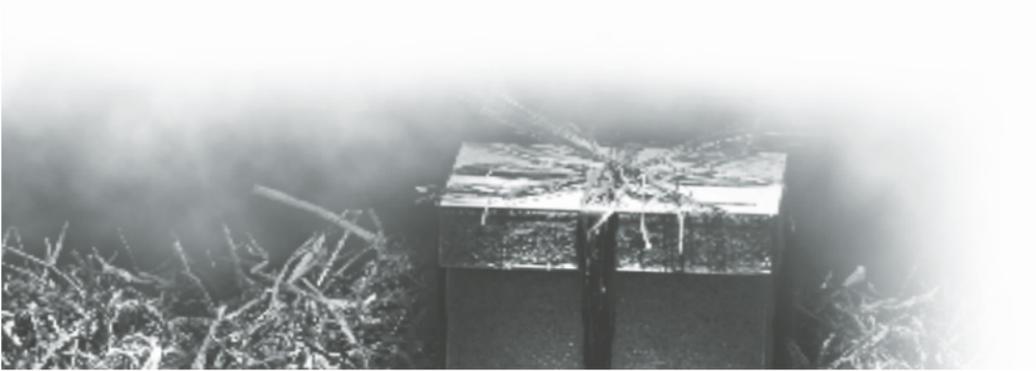


 Discovery Series®

# The REAL GIFT OF CHRISTMAS



**Dan Schaeffer**



*introduction*

# The Real Gift of Christmas

**D**o you ever have the sneaking suspicion that much of our emotional attachment to Christmas stems more from our traditional celebrations than the news announced to the shepherds some twenty centuries ago? We read the Christmas story in Matthew and Luke and we parrot all the appropriate clichés: “Jesus is the reason for the season,” and “Let’s keep the Christ in Christmas.”

But when all is said and done, we still wonder what fuels our Christmas sentiment.

And so it goes, on and on, as each year we struggle to know how to properly celebrate Christ's marvelous entrance into our world. We know what He did—even those who don't believe it know the story of the first Christmas. But how deeply have we thought about that story and its implications for our lives?

The problem is that when something becomes too familiar to us, we have trouble seeing it in a new way. That is the purpose of this booklet: to help you see beyond the familiar and find the true spirit of Christmas—the spirit that is meant to decorate our hearts the way lights decorate a barren tree.

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*one*

## What's Wrong with This Picture?

**E**very Christmas, in our living room, we put out our manger scene—a small, rustic-looking stall, crude but charming, busy with sheep, shepherds, camels, wise men, and two babes in the manger. (The second baby, put there by our youngest child, is from another long-lost set.)

When Dad connects the lights, and Mom adds some appropriate seasonal foliage to cover the top of the stable, it provides all of us a warm, wonderful holiday experience.

The problem is that I've gazed upon this manger scene

so long that I've become numb to it. I've heard the story so often that I've stopped thinking about it. But when I do think about it, I realize that this scene isn't normal. And God doesn't want me to view it as pretty and quaint. He wants me to be appalled, even bewildered and confused; because when I am, I have to think about the scene rather than ignore it. What happened at the manger wasn't designed to put me in "the holiday mood." It was intended to shake me to the roots of my soul.



Christmas is the day we celebrate the entrance of the eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, all-righteous, all-holy, and glorious God into our world. When I stop and consider this fact and then look at that scene of the baby Jesus in the manger, I scratch my head and say, "What's wrong with this picture?"

Four words in the story of the first Christmas should challenge my mind, not anesthetize it. "This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and *lying in a manger*" (LUKE 2:12, emphasis added). The God of the ages, too glorious to look upon, is lying in a feed trough. The God before whom Moses and Isaiah fell down on their faces, and from whom the cherubim hide their faces, is in a filthy stable. If this story were merely myth, we

could smile warmly and safely ignore it. But this isn't myth. It is fact.

