

# *Inside* Life

Issue 18

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## The Christmas Story: Does It Still Matter?

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Good Will towards Men

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at Christmas

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# Inside Life

*A Magazine of Understanding*

Number 18, December 2012

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### **Inside Life**

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**Inside Life** is a magazine of understanding. Rather than just reporting on life, **Inside Life** seeks to delve inside the marvellous mystery that is life, to discover what it is all about. What does life mean? Where did it come from? How can we make the most of it?

**Inside Life** provides insight and answers to life's deep questions and challenges, and aims to provide articles of lasting hope, help, and encouragement for successful living in today's fast-moving world.

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**Our Cover:** Christmas is an exhilarating time of year. A hectic time pulsating with sometimes frantic gift-buying and partying. It has become such a commercialised, consumer-driven event that the original meaning behind the festival can be all-too-easily overlooked, ignored, or forgotten. Our articles in this issue focus on the lasting spiritual values that stand behind the celebration of Christmas.

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# The Christmas Story: Does It Still Matter?

By Rusty Wright

What does Christmas mean to you? Times with family and friends; perhaps carols, cards, television specials; maybe hectic shopping, parties, and eating too much.

All these and more are part of a modern Christmas. But what about the first Christmas? Why is the original story—the baby in a manger, shepherds, wise men, angels—important, if at all?

May I invite you to consider eight reasons why the original Christmas story matters, even to you? You may not agree with all of them, but perhaps they will stimulate your thinking, and maybe even kindle some feelings that resonate with that famous story.

First of all, the Christmas story is important because it is...

## A Story That Has Endured

For two millennia, people have told of the child in a Bethlehem manger; of angels who announced his birth to shepherds; of learned men who traveled a great distance to view him.<sup>1</sup>

That a story persists for many years does not prove its truthfulness. Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy survive in the popular imagination. But a twenty-century tenure at least merits our consideration. What deep human longings does the Christmas story

portray? Why has it connected so profoundly with millions of people? Is the story factual? Curiosity prompts further investigation.

Secondly, the Christmas story is also...

## A Story of Hope and Survival

Jesus' society knew great pain and oppression. Rome ruled. Corrupt tax collectors burdened the people. Some religious leaders even sanctioned physical beating of

In the midst of social and cultural challenges, the Christmas story offers hope and encouragement toward survival and hope of new life linked to something—someone—greater than oneself. One of Jesus' followers said Jesus' 'name... [would] be the hope of all the world.'<sup>3</sup>

So, the Christmas story is important because it has endured and because it speaks of hope and survival.

Reason number three: the Christmas story is...

## A Story of Peace and Goodwill

Christmas carollers sing of 'peace on earth'. Greeting cards extol peace, families desire it, and the news reminds us of its fleeting nature.

Psychologist Daniel Goleman in his best-selling book *Emotional*

*Intelligence* tells of boarding a New York City bus to find a driver whose friendly greeting and positive disposition spread contagious warmth among the initially cold and indifferent passengers. Goleman envisioned a 'virus of good feeling' spreading through the city from this 'urban peacemaker' whose good will had softened hearts.<sup>4</sup>

The Christmas angel announced to some shepherds, 'Don't be afraid!... I bring you good news of great joy for everyone! The Saviour—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born tonight in Bethlehem, the city of David!'<sup>5</sup> A crowd of angels then appeared, praising God and proclaiming peace among people of good will.<sup>6</sup>



Jewish citizens participating in compulsory religious duties.<sup>2</sup>

Joseph and his pregnant wife Mary travelled a long distance to Bethlehem to register for a census, but could not obtain proper lodging. Mary bore her baby and laid him in a manger, a feeding trough for animals. Eventually, King Herod sought to kill the baby. Warned of impending risk, Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt with their son, and then returned home after Herod's death.

Imagine how Mary felt. Traveling while pregnant would be challenging. Fleeing to another nation lest some king slay your son would not be pleasant. Yet she, Joseph, and Jesus survived the ordeal.



The Christmas story brings a message of peace that can soothe anxious hearts and calm interpersonal strife.

Reason number four: the Christmas story is...

### **A Story of Family**

Christmas is a time for family gatherings. This interaction can bring great joy or great stress. Estrangement or ill will from past conflicts can explode.

Joseph and Mary had their share of family challenges. Consider their circumstances. The historical accounts indicate that Joseph's fiancée became pregnant, even though she was a virgin. Mary believed an angel told her she was pregnant by God. Now, how would you feel if your fiancé/fiancée exhibited apparent evidence of sexual activity with someone else during your engagement? Suppose your intended said that God had sanctioned

the whole thing. Would your trust and self-esteem take a nosedive? Would you cancel the wedding?

Joseph, described as 'a just man, decided to break the engagement quietly, so as not to disgrace... [Mary] publicly.'<sup>7</sup> But an angel appeared to him in a dream, explaining that the child was conceived in her by God, and told him to 'name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'<sup>8</sup> Joseph followed instructions and cared for his family. His continuing commitment to Mary and Jesus played a significant part in the boy's birth and early childhood. With God's help, the family overcame major obstacles. And so can your family.

