

November/December

# Our Times

Christmas Magic

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## The Day I Discovered Christmas

Gifts, cards, new clothes, dances, dinners are usually one's idea of Christmas. But to some few it is the object of God's love and a reminder of God's manifestation of His greatest gift, salvation through His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. And while December 25 is, in all probability, not the time when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, it still has a lasting significance as a reminder that Christ did come to "save his people from their sins." In a very real sense,

"Love came down at Christmas,  
Love all lovely, love divine,  
Love was born at Christmas,  
Star and angels gave the sign."

We keep our gifts, our sharing, and our love for Christmas. This is when we think that this should be done. But as the year wanes our enthusiasm for good also diminishes. Keeping this spirit alive is what Martin Luther meant when he said "There are some of us . . . who think to ourselves, 'If I had only been there! How quick I would have been to help the Baby. I would have washed His linen. How happy I would have been to go with the shepherds to see the Lord lying in the manger!' Yes, we would. We say that because we know how great Christ is, but if we had been there at that time, we would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem . . . Why don't we do it now? We have Christ in our neighbour."

I discovered Christmas when I was a student in college. Not the Christmas of childhood with its gifts and food, games and dances, but the Christmas of giving and sharing, of love and concern. It was a Christmas I will long remember for the lessons learnt, not from a teacher or preacher, but a humble and kindly woman.

College had closed for Christmas. It was not the usual two weeks, but just three days. Unable to go home, a thousand miles away, I spent the three days in my room. Roommates and friends had gone home. I was left with nothing but books to read. Slowly the monotony and boredom, with no one to talk to or any games to play, crept into me, till finally on Christmas morning, I was the unhappiest person around. To make matters worse it was the end of the month and I did not have enough money for a good meal that I thought would buoy my spirits up. It was in this sour mood that my friend Rajendran found me around noon.

"My mother wants you to come home," he said without wasting time with preliminaries.

"She thought that you might be missing Christmas with your family. Nothing very special, but she just wants you to spend the day with us."

My first impulse was to refuse the invitation. I had never spent Christmas away from home. But it was Christmas! I had to get out of my room! So, without saying anything, I went with him.

I don't remember what Mrs. Menon served me, or how I spent the day with them. All that I remember is her understanding, concern, and love for me when I needed it most. It is the Christmas spirit that I still remember. To me it was one of the strangest, yet fondest, experience I have yet had.

I thus discovered Christmas from a Hindu woman. Not the Christmas of gifts or Christmas trees, these are soon forgotten or thrown away, but of being human, understanding and warmhearted. Its a feeling that touches your heart. It warms your whole body and attitude. It radiates not only from your heart but also from your personality. A feeling that we call love.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son." It was in love that the first Christmas was born. Therefore let us tinge our Christmases with a little love so that it will last till the next one comes around. In the words of Dale Rogers: "Christmas is love in action. . . When you love someone, you give to them, as God gives to us. The greatest gift He ever gave was the Person of His Son, sent to us in human form so that we might know what God the Father is really like! Every time we love, every time we give, it's Christmas!"

—Edwin Charles

# OUR TIMES

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# Christmas Magic

by Mary J Vine

David is blind. He has always been blind. So full and satisfying has his life been, however, that no one would dream of thinking of him as handicapped. For the providence that denied him the gift of sight showered upon him many a compensatory benison. You could always tell when David preached you would not go to sleep.

It was during one of his sermons that David told the story of another kind of gift, the wrapped-up-in-paper kind, one that had been given to him in his childhood.

"David," one of his relatives had said to him, "now here is a real gold tiepin, all for you. Take care of it; it's real gold." And David had taken care of it. It had been his greatest treasure.

Until, one day, there came a man to the door buying up old gold and silver, and giving a good price, or so he said; and when David followed his

mother to the door and heard the conversation, he suddenly had a bright and wonderful idea.

His tiepin! Real gold it was, and here was his chance to help mother who, unhappily, was going through a very hard time. He hurried upstairs for it. He knew exactly where to find it, and within a minute or two he had thrust it into the old-gold-buyer's hand.

"How much will you give me for that?" he asked.

David never forgot the silence that followed.

"It is gold, isn't it?" he demanded at last.

"I'm sorry, son," the man said, "but it isn't gold at all; it's brass."

Poor David! Long years had passed since the incident before I heard him recount that story, but it was obvious that he still felt poignantly that moment of disillusion and disappointment. Not gold at all—just brass!

But there was one bright facet to this dark experience,

which thereafter could never lose its lustre; for though it had been diamond-studded, that poor brass pin could scarcely have seemed more precious in the fond eyes of that mother as she looked down on her little blind son. His loving heart had made it a perfect sacrifice. That was her moment, a moment that nothing could ever take away, her golden moment of *knowing*. There was no brass about that.

According to William Sydney Porter, otherwise known as "O Henry," Mr and Mrs James Dillingham Young, otherwise known as Jim and Della, had just two possessions in which they both took a mighty pride, the one. The watch, a gold watch that had been Jim's father's and his grandfather's and the other—well, it was just Della's hair, a beautiful, shimmering cascade that reached below her knees when, she let it down, and for which, in her

weaker moments, she had sometimes yearned over a beautiful set of combs. Without any hope, however. They were expensive combs, and she and Jim were hard put to it even to make ends meet.

And then came Christmas, and when Della counted her resources to get Jim a present she had just Rs. 15. What could she do with Rs. 15 to buy something worthy of Jim?

Like little blind David she suddenly had a wonderful idea, and before you could say "Jack Robinson," so to speak, she had put on her old brown hat and jacket, dashed out of the house before she had a chance to change her mind, and raved me. Sofronie in her "Hair Goods Salon." Then, with the Rs. 180 she received for those incomparable locks, she ransacked the stores for Jim's present—and found it, a platinum fob chain, "simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone." As soon as she saw it she knew that it must be Jim's. It was even worthy of The Watch, and now Jim would be able to take it out and look at it in any company instead of looking at it on the sly because of the shabby old leather strap that he used in place of a chain.