*Lying in a manger.* These four glorious words describe far more than the place where baby Jesus was laid. Here is

***What happened at the manger wasn't designed to put me in "the holiday mood." It was intended to shake me to the roots of my soul.***

a message from God, a parable in four words, a testament in wood and straw that contains more truth than would fit in a volume of books.

## **A Sign for the Shepherds**

At the time of the census decreed by Caesar Augustus, which demanded that all the citizens of the entire Roman Empire had to return to their hometowns to register, Bethlehem must have been swollen with people. The streets must have been congested, the homes crowded with relatives, and the inns bursting at the seams. In these circumstances, how would a group of shepherds find the child they were seeking? There could have been mothers and babies galore. Which one was the right one?

All the babies were wrapped in some kind of cloths, so that didn't narrow it down. The sign for the shepherds was that the baby would be lying in a manger. Even in that ancient time and place, a stable for a birthing room and a manger for a crib would have been unusual. This scene *was* strange, and it was intended to be.



Imagine the shepherds entering Bethlehem, searching for the manger, eagerly listening in the night for the sounds of a crying baby to guide them. Finally their faithfulness was rewarded. They found the promised Savior, Christ the Lord, in the form of "a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Now the shepherds knew without doubt that God had been leading them. The manger was their sign. Without it they had no compass and no hope. The baby in the manger was the Great Shepherd who led these sinful men to a carpenter and his young wife, and, ultimately, to Himself.

The scene—father, mother, baby, and manger—was a promised sign to the shepherds, confirmation that they were not on a fool's errand. The shepherd's themselves were a sign too, a billboard for the Christ child's earthly parents. Their appearance provided a sense of peace and rightness to the bewildering turn of

*The baby in the manger was the Great Shepherd who led these sinful men to a carpenter and his young wife, and, ultimately, to Himself.*

events of giving birth to this miraculous child in such unmiraculous surroundings.

## **A Confirmation for Mary and Joseph**

What we celebrate each year may have been a terrible ordeal for Mary and Joseph. Was this what Mary envisioned when Elizabeth, her friend and relative, had prophesied that she would be blessed and honored (LUKE 1:42)? Mary had great faith, but was it challenged when she entered that stable, heavy with child and exhausted from the long journey from Nazareth?

Somehow I doubt that this young woman found her circumstances inspiring. When her labor pains began, with no midwife to help her, when she and Joseph were alone in a stable “celebrating” the arrival of the heavenly child, promised through great miracles and dreams, did they ever ask themselves, “What’s wrong with this picture, God?”

Then the shepherds arrived, sharing their angelic vision and the all-important sign they had been

given—a sign to the world—a baby lying in a manger. Not in a palace or an ornately decorated crib befitting the Son of God. Not in a cozy room with proper comforts for a woman in labor, but in a cold stable. And yet the baby was right where He was supposed to be—lying in a manger. When they saw these rugged worshipers, did Mary and Joseph sigh in relief? Did the joy of confirmation flood their souls, washing away any doubt that might have accumulated in their hearts?

I think it did. The heavenly pronouncement from the shepherds was an additional confirmation that their present circumstances were holy to God. There had been no divine mistakes. This was precisely the place God chose to showcase His entrance into our world, wrapped up so tight in swaddling cloths that He couldn't even move.

This grand entrance did not fit His person or His glory. But in it, we begin to see glimmers of His purpose.

## **No Room for God in the World He Had Made**

The eternal God lying helplessly in a manger is an object lesson impossible to ignore. This scene puzzles



the critics, and rightly so. It is not uncommon to hear critics of Christianity speak of the wrathful, vengeful, judgmental God of the Old Testament. But would such a God suffer Himself to be disgraced by lying helplessly

***The heavenly pronouncement from the shepherds was an additional confirmation that their present circumstances were holy to God. The manger scene reveals as much about the mercy and love of God as do any of His words or acts of compassion.***

in a manger? No, the manger scene reveals as much about the mercy and love of God as do any of His words or acts of compassion.

