



Reflections

On His Birth
Volume 2

Essays by John Comer

THE CHRISTIAN
Appeal

PREFACE

“Once in our world,” writes C. S. Lewis, “a stable had something in it that was bigger than our whole world.” Bigger than our deepest perplexities, soul-chilling fears, and heart-rending sorrows, it made them bearable. Bigger than our deepest joys, fondest hopes, and most cherished dreams, it gave them life and color. It is a special pleasure this month to share with our readers veteran minister and longtime *Appeal* writer John Comer’s joy-filled essays, “Reflections on His Birth,” as John ponders again the stable-born Gift of hope far “bigger than our whole world.”

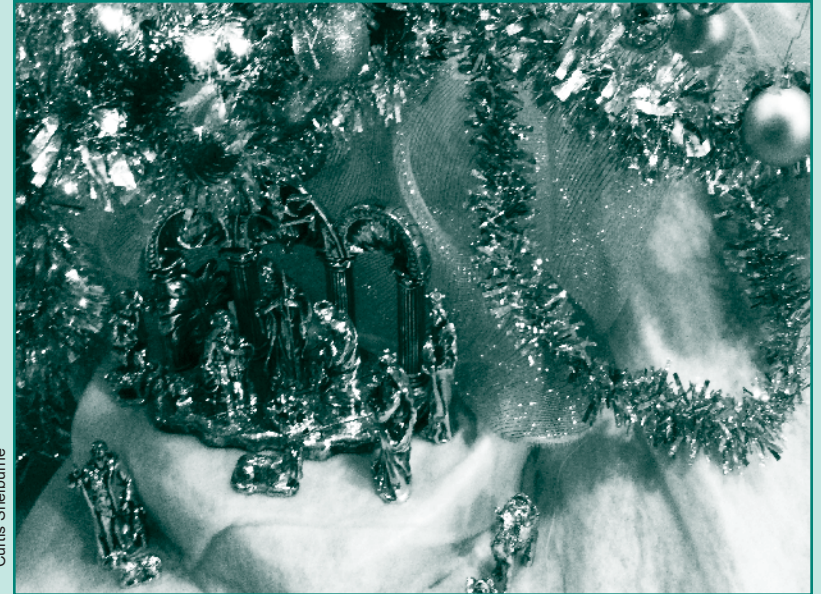
—Curtis Shelburne
Managing Editor

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Curtis Shelburne

“The Word
became flesh and made
his dwelling among us.
We have seen his glory,
the glory of the one and only Son . . .”



John 1

Reflections

“O Holy Night”

It is nighttime in the stable at the inn, and the cool evening air holds the sweet-sour smell from animals placed there by travelers who are now asleep. But there has been no sleep for Joseph and Mary, for this is the night the Child was born.


Mary is resting on a bed of straw. A manger has been made into a makeshift cradle. It is not what Joseph would have chosen, but he knows that having some shelter is better than having none at all. With only some occasional shuffling of the animals and a few soft sounds from them, it is relatively quiet. Something has disturbed the sparrows nesting in the rafters, perhaps a mouse out on its nighttime ramblings. The other birds have settled down now, and the only sound is the barking of some distant dog.

But suddenly the scraping of gates being opened and voices in the night break the stillness. Rough uncultured voices, excited, asking questions. About a baby? In a manger? Surely not. These night visitors are shepherds, of all people, and with such a story to tell. They say the glory of God had shone around them, with a whole army of heavenly

beings praising God. Of course, they had been terrified, but an angel told 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 Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

After the shepherds left, there was still no sleep for Mary. The angel’s message to the shepherds kept running through her mind. She lay there remembering what the angel Gabriel had told her nine months ago back in Nazareth. She knew the baby sleeping in the manger beside her was the Son of the Most High. He was Messiah the Lord, our Savior.

Her cousin Elizabeth had called her blessed, because she believed God’s word would come true. Oh, yes, Mary believed. But believing is not the same as understanding. There was still much sorting out to be done. Mary would treasure these things and ponder them in her heart.

May God give us the grace he gave Mary, that we too may believe his word and trust him to work out the details. 

Reflections

Random Acts of Culture


My wife has a niece in Dallas who periodically emails us anecdotes and items that enlighten or brighten our world. She recently sent a “Random Act of Culture” in the form of Handel’s “Hallelujah” chorus being sung by various choirs against the background of busy shoppers in a Macy’s department store.

