

# Experiencing the Holy Days



Jim Raddin

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**Jim Raddin**

J H Raddin LLC  
2017

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With great thanksgiving  
For my dear wife Janie  
And our sharing of the Holy Days  
For fifty years and  
Just for Now.

Jim Raddin  
Rockport, Texas  
April, 2017



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Jim Raddin

# INTRODUCTION

## THE HOLIDAYS

### A Significant Season

You've heard it before. "There's no place like home for the holidays." There is no mistaking which holidays are being discussed. When we talk about the holiday season in the United States, we can only be talking about the days ushered in by Thanksgiving, including Christmas, and ending at New Year's Day. All three are federal holidays. The season brings forth thoughts of home and warm memories, probably for most of us.

For me, some of the strongest and fondest memories of childhood involve trips to my grandparents' home at Thanksgiving and at Christmas. Home still means a lot at the holidays, but the site keeps changing over the years. My grandparents' home has given way to my parents' and then to our own, in various parts of the country. The memories jumble the locations up now, and mix the years together, but I can still see the faces and even smell the smells. Homes can be added but they rarely get subtracted away from our memories. The significance of the holidays remains firmly rooted in home, family and friends for most of us, but is also entwined with other considerations. These vary from person to person and for an individual over time. For some, these days can bring forth a profound sadness, particularly soon after the loss of a loved one. For others, the impending flurry of activities can even elicit thoughts of "Here we go again."

There is an overwhelming economic aspect to the holidays. Dramatic amounts of money are spent during this season. The holidays are therefore widely promoted by merchants and manufacturers alike. Thanksgiving opens the shopping season. Advertisers, malls, greeting card companies and even car dealers are among those who celebrate. Athletic contests vie for spectators who have the time off to spectate. Schools have breaks. Movies premiere. People travel. Money is spent. A good time is had, maybe not by all, but for many.

Food can be important during the holidays, particularly at Thanksgiving. Music and decorations can be of great significance, particularly at Christmas, when some music is heard only at that time of year. Celebrations with friends may take on great importance particularly at New Year's Eve. Always there is the remembering. Especially, there is the remembering.

Remembering is what defines and creates traditions, and our traditions shape our experience of the holidays in ways far beyond our everyday conscious recognition. We do and think and say some things simply because that is the way we have always known to do and to think and to say. There is a prevailing narrative overlay that we tend not to examine but which has a profound effect on the collective consciousness. This leads to some remarkable contradictions, as we shall explore later.

### The Boundaries of Acceptability

Our population does not unanimously share some significant aspects of the holidays. Things of deepest significance for some are of no significance for others and provocations for vehement rejection by still others. Typically these aspects center on what might be termed the "religious" content of the holidays. It's hard to avoid. Thanksgiving implies giving thanks, but for what and to whom? Christmas would seem to have something to do with Christ. The problem is skirted somewhat by expanding the references to other celebrations such as Hanukkah and Kwanzaa, but there remains a vocal group that takes offense even to being wished a "Merry Christmas".

The phrase, by the way, seems a little strange even to those who would look to Christ in these times. Merriment would seem to have more to do with New Year's Eve than Christmas, but, out of tradition, nobody says "Happy Christmas" or "Merry New Year". It just isn't done.

But scattered, vocal offense-takers do protest any hint of religious connotations on public display during the holidays. Nativity scenes on public grounds can be taken as an affront. The word "Christmas" may still be protested on constitutional grounds.

On the opposing side are those who insist on "keeping Christ in Christmas", even when it is not at all clear that He is there to be kept, among the reindeer,

the dancing snowmen, the Christmas trees, the gifts, and the stockings hung by the chimney with care.

It may be that neither side perceives the threat with any meaningful grip on reality.

The demilitarized zone in all this is populated by innocuous “Season’s Greetings”, potentially applicable at any time of the year, and of course “Happy Holidays”, treating the celebration euphemistically, without saying the “C” word.

### The Meaning of “Holiday”

It is curious indeed that the word “holidays” should gain acceptance by either side. We have observed that the holiday season refers uniquely and specifically in our minds to the time between Thanksgiving and New Year’s, but it seems to imply more than just days off from work or school. It is instructive to look at the origin and meaning of “holiday”.

Reference to most dictionaries would reveal that the word, in English, derives from the term “Holy Days”. The anti-Christ-in-Christmas crowd ought not find the term more acceptable than Christmas. The pro-Christ-in-Christmas crowd would probably be left wondering why the “Holy” is disguised and what the other holy days are. The wonder is that the greeting “Happy Holidays” doesn’t seem to raise much concern for anyone.

As a result, the holidays are generally marked by a strange truce among multiple opposing camps operating privately in their own terms but publically in poorly understood terms, with all sides generally having a pretty good time despite some scattered uproar. This result derives, I think, primarily from tradition. You don’t want to be a Scrooge, so you do what you’ve learned to do and you live and let live, for the most part. People operate within strange and radically contradictory circumstances because that’s the way we have learned to do it. Always, there is the remembering. You want to pass along to your children what has been meaningful to you, even when it constitutes an odd mix of contradictory symbols. Santa Claus, nativity scenes, decorated trees and presents somehow co-exist.

Tradition, learned from childhood, is rarely examined or analyzed rationally. We just tend to live it, because that is what we do. That is what our prevailing narrative dictates and narratives are powerfully important shapers of our lives.

In that sense, the holidays are an illustrative example of the way we live the rest of our year. We have little use for deliberative analysis of things that we have known as far back as we can remember. These are things we did not come up with on our own. There has never really been an occasion to think them over. We either live them over again, or we begin ignoring them. After all, “holiday” is just a word we use for a different day, maybe a day off. The meaning is not all that relevant to us.

### A Basis for Celebration

Let me explain what this book is about. To some extent it is about what I thought I knew but didn’t and what I thought I couldn’t know but can. It is an unusual blend of Bible study, history, mathematics and physics. I like them all. They can be considered together more gracefully than I expected. The mixture allows some different perspectives on each area. Fundamentally, the book derives from my experience with God.

We will look first at the “Holidays”: Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s. We will explore some surprising disconnects in the generally unexamined traditions that form the basis for each. As we go, we will look at some potential aspects of each holiday celebration from outside the conventional prevailing narrative. Finally, we are going to put forward a basis for celebrating not just the holidays, but for celebrating all of life. The holidays serve as an illustrative example for the rest of our days.

The basis for celebrating will be found not in any tradition but uniquely in the Person of God, not in what we think we know about Him, but just in Himself. I suspect some observations along the way may come as a surprise to all sides of the holiday controversy. God certainly has come as a surprise to me.

The book is written from an unapologetically Christian perspective for reasons that will become clear. Christ is the One I have come to experience, in ways I did not expect.

The book will quote from the Bible. Some of the passages may be familiar ones; others may not. I do this simply because of my own experience with this God we have. It does not come from training in theology or adherence to a denomination or a named doctrinal position. You will decide whether the thoughts are worth your consideration.

As I turn to the Bible as my source, I will not open a discussion on how it should be viewed. I am simply going to look at what it says. I suspect there is too much attention to opinions about the Bible and too little attention to what it actually says. I certainly have not been able to figure it all out. I have found, however, that my attention has been drawn to what it says, and that has been a consistent part of my experience with the God I know.

Much of this book refers to what is said in the Bible, both in the Old and the New Testament. There will be some direct quotes from various translations, often the New American Standard Bible (NASB). There will also be simple summaries of various sections, but I will try to provide references to those sections so that you may go and look for yourself. I recommend that you do, and that you follow wherever else His Word may lead.

The book is also sprinkled with some unapologetically technical discussions involving science and mathematics. Those disciplines form much of my own educational and professional background. These discussions are needful to address a few of the persistent disconnects in our orientation to the world in which we live. I will attempt to make these forays accessible without too much pain.