She did her best with what was left of her hair so as to be ready for him when he came in, and she was only just in time. "Please, God, make him think I'm still pretty," she prayed. But she could in no

way be fully prepared for his stupefied looks when he did arrive.

"You say your hair is gone?" he said.

"Yes," said Della, "it's sold and gone, but be good to me, boy, for it went for you. Don't you like me just as well, anyhow? I'm me without my hair, ain't I? Maybe the hair's of my head were numbered, but nobody could ever count my love for you."

"Don't make any mistake, Dell," Jim said, "I don't think there's anything in the way of a hair cut that could make me like my girl any less. But if you'll unwrap that package you may see why you had me going awhile at first."

There in the packet were The Combs. That such lovely things could possibly be hers! And now—

But it would be all right.

"My hair grows so fast, Jim," she said at last. And she still had the exquisite pleasure of giving her present to Jim. Isn't it dandy, Jim? I hunted all over town to find it. You'll have to look at the time a hundred times a day now. Give me your watch I want to see how it looks on it."

But just as there were no adorning tresses for the beautiful combs; neither was there any watch for the little fob.

"I have merely related to you," says O Henry, "the uneventful chronicle, of two foolish children, who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of

their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. They are the magi."

*They are the magi they are the magicians.*

And indeed they are, for it is a wonderful thing to convince another that he or she is dearly loved, and it is a wonderful emollient to a tired heart and a drooping spirit, once in a while to enjoy that revelation.

Shall we make that our ambition this Christmas time? To make our friends and dear ones know. Then, if there is that generosity of kindness and affection behind our gifts and in our behaviour, it will not matter if perhaps the golden tiepin becomes brass or our best efforts fail exactly to hit the mark. There is an alchemy that can transform whatever we do and that can transmute our humblest gifts into things of beauty and worth. There are depths of love and sweetness in us all, and wells of gratitude within us, for all the daily benefits we receive at one another's hands. What indeed would we do without one another? Just for once let's let the wells overflow—in generous action, in courtesy, in friendliness. Maybe it is hard for us to meet all of what we feel are our Christmas obligations, but that which makes everything worthwhile is without money and without price.

# B

# arriers To Blessings

by Jeris Bragan

Five things may be keeping you from enjoying the blessing God wants you to have.

God's passion is to bless people. Indeed, the Bible boldly insists that He would do anything and risk everything—including Himself—in order to bless us and reconcile us to Himself (see John 15:15).

Experience confirms this. Anybody who has walked through a field of daisies knows of God's phenomenal enjoyment of colour, form, contour, and scent. A fiery sunset leaves the jaded and cynical standing silent in wonder. And when we look into the warm eyes of one who loves us, we know something personal about God's passion to bless us with a transcending joy.

If we're honest about it, however, most of us would

have to admit that we give little thought to God's blessings—at least when things are going well. But when things go wrong, then we are painfully aware of our need for God's blessings.

But these are also the times we're in most danger of unwittingly throwing up barriers to God's blessings. Suffering—especially "unfair" suffering—makes it hard for some to believe that God loves them and wants what is best for them.

But even people in the most painful of circumstances can be showered with blessings from God—especially if they avoid five common barriers to blessing:

## 1. Immature Faith

Edie Hall struggled to believe that God cared when her two-year-old son, Cheyenne, fought for life after an accidental overdose of medicine. She begged God to heal her son. He got weaker! She angrily accused God of indifference. The boy lapsed into a coma!

Finally, when it appeared he had no chance of recovery, she surrendered her child to God with the toughest prayer of her

life: "Not as I will, but Thy will be done," she prayed—and meant it! (see Luke 22:42).

The child regained consciousness that day and made an astonishing recovery. Did God heal her son?

"Maybe he would have recovered anyway—I simply don't know," Edie admits. "But I do know God performed an important miracle for me when He broke through all my frightened begging and angry demands with the conviction that He loved me. I knew at that moment I could trust His will for me and Cheyenne, no matter what happened."

Faith opens our eyes during times of great pain and loss to see that God wants what is best for our lives. Not that God blesses us because of our faith; the blessings are there whether we recognize them or not. No, faith in God's will—in His passion to bless us—simply helps us recognize God's blessings, accept them, and enjoy them.

Cheyenne, now 16, understands this important truth. "It's easy to trust God," he says, "When you know for sure God only wants what is best for you."

## 2. Unresolved Guilt

Louise, a 66-year-old widow, seemed to have everything anyone could want: excellent health, adequate and secure finances, many loving friends and family members.

But on the morning of August 17, she got up, ate a light breakfast, went to the post office, returned home—and slit both wrists. It was the third time she'd attempted suicide in two years. This time, she succeeded.

People were stunned by her death. Why? She had everything to live for!

True. But she had one more thing that only a few people knew about: grinding, relentless, brutalizing guilt. Decades before, her husband had sexually abused their daughter. She had known it. She had done nothing to stop it. And she could not forgive herself.

She would not forgive herself. She refused to believe God could forgive her. She was convinced that her daughter despised her, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. "Nobody could love me after what I did," she said.

Unresolved guilt is a critical barrier to blessing; it leaves us spiritually crippled and emotionally disfigured. Guilt erects a barrier between us and our God-given resources for reconciliation and healing. This healing comes through

forgiveness, but forgiveness has no value unless we accept it.

In the final analysis, God has provided only two methods for dealing with guilt: 1) Either we seek forgiveness by confession and repentance, or 2) we hang on to the guilt, carrying a backbreaking load of it until we are crushed by the weight.

## 3. Self-destructive Feelings

After a decade of struggling with religious doubt, my conversion to Christianity came quietly at age 29 during a relatively minor personal crisis. I breathed a huge sigh of relief and made plans to pick up the theological education I'd abandoned in 1966.

