased at the price of allowing mobocracy to reign supreme over democracy. It was peace that had been purchased at the price of capitulating to the force of darkness. This is the type of peace that all men of goodwill hate. It is the type of peace that is obnoxious. It is the type of peace that stinks in the nostrils of the Almighty God!

Now let me hasten to say that this is not a concession to or a justification for physical war. I can see no moral justification

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for that type of war. I believe absolutely and positively that violence is self-defeating. War is devastating, and we know now that if we continue to use these weapons of destruction, our civilization will be plunged across the abyss of destruction.

However, there is a type of war that every Christian ought to be involved in. It is a spiritual war. It is a war of ideas. Every true Christian is a fighting pacifist.

In a profound passage which has been often misunderstood, Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Mt 10:34). Certainly, he is not saying that he comes not to bring peace in the higher sense. What Jesus is saying is this: “I come not to bring this peace of escapism, this peace that fails to confront the real issues of life, the peace that makes for stagnant complacency.” Then he says, “I come to bring a sword.” He is not talking about a physical sword. Whenever I come, a conflict is precipitated between the old and the new, between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. I come to declare war over injustice. I come to

declare war on evil. Peace is not merely the absence of some negative force—war, tension, confusion—but it is the presence of some positive force—justice, goodwill, the power of the kingdom of God.

I had a long talk with a man the other day about this bus situation. He discussed the peace being destroyed in the community, the destroying of good race relations. I agree that there is more

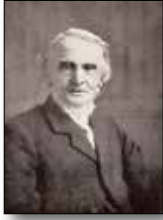
tension now. But peace is not merely the absence of this tension, but the presence of justice. And even if we didn't have this tension, we still wouldn't have positive peace. Yes, it is true that if the negro accepts his place, accepts exploitation and injustice, there will be peace. But it would be a peace boiled down to stagnant complacency, deadening passivity, and if peace means this, I don't want peace.

- If peace means accepting second-class citizenship, I don't want it.
- If peace means keeping my mouth shut in the midst of injustice and evil, I don't want it.
- If peace means being complacently adjusted to a deadening status quo, I don't want peace.
- If peace means a willingness to be exploited economically, dominated politically, humiliated and segregated, I don't want peace. So in a passive, non-violent manner, we must revolt against this peace.

Jesus says in substance, I will not be content until justice, goodwill, brotherhood, love, yes, the Kingdom of God are established upon the earth. This is real peace—a peace embodied with the presence of positive good. The inner peace that comes as a result of doing God's will. ✪

Fire on the Earth

By Alexander MacLaren (1826–1910)