By the way, the book is not for sale. If someone sold it to you, you paid too much. It was not written as a profit-making enterprise for anyone, especially not for me. With no profit motive, I expect there will be no conventional marketing campaign, advertising or sales statistics. I expect no wide distribution unless He brings it about. You may make as many properly attributed copies as you like, electronically or on paper, as long as they are for your own use or for giving to someone else free of charge. Please don't sell them. A website has been established at **[experiencingtheholydays.com](http://experiencingtheholydays.com)** where the book may be downloaded free of charge. I expect to have some hardcopies made just for the printing cost at **[lulu.com](http://lulu.com)**, a print-on-demand service. You are welcome to do the same if you want a hardcopy or you may find a less expensive way.

The God I experience is not a God to be exploited or even one who relies on me to serve Him. Instead, He has reached down in Jesus Christ to serve me. That is the basis for my celebration, for the holidays and for all of life.

# **PART 1: THE EXPERIENCE OF THANKSGIVING**

## **CHAPTER 1 THE UNEXAMINED ROOTS OF TRADITION**

### The Common Experience of Thanksgiving

You've heard this before too. The experience of Thanksgiving Day in the United States goes all the way back to the Pilgrims. They celebrated the first Thanksgiving with the indigenous people when they brought in their first harvest and it pretty much went on from there. At least the current popular narrative would have it that way.

Today, Thanksgiving is a pleasant time that often involves a rare and relaxing four-day weekend. It has to do with family gatherings, often at Grandma's. It has to do with food, usually a familiar feast prepared at home but sometimes eaten out, typically including turkey, because that's what the Pilgrims ate. At no other time of year is such a sumptuous feast prepared. Turkeys and the usual accompaniments are frequently made available to those in need. Everyone should be well fed, at least on this day.

Parades take place. They are more commonly watched on television than they are participated in or seen in person. Football is watched, again usually on television so you don't have to stray far from the dinner table. Traditional family recipes, like pumpkin pie, abound because that's what the Pilgrims ate. At the end, we have mounds of dirty dishes, but everyone pitches in and has a good time. A few simply carry out the task of holding down a recliner.

And then there is the shopping, and here is where it starts. After all, Christmas is coming. The decorations are out in the stores. Santa shows up



at the tail end of the parade. He has his list and so do we. The sales are upon us and we need to procure gifts. As children, we desired after them. As adults, we have inherited the need to give them. Our lists also include getting our own decorations up and planning to attend and put on a variety of holiday gatherings. For some, Christmas cards must be planned or letters written with the year's travelogues, illness chronologies, birth announcements and obituaries. The address list must be updated, added to and pared down. Photos must be taken. Our attention is drawn in hundreds of directions.

That is the typical American Thanksgiving. It is a busy time. It's certainly a good thing there are a couple of days after Thursday to get things attended to, unless you happen to work in retail or something.

The oddest thing to me is that, when we say or hear the word "Thanksgiving", it doesn't seem to mean "thanks" "giving" in our heads. "Thanksgiving" is simply a word on its own that stands for all this activity, evoking memories of family, food, pleasure and being busy. Actual giving of thanks, if it occurs at all, is relegated to the expression of warm thoughts or a brief prayer before digging in. The tradition has again replaced the plain meaning of the term.

## The Pilgrims

It is also odd to see how different the reality is from the tradition. The American celebration of Thanksgiving did not start with the Pilgrims and just carry on from there.

Take a look at the history, from a wide variety of sources, and you will find a different story. The Pilgrims were a group of separatists who had left the Church of England and pursued their own course. After a stay in the Netherlands for some of them, an expedition was formed to establish a colony in the New World, intending to settle in the area of the Hudson River in what is now New York. They arranged for shipping to take them, along with some other recruited colonists. Forced to consolidate into one ship, they arrived at Cape Cod, in what is now Massachusetts, almost at our current Thanksgiving time in 1620.

There was not much palpable cause for thanksgiving, however. The voyage was arduous. It was too late in the year for them to do much to help their situation. After some exploration, they ended up choosing their site off the

Cape at Plymouth in an abandoned native village where the population had died off, apparently from previously imported European disease. Cold and lack of food took their toll. Roughly half of the group died, including the governor. Some moved to hastily constructed homes. Some stayed on the Mayflower, which wintered over.

The native population provided some assistance. At least one of them, surprisingly, spoke English. He had previously been taken from the area by earlier visitors, learned the language in England and ultimately made his way back to the New World. For him it was the old one. Crops were planted in the spring, with some of the seed having been obtained from native burial mounds, and a harvest was ultimately had. It was life from death in a way.

A feast of Thanksgiving occurred in the fall of 1621 with some of the native benefactors in attendance. It likely took place well before the time of our current celebration. Ours occurs long after harvest time is past in New England. Theirs lasted three days instead of one.

Contrary to popular notions, however, it was not continued as an annual Thanksgiving. There was no observance in 1622. They actually had one in 1623, but it was in summer to observe the coming of rain that relieved a drought.

Thanksgiving observances were a haphazard affair throughout the colonies; some simply as harvest festivals, others to mark various occasions or events. Nobody followed an annual tradition laid down by the Pilgrims, not even the Pilgrims. In fact, the Plymouth Colony of Pilgrims did not survive as an identifiable group. It was later absorbed into the Puritan-associated Massachusetts Bay Colony.

The Pilgrims did not establish a tradition, there were no Pilgrims to hand a tradition down, and there was nobody who was disposed to receive one. Over 150 years passed by. There was no national holiday, in part because there was no nation.

## An Evolving American Celebration

We finally had a national day of Thanksgiving proclaimed by President George Washington on Thursday, the 26<sup>th</sup> of November in 1789. There had been a variety of colonial days of Thanksgiving and a few congressional or other recommendations that God be thanked on various occasions for battles won or other presumed favors granted. However, the first true national day of Thanksgiving was the one in 1789, and it was on the fourth Thursday in November. The Pilgrims were not mentioned by name in the declaration. The promotion of “the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue” was, however, specifically mentioned by Washington in his official declaration. Such words would surely raise some protest today.

Here is the next disconnect. They did not have a Thanksgiving in 1790, or the next year, or the next. Washington declared another a few years later. Some presidents declared occasional Thanksgivings at various times of year. Others declared none. Some states had them. Others did not. This continued up to the time of the American Civil War some 70 years later.

At that point there arose a formidable woman by the name of Sarah Josepha Hale. She was the editor of what was then the foremost periodical for women. I gather she was sort of a combination of Martha Stewart, Oprah Winfrey, and a few others. Sarah Hale likely had some influence on you. She wrote a little song that you might have heard entitled “Mary Had a Little Lamb”.

Sarah Hale conducted a tireless campaign, principally through editorials and letter writing, to establish a national day of Thanksgiving. Her targets specifically included President Abraham Lincoln. In 1863, he declared a national “Day of Thanksgiving and Praise” on the last Thursday of November of that year. Once again, the declaration did not mention the Pilgrims, but by that time 242 years had passed since the “first” Thanksgiving. Parts of the nation, still acting as the Confederacy, paid no heed.

The choice of date may have related to the precedent set by Washington 74 years earlier. It still did not correspond to the current arrangement. In most Novembers, the fourth Thursday and the last Thursday are the same day, but in years when November 1<sup>st</sup> falls on Wednesday or Thursday, the last

Thursday in November is the fifth Thursday and Thanksgiving Day was celebrated a week later than we would do it now on the fourth Thursday.

Presidents following Lincoln pretty consistently continued to proclaim Thanksgiving Day as a national observance on the last Thursday of November. In 1885, by act of Congress, Thanksgiving Day was finally established as a federal holiday along with four others, including Christmas and New Year's Day. This was only 3 years before my maternal grandfather was born, and 265 years after the "tradition" was established.

The final change was set in motion in 1939. By that time, Thanksgiving was a big deal. It ushered in the Christmas shopping season. Some concerned merchants contacted President Franklin D. Roosevelt because the first of November fell on Wednesday in 1939. That would have put Thanksgiving Day on November 30<sup>th</sup>, leaving the shortest possible Christmas shopping season. The nation was still recovering from the Great Depression. In an effort to stimulate the economy, Roosevelt declared the Thanksgiving holiday to be the next-to-last Thursday in November for 1939 and for future years. He did not appreciate what a hornet's nest he had stirred up.