Fifth, the story of Christmas is also...

### **A Story of Humility**

When kings, presidents, and other rulers appear in public, there is often great pomp. From a biblical

perspective, God came first, not as a ruling king, but as a servant, a baby born in humble circumstances. His becoming human helps humans identify with Him.

Imagine that you and your child are walking in a field and encounter an ant pile with hundreds of ants scurrying about. In the distance, you see a construction bulldozer approaching. Suppose your child asks how to warn the ants of impending danger. You discuss various possibilities: shouting, holding up signs, etc. But the best solution would be if somehow your child could become an ant and warn them personally. Some ants might not believe the danger. But some might believe and take steps to ensure their safety.

Paul, an early follower of Jesus, wrote of the humility Jesus displayed by becoming human:

Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross. Because of this, God raised him up to the heights of heaven.<sup>9</sup>

The Christmas story speaks of family and humility. But is it true?<sup>10</sup>

The sixth reason why the Christmas story matters: it is...

### **A Story That Was Foretold**

Jesus' followers noted numerous clues to his identity, prophecies written many years before His birth.<sup>11</sup>

The Hebrew writer Micah told around 700 BC of deliverance through a coming Messiah or 'Anointed One' from Bethlehem.<sup>12</sup> We know that '...Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea...'<sup>13</sup>

Isaiah, writing around 700 BC, foretold that the Messiah would be born of a virgin. He wrote, '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'.<sup>14</sup> The name 'Immanuel' means 'God with us'. Biblical accounts claim Jesus' mother was a virgin when she bore Him.<sup>15</sup>

Additional prophecies concern the Messiah's lineage, betrayal, suffering, execution, and resurrection. Peter Stoner, a California mathematician, once calculated the probability of just eight of the 300 prophecies Jesus fulfilled coming true in one person due to chance alone. Using estimates that both he and classes of college students considered reasonable and conservative, Stoner concluded there was one chance in 10<sup>17</sup> that those eight were fulfilled by fluke.

He says 10<sup>17</sup> silver dollars would cover the state of Texas two feet deep. Mark one coin with red fingernail polish. Stir the whole batch thoroughly. What chance would a blindfolded person have of picking the marked coin on the first try? One in 10<sup>17</sup>, the same chance that just eight of the 300 prophecies 'just happened' to come true in this man, Jesus.<sup>16</sup>

In a similar vein, consider the seventh reason why the original Christmas story matters. It is...

### **A Story That Has Substantial Support**

Can we trust the biblical accounts of the Christmas story? Consider three important points:

- **Eyewitness Testimony**

The Gospels—presentations of Jesus' life—claim to be, or bear evidence of containing, eyewitness accounts. In a courtroom, eyewitness testimony is among the most reliable evidence.

- **Early Date**

Dr. William F. Albright, one of the world's leading archaeologists, dated every book of the New Testament (NT) before about AD 80.<sup>17</sup> There is no known record of NT factual

authenticity ever being successfully challenged by a contemporary.

- **Manuscript Evidence**

Over 24,000 early manuscript copies of portions of the NT exist today. Concerning manuscript attestation, Sir Frederic Kenyon, director and principle librarian of the British Museum, concluded: 'Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established'.<sup>18</sup>

The Christmas story is notable for its enduring messages of hope, peace, goodwill, family, and humility. It was foretold by prophets and has substantial manuscript support. But there is another reason for considering the story of Jesus' birth, perhaps the most important.

Reason number eight: the Christmas story is...

### **A Story of Love**

Jesus' followers taught that His conception and birth were part of a divine plan to bring us genuine peace, inner freedom, and self-respect. They believed the biblical God wants us to enjoy friendship with Him, and meaning, and purpose. Alas, our own self-centeredness separates us from Him. Left to our own, we would spend both time and eternity in this spiritually unplugged state.

Jesus came to help plug us into God. Mary's baby was born to die, paying the penalty for our self-centeredness, which the biblical documents call 'sin'. If I had a traffic fine I could not pay, you could offer to pay it for me. When the adult Jesus died on the cross, he carried the penalty due all our sins, then rose from the dead to give new life.

Jesus explained: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.'<sup>19</sup> God can become your friend if you believe in Him, that is, if you trust

Him to forgive you. He will never let you down.

Perhaps you are becoming aware of the importance of the Christmas story in your own life. Might you like to receive Jesus' free gift of forgiveness and place your faith in him? You can celebrate this Christmas knowing that you are a member of his family.

Christmas is meant to celebrate peace and joy. Amidst the busy-ness of shopping, parties, presents, and fun, remember that the Prince of Peace came to spread peace and joy to all who believe in Him.