Then a veritable avalanche of unexpected problems roared over me. And when the dust settled, I was in prison, facing a 99-year prison sentence.

I confess I rapidly became an expert in self-destructive feelings. During my first few years of imprisonment, I had enough bile in my belly to pickle a cucumber with a glance! My faith in God was shaken. My confidence in my friends evaporated. My optimism about the future soured.

While reading in my cell one day, I came across some lines from Martin Luther that helped me regain control of my destructive feelings. "Temptations are like birds flying over our heads," he

wrote. "While we can't stop them from flying over, we can prevent them from flying over, we can prevent them from building a nest in our hair."

When I realized that, the feelings that had so badly distorted my spiritual vision disappeared rapidly, and I experienced a great rush of blessings from God within my circumstances—the most important of which was a renewed awareness of God's abiding presence in my life.

## 4. Disobedience

Disobedience to God's law is a guaranteed barrier to blessings. We've all observed the cause - and - effect consequences for people who violate health, moral, criminal, and natural laws. But the Christian has an additional "law" to obey: the law of discipleship.

No less than He did the first disciples, Jesus confronts each of us with a command: "Fellow Me!" It's not a polite invitation; an invitation suggests we might have something better or equally important to do. No, a command asserts the need for immediate, unqualified obedience. "If you love me, you will obey what I command," Jesus said (John 14:15, NIV).

What exactly did Jesus "command"? While He didn't formulate a precise set of orders, the specifics are clear: He has commanded us to follow His example (see John

13:15, 17). We are called to the same life of "love in action" that Jesus lived. "A new command I give you," He told His followers in John 13:34. "Love one another. As I have loved you" (NIV)

Jesus, in other words, calls each of us to love one another with unqualified self-sacrifice, with the kind of love that is unconditionally committed to the growth, welfare, fulfilment, and happiness of others—especially those most in need. "Whatever you do for one of the least of these brothers of mine," He reminds us, "you did for me" (Matthew 25:40, NIV)

It's deeds, not creeds, that open channels to the passionate flow of God's blessing in our lives. The happiest and most blessed people I know are those who imitate Jesus' life and practice.

### 5. Fear of Risk

After my conversion, I soon learned that I could not be a Christian without risk. I had to risk love, even when confronted with malice, hatred, and indifference. I had to risk forgiveness, even when abused and exploited. I had to risk following Christ—and the risk taking God demanded of me seemed both reckless and foolhardy.

And I was right—what Jesus asked of me was dangerous. He put it this way: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For

whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it" (Luke 9:23, 24, NIV).

"Now there's a prescription for divine madness," I thought to myself when I read those words. But I couldn't forget the words. Day and night they haunted my consciousness: "He must deny himself and take up his cross daily."

I thought about this for a long time. And then it was time to stop thinking and to begin acting—taking a risk—on what I believed to be true, even though it didn't always feel true. But God never asked us to feel faithful—just to be faithful.

Although I found the above risks to be quite intimidating at first, I cautiously went to work on them. They were surprisingly easy to deal with once I committed myself to the process, and I was acutely aware of an increasing flow of God's blessings in my life again.

But just when I thought I had everything under control, and I'd finally accepted the loneliness, isolation, and obscurity of prison, friends then confronted me with yet another risk: "Publish your writing!"

I refused. "I get enough rejection every day in here; I don't need to go looking for more," I grumbled. "Besides, who wants to read the scribbles of a man in prison?"

Margaret Sharp, one of my dearest adopted grandmas,

poked a large hole in my thinly disguised fear. "It's a good thing St Paul didn't feel so sorry for himself," she said pointedly. "God has blessed you with many gifts. One is a gift for writing about God's goodness. Now use it or lose it!"

That was five years ago. Fortunately, I didn't hold my breath waiting for the hostile, chilly reception I expected. Ken Holland, editor of *Signs*, purchased the first column I sent ("Christmas Reflections From Prison"). I appreciated his warm and encouraging letter of acceptance more than the enclosed check.

I have received a virtual flood of blessings from God since then. Hundreds of readers have written to me. Some have become good friends. But one of the most wonderful blessings came when my high-school sweetheart from 1961 came across my name in a magazine and decided to track me down. We were married April 8, 1989. She and her four children are a sweet gift of God's grace for me during some of the most difficult years of my life.

So what makes the difference between people who are emotionally and spiritually blessed and those who aren't? Just this: blessed people are willing to risk the pain of growth that comes in shouting an emphatic "Yes!" to God's call upon their lives.

Even in tough times. □

**S**amuel Morse, the inventor of the telegraph, demonstrated to the satisfaction of nearly everyone that his experimental model worked. But the machine needed perfecting, and that would take money—more than \$30,000! He turned to Congress for help, initiating a campaign of personal lobbying.

At last only one more vote was needed to assure the passage of a bill granting the necessary sum. Morse invited an undecided congressman to his hotel room for a demonstration. Explaining how the telegraph key worked, he told the congressman that it was attached to miles of wire through which the clicking at one end could be reproduced at the other, so that an operator on that end could receive a message and send a reply. The congressman's curiosity was aroused. Morse invited him to try the device for himself. When he found that it actually worked, he was so pleased that he gladly cast the deciding vote in its favour.

Prayer really works too. Yet somehow it seems not to. Often people ask for things they don't receive and wonder why God doesn't hear their prayers. Of course God hears, but He knows it isn't best to give us everything we ask for. I wonder, though, if God is bored at times by our cracked-record praying!

# Making

# Work

by *Leo R Van Dolson*

## **The Same Old Record**

Do you know someone who says the same thing every time you see him? Perhaps he is bitter about some wrong done to him, or his favourite sport is riding a hobby horse of some kind. What happens when you see him coming? You do your best to avoid him, don't you?

Surely it can't be pleasing to God to listen to us repeating the same old words and phrases over and over.

## **Honest Praying**

Effective prayer is honest prayer. It deals with our honest concerns and needs. It does not play the same old tune on the same old record. In an honest prayer we open our hearts fully to God and are not afraid to exhibit all that's there.