Consternation reigned. Football games had already been scheduled! FDR was accused of disrespecting Lincoln. Some called the day "Franksgiving". Some states celebrated the new "Democratic Thanksgiving". Some celebrated the old "Republican Thanksgiving". I have read that Texas chose to celebrate both. Good for them.

The unsatisfactory arrangements continued, with Thanksgiving defined to be November 21<sup>st</sup> in 1940 and November 20<sup>th</sup> in 1941. When November 1<sup>st</sup> falls on a Tuesday, Thanksgiving could have been as early as November 17<sup>th</sup>. Finally, a compromise was reached. Congress passed a designation of Thanksgiving Day as being the fourth Thursday in November, not the last (although sometimes it is) and not the next-to-last (although sometimes it is). No Pilgrims were consulted. Roosevelt signed it in December 1941, not long after the attack on Pearl Harbor and less than four years before I was born. It was more than 320 years after the celebration considered to be the "first" Thanksgiving. Our "tradition", in its current form, is only 75 years old as I write this.

## Transitory Thanksgiving

There are other groups and areas of the country claiming to have established the first Thanksgiving. Surely there are many who made landfall here or who survived difficult circumstances and proclaimed their gratitude to someone in some way. There does not seem to be any group at all with a uniquely credible claim to having established the one basis from which our current holiday derives. There simply has been no continuing tradition stretching back to the 1600's.

It is of interest, however, to examine the tradition we have and the character of the thanks we give, when thanks are given at all, at Thanksgiving. The "traditional" things that we are thankful for, in my opinion, fall into about five broad categories. See if your experience agrees with mine.

The first thing for which we are thankful seems generally to be our health. We are thankful for life itself and our capacity to enjoy it. Secondly, we are thankful for our loved ones: our family, our friends, those with whom we are gathered, or whom we miss. Thirdly, we are thankful for a place to gather, our homes or whatever shelter provides our gathering place. We may extend this concept to our country or whatever place or entity is considered ours. Fourthly, we are thankful for the food, and sometimes the hands that provided and prepared it. Pictures depicting an American Thanksgiving Day generally involve dinner tables, always laden ones. Finally, while we typically don't include the football games or shopping, we usually have something to say about our material blessings. What we have at whatever level, is acknowledged as a provision for which we are grateful. Have I reasonably summarized the standard prayer or sentiment voiced before everyone digs in? What is absolutely remarkable about all this is the transitory nature of everything on the list. Let's think about each category again.

We are thankful for our health, while we have it. For many of us over time that becomes harder. Those who die of a sudden crash, stroke or heart attack may never notice this. Many, however, get to experience long courses of the ravages of disease. We may still express thanks for what we have left, but dementia can limit our degree of reasoned gratitude.

Family and loved ones are not permanent in this life either. The family members I recall gathered around the table when I was a child are all gone

now except for one. I have heard people say Thanksgiving is just not the same since so-and-so died this year. Another may fill an empty chair at the table, but the process of falling away is inexorable. The old family physicians of the villages will eventually lose all their patients except for the select survivors that lose their doctor.

What about the homes? Some of the homes I have gathered in as a younger person no longer exist, or are being lived in by other people I do not know. The same will eventually occur for those places where we gathered last year. Countries are not immortal either.

What about the food? The leftover food tastes different after a week. More than that, there are things I can no longer eat that I used to enjoy. For some of us, it will be harder, though perhaps not impossible, to be thankful for food delivered through feeding tubes.

What about the material blessings? Not only can you not take it with you, it tends to lose its luster or slip through your fingers even before you leave.

The people and things we tend to be thankful for are not lasting in this world simply because they are people and things.

I believe God calls us to a fundamentally different and profoundly permanent Thanksgiving. The next chapters of this book examine three Thanksgiving feasts from the Bible that point to this permanence.

## CHAPTER 2

### A MEMORABLE THANKSGIVING

#### The Presence of God

Long before Lincoln or the Pilgrims, King David declared a national day of celebration, thanksgiving and praise when he reigned over the Kingdom of Israel. It involved national feasting with food provided to all the citizens. It did not establish an annual tradition, but, like the Pilgrims, it is noteworthy in its own right. David's feast was different from the annual, prescribed feasts and observances God had earlier laid out for His people. It was simply a celebration of thanksgiving. To appreciate what was going on, we need to review a fair amount of background from the Bible.

With David's feast, the celebration had to do with something called the ark, a different ark than the one Noah occupied. Allow me a few pages to summarize what this ark was and what was going on. We are considering a time in the neighborhood of 1000 years before Christ, or about 3000 years ago. Much had already happened that provides context for the event. Another 1000 years or so before David, God initiated interaction with a man who came to be named Abraham. Abraham responded to God in faith, and God counted that response as rightness before him (Genesis 15:1-6). God had promised that, out of Abraham, all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:1-4). The promise is particularly significant, since even today more than half the human beings on the planet identify at some level with religions that recognize Abraham in their origins. You can find statistics on the world religions from Pew Research. You can read about Abraham in Genesis, especially chapters 11 through 25.

A particular group of the descendants of Abraham were called the Children of Israel. Israel, also known as Jacob, was Abraham's grandson. There were other grandsons besides Jacob who also had identifiable groups of descendants, but Jacob's descendants were the ones delivered into Egypt to escape a widespread famine. A son of Jacob named Joseph was used to prepare the deliverance, having become the number two power in Egypt by God's provision. Well after Joseph's death, the Egyptians eventually enslaved the Children of Israel who had become a large population. Some of the

attractions viewed by tourists in Egypt today may have been built by descendants of Abraham through Jacob. They were ultimately delivered by God out of their enslavement, with God using a man named Moses to lead the people out. You can read about this in Genesis 37-50 and in the book of Exodus.

During the Exodus, God had Moses construct a wooden box with two gold figures on top, where God said His Presence would reside, not in the box but above it. That box was the ark of the Presence of God and it later had a lot to do with David's feast.

By God's command, the ark was to be treated as Holy, was not to be directly touched, and was to be kept behind curtains when not being moved. At different times, the box contained various items including the tables of the Ten Commandments. You can read about the construction of the ark in Exodus 25:1-22. More about the things that were associated with this place of God's Presence can be found in the subsequent few chapters of Exodus. The arrangements sound strange to our modern ears, but I suspect they also sounded unusual to Moses and the people he led.

When the people finally returned to the land that had been promised to Abraham, including what is now Israel, the ark and the Presence of God went with them, actually establishing the way. The leader by that time was a man who came to be called Joshua, which means "The Lord Our Salvation". You can read about this in the book by the same name. The name Joshua is the translation from the Hebrew. In the New Testament, translated from the Greek form of the Hebrew word, it comes out as Jesus, but that name still means "The Lord Our Salvation".

The ark continued to be the place of God's Presence among the people through a succession of leaders called judges, who delivered and corrected the people from their problems. The Old Testament book of Judges tells about them.

Towards the end of the period of the judges, a truly odd thing happened, as recorded in the early chapters of I Samuel. A priest named Eli was functioning as the next-to-last judge at the time. Neither Eli nor his priest-sons had sought God's presence. They had been doing despicable things. God had pronounced His judgment against the whole lot of them, but He had already brought forth a man named Samuel to take Eli's place. At this point,



the people had just been soundly defeated in a battle with their enemies the Philistines. Four thousand Israelites had fallen. The rest had fled in disarray. The survivors decided to bring up the ark of God with them for the next battle. They did this on their own accord, not by God's command. The ark was treated more like a good luck charm but God does not play that role. As it turned out, the next battle was even worse for them than the last. 30,000 died. Eli's sons were both killed and the unthinkable happened. The Philistines captured the ark of the Presence of God! Eli fell over and died when he heard the news, not about his sons, but about the ark.