Christmas is coming! And though we might think of holiday shopping and great Christian music as being on opposite ends of the spectrum, that’s not necessarily so. It’s actually the birth of Bethlehem’s baby, God’s great gift to the world, that prompts us toward a generous spirit of gift-giving.

So, yes, even the shopping part of the holiday is connected to the Christian background that permeates our American culture. Even though it’s sometimes hard to see, and there may be some who prefer not to see, American culture has within it a strong dose of Christian culture. Generosity is a part of it, and that’s usually out in full force for Christmas. (But be careful! Needing to repent in January for December’s financial over-indulgence is no fun at all.)

Yes, Christmas is coming, but I’m writing this essay about a month before Christmas, which means it’s about a week until Thanksgiving. What is more a part of our culture than turkey, pumpkin pie, and at least a mental image (however inaccurate) of pilgrims and Indians sharing a feast? Thanksgiving means giving thanks. But to whom? God, of course. Any unfortunate person who is trying to be an out-and-out secularist is likely to slip up during these days and become accidentally involved in some random act of American Christian culture.

We once had a family physician who came here from Germany. He informed us that there’d be a roasted goose on his Thanksgiving table. Let’s forgive him for that cultural indiscretion. He did well with the spirit of Christmas. He was a tender and kind-hearted man, a participant in the Christian culture of compassion brought to all the world by the Christ Child who became our Great Physician.

Let’s be on the lookout for random acts of Christian culture. They’re likely to appear almost anywhere, any time. 

Reflections

“Sweet Little Jesus Boy”

Here it is two weeks before Christmas, as I write, and I’ve heard virtually no Christmas music.

For purposes of accuracy in writing these lines, I just counted our Christmas albums. We have fourteen of them, ranging from classical to contemporary, operatic to spirituals. Some are really mel-low easy-listening (vintage Perry Como). I wish that more of us took time to just enjoy this sort of simple pleasure and blessing.

On Thanksgiving afternoon, I thought I’d try a little of Mahalia Jackson, but that didn’t work out well, not even as background music. Listening to Mahalia can be a pretty intense activity. She doesn’t easily stay in the background but commands the stage as her contralto voice renders “Silent Night,” “Joy to the World,” and all the other Christmas favorites in her distinctive sweet “spiritual” style. (Even Mahalia can’t steal the show from our nine-year-old grandson who’s visiting on Thanksgiving Day. Grandkids win every time.) But the season will not pass without the tones of her “Sweet Little Jesus

Boy” wafting through our home. That’s a “must”!

We’ll be singing some Christmas songs at church soon. They won’t be done Mahalia-style, which is for the better, all things considered. Her intensity and full-throttle accompaniment might be a jolt to our delicate systems.

It’s nothing short of astounding that God chose to come to earth in the form of a helpless little baby. We all have Christmas card manger scenes in our minds, not that they are likely very accurate. And the Bible itself describes Jesus as a twelve-year old in the Temple courts.

What is central to our faith is that we see him as a flesh-and-blood man, hanging on a cross. We know why he was there. We rejoice that after three days his tomb was empty. We know where he is now, and that he’s coming back again.

“To us a child is born, to us a son is given” (Isaiah 9:6).

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). *CA*

Reflections

The Son of God

The newly appointed apostles didn’t know much about the man who had chosen them. When he said, “Quiet! Be still!” to the wind, and the wind obeyed, they were awed. They asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him.” Good question. As these men learned more about Jesus of Nazareth, they left us a record telling us about him. Here’s some of what they said.

God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, where he told a virgin named Mary that the Holy Spirit would come upon her, the power of the Most High would overshadow her, and the holy one who would be born to her would be called the Son of God. On the night this child was born, an angel described him as a Savior, Christ the Lord. He was named Jesus, meaning Savior, just as an angel had instructed Joseph to do.

Later, Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River. As Jesus came up out of the water, a voice from heaven said “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

When Jesus asked Peter, “Who

do you say that I am?” the answer was, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” The Book of Hebrews tells us that God speaks to us by his Son. And one of the most famous verses in all the Bible says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Paul tells us that God sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering.

“The Word became flesh,” Scripture says. This implies both divinity and humanity, and introduces something of a mystery. Jesus was the Son of Man, in that he was flesh and blood. He was “the only begotten Son of God,” a concept not so easily grasped:

*Beyond all question,
the mystery of godliness is great:
He appeared in a body,
was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels,
was preached among the
nations,
was believed on in the world,
was taken up in glory.*

(1 Timothy 3:16) *CA*

Reflections

The Presence of God

In the Bible the word “glory” is often associated with the presence of God.