### **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Details of the Christmas story are in Luke 1-2 and Matthew 1:18-2:23.
- <sup>2</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973 printing of the 1883 original), i:372.
- <sup>3</sup> Matthew 12:21 NLT.
- <sup>4</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1997), ix-x.
- <sup>5</sup> Luke 2:10-11 NLT.
- <sup>6</sup> Luke 2:13-14 NASB.
- <sup>7</sup> Matthew 1:19 NLT.
- <sup>8</sup> Matthew 1:21 NLT.
- <sup>9</sup> Philippians 2:6-9 NLT.
- <sup>10</sup> For more on evidence for Jesus, see [www.WholesJesus-Really.com](http://www.WholesJesus-Really.com) and [www.probe.org](http://www.probe.org).
- <sup>11</sup> For a summary of prophecies Jesus fulfilled, see Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1979), 141-177.
- <sup>12</sup> Micah 5:2.
- <sup>13</sup> Matthew 2:1 NASB.
- <sup>14</sup> Isaiah 7:14 NIV.
- <sup>15</sup> Matthew 1:18, 22-25; Luke 1:27, 34.
- <sup>16</sup> Peter W. Stoner, *Science Speaks* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 99-112.
- <sup>17</sup> McDowell, *op. cit.*, 62-63.
- <sup>18</sup> Frederic G. Kenyon, *The Bible and Archaeology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1940), 288; in McDowell, *op. cit.*, 41. McDowell develops these points in pp. 39-41ff.
- <sup>19</sup> John 3:16 NLT

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# Yes, the Christmas Story Matters in New Zealand Today!

By Rex Morgan

Our lead article (pp. 3–5) asked if the Christmas story still matters, two thousand years later in the modern world. In an address to Parliament just prior to Christmas 2011, Green Party co-leader Russel Norman, even though he is an avowed atheist, eloquently explained that Christmas *does* matter in modern New Zealand. As he summed it up: ‘Christmas is a way to understand what really matters in life’.

Writing in the *NZ Herald*, noted commentator Jim Hopkins also came to a similar conclusion:

‘Christmas is a stock-take of sorts—if we allow it. It’s a chance to look at the gaps in the map of ourselves, the uncharted bits, the courses not taken and journeys not made, the fears given succour, the opportunities spurned. From time to time—and this, by its nature, is such a time—we should check our own moral compass and see where we sit on the spectrum of our expectations.

‘But that will happen only if we acknowledge the character and history of Christmas and allow some part of the holy day into the holiday. And that’s all but gone now. The spirituality of Christmas has been heedlessly stripped away by the Caesars of our age, who would have no rendering except to themselves’.<sup>1</sup>

The following is quoted verbatim from the speech given to the NZ Parliament by Dr Russel Norman on 21 December 2011. These words are well worth thinking about at this time of year:

We’re about to break for Christmas, a time for family, sleeping in,

barbeques, trips to the beach, and spending time with our mates and family.

We will work hard and smart to repay the faith you’ve put in us to deliver a richer New Zealand with a smart green economy that works for everyone.

Our Christmas holiday has its roots firmly in the Jewish and Christian traditions. It’s based on a pretty amazing story about the birth of Jesus Christ—‘God in the flesh’ as many Christians believe.

The story of the incarnation of God in a baby born in a stable is remarkable even to me, an atheist, because it’s a story about the distant God of the heavens coming down to live amongst us on earth.

It’s a story about that God decreeing that tyranny on earth and utopia in the afterlife is not acceptable, and that freedom and equality must characterise life here on earth, as well as the afterlife in heaven. It’s a story of the birth of new hope.

The Christmas story tells us that a saviour of humanity came, not as some great warrior or prince, but wrapped instead in swaddling cloth—a baby born amongst farm animals, and in absolute poverty.

You know the rest. The shepherds in the field saw a bright star and followed it. Three wise men turned up with expensive-sounding gifts.

The baby grew up a carpenter in ancient Palestine, stirred up a lot of trouble later as a young man, and was executed by crucifixion under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius Caesar, as legend has it sometime around AD 30.

But the story doesn’t end there. After his death the new hope that sprang from the stable in Bethlehem started to gather steam. Religious and political elites were threatened by the wild growth of a new religious sect committed to living out here on Earth the values of their God, once worshipped from afar.

The early Christians shared their resources and lived with greater equality amongst themselves than had earlier been known.



*A Kiwi Christmas is about BBQs and trips to the beach with friends.*

They believed that the world on earth could be a better place for ordinary people. Countless Christians were martyred for their faith, such was the threat that they posed to the ruling political and religious elites.

By AD 112, even the farmers cursed Christ's influence: Christian beliefs on idolatry were causing a slump in agricultural markets as people challenged the need to buy animals for ritual sacrifice to Roman emperors or gods.

Two thousand years later the story of the brief life of Jesus Christ still resonates.

This is why Christmas is still such an enduring part of our culture. Christmas was the start of some unlikely trouble and the start of new hope.

### How the Story Touches Me

I'm not a Christian, and there is not historical certainty about the records in the Christian Bible. But what I admire about the Christmas story is that it speaks to values I share, including some that make me feel a little uneasy speaking from this place of privilege and power. I think you'll agree we're pretty far away from a Palestinian stable.

But like all parents, perhaps particularly those newly acquainted with the role, the story of change arriving in the form of a baby has resonance in my life.