Things did not go too well for the Philistines either. They took the ark home as a trophy, placing it in the temple of the idol they worshipped. God has no patience for that either. Their idol kept falling down and finally broke after the ark was placed before it. So it is for all unreal gods when confronted by the God Who Is. Wherever the Philistines took the ark, truly bad things happened. They finally had enough, put it on a cart with some offerings and hitched the cart to two milk cows whose calves they had locked up nearby. They then watched to see what would happen. To the Philistine's surprise, the cows left their calves and pulled the cart with the ark back home to Israel.

Things did not go too well for the people who received the ark back in Israel either. It was becoming worse than a hot potato. Again, they treated it as a thing, rather than the place of the Presence of God. Over 50,000 more died before the ark was moved to a place where the honor due to the Presence of God was rendered. There it remained for a good while.

Eventually, the people desired to have an actual king over them instead of these judges, because the other groups around them had kings and they did not want to feel or be different. Thus has it always been. God keeps providing a way for people to be different from a world separated from Him, but people keep choosing their own separate way.

After warning the people that they were not going to like being in the king business, God gave them the king they wanted. Samuel, the last judge, anointed a man named Saul to be the first king. Saul was a man with the attributes that people thought befitted a king. He was very tall, he was strong, he was handsome, and God put a new heart in him. It seemed to be a propitious beginning, but things went downhill from there.

After some initial worldly success, Saul proved not to be a man who sought and relied upon the Presence of God either. In the midst of these doings, just as Samuel had been called to replace Eli, God had Samuel privately anoint another to be the replacement king for Saul. The man was David. He was only a boy in his teens at the time. He was just a shepherd, with a number of older brothers of military age serving in Saul's army. This is when the David-and-Goliath thing took place.

David was described as a "man after God's own heart" (I Samuel 13:14, Acts 13:22). He was a man who longed for the intimate experience of God's Presence. He wrote many of the Psalms and this was a consistent theme in them, Psalm 27 being a good example. It is well worth taking the time to read. David even calls upon the name of Jesus in verse 9.

God's Presence sustained David through years of difficult times. Saul had come to perceive David as a threat and spent years trying to kill him, but God preserved his life. After Saul's death, David became king first over two of the tribes of the children of Israel, and later over all of them. When he was initially crowned king over the two tribes, he was thirty years old.

After David became king, he captured Jerusalem and moved his residence there. At that point, it was in David's heart to move the ark to Jerusalem from the place where it had resided since shortly after the Philistines had put it on the cart. The movement of the ark was begun with much fanfare but, once again, things did not go well. You can read about it in II Samuel 6:1-11.

Apparently with good intentions, a man named Uzzah had reached out to steady the ark when it was jostled. He was struck dead on the spot. The place of God's Presence was Holy. God had already demonstrated that He was eminently capable of taking care of Himself. David was dismayed at this turn of events and discontinued the procession. He desired the Lord's Presence, but he was fearful of what it all meant. Sort of like some of us at times.

### A Thanksgiving Feast Celebrating God's Presence

Well, that is a lot of background, but now we can see the significance of what happened in the last twelve verses of Chapter 6 of II Samuel. It is not a lengthy passage. If you blink you might miss it, but it describes a most memorable Thanksgiving Feast.

David saw that God blessed the family and the house where the ark had been set aside. He recognized that the blessing of God's Presence he had sought came only on God's terms. He resumed moving the ark to Jerusalem, but this time it was done differently. The Presence of God was acknowledged as the Presence of the God Who Is. Sacrifices were offered every six steps of the way. There was music and shouting. It was a "Day of Thanksgiving and Praise" well beyond that envisioned by Lincoln when he made his proclamation.

David took off his royal robes. He leaped and danced before the Lord with wild abandon. What he abandoned was the pretense of kingship, for he was celebrating before One greater than himself. His wife poured withering criticism on David for this. She considered it unseemly for a king, and it diminished her queenliness. David, however, could do no less and desired only to do more before the Presence of his Lord.

Then there was feasting, involving everyone. It wasn't just a few turkeys distributed among those less "fortunate". Food for the feast was distributed to every person, and David picked up the tab. The various translations differ somewhat regarding the menu, but it apparently included bread, meat or fruit and raisins or wine. No mention is made of any turkeys.

It is most interesting to observe what was being celebrated. This was not thanksgiving for their health, their family or friends, their home or country, the food or their material blessings. Those things have long since passed away. David was celebrating the Presence of the God Who Is and He still Is. He was giving thanks for Someone permanent.

I don't know how many of the other people recognized and experienced what was happening here. David's wife apparently did not. There may have been others who consumed good food and "celebrated" the holiday but who did not experience the Holy Day that David did.

Much can come from considering this event because it points to something greater. The special Presence of God is no longer with us in a space above a box. In fact, the whereabouts of the ark is no longer known, if it exists at all. The notion of the "lost ark" has become fodder for movies. The reality from the Bible is that the ark of God was eventually placed inside the holiest spot in the temple built by David's son Solomon. God met His people there

through the high priest. Many years later, when Judah was conquered by Babylon and many were carried away into captivity, that temple was destroyed. The riches of the temple were also carried away, but the ark is not specifically mentioned among them. The temple was eventually rebuilt twice, once when the people were returned from captivity and again shortly before the Coming of Christ. In neither case is the ark mentioned as occupying the Holy of Holies. Sometime after the death of Christ, the temple was destroyed again, this time by the Romans. There is no museum where you may go and see the ark today, nor can you tour the temple.

Does it not seem strange that the God Who Is would confine His Special Presence to a space above a box inside curtains in a tent or building? Surely there must be more to this. Surely there was also something of God's Presence well away from the ark. Did His Presence not touch David personally as the shepherd boy out tending his sheep? Is His Presence not everywhere? Why would God define himself in this unusual way?

Some appreciation of these things may be obtained as we begin to seek His Presence wholeheartedly ourselves. The patterns and procedures such as the ark make more sense to me now than they ever did when I tried to sort things out in my own mind.

The New Testament makes clear that the patterns of the Old Testament were set forth in anticipation of being fulfilled in completeness in Jesus Christ. In fact, Galatians 3:24 tells us "... the law" (including the ark procedures) "has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith" (NASB). God placed His Special Presence above the ark in the midst of a specific people. He then fulfilled that pattern by placing His Special Presence in the midst of individual persons. He is not just nearby. His Very Presence is inside us when we are His. He does that in the person of Jesus Christ by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit of God Himself. Jesus says in Revelation 3:20, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me" (NASB).

The Old Testament had already laid this out for us. Isaiah 7:14 states, "... the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel" (NASB). Immanuel means God's Presence with us. If we were left with just the Isaiah passage to figure out, we might be confused about who was being discussed. However, the

New Testament makes clear in Matthew 1:21-23 that this refers specifically to fulfillment in Jesus Christ. He is the Presence of God available to be in us.

There are abundant references to tell us that. Here are just a few examples. Jesus said that if we have seen Him, we have seen the Father (John 14:9). He said that He and the Father are one entity (John 10:30). He said He would never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). He said we could abide or live or reside in Him and, in the same breath, He said He would abide in us (John 15:4). Now this is impossible to picture or explain. How can you have two entities, each of them inside the other? But, by the grace of God, it actually is possible to experience what we cannot picture or explain. That is because this has to do with the Presence of the God Who Is.

In verse 16 of the third chapter of First Corinthians, Paul says, “surely you know that you are God’s Temple, where the Spirit of God dwells.” The temple was the place of the ark where the Special Presence of God resided. God’s intent is for you and for me to be that place of His residence.

The coming near of the Presence of God that David celebrated with such abandon is available to us now in an even deeper intimacy. We have been given the fulfillment of the pattern laid out for David. We have occasion to celebrate the permanent Presence of God with great thanksgiving and praise. We need not ask Him to send angels to us. He is here within. What greater blessing could we desire?

David’s feast did not establish an annual commemoration any more than the Pilgrims’ did. The Presence of God celebrated by David can, however, be recognized as a basis for a continuing celebration. Any day of experiencing the gift of the Lord’s Presence is indeed a Holy Day, and an occasion for thanksgiving and praise.