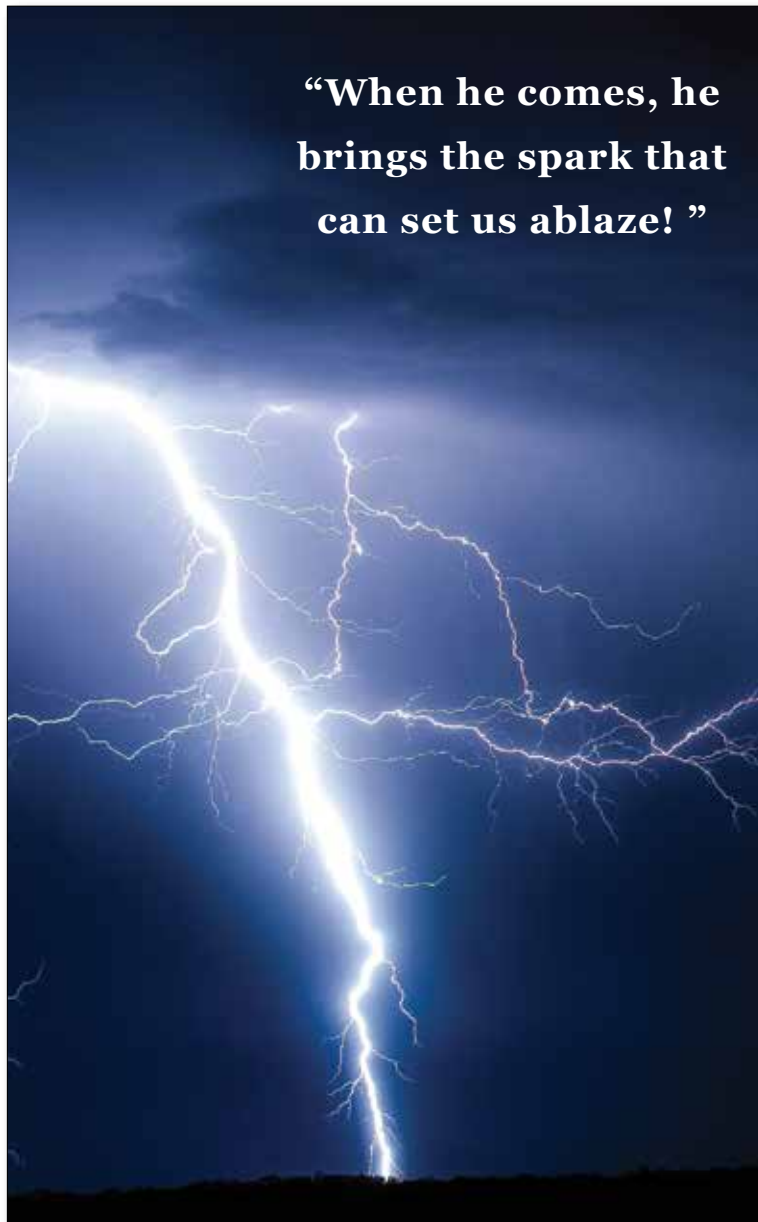
Called “the prince of expository preachers,” Alexander MacLaren was a Baptist minister from Scotland. The following abridged and edited article is taken from *Expositions of Holy Scripture* (Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <https://www.ccel.org/print/macLaren/luke/ii.li>; accessed October 14, 2018) and is based on Luke 12:49–50.

Here in Luke 12:49–50 we have a glimpse into our Lord’s inmost heart as he shares his feelings about his mission. What startling words these are:

I came to cast fire on the earth; and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!
(Luke 12:49–50)

Now, opinions differ as to what is meant by this fire. Some would have it to mean the glow of love kindled in believing hearts, but while this is certainly one of the results of Christ’s coming, it is not what he is talking about here. The fire Jesus is talking about is something that he flings down upon the earth. In a word, it is God’s Spirit which Christ came to communicate

“When he comes, he brings the spark that can set us ablaze!”



to the world. Such an interpretation is entirely consistent with the words that John the Baptist used in pointing people toward Jesus Christ: “I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Lk 3:16). I could also point to Pentecost and the symbolism of fire we find there (see Acts 2:1–4). With these analogies to guide us, I think we can see that our Lord, in the words of our text, is speaking about his mission to the world which will come like a flame that burns in the midst of all humanity.

The imagery of fire opens up for us a many-sided application of what Jesus is talking about. For one thing, fire speaks of the gift of life. In a very real sense, life is warmth and death is cold. And is not breath needed to spark combustion? And isn’t the blazing sun at the very center of our solar system radiating heat? Thus we see that when Jesus promises to send fire on the earth, he is giving the assurance that in the midst of our death there shall be a quickening of life caused by his Spirit.

The promise of fire also speaks of the purifying and cleansing power that comes to us through the Holy Spirit. When a piece of clay is placed in a furnace, it turns white with the heat and you can see the impurities melting away as the fire does its cleansing work. This is a picture of what the work of the Spirit intends for us. The ore is flung into the furnace and the scum rises to the surface from where it can be ladled off. All that is impure is burned away. What remains is pure and precious.

A third benefit that comes from fire is energy. In the coal bin, the black lumps are cold and heavy. But cast them into the fire, and they are turned into flame that heats a house or powers an engine. That is what you and I may experience when we are filled with the Spirit of God.