"There was no room for them in the inn." Those familiar words ring out across the centuries. Yet in truth, there was no room for Him anywhere. And this scene, forever frozen in time, reminds us not only of His character but also of ours. The Creator returned to a decidedly hostile world, not with divine wrath prepared to destroy all that would treat Him with contempt, but in divine mercy prepared to endure all that we could throw at Him. Could God's mercy and love toward our

hostile and rebellious world have been any clearer than when He was found lying in a manger?

When we are having difficulty conjuring up an appropriate Christmas spirit, we need only picture the God of eternity enduring that filthy and incredibly humiliating setting. It was His love for us that put Him in that manger. And as we picture Him lying in a manger we see something we'd never have understood otherwise.

## So We Could Understand

In our world, important people tend to associate with other important people; they seek each other out. And being seen with the right people in the right places can take you far. So it is with no little confusion that we view God humbling himself so drastically before us. Yes, us. You and me. We were the reason He left His glory. We'll never really understand it, not completely anyway. We know what He did, but for the life of us we can't figure out why.

When someone greater than us humbles himself before us in some way, it is a powerful gesture. We are amazed and moved that someone of such stature and status would do such a thing. When someone gives us a gift we don't expect or deserve, we are touched. So when



I think about God in a manger, I am amazed, touched, and, above all, grateful.

God humbled himself in a way that a shepherd, or a child, or a tax-gatherer, or a fisherman, or a woman with a checkered past, or a self-righteous Pharisee, or even I would understand. While lying in a manger, God was sending a message that tells us what we desperately need to know about Him.

***While lying in a manger, God was sending a message that tells us what we desperately need to know about Him.***

## **Anyone Could Approach Him**

The God-Child was announcing in a dramatic way that He had come to be available, to be accessible. He hadn't come to isolate Himself, or to hobnob with only the important people. He had come to mingle with all, to receive them with open arms and put Himself at their disposal. All this He conveyed by simply being found *lying in a manger!*

A common feeding trough for beasts of burden hosted the God-Child Himself. "Why?" we ask ourselves. Why indeed! For us! God humbled Himself before us so that

we would realize that there was nothing He wouldn't do to bring us into relationship with Him.

What's wrong with this picture? Not a thing! Because the primitive scene of our God *lying in a manger* reminds us of this precious truth: We're no longer alone.



*two*

## When It Doesn't Feel Like Christmas

### Something Different, Something Deeper

**T**he message of Christmas is about hope. But sometimes "it doesn't feel like Christmas." It doesn't feel hopeful. Sometimes life conspires to challenge the Christmas message of "good news of a great joy."

Each culture has its own traditions surrounding Christmas. While many of these traditions have little to

do with God entering our world, they have become so inextricably intertwined with our Christmas celebrations that it is difficult, if not impossible, for us to separate the truth of Christmas from the traditions we have grown up with. For example, in the West, Christmas has become a time of family celebration with food, presents, and parties. So when the painful reality of life interrupts our celebrations of the Christmas season, when we lose some of these traditional supports, we believe we cannot experience the spirit of Christmas. For years the Christmas spirit has meant an immersion in the festal garb of the season—the colors, lights, decorations, songs, presents, family get-togethers—and yes, the story of the Babe in the manger.



But the Christmas story, the real story, has become a sidelight to our celebration. It is important, but not absolutely essential. We could actually get through the season with great joy, celebration, and treasured memories without seriously considering the implications of the entrance of God into our world. A simple nod to “the reason behind the season” would suffice—even a brief one. Millions of Christians do it every year and appear none the worse for it.

But what happens when a broken family or the aching loss of a loved one or deteriorating health or fragmented and painful relationships conspire to wipe away our joy?

***It is difficult, if not impossible, for us to separate the truth of Christmas from the traditions we have grown up with.***

At such times we begin to see how far we have strayed from the true message of this blessed season. What we need is something different, something deeper.