## CHAPTER 3

### A GREATER THANKSGIVING

#### Returning to Jerusalem

Another national day of celebration, thanksgiving and praise took place a little over 500 years later. This also involved feasting. It is conceptually related to David's feast of thanksgiving for the Presence of God, but by this time the ark was nowhere to be found. The later thanksgiving celebration had to do with the Word of God. Again, some background is in order to understand what was going on at the time. Bear with me.

We have already noted that David's son Solomon assumed the throne after David's death. He built the temple with materials and plans which had begun to be put together under David's administration. The ark was placed inside in the holiest, closed off place where the Presence of God resided. The high priest entered the holiest place once a year to make atonement for the sins of the people using animal sacrifices.

When Solomon died, the kingdom split up. A son of Solomon became king over two tribes, namely the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. His realm was known as Judah and it included Jerusalem and the temple. Judah continued to be ruled by kings descended directly from David. The other tribes followed a different man as their king and constituted a different nation north of Judah known as Israel. Israel set up separate places of worship away from the Jerusalem temple. Israel was ruled by a succession of different families who, in some cases, took office by force. The people of both kingdoms fairly consistently fell away from following God, with some notable revivals, usually associated with kings of Judah.

Both kingdoms were ultimately conquered, Israel falling first to the Assyrians. Judah fell a number of years later to the Babylonians in two installments. In the first Babylonian invasion, Judah was defeated, about 10,000 citizens were carried into captivity, including a man named Daniel, and the rest of Judah was left under Babylon's thumb. That didn't work out well and Judah was later completely defeated, Jerusalem and the temple

destroyed and many more carried away captive. The prophet Jeremiah, who had been left behind with the remainder, delivered God's message that the captivity would last for 70 years (Jeremiah 29:10, for example). The captivity did indeed last that long.

During the captivity, Daniel was raised to a position of authority in Babylon in a manner similar to what had previously been the case for Joseph, Abraham's great grandson, back in Egypt. Daniel's influence continued even after the regime changed when the Medes took over Babylon and later when the Persians took them over. Cyrus, the first Persian king, finally decreed that the captives from Judah would be allowed to return to Jerusalem. They came back under the leadership of a man named Zerubbabel and under the priesthood of a man named Joshua. Once again, a man with the name meaning The Lord Our Salvation (or Jesus) was involved in getting the people back into the land promised to Abraham. This time, however, there was no ark as a locale for God's presence.

Cyrus had authorized the rebuilding of the temple, however, and it was built under later prophetic encouragement from Zechariah and Haggai. You can read about all this in the Book of Ezra, chapters 1 – 6. The temple appears to have operated largely as it had previously, with God being worshipped and sacrifices offered. There is just no mention of the ark, where God had said His Presence would reside.

Incidentally, a process of change has continued right up to the present. Today, there is not only no ark known in Israel, there is also no temple. The sacrifices required in God's law are no longer offered either, but God is still worshipped in Israel in accordance with derivative customs and traditions that form the now-prevailing narrative.

Returning to our background, after the completion of the temple there were two notable additional returns to Jerusalem, the first led by Ezra the scribe. He was a man who "had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10, NASB). You might say that Ezra was a man after God's Own Word in a fashion similar to David being a man after God's Own Heart. Ezra led a group back to Jerusalem, further equipped the temple, and re-instituted previous practices after confessing the sins of the people to God.

Some years later Nehemiah led another group back to Jerusalem and led the rebuilding of the city walls. From a military perspective it would have seemed wiser to build the wall first and the temple later, but first things with God don't typically correspond to the first things in the minds of people. Anyway, you can examine the record of these things in Nehemiah, chapters 1 through 7.

## The Word of God

With that background, we arrive at Nehemiah, chapter 8. Much had been accomplished. The temple stood again, albeit not in its former physical glory. The city wall of Jerusalem was back in place in some fashion, after 52 days of an urgent construction project. Obstacles had been overcome. People had set to the difficult tasks with willing hearts. The most important thing remained to be accomplished.

It was at this point that Ezra, the man with a heart for the Word of God, was called upon to bring that Word out and read it before the people. What a scene! Basically the whole nation was gathered together in Jerusalem to hear the reading of God's Word. It would probably have included much if not all of the Books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Other Books could have included Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Psalms and others. Ezra read the Word his heart had sought from early in the morning on into the afternoon. It took a lot longer than the reading of the list of names of those killed on September 11, 2001.

There were many thousands gathered for the reading. Now this was long before anyone had public address systems, so Ezra could not have made himself heard by all as he read. This is how he did it. He had helpers. There were thirteen men standing with him. Thirteen more apparently stood among the people. There may have been some further repetition from among the attendees. The Bible says, "They read from the Book of the Law of God clearly, made its sense plain and gave instruction in what was read" (Nehemiah 8:8, NEB). That seems to me to be a pretty good definition of what teaching ought to be. I think it is also noteworthy that one of the helpers who repeated and gave the sense of what Ezra was reading from God's Word was another man named Joshua (Jesus), or The Lord Our Salvation. There is that name again.



Now a remarkable thing was happening during the reading. When Ezra first stood up to read, the people also stood and remained in rapt attention for all those hours. The people of that day were generally unfamiliar with God's Word in the Bible. It was pretty much like the way things are today. But on this day they not only heard, but also a great conviction came over the whole audience. When Ezra finished, everyone among the crowd of many thousands was standing there in tears. They had built a temple and set up a city wall. They had gone through the motions of their lives. It really had been very much like the way things are today. But on this day, they actually heard the Word of God and they wept.

There was no emotional music. There was nobody to get people clapping or singing. Just the Word of God read by a man with a heart for it. And all the people wept.

### Another Thanksgiving Feast

At that unlikely point, Nehemiah declared a holiday. How could such a thing be? Nehemiah simply said, "Do not mourn or weep" (Nehemiah 8:9 NASB). He continued, "Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the Joy of the Lord is your Strength" (Nehemiah 8:10 NASB). It was literally declared to be a Holy day. Why would a feast be declared as they wept?

An answer is provided in Verse 12. "All the people went away to eat, to drink, to send portions and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the Words which had been made known to them" (NASB). They celebrated because they had understood the Word of God. Both the delivery of the Word and the understanding of the people was God's doing. That is why it was a Holy day.

A holiday becomes a Holy day not on account of what people do but on the basis of what God does. David's feast had celebrated the Presence of God. This feast celebrated the Word of God. That Word God had caused the people to understand and take it to themselves. This was no thanksgiving for an intellectual accomplishment by these people. God's Word had not entered their minds; it had entered their hearts. It had produced no understanding of the intellect leading only to stroking of chins and nodding of heads. It had

produced a heart knowledge that led to uncontrollable weeping and turning of hearts. That is something to be celebrated with thanksgiving and praise. It was a truly Holy day.

God brought about a change of heart that led to a change of behavior. The reading of God's Word continued in the next days. These people who had been recently delivered out of bondage discovered that God had earlier prescribed an annual commemorative celebration in the seventh month to recognize God's provision over their ancestors who had been delivered by God out of earlier bondage in Egypt. It was, just then, time for that feast, and they celebrated it, for the first time in many years. More reading of God's Word was done. People repented. An extensive song of praise and thanksgiving was offered which you can read about in Nehemiah 9.

The king did not provide the food for the feast. There was no king. The food had already been distributed among the people by a greater king than David. The people further distributed the food so that all could participate.

As it developed later, the people eventually fell back into substituting their own doings for God's doing among them. They wrote out their own commitment document and signed their names to it sort of like we do. They made promises about what they were going to do for God instead of standing in awe of the God who was doing a new thing among them. You may be able to predict the outcome of that little enterprise on the basis of your own experience with good intentions, promises and commitments.

Naturally, the feast at Ezra's reading of God's Word did not establish a continuing Thanksgiving tradition any more than did David's feast of God's Presence or the Pilgrim's Thanksgiving. That remained for a different event we shall examine later.