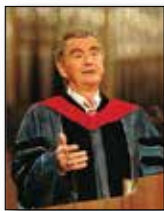
Our text explains, however, that something had to happen before Christ’s mission of casting fire on the earth could be accomplished. He longed to fulfill his purpose but something stood in his way. Something had to be done first before the Spirit could fall. Jesus expressed it in these terms: “I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished” (Lk 12:50). In speaking of his “baptism,” Jesus was referring to his passion and his cross. I want to emphasize that in the estimation of Jesus himself, it was not in his power to kindle this holy fire until he had died for men’s sins. The cross must precede Pentecost. The sequence is absolutely necessary.

In conclusion, I want to ask the question: What must happen today for us to receive the fire? The church today, alas, is often little more than grey ashes, choked with the cold results of its former flaming power. What has become of the fire? It seems that many in the church today do as people in Swiss villages do when there is a fire—they cover their houses with nonflammable fabrics and then deluge them with water, in the hope that nothing will catch fire.

There is no way the fire can do its work on us until we open our hearts to the Fire-bringer! When he comes, he brings the spark that can set us ablaze! Quench not the Holy Spirit! Your heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask. Brothers and sisters, let us seek to be baptized with fire, lest we should be cast into it and consumed by it. ✨

What if Jesus Had Never Been Born?

By D. James Kennedy (1930–2007)



Evangelist, broadcaster, author, and for many years senior pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church (Fort Lauderdale, FL), Dr. Kennedy responds to the anti-Christian sentiment in our culture by emphasizing the positive impact Christ has made upon human history. In his book *What If Jesus Had Never Been Born* (Nelson Books, 1994), he imagines what our planet would be like if Christmas had never happened. The following abridged and slightly edited article is taken from the first chapter, “Christ and Civilization” (1–8).

Some people have made transformational changes in one department of human learning or in one aspect of human life, and their names are forever enshrined in the annals of human history. But Jesus Christ, the greatest man who ever lived, changed virtually every aspect of human life—and most people don’t know it. The greatest tragedy of the Christmas holiday each year is not so much its commercialization (gross as that is), but its trivialization. How tragic it is that people have forgotten him to whom they owe so very much.

Jesus says in Revelation 21:5, “Behold, I make all things new.” The word “behold” means, “note well,” “look closely,” “examine carefully.” Everything that Jesus Christ touched, he utterly transformed. He touched time when he was born into this world; his birthday utterly altered the way we measure time. Now, the whole world counts time as BC, Before Christ, and AD. Unfortunately, in most cases, our illiterate generation today doesn’t even know that AD means *anno Domini*, “in the year of our Lord.” It’s ironic that the most vitriolic atheist writing a propagandistic letter to a friend must acknowledge Christ when he dates that letter.

Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which is tiny in and of itself, but, when fully grown, provides shade and a resting place for many birds. This parable certainly applies to an individual who embraces Christ; it also applies to Christianity in the world.

Christianity’s roots were small and humble—an itinerant rabbi preached and did miracles for three and a half years around

the countryside of subjugated Israel. And today there are more than 1.8 billion professing believers in him found in most of the nations of the earth! There are tens of millions today who make it their life’s aim to serve him alone. Napoleon said: “I search in vain in history to find the similar to Jesus Christ, or anything which can approach the gospel . . . Nations pass away, thrones crumble, but the Church remains.”

Despite its humble origins, the Church has made more changes on earth for the good than any other movement in history. To get an overview of some of the positive contributions Christianity has made through the centuries, here are a few highlights:

- The rise of hospitals and universities.
- Literacy and education for the masses.
- The abolition of slavery.
- The beginning of modern science.
- The elevation of women.
- Benevolence and charity; the Good Samaritan ethic.
- High regard for human life.
- The inspiration for the greatest works of art.
- The eternal salvation of countless souls.

The last one mentioned, the salvation of souls, is the primary goal of the spread of Christianity. All the other benefits listed are basically just by-products of what Christianity has often brought when applied to daily living.