And whether we're parents, grandparents, aunties, or friends, in our children we find our own awe at the beauty of our planet. They show us what it is to be truly open minded, and in their ferocious capacity to learn and grow and change we see that things could truly change and be better.

This Christmas we wish for all our babies to have their unquestioning need for love generously met. We wish that all our children are treated with patience and understanding, trust, and commitment. And we wish



*'...the story of change arriving in the form of a baby has resonance in my life.'*  
Dr. Russel Norman

that all our parents have the time, support, and resources necessary to give our children the best start in life.

And for us here in Parliament, I wish that we have the intelligence and compassion to choose to make things better for those who depend on us to make the right calls.

### Christmas As a Way to Understand What Really Matters in Life

Mahatma Gandhi said this about Jesus Christ: 'I believe that Jesus belongs not only to Christianity but to the entire world, to all races and to all people'.

Ghandi was right. The hopes and values Jesus Christ articulated during the course of his short life are too important to belong only to Christians. They belong to us all: believers and non-believers alike. They live within us. They are embedded in our culture. They are

reflected in most of the world's major religions.

These are the values that help to lay down the essential nature of what it means to be human and guide us to live a 'good' life: good to ourselves, good to one another, and good to the world in which we make our livelihoods.

I identify with the Christianity that teaches love and compassion towards each other, especially the most vulnerable: the widows, the orphans, the sick, and those in prison. Those values inspired some of the world's first hospitals, orphanages, universities, and reforms to the way we treat those who've broken the law.

I also identify with the Christianity that demands we live with truth and justice with one another. Those values challenged the status quo on slavery in Great Britain and moved Martin Luther King to march for equal rights for African Americans.



Christians and community organisations show compassion for the poor, the lonely, and the homeless at Christmas.

And here, in our home, it was through applying those very same values that Michael Joseph Savage turned the state on its head in an attempt to offer cradle to grave security from poverty and despair. In fact, the very first act of the new Savage Government was to grant a special Christmas bonus payment to the unemployed. Now there was a true moment of Christmas in this Parliament that gave birth to a new hope that our political economy could be bent to protect the vulnerable. That was applied Christianity.

Finally, I identify with the Christianity that teaches an awe and respect for the natural world. The Christianity that says: 'Tread sacredly through nature because God incarnated himself in the world through the person of Jesus Christ'. St Francis of Assisi wrote sermons for the birds and taught us to live simply and value nature for its own sake. Listen to the dying words of Father Zosima, a character in the last work of Fyodor Dostoevsky, the great Christian novelist:

Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray

of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything,...you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love.<sup>2</sup>

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> 'Silent Night - Voice of Our History', Jim Hopkins, *NZ Herald*, 23 Dec., 2011.

<sup>2</sup> *The Brothers Karamazov*

### You are invited to come and meet the sponsors of *Inside Life!*

Worldwide Church of God services are held weekly in the following locations:

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(contact: Rex Morgan, ph. 09 489 8910)

**Rotorua:** Contact Peter Lindop, ph. 07 349 2272

**Wellington:** Thumbs Up  
5 Elizabeth Street, Petone  
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(contact: Dennis Gordon, ph. 04 386 2094)

**Invercargill:** The Southern Light Community Centre  
64 Conon Street  
Saturdays at 1:00 pm.

(contact: Les Evans, ph. 03 216 3680)

**Other NZ locations:** Small groups meet regularly in other cities nationwide. For details, contact Dennis Richards, ph. 06 353 6224 or visit [www.wcg.org.nz](http://www.wcg.org.nz)



# hristmas for Sinners



By Joseph Tkach

**W**hen the Magi finally met Jesus, the King of the Jews, after being led to him by a special star, they did not find him in a king's palace. They found Mary, Joseph, and the babe in a manger.

Who would have expected it—the promised King, the Anointed One—born in a stable? What more unlikely place to look for the prophesied Prince of Peace—in a cattle stall. But Jesus came to real people in the real world. He came to stand in for and represent every person in every age, from the first man to the last, from the greatest to the least, the rich, the poor, the middle class, every race and every tribe—and every one of them a sinner. Jesus came to save sinners, not to bask in the fineries of human royalty.

The Christmas stable reminds us that whatever life throws at us, whatever trials we might face, whatever our lot in life, Jesus is with us. Jesus is there beside us. God knows our plight and stands alongside us in undying love.

At the Messiah's stable the world's pride has no place. In that lowly place he came to dwell with us in our deepest sin, weakness, need, sorrow, and pain. Here in a corner of a barn is Emmanuel, God with us.

Throughout Jesus' life, in lowliness and humility, he served sinning, broken, and desperate people. He showed even the lowliest and loneliest of men, women, and children that they really matter to God, and that true life does not consist in what people possess, or what their station in society is, or how much the world respects them.

Jesus shows us that God loves us and that we count; he loves us completely even at our very worst, even at our most sinful and our very weakest.

The message of the stable leads us to seek what really matters, the joy of receiving and giving faithful love. It calls us to trust in the One who loves us so much he will never let us go, and to stop wasting our lives on all the empty and meaningless things that cannot bring us real satisfaction, peace, hope, and joy.