At the birth of Jesus, “the glory of the Lord” shone around the shepherds (Luke 2:9). As Peter describes the Transfiguration, he says it was the voice “from the Majestic Glory” that gave honor and glory to Jesus (2 Peter 1:17).

As we join the prophet Isaiah in his vision of the throne room of God (Chapter 6), we’re reading one of the more moving passages of Scripture. He “saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted.” The train of God’s robe filled the temple.


Above him flew heavenly creatures, seraphs. Each of them had six wings. “With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying.” We sense here their reverence, awe, and humility. (It’s no wonder Isaiah, a mere mortal, felt so out of place when even heavenly beings kept their faces and feet covered as they praised God.)

As the seraphs fly, we hear

what we might assume to be antiphonal singing as they call out to one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” (Those who know biblical languages tell us that this could also be translated, “His glory is the fullness of the earth.”)

The Apostle John said that Isaiah saw Christ’s glory. He may have had reference to this vision. This was the experience in which Isaiah was called to his wonderful prophetic ministry that sometimes described Christ as the suffering servant but also as “Mighty God.”

“The whole earth is filled with his glory.” We might be able to see just a touch of this glory in a colorful butterfly, a prescription from the pharmacist, the Hubble telescope, a sweet grandmother, and all the people we know who do their best to follow Jesus. If we look closely enough, we’re likely to find glory all over the place.

“To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen”
(1 Peter 4:11). 

Reflections

Vision in a Yucca Bush

There are few things of beauty along East Van Buren Street in Phoenix. Too many seedy motels and sleazy bars give visual reinforcement to its unflattering but accurate reputation as a red light district.

The general public perception of its street corners is that of a place where pimps, prostitutes and prospective customers strike deals. It’s hardly a place with a reputation for fostering religious experiences.

Ah, but visions are where you find them.

And so it was that, a few years ago, the yucca bush in front of the Mexican restaurant at 11th Street and Van Buren became a shrine.


Yes, that’s what I said. To those whose eyes see such things, the dried out, twisted blossom stalk took on the form of the Virgin Mary. Reports of visions of the Virgin soon required a police barricade and added traffic control.

Flowers, candles, cash, and rosary beads were left to adorn

the area around the bush. Sword-shaped leaves from the plant were taken to be fashioned into crosses.

On the Sunday night following the “discovery,” television news broke the story that vandals had broken off the stalk. The miscreants were soon arrested. One worshiper expressed the opinion that they should be executed.

That Monday’s newspaper reported that a priest had lifted up the broken-off piece and, followed by 200 people, carried it over his head into a nearby church so that it could be put on display. On the following Sunday afternoon, even with its flower stalk missing, about 300 people gathered at the yucca bush.

It’s proper for us to remember Mary with respect and honor. But this virtuous Jewish maiden who was blessed by God to be the mother of Jesus surely deserves better than to be the object of bad theology, superstition, and a carnival side-show atmosphere. 

Reflections

“Mary, Sweet Mary”

Before my wife got too busy in the kitchen Thanksgiving morning, she had Christmas CDs filling the house with music.

First up was Curtis Shelburne’s Christmas album, and soon we heard his mellow voice singing, “Mary, sweet Mary, your heart overflows . . .”

We need to give this wonderful lady her due. After all, it’s just as Curtis was singing: she “carried a baby sent to save the world.”

When the angel Gabriel told her that she was to bear a son and name him Jesus, her response was, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:34).

“The angel answered, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the one to be born will be called the Son of God.’”

Her reply: “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.”

Mary faced a problem when Joseph, to whom she was pledged to be married, considered divorce.


An angel set his heart at ease.

Luke records Mary’s beautiful song, including the words, “From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name.”

We all know about the events in Bethlehem where there was no room in the inn. By the time the shepherds’ visit was over, Mary had many things stored up in her heart to ponder.

She had even more things to consider when the child was presented in the Temple and righteous Simeon told her, “A sword will pierce your own soul.”

About thirty-three years later we see Mary at Calvary, standing beneath her son’s cross. But we don’t leave her there. Following the Resurrection and Ascension, we find her in the upper room with the eleven apostles, other women, and Jesus’ brothers, gathered in prayer awaiting the sending of the Holy Spirit.

Mary, highly favored by God, we call you blessed. 