Many are familiar with the 1946 film classic *It’s a Wonderful Life*, wherein the character played by Jimmy Stewart gets a chance to see what life would be like had he never been born. In many ways this terrific movie directed by Frank Capra is the springboard for this book. The main point of the film is that each person’s life has impact on everybody else’s life. Had they never been born, there would be gaping holes left by their absence. My point in this book is that Jesus Christ has had enormous impact—more than anybody else—on history. Had

Continued on page 8



- “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law” (Mt 10:34–35).
- “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mk 2:17).
- “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45).
- “I came to cast fire on the earth...” (Lk 12:49).
- “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Lk 19:10).
- “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind” (Jn. 9:39).
- “I came that they might have life and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10).
- “I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness” (Jn 12:46).
- “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth” (Jn 18:37).
- “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal 4:4–5).
- “He had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb 2:17).
- “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 Jn 3:8).

You might want to read that list again—and again. You may want to use these verses in daily devotions during the Christmas season. If you’re a preacher, you might preach a series of sermons on “Why Jesus Came.” The Good News of Christmas involves more than the announcement that Jesus is born. The real message relates to what he intends to do!

This issue of *The High Calling* touches on only a few of the reasons Christ came. We send this magazine to your home with the prayer that this year’s celebration will be more than the acknowledgment of an historical event. This year, may his purpose in coming be realized in your life and mine! ✨

he never come, the hole would be a canyon about the size of a continent.

But some people wish Christ had never been born. Not all have been happy about Jesus’s birth. Friedrich Nietzsche, the nineteenth-century atheist philosopher who coined the phrase “God is dead,” likened Christianity to poison that has infected the whole world. “I condemn Christianity,” he wrote in his book *The AntiChrist*. “It is, to me, the greatest of all imaginable corruptions . . . it has turned every value into worthlessness, and every truth into a lie.”

Many of the ideas of Nietzsche were put into practice by his philosophical disciple, Hitler, and about 6 million Jews died as a result. Both Nietzsche and Hitler wished that Christ had never been born. Others share this sentiment. My purpose in writing is to say to Nietzsche and to Hitler, as well as to Freud,

Lenin, Stalin, Mao, the ACLU, anti-faith college professors, leaders in Hollywood who constantly denigrate Christianity, and anti-Christians of the past and present, that the overwhelming impact of Christ’s life on Planet Earth has been positive, not negative.

The next twelve chapters will look at a dozen areas where Christianity has made important contributions to world civilization. Then, we will also deal with the negative aspect of the Church’s track record in history. We’ll deal with the sins of the Church, trying to come to grips from a Christian perspective with the Crusades, the Inquisition, and anti-Semitism by the Church. But we will also look at the sins of atheism. We will show how the post-Christian West ventured into a much more

bloody history precisely because the restraints of Christianity were removed. We’ll also put to rest the myth so often repeated that “more people have been killed in the name of Christ than in any other.”

Dr. James Allan Francis puts Christ’s life and influence into perspective so well in his famous narrative *One Solitary Life*, which concludes with these words:

Nineteen centuries have come and gone, and today he is [still] the central figure of the human race. All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man on this earth as much as that one solitary life. ✨

Our Greatest Need
Author Unknown

*If our greatest need had been information,
God would have sent us an educator.*

*If our greatest need had been technology,
God would have sent us a scientist.*

*If our greatest need had been money,
God would have sent us an economist.*

*If our greatest need had been pleasure,
God would have sent us an entertainer.*

*But since our greatest need
was forgiveness,
God sent us a Savior.*

course, but they are not his primary concern. What he is after is *us*—our laughter, our tears, our dreams, our fears, our heart of hearts. Remember his lament in Isaiah, that though his people were performing all their duties, “their *hearts* are far from me” (29:13, italics added). How few of us truly believe this. We’ve never been wanted for our heart, our truest self, not really, not for long. The thought that God wants our heart seems too good to be true.

The reason we enjoy fairy tales—more than enjoy them—the reason we *identify with them* in some deep part of us is because they rest on two great truths: the hero really has a heart of gold, and the beloved really possesses hidden beauty. While we may have little difficulty believing that God does indeed have a heart of gold, we struggle with the thought that we, the beloved, possess hidden greatness. It seems too good to be true.