In our Saviour Jesus Christ born in the common surroundings of common people, we find our deepest fulfillment in the shared love of God and our relationships with one another that alone make life worth living.

This is a transcript of the weekly 'Speaking of Life' radio programme by Joseph Tkach, president of Grace Communion International. For more information visit [www.gci.org](http://www.gci.org).

# Truce on Earth, Good Will to



*British and German troops fraternise on the field of battle on Christmas Eve, greeting each other and exchanging goodwill, and are even photographed together.*

By John Halford

About 15 years ago, I met an old soldier. A very old soldier. Frank Sumpter was more than 100 years old when we met. He was one of the dwindling ranks of veterans who had fought in the trenches of the First World War that raged from 1914 to 1918. Frank is dead now, as are all those who fought with him and against him. The last known WWI combat veteran died in Australia in May 2011.

I wanted to meet Frank because he was one of the few people who had personal memories of a remarkable event that happened at Christmas in the first year of that devastating

war nearly a century ago. The old soldier's body may have been fragile, but his mind was still sharp and focused. He told me a fascinating story.

Let me set the scene for you.

The dreadful conflict that history remembers as The Great War had been building in Europe for years. Germany in the late 19th century had become a formidable, united nation, and felt threatened by its neighbours. The rest of Europe, in turn, was alarmed by Germany's growing power.

Soldiers left their muddy trenches and met each other in No Man's Land. They shared drink, food,

and cigarettes. Some even played football.

Great Britain had been the unchallenged superpower of the day, but Germany was becoming a serious rival. The German leader, Kaiser Wilhelm II, was the grandson of Queen Victoria of England, and the two nations were not natural enemies. But storm clouds were gathering as political and economic tensions steadily increased across the continent.

By August 1914, Europe was ready for war, and a madman's murderous assault on the Archduke of Austria provided the catalyst. Germany invaded Belgium, and Britain and

# ward Men



France had pledged to come to the little nation's defence. So hundreds of thousands of young Britons, Germans, and Frenchmen cheerfully went off to fight for King, Kaiser, or Country. Both sides expected a quick victory: 'Home by Christmas' was the patriotic slogan.

But it was not to be. A fierce winter set in over the battlefield, and neither side could gain a quick victory. By December 1914, the two huge armies were stalemated, bogged down in a line of trenches that stretched from the Belgian coast to the Alps. Losses to both sides were appalling as they fought to gain or regain a few feet of land.

It soon became obvious that this war would be different from anything the world had seen before. It would not be decided by one or two pitched battles. The front-line soldiers lived for weeks on end, knee deep in mud, literally in each other's gun sights. They had once shared the same youthful enthusiasm, the same belief that they were fighting for a worthy cause. But as winter clamped down, friend and foe realised that, far from being home for Christmas, they were trapped in the grim trenches, cannon fodder for the first modern industrialised war.

Then on the evening before Christmas of 1914, a remarkable thing began to happen. Frank Sumpter remembered:

The Germans started it. They were in the trenches about 80 yards away, with rolls of barbed wire separating us. As Christmas Eve fell, the German troops called across 'Happy Christmas, Tommy'. 'We called back 'Happy Christmas, Happy Noel'. Then the Germans signalled to us to come out and we began to move.

The officers became extremely annoyed and called out 'Get back in the trenches'. But we ignored them. We had no particular feelings of animosity towards the individuals on the other side. We were soldiers, and soldiers don't hate each other. We put our hands through the rolls of barbed wire and shook hands with the German troops.

One man asked me where I was from, and I told him. 'Do you know the Jolly Farmer Pub?' he said, and I said, 'Yes'. He said, 'I used to be the barber next door!' As far as we were concerned there was no hatred between us.<sup>1</sup>

Similar exchanges began to happen all along the front line. German soldiers adorned their lines with candles and makeshift Christmas trees. On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, men who only a few hours before had been trying to kill

each other sang carols and songs across the trenches. Soldiers left their muddy trenches and met each other in No Man's Land. They shared drink, food, and cigarettes. Some even played football.

Soldiers on both sides wrote home about this extraordinary event. One German soldier wrote:

Is it possible? Are the French really going to leave us in peace today, Christmas Eve? Then, listen; from across the way came the sound of a festive song. A Frenchman singing a Christmas carol with a marvellous tenor voice.

Everyone lay still, listening in the quiet of the night. Is it our imagination or is it maybe meant to lull us into a false sense of security? Or is it in fact the victory of God's love over human conflict?

And from a letter written by Sergeant A. Lovell of the 3rd Rifle Brigade:

Climbing the parapet, I saw a sight which I shall remember to my dying day. Right along the whole line were hung paper lanterns and illuminations of every description...as I stood in wonder a rousing song came over to us....Our boys answered with a cheer. Eventually a party of our men got out from the trenches and invited the Germans to meet them halfway and talk. And there in the searchlight they stood, Englishmen and Germans, chatting, and smoking cigarettes together midway between the lines. A rousing cheer went up from friends and foe alike.