Some people I know say they don't really enjoy the Psalms. They can't understand why the psalmist was allowed to record for posterity such unchristian sentiments: "Let them be driven backward and put to shame that wish me evil. Let

them be desolate for a reward of their shame that say unto me, Aha, aha." Psalm 40:14, 15. "They (my adversaries) give me also gall for my meat; and in my thirst they give me vinegar to drink. Let their table become a snare before them: and that which should have been for their welfare, let it become a trap. Let their eyes be darkened, that they see not; and make their loins continually to shake." Psalm 69:21-23.

Strange words, aren't they? Seemingly unworthy of a servant of God. Yet isn't this what prayer is all about—letting God know how we feel and what is troubling us and then leaving it with Him to help us as He thinks best?

## **Look in the Mirror**

The best way to trigger an experience of honest, meaningful prayer is to take a long and careful look in the mirror of God's revealed will before we pray. As we read the Bible we sense our real needs, and our prayers can't help but become more honest and meaningful.



# PRAYER

## For You

Of course we must examine ourselves as objectively as possible. Sometimes I try putting myself in the frame of mind of my recording angel as I look back over the events of my day. I try to give credit where credit is due, but also to remember that my good is never really good enough.

This approach to prayer does not lead to self-depreciation. I believe it helps all who try it to grasp the potential that is ours as sons and daughters of God. It helps make prayer a loving, happy acceptance of God's will, based on our complete trust in His intense concern for us.

### Drop the Barriers!

All of us, as we develop from infancy, build up defense mechanisms to protect us from being hurt by others.

In essence, we say to everyone about us, "Keep away; I don't trust you near me." Whether we realize it or not, too often we say the same to God. But we need to drop the

barriers and allow Him to become our defense and security. One of the guaranteed results of this kind of confident relationship is that it helps us to get along with our fellowmen.

What we need to learn to do is to relax and bask in the warm sunshine of God's love. This may seem strange at first, particularly if you are not used to it. Actually it's like coming up from a long stay underground. The sun seems so bright and blinding that we can't stand it. Soon we adjust to the brightness, and its warm, healing rays make us feel as though we are really living again.

### Sharing With God What We Feel

Prayer is sharing with God what we are and feel. The joy of companionship that characterizes those who have lived together and loved each other for a long period comes not from a lot of activity and fun and games but from a sense of sharing what they are experiencing and how they

are reacting to their experiences. Part of the pleasure of this kind of companionship comes from seeing things through the eyes of someone quite different from you, yet in full accord with you. Think, then, of the joy it must bring God to experience with all His children their reactions—their way of viewing things. Don't picture God as continually burdened by our prayers. He loves to have us share our thoughts and viewpoints—to express what we are thinking and feeling.

After enjoying this kind of closeness for a while we develop an infinite feeling of loneliness if we are not sharing ourselves with Him. As we pray, we can ask with complete confidence and trust that what is right for us in His sight will become more meaningful to us, and that which is not right for us will be pushed aside and not be the center of our attention. We can present our petitions knowing that He will open the right doors for us and keep us from going through the wrong ones. When we approach prayer with this kind of attitude, we find that it *does actually work*. Prayer becomes true communion with God—an exchange of friendship, love, and ideas; a sharing of our hurts and troubles—but much more than that, a sharing of the joy of belonging to Him.

**W**e all want good health. But with everybody trying to sell it to us, it's confusing where and how to get it. Here's an effective and inexpensive way to get a lifetime of good health.

Some people think that health is just freedom from disease—if you're not sick then you must be healthy. But health doesn't just happen.

Everything your body does, even the scratching of an ear, depends upon three systems. First, a functioning unit such as the muscles, which brings about the action. Second, a support system such as circulation, which provides blood and oxygen to the muscles. And third, a guidance system that ensures you scratch your ear rather than poke your eye. A breakdown in any of these can lead to chaos in the total body.

Some health experts liken our health to an equilateral triangle. The three sides represent our social, mental and physical components. All are equally important.

But our health is out of balance without a fourth component—spirituality. Add this component and our health is more like a pyramid, with the strength of each side depending on the strength of the others. A breakdown or an overdevelopment in any of the sides leads to a breakdown of the pyramid as a whole.

### New Start

Let's look at the New Start concept of health. **NEW**

**START** stands for nutrition, exercise, water, sunshine, temperance, air, rest and trust.

**Nutrition.** The old saying "What you eat today is what you are tomorrow" has some truth to it. Nutrition isn't only responsible for the ongoing



growth and repair of our bodies, but what we eat also determines our energy reserves.

Failure to maintain the right balance and variety of foods, or overindulging can lead to a breakdown in the health and function of our bodies.

**Exercise.** Most of us have done away with the need for physical exertion in our daily tasks, but our bodies haven't.



They still function more effectively and efficiently when they're physically fit. Exercise improves the cardiovascular, respiratory and immune systems. Three to five sessions per week of 20 to 30 minutes of vigorous

# Just Hea Are

by Jonathan

activity is necessary for the effective and efficient functioning of our bodies.

**Water.** Many people are lax in their intake of water. Our bodies need six to eight glasses of water a day. Tea, coffee, fruit juices or soft drinks don't replace the body's need for water. Water



is a cleansing agent and makes up a large percentage of our total body waste. When fluid is lost, it needs to be replaced. If it's not, the body begins to dehydrate. The blood becomes more viscous and

# How Ithy You?

**Temperance.** Temperance isn't just a word that's aligned with various organisations that promote total abstinence from alcohol. It's a term that promotes moderation in *all* things. To little of many things and too much of most things will lead to ill health. Good health means promoting all aspects of our lifestyle in balance and harmony.



aren't related to our daily tasks. Our brains need rest and the stimulation of focusing on aspects other than our daily work pressures. Research has shown that, for most people, less than six hours of sleep or more than nine hours of sleep a night has a detrimental effect upon our longevity. Inadequate time to rest, recuperate, recreate and rebuild impedes the body's efficiency.