Author and speaker Jill Briscoe recalls being asked to speak to a church gathering in Croatia for two hundred newly arrived refugees. They were mostly women, because the men were either dead, or in camp, or fighting. That evening she told the refugees about Jesus, who as a baby became a refugee Himself. He was hunted by soldiers, and His parents had to flee to Egypt at night, leaving everything behind. Sensing that her audience was listening intently, she continued telling them about Jesus' life, and when she got to the cross, she said, "He hung there naked, not like the pictures tell you." At the end of the message, she said, "All these things have happened to you. You are homeless. You have had to flee. You have

suffered unjustly. But you didn't have a choice. He had a choice. He knew all this would happen to Him, but He still came." Then she told them why. Many of the refugees knelt down, put their hands up, and wept. "He's the only one who really understands," she concluded.<sup>1</sup>



This is the part of the Christmas story that is often neglected. God had a choice, and He chose to become a vulnerable human child. He chose to come to earth and suffer and die. We can decorate His entrance into the world with festive angels and stars. But those decorations cannot mask the purpose of His entrance—to suffer and die for us.

## **The Christmas “Unpeace”**

Ironically, in those times when it least feels like Christmas, it might be most like Christmas. Maybe hope, in the midst of strange, uncomfortable, and confusing circumstances, is the closest we can get to the true and original spirit of Christmas. Often, the lack of the internal peace we are desperately seeking nearly convinces us that God's love for us—us personally—has waned. How can God truly love us when He allows such pain and suffering to enter our lives? But it was because of this very pain and

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suffering that God came in the first place.

In fact, it was into just such “unpeace” that our Lord arrived. As author Emmy Arnold writes,

How could God hate us, when He gives us what He, past all measure, loves? I proclaim to you great joy that shall come to all peoples—peace on earth! The true Christmas experience is to feel that this Christmas peace is the greater power; that even now on earth it overcomes all unpeace. That this peace shall come to all—that is the expectation and faith of Christmas. The Christmas Star in the night sky, the shining of the Christmas light in the night—all this is the sign that light breaks into the darkness. Though we see about us the darkness of unrest, of family discord, of class struggle, of competitive jealousy and of national hatred, the light shall shine and drive it out. Wherever the Christmas Child is born in a heart, wherever Jesus

begins His earthly life anew—that is where the life of God’s love and of God’s peace dawns again.<sup>2</sup>

When all the things that spell security and comfort are removed, we become keenly aware of how much we needed God to enter our world. We can’t make heaven on earth, no matter how hard we try, no matter how much we decorate. Sin has affected and infected everything we touch. We needed to be rescued. We need a Savior.

We long for peace. Peace on earth, and peace in our hearts. This is what the original participants in the Christmas story were waiting and hoping for.

A powerful way to appreciate having a Savior is to imagine what it would be like not to have one. Imagine that your pain and suffering have no meaning. Your life is simply ruled by fate—and you are just unlucky. Wrongs will never be made right, truth is relative, and hope for a better world is just so much dreaming. Your silent suffering and hidden pain have no divine audience; they are yours to bear alone. There exists, quite simply, no hope beyond this life.

But we do have reason for rejoicing. A Savior was born



to us, and our suffering touches His merciful and gracious heart. He was not only moved by our suffering; He came to join us in it. He lowered Himself to suffer what we suffer, to feel what we feel, to cry with us, hunger with us, thirst with us, and live with us. The Almighty God made Himself vulnerable to all the pain of human life.

***We long for peace. Peace on earth, and peace in our hearts. This is what the original participants in the Christmas story were waiting and hoping for.***

One of my greatest joys is in knowing that there is a God and that He is righteous and loving. That this God loves me never ceases to amaze me. So my hope can shine through any pain, confusion, and suffering that comes my way, because I know my Savior cares for me. My hope cannot be quenched, because I know my God loves me even through suffering.

Christmas reminds us that we can put our hope in a sure thing—the love of God—demonstrated so beautifully on that wonderful day when He came forth into our world as a baby. Because of our despair,

hopelessness, and helplessness He left His throne in heaven. This is the "good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (LUKE 2:10). This is the Christmas we can all celebrate, with or without family, friends, or familiarity. Christmas goes beyond trees, decorations, songs, and presents to speak to our true condition.