Remember, the theme of veiled identity runs through all great stories. As Buechner reminds us, “Not only does evil come disguised in the world of the fairy tale but often good does too.” The heroines and heroes capture our heart because we see long before they ever do their hidden beauty, courage, greatness. Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White—they’re not simple wenches after all. The beast and the frog—they’re actually princes. Aladdin is “the diamond in the rough.” If the narrative of the Scriptures teaches us anything, from the serpent in the Garden to the carpenter from Nazareth, it teaches us that things are rarely what they seem, that we shouldn’t be fooled by appearances.

Your evaluation of your soul is probably wrong. As C. S. Lewis wrote in *The Weight of Glory*,

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare.... There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.

Imagine if Cinderella’s story ended this way: “And the Prince married Grimheld, one of the brutish, wicked stepsisters, who complained about everything and picked her nose during the wedding.” It’s not far from our understanding of the gospel. The familiar refrain goes something like this: “You are a sinner, a traitor, a depraved wretch—pond scum, really. But God, in order to show the world what a great guy he is, will let you in anyway.” We can’t start with the Fall in our understanding of who we are and our role in the story. That’s like coming into a movie twenty minutes late. But most Christian efforts to explain the story

begin there. The whole idea of a fall assumes a starting place from which to plummet and given what a big deal the Bible makes of the Fall, it must have been from a pretty high place. “Boy trips, stubs toe” doesn’t make the evening news. “Skydiver jumps, chute fails” does. The higher the original position, the bigger the story. Nobody’s surprised when the neighborhood mutt runs off, plays the mongrel, sows a few wild oats, and kicks off a great night by rummaging through the trash. But what’s the response if the Queen of England is found rolling around in the alley?

Think for a moment about the millions of tourists who visit ancient sites like the Parthenon, the Colosseum, and the Pyramids. Though ravaged by time, the elements, and vandals through the ages, mere shadows of their former glory, these ruins still awe and inspire. Though fallen, their glory cannot be fully extinguished. There is something at once sad and grand about them. And such we are. Abused, neglected, vandalized, fallen—we are still fearful and wonderful. We are, as one theologian put it, “glorious ruins.” But unlike those grand monuments, we who are Christ’s have been redeemed and are

being renewed as Paul said, “day by day,” restored in the love of God.

Why is it that thousands of years later, Helen’s story still has the power to haunt us? Isn’t it that we long to believe beauty really could do that—there really might be someone worth launching a thousand ships to regain and someone willing, out of passionate love, to launch those ships? God has launched his ships for us.

As hard as it may be for us to see our sin, it

is far harder still for us to remember our glory. The pain of the memory of our former glory is so excruciating, we would rather stay in the pigsty than return to our true home.

Who am I, really? The answer to that question is found in the answer to another: what is God’s heart toward me, or, how do I affect him? If God is the Pursuer, the Ageless Romancer, the Lover, then there has to be a Beloved, one who is the Pursued. This is our role in the story.

In the end, all we’ve ever really wanted is to be loved. “Love comes from God,” writes St. John. We don’t have to get God to love us by doing something right—even loving him. “This is love: not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 Jn 4:10). Someone has noticed, someone has taken the initiative. There is nothing we need to do to keep it up, because his love for us is not based on what we’ve done, but who we are: His beloved. “I belong to my lover, and his desire is for me” (Song of Songs 7:10). ✨



A Portrait of God

By Philip Yancey



In his book *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Zondervan, 1995), Philip Yancey reminds us that Jesus came so that we could know who God is and what he is like. “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father,” Jesus said (Jn 14:9). “He is the image of the invisible God,” said the apostle Paul (Col 1:15). The story of Jesus’ birth gives us a startling picture of God. The following article is a slightly edited abridgement of the second chapter of Yancey’s book, “Birth: The Visited Planet” (35–45).

The facts of Christmas, rhymed in carols, recited by children in church plays, illustrated on cards, have become so familiar that it is easy to miss the message behind the facts. After reading the birth stories once more, I ask myself, *If Jesus came to reveal God to us, then what do I learn about God from that first Christmas?* The word associations that come to mind as I ponder that question take me by surprise. Humble, approachable, underdog, courageous—these hardly seem appropriate words to apply to deity.