**Trust.** *Newsweek* recently called the 1990s the "Age of Anxiety." In the uncertain world in which we live, we all like to find some certainty. We all need to trust someone. And there's peace and tranquility in trusting God.

## How Do I Make My New Start?

The concepts are simple and the practices aren't complicated. But gaining the motivation to start and the commitment to continue is the hard part.

Start now. Set yourself a start date—within the next week—and write it on your calendar. Then get to it. Good health adds life to your years. And it will probably add years to your life.



**Air.** An adequate supply of oxygen to the body ensures that it functions effectively and efficiently. It means we can concentrate more decisively and have more energy. Poor ventilation or a polluted source of air impedes

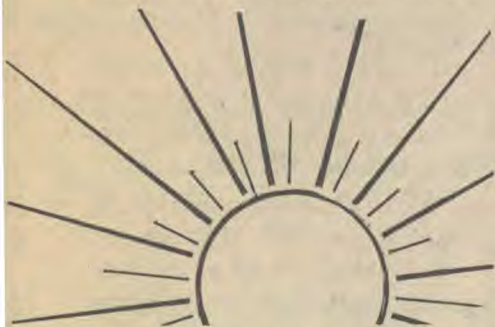


the normal functioning of the body and the effectiveness of the brain.

**Rest.** Proper rest, recreation and relaxation are essential for good health. We need to take time out to do those things that give us pleasure and

less efficient in supplying nutrients and oxygen, and in removing waste from the cells.

**Sunshine.** Our bodies depend on an adequate supply of sunshine. Without it, certain vitamins can't be produced. Lack of vitamin D may lead to poor bone



development or rickets. Research is now showing that there's a strong relationship between our emotional health and sunshine. But just as too little sunshine is harmful, so is too much.

**T**hrough nature and revelation, through His providence, and by the influence of His Spirit, God speaks to us. But these are not enough; we need also to pour out our hearts to Him. In order to have spiritual life and energy, we must have actual encounter with our heavenly Father. Our minds may be drawn out toward Him; we may meditate upon His works, His mercies, His blessings; but this is not, in the fullest sense, communing with Him. In order to commune with God, we must have something to say to Him concerning our actual life.

Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as a friend. Not that it is necessary in order to make known to God what we are, but in order to enable us to receive Him. Prayer does not bring God down to us, but brings us up to Him.

### Jesus, Our Example

When Jesus was upon the earth, He taught His disciples how to pray. He directed them to present their daily needs before God, and to cast all their care upon Him. And the assurance He gave them that their petitions should be heard is assurance also to us.

Jesus Himself, while He dwelt among men, was often in prayer. Our Saviour identified Himself with our needs and weaknesses, in that He became a suppliant, a petitioner, seeking from His Father fresh supplies of strength, that He might come

# HOW TO

*by Ellen G. White*

forth braced for duty and trial. He is our example in all things. He is a brother in our infirmities, "in all points tempted like as we are"; but as the sinless one His nature recoiled from evil; He endured struggles and torture of soul in a world of sin. His humanity made prayer a necessity and a privilege. He found comfort and joy in communion with His Father. And if the Saviour of men, the Son of God, felt the need of prayer, how much more should feeble, sinful mortals feel the necessity of fervent, constant prayer.

Our heavenly Father waits to bestow upon us the fullness of His blessing. It is our privilege to drink largely at the fountain of boundless love. What a wonder it is that we pray so little! God is ready and willing to listen to the sincere prayer of the humblest of His children, and yet there is much manifest reluctance on our part to make known our wants to God. What can the angels of heaven think of

poor helpless human beings, who are subject to temptation, when God's heart of infinite love yearns toward them, ready to give them more than they can ask or think, and yet they pray so little and have so little faith? The angels love to bow before God; they love to be near Him. They regard communion with God as their highest joy; and yet the children of earth, who need so much the help that God only can give, seem satisfied to walk without the light of His Spirit, the companionship of His presence.

The darkness of the evil one encloses those who neglect to pray. The whispered temptations of the enemy entice them to sin; and it is all because they do not make use of the privileges that God has given them in the divine appointment of prayer. Why should the sons and daughters of God be reluctant to pray, when prayer is the key in the hand of faith to unlock heaven's storehouse, where are treasured the boundless

# o T a l k h r i s t

resources of Omnipotence? Without unceasing prayer and diligent watching we are in danger of growing careless and of deviating from the right path. The adversary seeks continually to obstruct the way to the mercy seat, that we may not by earnest supplication and faith obtain grace and power to resist temptation.

## Ask and Believe

There are certain conditions upon which we may expect that God will hear and answer our prayers. One of the first of these is that we feel our need of help from Him. He has promised, "I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground." Isaiah 44:3. Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, who long after God, may be sure that they will be filled. The heart must be open to the Spirit's influence, or God's blessing cannot be received.

Our great need is itself an argument and pleads most

eloquently in our behalf. But the Lord is to be sought unto to do these things for us. He says, "Ask, and it shall be given you." Matthew 7:7. And "he that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" Romans 8:32.

If we regard iniquity in our hearts, if we cling to any known sin, the Lord will not hear us; but the prayer of the penitent, contrite soul is always accepted. When all known wrongs are righted, we may believe that God will answer our petitions. Our own merit will never commend us to the favour of God; it is the worthiness of Jesus that will save us, His blood that will cleanse us; yet we have a work to do in complying with the conditions of acceptance.

Another element of prevailing prayer is faith. "He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him."

Hebrews 11:6. Jesus said to His disciples, "What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them." Mark 11:24. Do we take Him at His word?