Reflections

“Standing Outside”

The child belonged to her, yet he didn’t. She carried the baby for nine months, gave birth to him, cared for him as a loving mother throughout his infancy and childhood, and proudly watched him grow into perfect manhood. She must have known him as any mother would have known her son. Yet, this child of hers was the Son of God.

Mary had humbly dealt with the circumstances of the virgin birth and knew the child would be called Son of the Most High. She remembered the amazing events surrounding his birth. She would never forget that as a twelve-year-old boy he had left the family to spend three days in the Temple discussing issues with the teachers there. She recalled his explanation: “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?”

But that was the action of a child, not a mature man. The fact is that Jesus, as Mary’s thirty-year-old son, was something of a bewilderment to the whole family.

Jesus had suddenly left his family and the carpenter shop behind and set about gathering a group of disciples. He became an itinerant teacher,


performing miracles and attracting crowds so large that he and his disciples could not even manage to eat.

When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him: “He is out of his mind.”

It seemed obvious to his family that he needed help, so Mary and Jesus’ brothers traveled to Capernaum and stood outside the crowded house. When Jesus heard that they were looking for him, he let not only Mary and the family, but all the world, know that there is a higher level of kinship and an even more intimate relationship to be had with him.

The carpenter from Nazareth, the son of Mary, had begun his ministry as Son of the Most High. Who really needed help? Not Jesus. His mother and brothers were dealing with his son-ship, not his Son-ship.

Jesus explained his larger family circle: “Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.” No one need be left standing outside his larger family, neither his mother, his siblings, nor us.

“In my Father’s house are many rooms,” Jesus said, and he invites us inside. 

Reflections

“Near the Cross”

“Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother . . .” (John 19:25).

Among the magnificent works created by the Renaissance artist Michelangelo is his interpretation of the Pietà, the sorrow of Mary grieving for the crucified Jesus. From a piece of cold Carrara marble this exceptionally talented man created one of the tenderest of moments as he envisioned Mary with the lifeless body of her son reclining upon her lap. This statue, in the Vatican’s St. Peter’s church, easily touches the heart. It can be an emotional religious experience just to look upon it.

But the depth of its message and the believer’s appreciation is increased when we realize that Mary is not realistically represented as the middle-aged woman who would be the mother of a thirty-three-year-old son. Instead, her face is that of a very young woman who might be expected to be holding her infant child.

Mary’s introduction to sorrow did not begin at the cross. Its dark shadow, though undefined, had been with her for the past thirty-three years. Michelangelo

captures this for us as he portrays the young and innocent face of the virgin who gave birth and held the infant Jesus in her arms. Now in the virgin’s arms, we view the ugly result of what the sins of the world did to her child.

Michelangelo knew his Bible and that Mary realized that neither her own life nor that of her Son would be a life without pain. The words of old Simeon were burned into her heart, warning that her child would be “a sign spoken against” and that “a sword would pierce” her own soul, too.

Many believers have made Mary herself an object of devotion. Others of us, we would say, have tried to retain a more balanced view of this humble servant who, at the cost of great sorrow to herself, yielded her life to the will of God. Anyone who has suffered in service to God—hearts broken and souls pierced even while obeying him—knows at least something of both Mary’s pain and blessing.

Let us all add our voices to the generations of appreciative Christians who have called her blessed. *CA*

Reflections

Rachel Weeping

We first meet Rachel at the well where she and Jacob, her future husband, first meet (Genesis 29). You and I wouldn’t think of watering a flock of sheep as being anything romantic, but Jacob was soon smitten by this lovely shepherdess.

We skip many years and travel many miles from the above meeting, and Jacob is now the husband of Rachel, and of her sister Leah, and of the handmaidens of these two women. Eleven sons have been born to these four women, and Rachel, far and away Jacob’s favorite wife, is now pregnant again.

This family, along with herds and possessions, are traveling south toward Hebron. Near Bethlehem, Rachel gives birth to a son. Sadly, she dies and is buried near that little town, and Jacob sets up a stone to mark Rachel’s tomb (Genesis 35).

More than a thousand years after Rachel was buried near Bethlehem, her name appears in Jeremiah’s prophecy (31:15):

*A voice is heard in Ramah,
mourning and great weeping,*

*Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because her children are no more.*

Moving forward six hundred years or so, as the Apostle Matthew tells the story of Jesus’ birth, he says this prophecy was fulfilled when wicked King Herod commanded that all boys in Bethlehem two years old and younger be killed, the “slaughter of the innocents.”

Here we have a tragic, though touchingly beautiful, story being told. We see Rachel, a matriarch of the twelve tribes of Israel, figuratively weeping from her grave near Bethlehem as she mourns “her children” slaughtered nearby by Herod’s cruelty.