### Celebrating The Word

Before we move on to that, just as we did with David's feast it is instructive to examine once more what the people were actually celebrating here. The Word of God in those days had been generally forgotten and ignored. There were no printed copies lying around. There were no modern translations. There were few who could even read. The Bible was smaller then. No New

Testament. Not all the Old Testament Books were yet written and those that had been written were not gathered into one volume, in part because there were no volumes. There were scrolls recording the law, history, prophecy and songs.

There had been more to be heard in those days than just a written Word of God. The Word of God had also come directly to individual people like Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, David and Daniel. The Word of God had come, and was still coming, to groups of people through individuals, usually called prophets. The Word of God had just come to the people of Jerusalem in audible form through Ezra's reading.

The New Testament clearly identifies this Word of God. It is not a thing. The Word of God is a Person. The Gospel of John begins with a familiar passage to many. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (NASB). John begins a little bit like Genesis does: "In the beginning God...". The first chapter of John is in some ways a New Testament creation story. The word for "Word" in chapter one of John is "Logos" in the Greek in which it was originally written. We get all kinds of English words from that, like analog, logic, and biology. It has to do with expression and understanding. It is characteristic of God that He expresses Himself to His Creation in ways that can be understood and experienced.

But Chapter 1 of John goes further. In verse 14 it says that "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us and we saw His Glory..." (NASB). John is talking about Jesus Christ here. Jesus, the Anointed One or Messiah, is identified as that very Word of God. He Himself is that expression of God to His Creation and He Himself is God. That is the reason Jesus could say with a straight face that, if you have seen Me, you have seen the Father (John 14:9) and "I and the Father are One" (John 10:30 NASB).

I am sure that I have not even begun to "get" this. I am not convinced it can even be "gotten". But Chapter 1 of John goes further still. In verse 3 it says, "All things were made by Him and without Him was not anything made that was made" (KJV). He did it all. In verse 10 it says, "He was in the world and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not." These striking statements are confirmed elsewhere. For example, the first chapter of the book of Colossians, verses 15-17 reads as follows: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or

dominions or rulers or authorities – all things have been created through Him and for Him” (NASB).

If these things are true, why do so many persist in conceiving of Jesus as some kind of junior partner to God the Father? If Christ accomplished the creation, why would someone write, or recite, an Apostle’s Creed starting with, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ His Son...”? Have we not heard God’s Word? If God the Father was involved so was the Son.

This all makes me mentally uncomfortable if I try to figure God out. How can I possibly comprehend the One who hung on the cross and died as being the same One who hung the stars? For me the answer is that I don’t. I don’t comprehend the God who made me. I don’t understand how He would have died on the cross for me, of all people. But by the grace of God, He allows me to receive the experience of God. I find I prefer having the experience to understanding it.

I don’t “understand” God in the common sense of the term. Instead, He approaches me and offers an experience with the God Who Is. I have responded, tentatively at first, and still tentatively even now by the measure of what He has offered of Himself. In that experience, the knowledge of God produces an understanding beyond any creed, doctrine, or formulation. It is not an intellectual understanding of the mind but a heart understanding in the depths of my being.

Hearing God’s Word, and understanding it, is not something that is done with our physical senses and our brains. That is why so much of our theological reasoning and doctrinal arguments simply gets in the way. Hearing God’s Word and understanding it is an experience with God Himself because the Word of God **is** God Himself. We do not seek Him out, find Him, and figure Him out. Neither does someone else explain it all to us. God Himself confronts us in the person of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. What we call “understanding” of that Word is simply our response of entering into the personal experience that He offers us. It seems often to involve tears, repentance, worship, praise and rejoicing. It certainly did for Ezra’s people, and it has for me. It still does. It brings about the experience of a Holy Day. Indeed, the experience of the Word of God as Ezra read the Word is fundamentally the experience of the Presence of God as David brought the ark near.

Ezra did not touch all those people. Most could not even hear him. The Word of God, Jesus Christ, had done a work in Ezra, did a work in those people and does a work in me.

The people who celebrated with Ezra had good reason to do so because the Word of God, indeed the Very Presence of God, was experienced and had His Gracious way with them. The same experience still continues as the basis of a Holy day for me.

## CHAPTER 4

# THE GREATEST THANKSGIVING

### Recalling The Setting

Thus far, we have examined two great Thanksgiving feasts. One had to do with David and the Presence of God; the other with Ezra and the Word of God. The Bible has made clear that Jesus Christ is Immanuel, or the Presence of God with us, and also The Word of God as Christ come to live in us. In reality, both David and Ezra were celebrating Jesus with thanksgiving before He came to us in human form. Now we come to the greatest of the biblical thanksgiving feasts. Once again, we need to first examine a significant amount of Biblical background.

The process by which God had delivered the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt involved a family dinner in which all the Israelites participated. It did not really start out as a thanksgiving for deliverance in the past. It started out as the very means by which they participated in the deliverance God had promised.

When God visited the first nine plagues upon the nation of Egypt, the children of Israel were often exempted. The ruler of Egypt remained determined not to release a workforce that by that time numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Finally came the plague of the death of the firstborn. The first child of every family, from the ruler's family to all the slaves' families were all going to die in one night. Even the cattle of Egypt were included in this. There was an important distinction this time, because there was no automatic exemption for the children of Israel. They had to do something to avoid being included.

There is some confusion out there about what happened that night. I have often heard stories about the Death Angel passing through Egypt claiming all those lives. That is not what the Bible says. It says that God Himself promised to pass through Egypt. You can read this specifically in Exodus 11:4. The whole event is described in the first fourteen chapters or so of Exodus.

The children of Israel were required to participate in their deliverance in a fashion teaching them, and teaching me, something about what was going on. You can read about this in Chapter 12 of Exodus. Each family or small group was to take a year-old male lamb or goat with no blemish on it. They were to do this on the tenth day of the month that would be defined as the first month of the Jewish year. It occurs in the spring of the common calendar year if you live in the northern hemisphere. The animal was to be brought into the family home and kept alive for a full three days and then killed at twilight on the fourteenth of the month. The blood of the animal was to be smeared with a stalk of a particular plant along the sides and top of the door to the house. Then the animal was to be roasted and consumed by the family inside the house. No bones of the animal were to be broken and none of it was to be removed from the house (Exodus 12:46). Any leftovers were to be burned up.

The purpose of these procedures was multi-fold. Clearly, the death of the animal is understood as a substitute for the death that was spread around the households of Egypt that night. The occupants within the house consumed the animal's body. It became a part of them. The blood was a sign of death and life and, according to Exodus 12:13, it also operated in two directions. The verse quotes the Word of God to the people as saying "The blood will be a sign for you..." (NASB). In the same verse God says, "... And when I see the blood I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt" (NASB). Again, we don't see a Death Angel, we see God Himself.

The blood was a bi-directional sign. It had significance to the people ("The blood will be a sign for you") and it had significance to God ("When I see the blood I will pass over"). It also had a double message. It spoke of the death of the sacrifice and it spoke of life for the people under that blood.

It is important to observe that this Passover meal was not a thanksgiving celebration for a deliverance that had taken place. It was anticipatory. The deliverance would take place that night. However, Exodus records that it was instituted by God as a continuing annual observance involving thanksgiving for God's provision of life out of death. It included the eating of unleavened bread and continued for several days. It was more than just an annual tradition; it was an annual requirement, but it was not called Thanksgiving Day and it did not occur in late November.

As you might expect from your own experience when you try to consistently fulfill the requirements placed on you, the people did not do very well with this one either. The actual observances were spotty at best with long periods in which there was no Passover observance at all. However, God kept drawing His people back to Him again and again. It is remarkable how often those revivals occurred just in time to celebrate the Passover.