## God Answers Prayer

The assurance is broad and unlimited, and He is faithful who has promised. When we do not receive the very things we asked for, at the time we ask, we are still to believe that the Lord hears and that He will answer our prayers. We are so erring and shortsighted that we sometimes ask for things that would not be a blessing to us, and our heavenly Father in love answers our prayers by giving us that which will be for our highest good—that which we ourselves would desire if with vision divinely enlightened we could see all things as they really are. When our prayers seem not to be answered, we are to cling to the promise; for the time of answering will surely come, and we shall receive the blessing we need most. But to claim that prayer will always be answered in the very way and for the particular thing that we desire is presumption. God is too wise to err, and too good to withhold any good thing from them that walk uprightly. Then do not fear to trust Him, even though you do not see the immediate answer to your prayers. Rely upon His sure promise, "Ask, and it shall be given you."

# Looking for FOOTPRINTS

by Lynden Rogers

This may sound like a water drop wondering about the existence of the ocean.

There was a time in western society when no one would have written such an article. And if they had, it wouldn't have been read because everybody believed in God.

Over the past 400 years, Christianity has become one of a range of religious options, and God has become but one of many commodities on the sacred shell. Even some who sport reversed collars don't seem too sure about His existence. Others have simply stopped wondering.

Society now seeks knowledge without inspiration. The battle probably began in the 16th century over whether the earth or the sun was in the middle. This worsened with the subsequent development of science and the emergence of modern philosophy.

Many think that God is dead! But millions still believe. And with good reason.

Can we prove the existence of God? Of course not.

However, it's legitimate to examine the evidences—to look for His footprints.

During the Christian era many arguments for the existence of God have been advanced. Discussion finally centered on five arguments for the Divine. They're still discussed today. Although they've inherited theological titles, they aren't too difficult to understand.

The *ontological* argument suggests that since humans have the idea of a perfect Being, then such a Being must exist.

Conflict has raged about this evidence ever since it was first formalized. Some say that the same argument establishes the existence of hobgoblins!

The *Cosmological* argument is based on the concept of cause. It states that all reality must have an adequate cause, and a universe must have an Infinite Cause. We now know that the universe isn't infinite, but the argument is far from dead.

In fact, the cosmological argument has enjoyed a life-giving injection from

modern physics. It's now understood, through a study of quantum mechanics, that an observer is *required* in order to collapse quantum waves and that this might in fact imply that some Divine Observer is necessary to impart reality to the universe. This may sound far-fetched, but it's sound science today.

The study of the origins of the universe has uncovered many apparent fine balances and "coincidences" in the universe. So even hard-bitten scientists are asking if it isn't getting a little strained to regard it all as coincidence.

Paul Davies in his excellent book *God and the New Physics*, notes that the mass density in the universe seems to have been matched rather closely to the explosive force that appears to be driving the universe apart. The fact that it's *still* so closely matched indicates that initially it had to be *very* finely set up.

A variation of either factor by as much as 1 in 100,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 would by now have resulted in a very different universe from the one we see today!

Scientists are impressed. And there's a lot more evidence like this. Mind you, we have to be cautious. The science of relativity has altered our view of space and time, and consequently our concept of causality.

The earth is large enough to hold an atmosphere, which is

essential to life, but small enough to allow some of the more dangerous molecules, such as hydrogen, to escape that atmosphere. The distance of the earth from the sun and its speed of rotation turn out to be just right for us. Venus gets far too hot at 500 degree C. On Mars the thermometer plummets to 86 degree C unpleasant conditions indeed.

Water is a substance we rely on heavily. It has a number of unusual, but necessary, qualities. It takes a lot of heat energy to raise the temperature of a body of water. Thus it's excellent for temperature regulation. That's one of the ways our bodies use it.

Water also happens to be a harmless substance that's one of the best solvents about. There are better solvents, however. Aqua regia, for example, is a great solvent—it even dissolves gold. But it's a mixture of concentrated nitric and sulfuric acid! Drinks, anyone?

Water is also one of a small group of substances that expand as they solidify. This means that ice floats. This prevents the gradual freezing up of the oceans from the bottom which is something our finned friends appreciate.

Even with this evidence, not everyone sees the cosmological argument as conclusive. Many are unimpressed.

The *teleological* argument is also related to cause. Because

the world reveals intelligence, order, harmony and personality, as well as purposeful being, this suggests the existence of an originating Being with all of those qualities. The apologist Paley drew extensively on this argument.

However, this too is far from universally accepted. Dawkins, borrowing one of Paley's main illustrations (about a watch needing a creator), has recently written a book called "The Blind Watchmaker."

The *moral* argument suggests that because humans recognize a highest good and search for a moral ideal, there must be a God to impart reality to that ideal.

Much has been made of the problem of *evil* in the world. The moral argument highlights the problem of *good*. Why is there so much that is high, noble and altruistic in the world? The philosopher Kant found this far more compelling than the other arguments.

Modern theology uses this theme extensively, but it has been pointed out that humanists also seek the highest good, without the framework of God.

The *historical* argument seeks evidence throughout history that a sense of the divine reveals itself in all civilizations. There seems to be a God-shaped hole in every human soul. Even anti-Christian societies seem unable to avoid worshipping

something, even if it is corporate prosperity.

This God-shaped hole has been seen to imply a Creator Who has made us religious beings. Against this argument is the observation that this religious feeling seems strongest among primitive cultures, and seems to weaken as they become civilized. Some maintain that it may not be intrinsic in the sense claimed.

These arguments are evidences. As a scientist, I'm more impressed by presentations relating to the cosmology and teleology. But I can't claim a watertight case.

The resolution of the dilemma lies in other areas. Historical evidences help authenticate Scripture, the life of Christ, and the early Christian movement. Christianity is based on a tomb that is still empty despite many attempts to fill it.

Sceptics such as Wallace and Morrison have set out to discredit the biblical account and finally published tomes that have become classic Christian defenses, with the authors being converted in the process.