Humble. Before Jesus, almost no pagan author had used “humble” as a compliment. Yet the events of Christmas point inescapably to what seems like an oxymoron: a humble God. The God who came to earth came not in a raging whirlwind nor in a devouring fire. Unimaginably, the Maker of all things shrank down,

down, down, so small as to become an ovum, a single fertilized egg barely visible to the naked eye, enlarging cell by cell inside a nervous teenager. “Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb,” marveled the poet John Donne. He “made himself nothing . . . he humbled himself,” said the apostle Paul more prosaically.

“God is great,” the cry of the Moslems, is a truth which needed no supernatural being to teach men,” writes Father Neville Figgis. “That *God is little*, that is the truth which Jesus taught man.” The God who roared, who could order armies and empires about like pawns on a chessboard, this God emerged in Palestine as a baby who could not speak or eat solid food or control his bladder, who depended on a teenager for shelter, food, and love. God’s visit to earth took place in an animal shelter with nowhere to lay the newborn king but a feed trough. Indeed, the event that divided history, and even our calendars, into two parts may have had more animal than human witnesses. A mule could have stepped on him. “How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given.”

Approachable. Those of us raised in a tradition of informal or private prayer may not appreciate the change Jesus wrought in

how human beings approach deity. Hindus offer sacrifices at the temple. Kneeling Muslims bow down so low that their foreheads touch the ground. In most religious traditions, in fact, *fear* is the primary emotion when one approaches God.

Certainly the Jews associated fear with worship. Mishandle the Ark of the Covenant, and you died. Among people who walled off a separate sanctum for God in the temple and shrank from pronouncing or spelling out the name, God made a surprise appearance as a baby in a manger. What can be less scary than a newborn with his limbs wrapped tight against his body? In Jesus, God found a way of relating to human beings that did not involve fear.

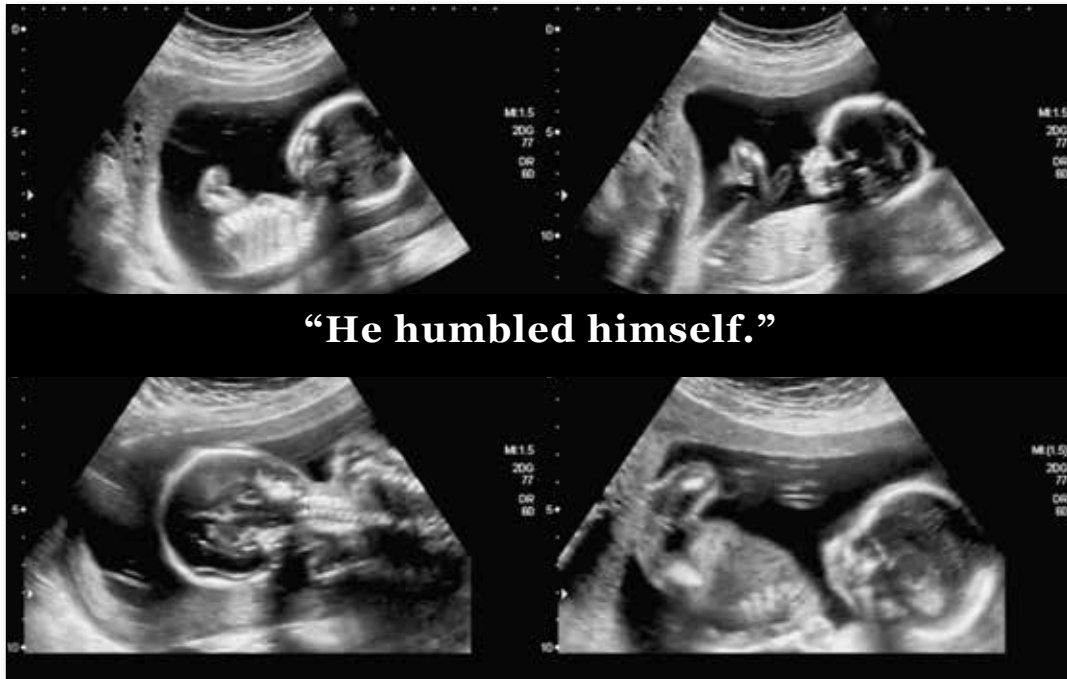
I learned about incarnation when I kept a salt-water aquarium. I had to run a portable chemical laboratory to monitor the nitrate levels and the ammonia content. I pumped in vitamins, antibiotics, and enzymes. I filtered the water. You would think,