The diary of Lieutenant Geoffrey Heinekey of the 2nd Queen's Royal West Surrey regiment recounted an astonishing development as Christmas dawned over the front line:

The next morning a most extraordinary thing happened—I should think one of the most curious things in the war. Some Germans came out and held up their hands and began taking

in some of our wounded, and so we ourselves immediately got out of the trenches and began to bring in our wounded also. The Germans then beckoned to us and a lot of us went over and talked to them and they helped us bury our dead. This lasted the whole morning, and I talked with several of them and I must say they seemed extraordinarily fine men. It seemed too ironical for words. There,



Officers and men of 26th Divisional Ammunition Train playing football in Salonika, Greece on Christmas Day, 1915.

the night before we had been having a terrific battle and the morning after, there we were, smoking their cigarettes and they smoking ours.

No one gave the order to fraternise like this. It happened spontaneously, in many different places, all along the front. It was just that the ordinary Tommy, Fritz, and Jacques had had enough, and for 'one brief shining moment,'<sup>2</sup> sanity prevailed over the madness. The generals didn't like it. They realised that if opposing soldiers became friendly, it would weaken their resolve to continue the struggle. Nevertheless, in some places the unofficial armistice continued into the New Year. (Certain areas of the line actually remained quiet for even longer by an unspoken, mutual consent.) But eventually the fighting started again.

It lasted for nearly four more years, until the 11th minute of the 11th hour of the 11th month of 1918. So terrible had been the carnage that politicians confidently said it had been the war to end all wars. It wasn't. Twenty-one years later, the sons of those who fought in those trenches

were at it again in the trenches of World War II. It never ends.

Of course, there is another way—a way humanity longs to go but cannot. But that path, the path of love, the path of peace, is a path humanity is incapable of walking. Even when we are weary of the fighting, hating, and killing; even when we weep the tears of deepest pain and anguish for our sons, and now our daughters, who are sent away to war to return broken and traumatised, if not in body bags. Even then—even then—we always do it again. In the words of the musical, *Shenandoah*, set in the U.S. Civil War: 'They always got a holy cause to send you off to war'.

Jesus changed all that.

Christmas is our way of celebrating the Incarnation, the 'becoming human' of the Son of God for the sake of humanity. He became one of us. He took up our cause into his own being. He lived our life for us.<sup>3</sup> He died our death for us.<sup>4</sup> He is our righteousness,<sup>5</sup> and he draws all people, even you and me, to him.<sup>6</sup> He has made us one with him, one

with each other, and in him, one with the Father.<sup>7</sup> In Jesus Christ, at what the Bible calls 'the day of his appearing', the day will at last have arrived when 'Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore'.<sup>8</sup>

Ninety-eight years ago, at Christmastime, for one shining moment in the midst of a ghastly war, the spirit and hope of peace transformed the hearts of soldiers at the front. The day is coming when such a moment will last forever.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Louis Orgeldinger, *History of Württembergische Reserve Infantry Regiment No. 246*, Stuttgart, 1931.

<sup>2</sup> Lerner and Lowe, *Camelot*.

<sup>3</sup> Colossians 3:4.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:14.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:30.

<sup>6</sup> John 12:32.

<sup>7</sup> John 14:20.

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 2:4.

John Halford is Editor of *Christian Odyssey* magazine. This article was first published in the December 2011-January 2012 edition of *Christian Odyssey*.  
[www.gci.org/publications/odyssey](http://www.gci.org/publications/odyssey).

# Coping with Loneliness at Christmas

By Rusty Wright

**T**is the season to be...gloomy? Feeling low this Christmas season? You're not alone.

Amid cheery songs, festive parties, gifts, and good wishes, many lonely people are crying or dying on the inside. Maybe you're one of them. I was.