Then there's the evidence of changed lives — including mine. While God can never compel belief and still be God, He has given enough evidences for me to believe. The last of all these is the most important of all. He transforms humans. □

# Potraits of Jesus



*The Gospels give us four similar but distinct depictions of the life of Christ.*

When a four-foot bronze statue of Jesus on the cross was unveiled several years ago in the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine, in Manhattan, worshipers gasped. The Christus was a Christa, with undraped breasts and rounded hips.

When Africans portray Jesus, He looks like an African.

When Koreans paint His picture, He looks like an Oriental. When Indians depict Him, He is at home in a saffron robe.

Six centuries before Jesus, the Greek philosopher Xenophanes observed: "If oxen and horses, and lions, had hands or could draw with hands and create works of art

like those made by men, horses would draw picture of gods like horses, and oxen of gods like oxen.

Aethiopians have gods with snub noses and black hair; Thracians have gods with gray eyes and red hair."

So why not contemporize Jesus? Isn't He the universal Man-or person-whose



portrait we each may colour in according to our culture and environment?

No. Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew of first-century Palestine.

### Particularity, Vagueness

So colour Jesus a Jewish male. Not a Greek or a Roman. Not a woman. Not as White or as Black or as Oriental, even though we might wish Him to be.

Colour Him in the first century. The Temple still stands; He pays the Temple tax: Priests offer sacrifices daily; His parents offer two doves at His circumcision.

Colour Him from Palestine. Not from Alexandria (more learned) or from Rome (more sophisticated). Carpenter, Rural, Provincial.

But what does He look like, this Jew of the first century? How shall we trace the set of the jaw, the fire of the eye, the pursing of the lips?

We don't know. We have no pictures of Jesus from His contemporaries. The earliest portraits are centuries after the fact and are worthless as historical likeness.

Most surprising, perhaps, is the total silence of the New Testament concerning His appearance. Here is the most significant Person of all time. Here is the Man who divided world history into two—before His or after Him. Here is Someone whose life and death (and what came after) caused people to leave their occupations to follow Him, who changed prostitutes into

pure women and swindlers into honest men, and who today is confessed by millions as Saviour and Lord. *What did He look like?*

We don't know. Although the Bible contains four books—the Gospels—about Him and He dominates those writings, not a word describes His appearance.

Does the Old Testament prediction of His coming give us a hind of His portrait? "He had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him" (Isaiah 53:2). \*Perhaps. Probably, however, the meaning is that Jesus did not come to us with glory and splendor, with supernatural display that would impress His contemporaries.

Maybe, after all, this search for Jesus' physical characteristics is misguided. The New Testament writers wrote about what "we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands" (1 John 1:1), but they gave no space to describing Jesus. Under the impress of the Holy Spirit they wrote something more important.

### Four Portraits

They did leave us a portrait of Jesus—four of them, in fact. Instead of describing the lilt of His voice, they gave us His words; instead of tracing His appearance, they showed how He dealt with people; instead of giving us His physical

measurements, they spelled out His character.

As we look at these four portraits, we are struck by the amazing similarities. The basic outline and plot are the same. Jesus dominates.

In fact, we have a new literary genre—Gospel. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John have not written chronicles or biographies of the Man they called "Master." They have concentrated on the three years of His public ministry—especially on the last week of His life. In Matthew that week occupies nearly 30 per cent of the account; in Mark, 37 per cent; in Luke, 25 per cent; and in John, almost 50 per cent.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke in particular, we find duplication of material, often word for word. Yet we also find amazing differences. The words of Jesus are reported with variations from writer to writer; the order of events varies.

Take the inscription over Jesus' cross. We would expect that a public notice so important to the followers of Jesus would have been recalled accurately. But this is what we find:

Matthew: "This is Jesus the King of the Jews."

Mark: "The King of the Jews."

Luke: "This Is the King of the Jews."

John: "Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews."

Which is the correct inscription? All declare that

Jesus was King of the Jews, and this is the chief point. But beyond that the accounts vary.

The Gospel accounts in general are different from one another too. While all set forth Jesus as the Messiah, the Saviour of humanity, each writer pens a distinctive portrait. Each introduces his Gospel in a particular way; each selects a different incident to highlight in the commencement of Jesus' ministry; each closes his Gospel in a manner that rounds out the portrait he has developed.

Matthew's readers are introduced to "the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt. 1:1). Thereby the writer signals his intent to depict Jesus as thoroughly Jewish, thoroughly royal. He is the fulfilment of the Old Testament, Israel's Messiah. But He is a teaching Messiah: the first act of His ministry that Matthew underscores is the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7).

The Gospel is structured around five sermons, just as Moses wrote five books, for Christ is pictured here as the new Moses. And the last scene in this Gospel is a teaching one: The risen Christ, armed with all authority, gives His parting instructions from a mountain in Galilee (Matt. 28:16-20).

Mark, however, tells us at the outset that Jesus is "the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). In his Gospel the quintessential Jesus is a man of

action—rebuking demons, stilling the tempest, cleansing the lepers. The first incident of the ministry that Mark highlights is an exorcism (verses 21-28). Everywhere Jesus goes, His presence and mighty acts evoke awe and amazement. And at the end His followers are struck dumb with wonder at the mightiest act of all—the empty tomb (Mark 16:8).

In Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus, the Magi came to worship, bringing gifts. But in Luke's Gospel we find no Magi, only shepherds. That concern for those on the social fringes is epitomized by the first major item of ministry in Luke's Gospel—the sermon at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21). In this address Jesus declares Himself the liberator, the healer, the salvation bringer, the friend of the poor. Throughout the Gospel He shows concern for women, Samaritans, Romans, tax collectors, and "sinners" (a catchall term to describe the religiously disestablished).

Unlike the other Gospels, this one closes with a to-be-continued sort of ending. The book of Acts is its companion volume, telling how the good news proclaimed by Jesus of Nazareth spread from Jerusalem to Rome.

John begins his Gospel dramatically: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John

1:1). This Jesus of Nazareth, this Messiah of Israel and Saviour of the world, is eternally God! John chooses a miracle of Jesus—the wedding feast at Cana—as the first significant event of the public ministry (John 2:1-11). "This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him" (verse 11).