There are certainly times in this world when in the midst of darkness and evil and mindless cruelty, the only appropriate response is to weep along with Rachel.

But may we never forget that forever more enduring than the voice of mourning is the angel’s healing message of God’s love: “I bring you good news of a great joy!” *CA*

Reflections

The Mother of Jesus

*“From now on
all generations will call me
blessed,
for the Mighty One has done
great things for me—
holy is his name” (Luke 1).*

God honored Mary by selecting her from all the women in the world to be the mother of Jesus. This was truly a great thing for Mary, a special blessing, and each generation marvels anew at the wonder-filled way in which God, who created humanity, became involved with us when the Word became flesh.


Truly, Mary was blessed. But, as with so many blessings, hers came with a price. As she grew up in the Galilean hill-town of Nazareth, the most exciting thing in her life had likely been her pledge to marry Joseph. But from the moment God sent the angel Gabriel to her with the message, “You will be with child and give birth to a son,” her life was never the same again.

Artists sometimes portray Mary with a calm, composed, even beatific beauty. Maybe so, but not necessarily so. If there were wrinkles on her brow and a look of pain upon the face of this one who had known more than her share

of anguish, surely we’d all understand. It’s difficult to imagine that anyone could have led a more complex life with more pressures than she did—and for all of her life.

There was Joseph, her family, and the neighbors. All wondering. Who, since the world began, had been made pregnant by the Holy Spirit? At the angel’s announcement, Mary simply answered, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel went away, and Mary was left alone. How did she feel without the reassuring presence of God’s angelic messenger? Her baby, she had been told, would “be called the Son of the Most High.” Who in all of Nazareth would believe this?

Mary hurriedly went down into the Judean hill country to visit her relative Elizabeth, already in the sixth month of her own pregnancy with her son John who would eventually be known as “the baptizer.” These two amazing women who had so much in common and so much to share greeted each other, and Elizabeth exclaimed, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear.”

Great things were happening with Mary. 

Reflections

Tucked Away

Tucked away in the far northwest corner of Arkansas, nearer Oklahoma and Missouri than almost anywhere else in Arkansas, Sam Walton and Walmart put the small town of Bentonville on the map.

And now, thanks to Sam’s daughter Alice, the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art has recently opened in Bentonville. With approximately 30 billion dollars in her pocket, making her one of America’s wealthiest women, she was able to fund this major art collection and display it in an outstanding architectural venue located on a park-like 120 acres.

A wooded ravine in a remote Ozark mountain town is an out-of-the-way spot to have a collection of 440 paintings on display, with 800 more in storage. Bentonville’s nearest large airport is a two-hour drive away in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The question is raised by many art lovers: Who will travel there to view the great artwork?


This brings to mind two lines from Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Church-yard”: “Full many a flow’r is born to blush unseen, / And

waste its sweetness on the desert air.” Will an important collection of art go unseen in this remote mountain town? Maybe it’s just a matter of “If you build it, they will come.”

Some major Bible history happened in out-of-the-way places. It is only because Noah and his family disembarked in the mountains of Ararat that anybody except map-makers ever heard of that place. Moses went to the far side of the desert to experience the burning bush theophany. And the mention of Jesus’ hometown prompted Nathaniel to ask, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?”

It was on the other side of the Jordan that John the Baptist preached, and the city people flocked to hear him. It was in the barren desert, a “lonely place,” that Jesus met the devil and resisted his temptations. It was in a nighttime olive grove, dark and quiet, that Jesus went to pray.

As God intervened in world history, it’s interesting that he often did great things in almost hidden places: small villages, rock-strewn deserts, and tucked away corners of the earth.

And yes, Nathaniel, even Nazareth. Especially Nazareth. 

Reflections

The Nazarene

It happened in Nazareth, a little town perched on a hilltop up in Galilee.

It was a nothing town.

Nazareth would never compete with Jerusalem, the holy city, with its magnificent Temple. Nazareth boasted no Most Holy Place, no Ark of the Covenant kept in its curtained sacred sanctuary, no cherubim crafted from hammered gold. No blood guttered down through sluices from animals ritually slaughtered for a holy altar. Nobody made pilgrimages to this town. It was the kind of place about which one could easily say, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” (John 1:46).