in view of all the energy expended on their behalf, that my fish would at least be grateful. Not so. Every time my shadow loomed above the tank they dove for cover into the nearest shell. They showed me one “emotion” only: fear. Although I opened the lid and dropped in food three times a day, they responded to each visit as a

sure sign of my designs to torture them. I could not convince them of my true concern.

To my fish I was deity. I was too large for them, my actions too incomprehensible. My acts of mercy they saw as cruelty; my attempts at healing they viewed as destruction. To change their perceptions, I began to see, would require a form of incarnation. I would have to become a fish and “speak” to them in a language they could understand. A human being becoming a fish is nothing compared to God becoming a baby. And yet according to the Gospels that is what happened at Bethlehem. The Word became flesh.

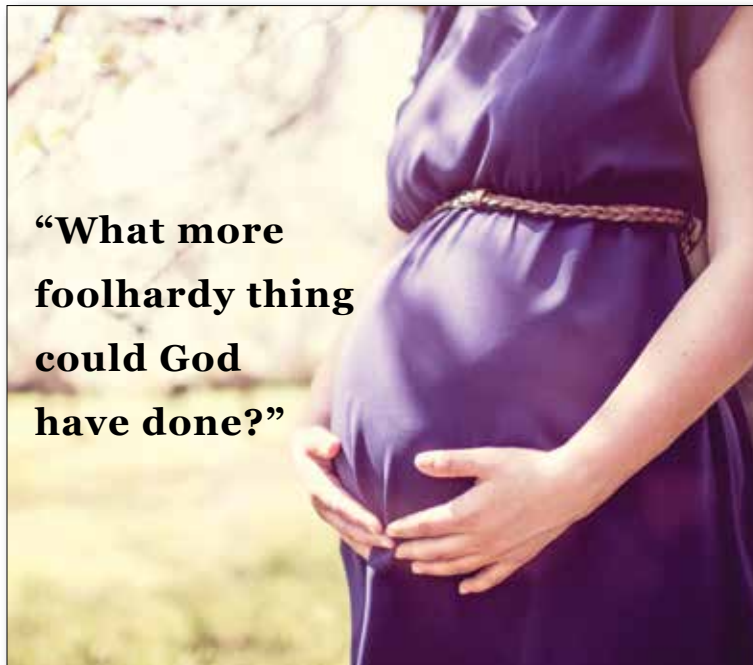
Underdog. I wince even as I write the word, especially in connection with Jesus. It’s a crude word, probably derived from dogfighting and applied over time to predictable losers and victims of injustice. Yet as I read the birth stories about Jesus I cannot help but conclude that though the world may be tilted toward the rich and powerful, God is tilted toward the underdog. “He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good



things but has sent the rich away empty,” said Mary in her Magnificat hymn (Lk 2:52–53).

Perhaps the best way to perceive the “underdog” nature of the Incarnation is to transpose it into terms we can relate to today. An unwed mother, homeless, was forced to look for shelter while traveling to meet the heavy taxation demands of a colonial government. She lived in a land recovering from violent civil wars and still in turmoil. Like half of all mothers who deliver today, she gave birth in Asia, in its far western corner, the part of the world that would prove least receptive to the son she bore. That son became a refugee in Africa, the continent where most refugees can still be found.

Growing up, Jesus’ sensibilities were affected most deeply by the poor, the powerless, the oppressed—in short, the underdogs. Today theologians debate the aptness of the phrase “God’s preferential option for the poor” as a way of describing God’s concern for the underdog. Since God arranged the circumstances in which to be born on planet earth—without power or wealth, without rights, without justice—his preferential options speak for themselves.



“What more foolhardy thing could God have done?”