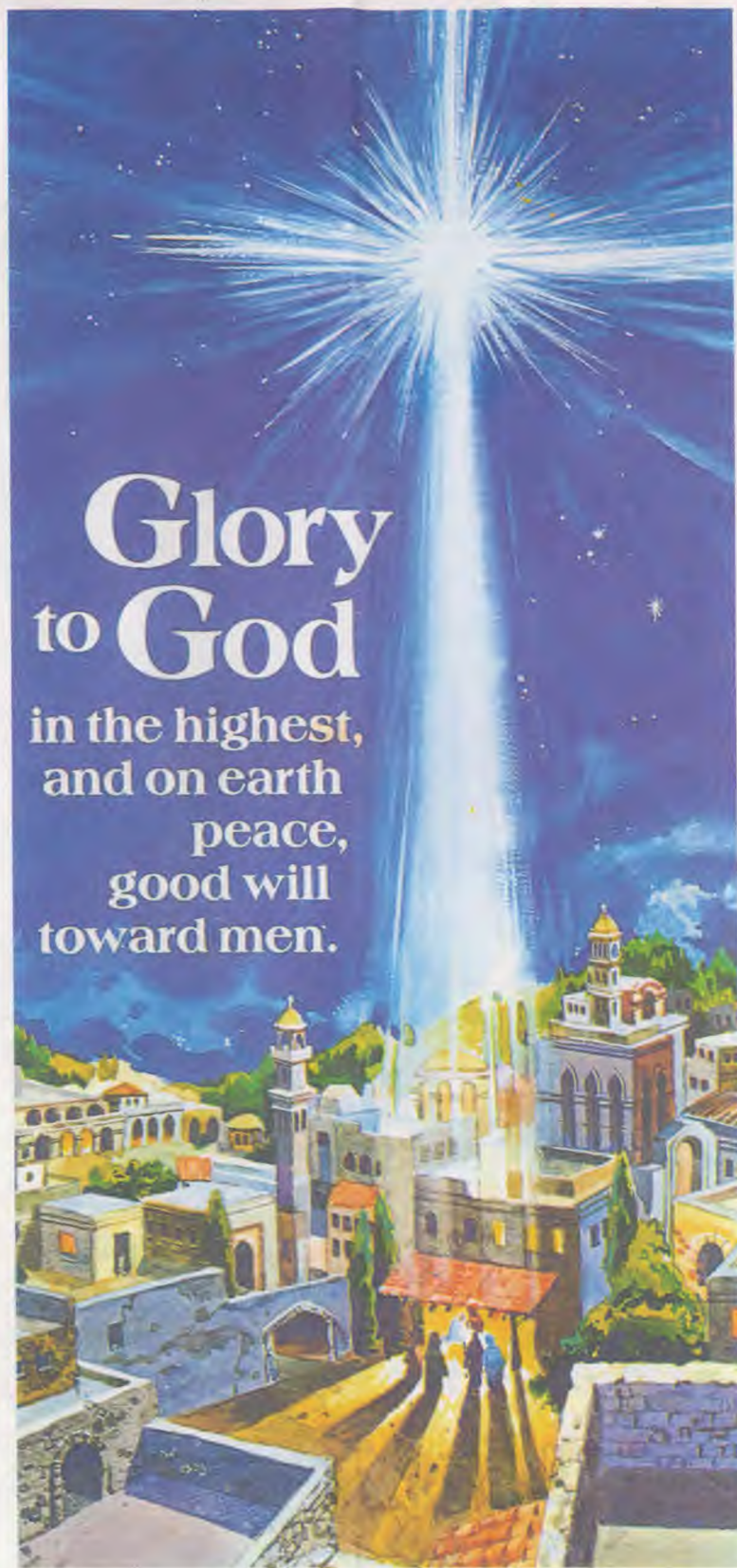
Here are the three key words of the Gospel—*signs—glory, believe*. Throughout John's account Jesus performs miracles—signs that show His glory. But only those who believe recognize what they mean. And the greatest sign of all, the supreme glory, is the lifting up of Jesus on the cross. So John, in a burst of hyperbole, closes his Gospel with the comment that the world is not big enough to contain all the books that might be written about Jesus (John 21:25).

Four Gospels. Four portraits of a first-century Jew of Palestine. No single portrait exhausts the subject, nor do all four together. But they are sufficient. They show us the Man for us, God our friend, our Saviour, our Lord.

And they are compelling—more compelling than any artist's creation. They ask: "Who do you think I am?"

\* Bible texts in this article are from the Revised Standard Version.





# Glory to God

in the highest,  
and on earth  
peace,  
good will  
toward men.

"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her first born, a son. She wrapped him in strips of cloth and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests." Luke 2:1, 4-14, NIV.

# Christmas Thoughts

by Stanley Watson

When your heart is all a'tingle  
And you have that deep, warm glow,  
As you think of keeping Christmas,  
As they've done since long ago,  
Give a thought—yes you can spare it—  
Of the One whose birth's observed,  
How He came and bled to save us,  
Died the death that we deserved.

When you think of giving presents,  
To loved ones around the tree,  
Meditate upon the Magi,  
How they searched so faithfully  
In their travels ever following  
That star, brighter than the rest,  
Seeking out the lovely Jesus,  
Of all the gifts, the first and best.

When you see the Christmas holly,  
Think of that thorn-crowned head,  
Cogitate upon Golgotha,  
Wherein love and sorrow wed,  
Consider too the bright red berries,  
As Christ's blood—redeeming flow,  
Dwell upon the crucifixion,  
It will help your faith to grow.

When the Christmas season's over,  
And you resume the common task,  
Take the Christmas spirit with you,  
It will give you all you ask.  
Live for Christ with each new morning,  
Consider Him your King just crowned;  
Love Him, honour Him and serve Him—  
'Twill be Christmas all year round.