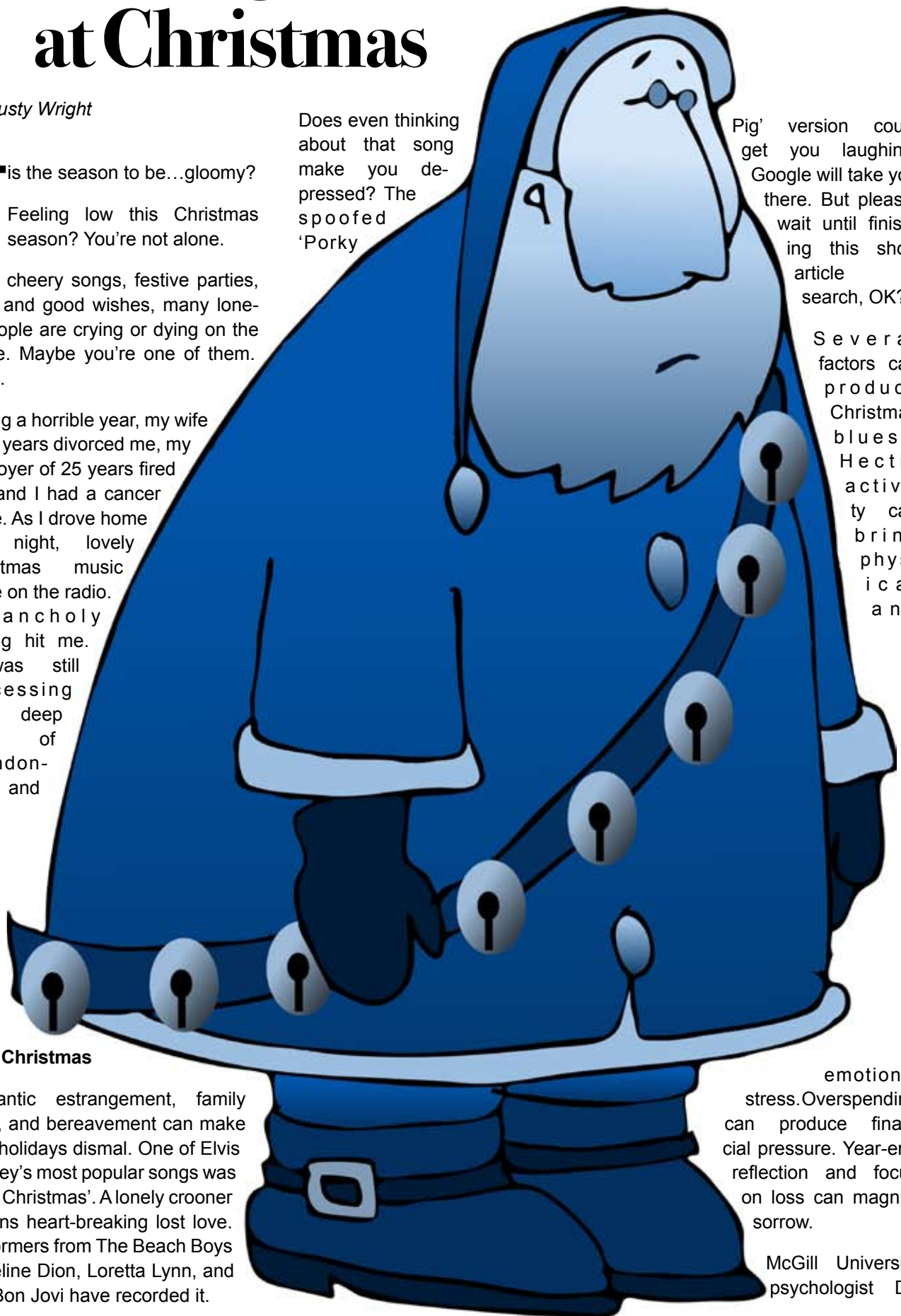
During a horrible year, my wife of 20 years divorced me, my employer of 25 years fired me, and I had a cancer scare. As I drove home one night, lovely Christmas music came on the radio. Melancholy aching hit me. I was still processing the deep pain of abandonment and loss.

No fun.

Does even thinking about that song make you depressed? The spoofed 'Porky

Pig' version could get you laughing. Google will take you there. But please, wait until finishing this short article to search, OK?

Several factors can produce Christmas blues.<sup>1</sup> Hectic activity can bring physical and



## Blue Christmas

Romantic estrangement, family strife, and bereavement can make your holidays dismal. One of Elvis Presley's most popular songs was 'Blue Christmas'. A lonely crooner mourns heart-breaking lost love. Performers from The Beach Boys to Celine Dion, Loretta Lynn, and Jon Bon Jovi have recorded it.

emotional stress. Overspending can produce financial pressure. Year-end reflection and focus on loss can magnify sorrow.

McGill University psychologist Dr.



of depression the medical community doesn't completely understand. The Mayo Clinic says genetics, age, and body chemistry could be the culprits. Mayo recommends seeing your doctor if you feel down for days and have motivation problems. Symptoms can include changing sleep patterns and appetite, feeling hopeless, contemplating suicide, or seeking

comfort in alcohol.<sup>4</sup>

Michael Spevack notes: 'Overeating and over drinking combined with a decreased amount of sleep is also a formula for extreme emotional swings'. Depression can lead to thoughts of suicide, especially among the socially isolated, he says.<sup>2</sup>

### The 'Empty Chair'

Is your family apart this season by necessity or choice? Maybe an 'empty chair' reminds you of your pain. Does Christmas 'Ho, ho, ho' contrast with your deep anguish?

One widow recalled how she felt during the Christmas after her husband's death:

Little mattered to me. I didn't want to hear carols. I didn't want to be cheered up. I didn't want to look at perky Christmas cards. I wanted the same thing I'd wanted every day for eight months: the strength to force myself out of bed in the morning, to brush my teeth, and to eat.<sup>3</sup>

One possible influence, Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), is a form

### Coping

How can you cope with Christmas loneliness? Some suggestions:

● Spend time with people, especially positive ones who lift your spirits. Perhaps you'll be grateful for their cheer.

● Exercise regularly. Blood pumping can help clear your mind.

● Eat right. Chocaholics beware. Overindulgence can mean temporary highs followed by disappointing flab.