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<sup>1</sup> Jill Briscoe, "Keeping the Adventure in Ministry," *Leadership Journal* (Summer 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Emmy Arnold, "Christmas Joy," *When the Time Was Fulfilled* (Farmington, Pa.: Plough, 1965).



*three*

## One More Gift to Give

**D**uring the Christmas season, one of the most quoted Scripture verses is from the prophet Isaiah: "For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (ISAIAH 9:6).

This passage is the fulfillment of God's promise to give us a gift that would heal our relationship with Him (cf. GEN. 3:15). The day Jesus was born, this hopeful and long-forgotten promise was fulfilled. Something had

to bridge that gulf and bring our hearts back to Him. That something was the Son—the presence of the Son with us.

This famous passage (ISAIAH 9:6) adorns countless Christmas cards and is quoted from thousands of pulpits every year.

And, as with the nativity, familiarity can bring indifference to the beautiful message imagery of this promise.



## **“A child is born”**

Isaiah was in the midst of prophesying against Israel because of her unfaithfulness. Very soon he would tell the Israelites that the Assyrians would be God’s instrument of discipline, coming down upon Israel and overwhelming her. Yet God interrupted this tragic prophecy to speak tenderly about Israel’s future, promising that He would never abandon her, despite her unfaithfulness. As evidence of this promise, a child would be born for her.

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” (ISAIAH 7:14).

This is not an allegorical lesson or wishful thinking. No, this is a real promise. God would someday deliver His wayward people, and that deliverance would involve

***God would someday deliver His wayward people, and that deliverance would involve a miraculous human birth at a definite time and place in history.***

a miraculous human birth at a definite time and place in history.

When we make promises we really intend to keep, we get specific with dates, times, and details. And that's what God did with Israel. He got specific about this coming Messiah. This wouldn't be just any child; it would be a child born of a virgin. That is specific!

But notice, this same child would not only be born to a *virgin*, He would also be born to us. This child would be born to Israel. And all who have become children of Abraham by faith also benefit from God's eternal plan. This child was a gift not simply to Israel, but to all of mankind.

Then Isaiah gets even more specific: This child will be *born of a virgin*, will be *born to us*, and will *be a son*.

## **“A son is given”**

One day in eternity the Father and Son spoke about the plan for creation. So the Son disguised His glorious divinity,

descended to earth, and under the cloak of humanity became the promised child. A child was *born*; the Son was *given*.

Mary birthed Jesus, but not until after the Father had first given Him. He was the Son from all eternity, but on a given day He became a child. This was to identify this special child with His eternal, divine origins.

The tradition of exchanging gifts in which we participate so fervently and eagerly at this season can be traced ultimately to the Father. The giving began with Him. The greatest gift came from Him. He gave us a world to live in, and He gave us life to enjoy it. Then, when through our own sin we forfeited that life, the Father gave again. He gave us His Son, and through Him new life, eternal life, not merely as His creation, but as His beloved children.

That life, however, came with a price tag we couldn't afford. Like the expensive car that is way out of our reach, or the house we could never afford to even think about buying. We did not deserve this second chance, so it had to be given.

## **“The government will be on His shoulders”**

People often expect their government to provide prosperity, peace, justice, compassion, and guidance.



But the governments of the world have rested on some pretty weak and narrow shoulders over the years, and none have ever measured up to this lofty goal. In fact, precious few have even sought such a self-sacrificial end. Most seek only their own power and self-aggrandizement.

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We tend to be hard on our leaders when they fail, but we must remember that they have an inherent handicap. They are imperfect just like us. We might as well ask a cow to fly south for the winter, or a dog to live underwater like a fish, as ask an imperfect person to govern perfectly. Imperfect people make imperfect laws, which they imperfectly enforce, and which are powerless to change imperfect hearts.

Imagine a government that would be perfect, righteous, fair, effective, and compassionate. Wouldn't that be wonderful? But who would be qualified to lead such a government? Who could bear such a burden? Only the

Child born to us, the Son given to us. Because one day the government of all nations and all people *will* be given to Him forever, and He will govern perfectly, righteously, and eternally.