Courageous. It took courage, I believe, for God to lay aside power and glory and to take a place among human beings who would greet him with a mixture of haughtiness and skepticism. It took courage to risk descent to a planet known for its clumsy violence, among a race known for rejecting its prophets. What more foolhardy thing could God have done?

That very first night in Bethlehem required courage. How did God the Father feel that night, helpless as any human father, watching his Son emerge smeared with blood to face a harsh, cold world? One of our favorite Christmas carols suggests that the “little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.” But this seems to me a sanitized version of what took place in Bethlehem. I imagine Jesus cried like any other baby the night he entered the world, a world that would give him much reason to cry as an adult. “Alone of all the creeds, Christianity has added courage to the virtues of the Creator,” said G. K.

Chesterton. The need for such courage began with Jesus’ first night on earth and did not end until his last. ✦

Thank You for Supporting FAS

By Charlie Fiskeaux, Assistant to the President for Development

As we approach Thanksgiving and the end of the year, it seems appropriate to stop and say a big “Thank You” to each of you for your support of the ministries of the Francis Asbury Society. Your prayer and financial support, along with participation in our various ministries, during this past year has enabled the forward movement of FAS ministries proclaiming the message of full salvation. Consider the ministries that your support has encouraged and enabled:

- 20 speaker-evangelists are going across the nation and around the world proclaiming Scriptural holiness in camp meetings, revivals, and retreats. Only eternity will reveal the number of persons whose lives have been changed because they were challenged by an FAS speaker.
- Many persons are developing a more substantial understanding of discipleship through Bible studies.
- 125 persons are living out their commitment to discipleship by networking with the Covenant Fellowship.
- The Hemlock Inn Retreats provide an annual opportunity for more than 70 persons to be challenged and encouraged in their Christian walk.
- Many women are encouraged in their Christian walk through Titus Women prayer retreats, publications, and networking.

- Our periodical, *The High Calling*, stimulates all of us to examine ourselves and pursue lives that are wholly devoted to God.
- Our e-mail newsletter, *Ministry Matters*, keeps persons in touch with current events in various FAS ministries.
- In recent years, one additional book per year has been published with the goal of enabling persons better to understand and live out a full commitment to Jesus.



Your support through prayer and financial contributions enables the forward movement and vitality of these ministries. Think of the lives being changed for eternity because your participation is making a difference.

With the approaching end of the year, there is opportunity to support the Francis Asbury Society through monthly giving, Leadership 100 giving, donations to the Kinlaw Legacy Fund, and Covenant Fellowship commitment. Your contributions are still needed to end this year in a strong position and move into the New Year with momentum. In advance, we say “thank you” for supporting FAS. ✦

by nature and being born a man. And, plainly seen as a human being, he humbled himself by living a life of utter obedience, to the point of death, and the death he died was the death of a common criminal” (Phil 2:6–8 *Phillips*). And all this was for our salvation.

Theologians have sometimes toyed with the idea that the Incarnation was originally and basically intended for the perfecting of the created order and that its redemptive significance was, so to speak, God’s afterthought. But, as James Denney rightly insisted, “the New Testament knows nothing of an incarnation which can be defined apart from its relation to atonement. . . . Not Bethlehem, but Calvary, is the focus of revelation, and any construction of Christianity which ignores or denies this distorts Christianity by putting it out of focus” (*The Death of Christ*, 1902, 235–36).

The crucial significance of the cradle at Bethlehem lies in its place in the sequence of steps down that led the Son of God to

the cross of Calvary, and we do not understand it till we see it in this context. The key text in the New Testament for interpreting the Incarnation is not, therefore, the bare statement in John 1:14, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us,” but rather the more comprehensive statement of 2 Corinthians 8:9, “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” Here is stated not the fact of the Incarnation only, but also its meaning; the taking of manhood by the Son is set before us in a way which shows us how we should ever view it—not simply as a marvel of nature, but rather as a wonder of grace. ✨

And Can It Be?
By Charles Wesley

*He left his Father’s throne above,
 So free, so infinite his grace!
 Emptied himself of all but love,
 And bled for Adam’s helpless race:
 ‘Tis mercy all, immense and free!
 For O my God! it found out me!*

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The High Calling

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