● Lights on! Enjoy sunlight, outdoors if possible. Brighten up your home and workplace. Light therapy sometimes helps SAD.

● Budget your gift spending and stick with your budget. Prevent January bill shock.

● Talk about your feelings. Keeping them bottled up can mean anxiety, ulcers, sour disposition, and/or explosion. Need a trusted, listening friend? Try a local church.

● Give to others. Volunteer. Medical professor Stephen Post is convinced that giving is essential for optimum physical and mental health in our fragmented society. He says some California physicians give volunteerism 'prescriptions' to their Medicare patients.<sup>5</sup>

● Seek counsel. I used to be embarrassed to obtain professional counsel. Now I recommend it. We all can use good advice navigating life's storms.

● Develop spiritual roots. I'm glad that before my dark days began, I had a friendship with God.

Tired of friends who betray, manipulate, disrespect, or desert you? God won't. He cares for you, values you, will listen to you, and comfort you. You can trust Him. He always wants your best.

One early believer put it this way: 'Since God did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't God, who gave us Christ, also give us everything else?'<sup>6</sup> His point: God loved us enough to send Jesus, his only Son, to die on the cross to pay the penalty for our wrong, our sins. What a demonstration of love! I can trust a God like that. Then Jesus rose from the dead so He could live inside us and become our friend.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> 'Christmas Holiday Depression', 18 December 2005, [www.medicalnewstoday.com](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Cartledgehayes, 'Blue Christmas – Grieving through The Holidays', *Christian Century*, December 27, 2003, [www.findarticles.com](http://www.findarticles.com)

<sup>4</sup> 'Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)', *Mayo Clinic Staff*, September 24, 2007, [www.mayoclinic.com](http://www.mayoclinic.com).

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Post and Jill Neimark, *Why Good Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Romans 8:32

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# HolidayGreetings.com

By Brenda Steffen

I don't do much for the holidays. I string up a few lights, more for a cosiness factor in the cold than anything else. And I have a single star I put in my window every year.

I also bake a few batches of gingerbread cookies and give some to the neighbours and to my high-school girlfriends at our annual holiday breakfast. My husband, who is a sailor, is gone every other Christmas. Last year, I spent the day talking with him on Skype, along with friends in Germany and Egypt, and eating the rest of those gingerbread cookies. I probably took a nap in between. All in all, I'm pretty low key as far as any holiday goes. Except for one thing.

Most of my friends tell me that mailing Christmas cards is a chore, and expensive, and something they put off until the last minute. But I love it.

I remember, as a child, getting pen pal letters from far away. Some pen pals I had met, through church or summer camp, but others I wrote to for school projects or in response to their ads in magazines asking for pen pals. I had my own little desk where I wrote about my life as a 10-year-old. Once I mailed the letters, I eagerly awaited replies.

How thrilling to know that somewhere on the planet, someone else eagerly waited to hear news from me. Me!

Checking the mail was (and admittedly, it still is) one of my favourite parts of the day. Sometimes there was a photo of a pen pal in one of the letters, or even some kind of trinket. Before the Internet made it so easy to share our every obscure thought and fuzzy photo, we kids measured our 'friend lists'

by the stack of wallet-sized pics we had traded with one another.

From our house to the mailbox was a good walk, and some days it proved fruitless except for the exercise. Sometimes my mom would get the mail and come back and joke that nobody loved us because there were only bills in the mail.

Even now, my husband says the same thing with a laugh when there is nothing good in the mail. With a mailbox full of bills, rejection letters from various publishers, and flyers with special offers that aren't so special after they've sent the fifth one, good news is hard to come by.

There is something so refreshing about opening an envelope with a foreign postmark and my name handwritten on it, and reading holiday cheer—or indeed anytime-of-year-cheer—from friends far away.

Proverbs 25:25 says: 'Like cold water to a weary soul is good news from a distant land'.

*The Message* paraphrase says it like this: 'Like a cool drink of water when you're worn out and weary is a letter from a long-lost friend'.

I don't know about you, but I know a lot of worn out and thirsty people out there. Sure, the cost of stamps has gone up. And most greeting card companies charge a small

fortune to say something that you can just as easily email or post to 400 plus friends at the same time on Facebook. But really, how special does it make you feel when you get a mass message from someone that essentially says: 'You're a dear friend...but you are not worth 70 cents to me.'?

I have been guilty, more than once, of crossing someone's name off my Christmas card list because they haven't reciprocated for a few

years. I might have to rethink that policy, though. Maybe they're the very people who need to hear some good news, even if it's simply news that someone, somewhere, is actually thinking of them.

Perhaps it's time to add a few people to the list instead of crossing some off. Won't you join me? And while we're at it, let's not stop at just at the holidays. We can send a note to our friend's child at summer camp. We can mail a letter to a school friend we haven't seen in 20 years. We can put a family photo in a real card for the widow at church who always gives us a hug and says we remind her of her granddaughter on the other side of the country. It might be exactly what they've been waiting for in their own mailbox.

May we all receive a little good news from both far and near this holiday season!

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