And Nazareth had nothing of the historical patina of tiny Bethlehem with its ancient memory of Ruth and Boaz and its tie, through them, to King David. God had told Samuel the prophet, “Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem” (1 Samuel 16:1). From Jesse’s sons, David the Bethlehem shepherd boy was chosen to become king.

But when the time was right, though, in Nazareth, a special place in nobody’s book, a most special event occurred.

“God sent the angel Gabriel to

Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus’” (Luke 1:26-31).

We do not remember our Lord as “Jesus of Bethlehem.” Nor was he “Jesus of Jerusalem.” He was Jesus of Nazareth, a hometown from which nobody expected any good to come.

But when he triumphantly rode a donkey into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he was called “Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth” (Matthew 21:11). Just a few days later, a notice was fastened to the cross: “Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews” (John 19:19). And on Resurrection morning, a young man in white sitting on the right side of the empty tomb said, “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen!” (Mark 16:5-6).

The Nativity story, and our salvation story, would be incomplete without the good things that came from this once obscure Galilean town.

Ca

Reflections

Happy New Year!

As I write, we’re past the time to say “Merry Christmas,” and it’s almost too late to say “Happy New Year,” unless, of course, we’re one of those people who prefers to say, “Have a good holiday,” which is about as bland and colorless as a seasonal greeting can be. (If any of us have been doing that, we might want to repent of our ways.)

So here’s hope that you did have a great Christmas and that the new year will be one of genuine blessing. James, the author of the Bible book that bears his name, tells us not to be presumptive regarding the time we’re given. He reminds us that life is like a morning mist, and if we speak boastfully about what we’ll do in the approaching year, we’ve got it all wrong. We’re dabbling in evil.

Time is a gift from God. We get to use it, but we can’t create it. We say, “I’ll make time to do something,” but we don’t really make it; we just arrange our schedule to use it for a certain purpose.

The writer of Ecclesiastes tells us that “whatever is” has already been, and “what will be” has been before. This must be a way of saying that

history repeats itself. And it does. The specific details will differ, but there’s a consistency of generalities. This must indicate that this new year and all future years (“Lord willing,” as James reminds us) will bring many blessings and some problems.

A cousin recently emailed me a copy of a very old family reunion photo that included my grandfather who was born the year the Civil War ended. He died during the Korean conflict. It’s a sad note to measure a life by wars, but it helps to show how the world changed during his lifetime, yet remained much the same. Strange as it sounds, the basic issues faced by my grandfather are not too unlike those faced now by my grandsons.

We still must adapt to changing times. Since life is always uncertain and holds many unknowns, we should expect the unexpected. Keep the faith. Pray. Hope. Expect to see the Lord’s hand at work. Stay alert for his presence.

*For the Lord is good
and his love endures forever;
his faithfulness continues
through all generations.*

(Psalm 100:6)

Ca

Reflections

A New Year's Challenge

Happy New Year! It's a great time to realize that our salvation is "nearer now than when we first believed" (Romans 13:11) even as we wonder how the old year passed by so quickly.

Most of us (I hate to bring this up) are probably not too adept at making New Year's resolutions. Or more true to the painful truth, we are not very good at keeping them. Do you suppose we could collectively come up with something that would be both worthwhile and practical to work on as a New Year's project? Let's try. Here's a suggestion.


In Acts 20:35, Paul shares one of Jesus' sayings that is contained nowhere else in Scripture. The Lord Jesus says, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Do you think we can work these words into something of a lifestyle attitude?

With Christmas just past, it may well be that these words from Christ have been bouncing around in your head already, and you have a headstart on our proposed New Year's project. But what we're talking about here goes deeper than just having enjoyed selecting the right Christmas gift for someone and harboring no thought of what might be received in return.

Though we may not actually say the words, "What's in it for me?" is usually not far from the surface in most of our relationships. We all know what Philippians 2 says about our imitating Christ's humility. Our lives are not to be lived out of selfishness but instead in considering the interests of others as of utmost importance. This fits hand-in-glove with what Jesus said about our being more blessed by giving than we are by receiving.

Do you suppose people like us can work these words into a long-term behavioral pattern? Can we be this generous in our thinking? Can we be unselfish enough to try? Will our egos allow this? Can we be this sacrificial? Do we really want to be this humble?

One of my college professors impressed on his students the fact that when the Bible speaks of our loving someone (whether friend or enemy), what it means is that we want what is best for that person. And this ties in with our New Year's project as we try to be givers, not takers.

The Father himself set the standard for us: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son . . ." (John 3:16). 

"Today
in the town
of David,
a Savior has
been born
to you!"



Luke 2

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