When the children of Israel were delivered into the Promised Land after forty years in the wilderness, it was Passover time. You can read about it in Joshua chapter 5. There were a lot of God's requirements that they had not practiced in the wilderness. Specifically, there is no mention of them having consistently kept the Passover after leaving Egypt except for the first annual observance while they were still in the wilderness of Sinai (Numbers 9). They had stopped doing the required circumcisions of male children and circumcision was apparently required to participate in the Passover observance. God had Joshua lead them into the Promised Land after forty years. Joshua, once again, is the Hebrew form of Jesus. Notice that the people were not delivered into the land on the basis of their keeping of the law. Their deliverance was only on the basis of God's mercy. Once they were in the land, they began following God's requirements, including circumcision, and it turned out to be Passover time.

Obedience to God was remarkably inconsistent again in the years that followed. There were periods of great falling away. Roughly 300 years after David, one of his descendants became king over Judah and restored the worship of God in the Temple that had been abandoned. The ark of God's Presence was still there. Hezekiah was the king, with a name meaning "strong in the Lord" or "fastened to the Lord". When he got the worship of God started again, it was Passover time. The observance was a month late that year because it took some time to get things ready. You can read about these things in II Chronicles 29 and 30, with the legal precedent for the delayed celebration in Numbers 9.

The king after Hezekiah, Manasseh, was another disaster and there was another great falling away. The temple was used for idol worship. The ark of God's Presence was removed. The Word of God was forgotten. King Manasseh was finally turned around somewhat late in his reign, but it was his grandson Josiah through whom the real turnaround was accomplished. Josiah's name means "founded upon the Lord". He became king at the age of eight and began to seek the heart of God at the age of sixteen. As he went



about repairing the temple, the books of the law were found. When they were read before King Josiah, it had an effect similar to what the people would experience when Ezra read them years later. The king tore his clothes and resolved to turn back the nation to the Word of God. Once again, it was Passover time. Josiah's was perhaps the greatest Passover celebration up to that time. You can read all about it in II Chronicles 34 and 35.

The list continues. About a hundred years later, returnees from the Babylonian captivity rebuilt the destroyed temple in Ezra's time, not long before his reading of the law. Once again, it was Passover time. The high priest at that time was again a man named Joshua (or Jesus). There is no record of the ark being found. The history can be found in Ezra 3 through 6.

Finally, some 500 years later, the rebuilt temple had been rebuilt again. This time, Herod the Great, wielding Roman authority over Judea, had done the rebuilding. A Roman descendant of his had come to power, but the Jews in the population were still accomplishing temple worship of God. These people also were in the habit of celebrating the Passover. Among these was a man named Jesus of Nazareth.

### An Amazing Thanksgiving

Jesus was the One who was identified to be Immanuel, the very Presence of God come to be with us in human form. No ark was required. He was stated to be the very Word of God made in human flesh to inhabit the creation He Himself had formed. No reading ability was necessary for people to know Him. Jesus was the very Presence of God celebrated by David and the very Word of God celebrated by Ezra in their respective thanksgiving holy days. Those holy days had established no continuing observance, but now, as it came time for Jesus, the Anointed One, to go to the cross, it was of course Passover time.

There is no information in the Bible about Jesus making a reservation to use the upper-story room where He and his disciples shared the Passover meal, but the room was ready. The meal was prepared and there they gathered. A lot more happened that night than any single Gospel presents. If you want a more complete picture of what happened, it is useful to read all four Gospel accounts together. You would need to review Matthew 26:17-35, Mark 14:12-31, Luke 22:7-38 and a much longer section of John from 13:1 to

17:25. Each account adds to the picture. Even more can be gained by adding in descriptions of associated events by doing some additional reading before and after these passages.

Simply put, the disciples were likely expecting only to observe the Passover with Jesus. They got a lot more. There is every reason to believe it was observed according to the required pattern. The Passover lamb would have been killed. It does not say who did the killing. Perhaps it was Judas Iscariot? The blood would have been smeared or sprinkled on the side posts of the door and across the top with cuttings from a plant called Ezowb in Hebrew and often translated as hyssop or some other similar plant (Exodus 12:22). It does not say whether the blood was placed on the downstairs outer door or the upstairs door to the room in which the thirteen men ate. I have wondered if the plant cutting could have been the exact one used to lift the sour wine-soaked sponge to Jesus on the cross (John 19:28-30).

In any event, the Passover lamb was roasted and eaten for dinner with unleavened bread and apparently with some wine at least available. This was the last supper of Christ before the cross, but not for the disciples, because Jesus did not join in the consumption of what He was about to offer them. The Lord's Supper offered to the disciples and to us was not the Passover. It was the fulfillment of the Passover, because it involved a far greater deliverance than the temporary one from Egypt.

It was after the traditional Passover meal that Jesus introduced something strikingly new and different. First, He explained that this would be His last Passover observance on the earth, but He pointed to a future event to come in the Kingdom of God (Luke 22:16). Then, according to the Luke account, He did not start with the bread but instead with the cup. Again, He stated that He would not be partaking of wine again on the earth until a future fulfillment in the Kingdom of God (Luke 22:17-18). Wine was not an originally prescribed part of the Passover meal. That may be why both the meal and the wine were identified separately as coming to an earthly end for Him.

Then came the bigger surprise. Jesus gave them some bread to eat and said it was His body given for them. They were instructed to eat it in remembrance of Him, even though He was present there before them. Now this was more than unusual. The notion of eating a person's body was not acceptable. They had just eaten some of the body of a dead animal whose blood was still drying at the door, but that was different. That was commemorating the animal that

had died in the place of the firstborn among them on that dramatic night in Egypt. It was both legal and required to eat the lamb.

It is highly significant that the Lord's Supper involves no lamb meat. It is more than just a matter of mere convenience of preparation. The bread speaks to us of the One who said He was the Bread of Life. He died the next day, not only for the firstborn, but also for all flesh. He Himself is the lamb meat. John 19:31-36 tells us His bones were not broken at the cross as befitting a Passover lamb and as prophesied in Psalm 34:20.

Even more startling to the disciples was the next part. He gave them wine to drink and explained that it was a new solemn agreement between God and man through His shed blood. Now this may have seemed like entirely too much. It was illegal to drink blood, any blood. Leviticus 17:10-14 makes very clear that anybody who consumes blood will be cut off from God. Despite that prohibition, here He was right there before them saying that this was His blood shed for them and that they should drink it. To even symbolically perform such a strictly forbidden act would have seemed offensive. Why would the Lord have prescribed such an act?

The reason stated in Leviticus 17 for God prohibiting the drinking of blood was that the life was in the blood. The blood of the sacrifices, placed on the altar at the temple (Leviticus 17:11), made a statement similar to the sign of the blood on the doorpost at the first Passover. It speaks of a life given in place of a life that would otherwise have been taken. In fact, this has its roots way back in Genesis when God Himself provided animal skins to cover the nakedness of Adam and Eve after their sin. God, in the Person of Jesus I expect, performed the first bloodshed at that earliest of times. In a way, it was looking forward to what Jesus would do on the cross. God is the One who provided the way for us from the start. It is not our doing.

This was not the first time Jesus had talked of eating His body and drinking His blood. Back in John 6:47-58 Jesus had made this remarkable statement just as clearly. He had said unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood you are not alive. That is why He said He is the Bread of Life. He stated in so many words that the one who eats Him and drinks His blood will live in Jesus and Jesus will live in Him. Jesus had indeed said the words just as clearly then, but now He was holding out the bread and the cup directly for them to consume.

It is highly significant that the Lord's Supper does not involve our staining of the doorpost with the wine. Instead, it is consumed. The blood of animals was not to be consumed because the life of the animal was in the blood. The blood of Christ was offered for our consumption because His Life is in the blood. He offers us not only His death in our place for us to share, but also His life in us to be shared as well.

Just as in the first Passover, the first Lord's Supper was offered in anticipation of the deliverance. Subsequent observances were done in remembrance of our deliverance through His cross and resurrection coming immediately thereafter.

Unlike David's feast and Ezra's feast, the Lord's Supper did indeed establish a continuing observance. The tradition has been carried on for over two thousand years. It was a tradition that was already in place before the Pilgrims. In fact, it was a tradition with which they were familiar and in which they participated.