## **“And He will be called Wonderful Counselor”**

Life is full of so many choices, so many decisions that need to be made. Often we seek counselors who can help us make the right ones. But every counselor is also in need of a counselor. Because, try as we might, it is impossible for any of us imperfect human beings to have a perfect perspective. None of us have all the answers, all the time. Wouldn't it be *wonderful* if we did?



Isaiah's use of the Hebrew word *pele*, meaning "wonder," indicates that everything about Jesus is a wonder. He is beyond all we could ever imagine. Jesus is such a wonder, so perfectly capable, that He has no need of counselors. He never has to ask advice, or "get back" to us on something. He has all the answers to everything all the time. Isn't that wonderful?

The perfect heart and mind are blended in God's gift to us of a Wonderful Counselor.

## “Mighty God”

In the Hebrew, *El Gibbor* is translated “God, the mighty one.” However, the word *Gibbor* actually means “hero.” It could be translated “a heroic God,” or “a God of a hero”—a hero whose chief quality is that He is God. He is not just our God; He is our hero. For He not only has the *power*, but also the *desire* to rescue us.

Notice the contrast between the terms Mighty God, child, and Son. We think of God’s Son as the meek and gentle

***One day the government of all nations and all people WILL be given to Him forever, and He will govern perfectly, righteously, and eternally.***

child Jesus. But He was in disguise. He was God cloaked in humanity. God incognito. From everlasting, the child born, the Son given, was and is *El Gibbor*, the Mighty God.

We know people can make promises they don’t intend to keep. But what about the person who can’t deliver on his promise because he doesn’t have the power to make it happen? Is there anything more disappointing? Yet all of the promises implied by these titles of the coming Christ

child would be fulfilled because He would be *El Gibbor*, the Mighty God.



## “Everlasting Father”

In this phrase, Isaiah is not confusing Jesus the Son with God the Father. Instead, Isaiah is describing the nature of the Messiah’s relationship with His people and His relationship with time. This child to be born is eternal, and He is fatherly in His dealings with us.

Father! The very word can evoke strong emotions. We love our fathers; we blast our fathers. We blame them for our condition; we bless them for our condition. Yet whether we bless them or blast them, we all seem to be looking and longing for that perfect father relationship. But our human fathers are imperfect, even the best of them. And so we yearn for One who will look out for us, protect us, provide for us, hold us in His strong arms, and answer all our dumb questions.

Whatever our minds and hearts can desire or imagine in a perfect Father, Jesus will be for us . . . *forever!*

## “Prince of Peace”

Almost the moment we are born, the conflicts begin. We fight with our parents, our siblings, our friends, our spouses, our children, our relatives, and our leaders. Peace

*We think of God's Son as the  
meek and gentle child Jesus.  
But He was in disguise.*

is our eternally elusive pursuit. Peace between nations, peace between neighbors, peace between spouses, peace between family members, even peace in our own minds and hearts. Many men and women have achieved great things, but no one can claim to have brought the world real peace.

We want peace, but we also want our own way. We desire peace, but we can't remove all the peace-disturbing things in our life. I can feel at peace toward you, but what happens if you don't feel at peace toward me? A true and lasting peace in our world is simply beyond our reach. How appropriate then, that as the names of Messiah are listed, the last one we hear echoing in our minds is Prince of Peace.

Real, lasting peace, for nations or individuals, is not something we achieve; it is something we receive through the Son. It is part of the gift.

Vance Havner once wrote, "Christmas is based on an exchange of gifts: the gift of God to man—His Son;

and the gift of man to God—when we first give ourselves to God.”<sup>3</sup>

The true Christmas spirit reminds us of the ultimate gift—God’s offer of salvation, His presence with us. It is good news! Good news for all people!

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<sup>3</sup> Vance Havner in *Draper’s Book of Quotations for the Christian World*, compiled by Edythe Draper (Wheaton Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1992), #1360.



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