The Lord's Supper is more than just an annual event. If one is celebrated just before Good Friday, it can be particularly meaningful, but Jesus did not prescribe the frequency. He simply said do it, when we do it, in remembrance of Him. Some groups do it annually, quarterly, monthly, weekly, daily, or just occasionally. For Christians, however, it is indeed a continuing tradition, but not typically a formal holiday.

### A Name For The Celebration

People use different names for the observance we have been talking about. Some call it the Lord's Supper. Some call it Communion or Holy Communion. Some call it Mass. There are those of the Jewish faith that do not accept all this and continue to observe the Passover. Christians generally consider the celebration of the Lord's Supper as the fulfillment of the Passover observance, so not many would formally celebrate both.

There is one name used by some Christians for this observance that is particularly significant. That term is Eucharist or Holy Eucharist. To understand something of the term, we need to examine a remarkable aspect of the Last Supper that we have chosen not to discuss until we arrived at this point. It is now time to take a look.

When Jesus spoke to the disciples, He said that He had desired for a long time to observe this particular Passover with them. Then He showed them why. He offered them the bread and the wine after the Passover meal, but He did something else that I marvel at more and more as I consider it. He gave thanks! It keeps saying, “and when He had given thanks” He offered them the bread. “And when He had given thanks” He offered them the cup. Wonder of wonders! God Himself offered thanks to God Himself that He had come to the cross to die for these men and for me!

Of all occasions these men had yet experienced, this was the one calling for the greatest thanksgiving of all, but none of them spoke up. It was Jesus doing the thanksgiving.

Jesus gave thanks that He could offer His own body broken for them. He gave thanks that He could offer His own blood shed for them. It gives me new perspective on the Gethsemane experience. Just a short time later that night, Jesus would pray that, if it were possible, the cup would pass from Him. You can read about it in Matthew 26:36-46. Within the Will of God, it was not possible. In the Mind of God, my salvation had already been decided upon the cross before it was ever erected. It had already been announced by Christ Himself that He would die there and then be raised again (Matthew 16:21-23). The prophets had announced it as well. And now Jesus had given thanks for this at the institution of the Lord’s Supper. Christ’s prayer at Gethsemane was never asking that all this was not to be. That prayer was for my understanding, that I might catch a glimpse of the depth of His Love and the painful condition of one under the judgment of God for my very sin.

The word that is translated in the Gospels as “when He had given thanks” is the Greek word “eucharisteo”. It is pronounced approximately as “you-care-is-**stay**-oh”. It is the word from which we get our word “Eucharist”. When we refer to the Lord’s Supper as Eucharist, we are literally calling it His Thanksgiving Dinner!

## Celebrating with Him

How profound that it should be the Lord doing the thanksgiving and not us! How could we imagine a greater thanksgiving? But when we experience the Lord's thanksgiving over us, does it not provoke a thanksgiving response in us that is wholly beyond any that we could originate in ourselves? His thanksgiving is the greatest because it is fully in accord with the Father's Will, but it produces in us a greater thanksgiving than we have ever known. Our experience with Him makes us an ever more consistent part of who He is and what He does as we celebrate with Him.

Jesus was thankful for the Will of God in offering His broken body and shed blood for our consumption. It is not necessary to comprehend this in order to experience it. If Christ and the Father are indeed One and the Same, was He giving thanks for His own will? In some way beyond our understanding, Christ was God in human form and subjected Himself to God the Father in a way that He enables us to do as well.

If God is God and we are His created beings, then it might not be surprising that we could be given an opportunity to experience Him without also having the capacity to understand Him. As an example, consider Christ's invitation in John 15:4 to "abide in Me and I in you" (NASB). Just how does that work? I can understand how I could put a sock in a box or a box in a sock, but how might I accomplish both simultaneously? I cannot follow the process conceptually, but God offers me in John 15 an experience in which He Himself satisfies my heart and causes my mind to assent.

It should be apparent here that this experience in Christ tunes our thanksgiving to be more and more like His. We no longer recite our thanks for the standard things in the standard ways as we traditionally have done. Look with me at how He renews our previous five categories of the conventional Thanksgiving prayers.

As He gave thanks for the bread at the Lord's Supper, Jesus was not offering thanks for His physical health the way we tend to do. His physical health was not in the forefront of His attention that night. He had no upcoming appointment for His annual physical examination. The Great Physician was going about the business of healing us and He was doing it in a permanent,

eternal way. He was giving thanks for the healing He was offering us in Himself. So should we.

Jesus was not offering thanks for friends and family who loved Him that night. The Bible says that Christ died for us while we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8). Jesus told us that we should love our enemies (Matthew 5:43-44) and then He laid down His own life for enemies He had called to be friends (Luke 23:34). The Bible says that we love God because He first loved us and gave Himself for us (I John 4:9-10 and 19). He was giving thanks for God's grace that would draw enemies to be closer than brothers and sisters could ever be. We should also give that kind of thanks, not out of obligation, but because He causes it to well up in us.

Jesus was not giving thanks for a place to meet and share that meal. He had told us He was on His way to prepare a place for us (John 14:2). The Bible says that, through His completed work on the cross and through His resurrection from the dead, we are even now seated with Christ in the heavenly places (Ephesians 2:4-6). Jesus was giving thanks over the bread and the cup for God's Grace in providing that where He is, there we may be also (John 14:3 and 17:24). So should we.

Jesus was not giving thanks at the Lord's Supper for any material blessings. As far as we know, He possessed no "stuff", only the clothes on His back He was about to lose. And yet the Glory of the very God was upon Him (John 1:14). He was giving thanks for His broken body and shed blood by which that same Glory might be conferred upon us (John 17:22). So should we.

Jesus was not giving thanks for the physical food He was about to offer. His Thanksgiving was for God's Grace at the cross. The Lord's Supper was not something the Lord ate. It is He Himself, offered to us. Thanks be to God!

Our usual thanks at Thanksgiving are rendered for health, family/friends, home, material blessings and the food. All of these are transitory. His thanks were offered both for His body broken for us and for His blood spilled out for us; for the payment of death and the gift of life. Our thanks can begin to be transformed so that they can be conformed to His.

Finally, it is well to observe one other aspect of our celebration with Him. We noted a few pages back that Jesus instructed the disciples to receive the bread and wine in remembrance of Him even though He was right there in

their midst. I can recall many occasions when I have gone through this observance in remembrance of an absent man who I thought had died two thousand years ago and is now living in heaven, but I'm sure I was missing much of the point. The remembrance is not related to a past event or a person dead and gone. This is the same Christ who told us that He is with us always, to the very end of time (Matthew 28:20). This is the same Christ who told us that He would never leave us or forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6 with Hebrews 13:5). The remembrance should not take us back to the past. It should bring us to the instant present in which we are offered a fresh, living experience with the Living Lord of all creation who has, at great cost, purchased new life for us to know in Him right now.

With all the distractions of this life, I need the experience of the One Whom to know is life eternal (John 17:3). I need to know Him. Sometimes I forget that He is not just in the room but present in me, and I ignore that Presence. It is not that I need to be reminded by someone that He is here. I do not need to tie a string around my finger and try hard to remember that He must surely be present somehow, somewhere. No, it is He Himself who stands at the door and knocks (Revelation 3:20). When I respond, even tentatively, by attending to His revealed Presence, He enables that deeper response to His Presence that draws me into a rich thanksgiving. I begin to give thanks for that for which He gives thanks, and it is not just a once-a-year holiday. The experience of Thanksgiving is the continuing experience of the Living Christ. He draws me into a growing experience producing Holy Days, made so by the One who loves me and who gave Himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)





## **PART II: THE EXPERIENCE OF CHRISTMAS**

### **CHAPTER 5 CONFLATED WITH TRADITION**

#### The Common Experience of Christmas

Christmas defines the holidays for me. For as far back as I can remember, the holiday season and the Christmas season were synonymous. I don't recall ever counting the days until Thanksgiving or New Year's Day but I sure have counted the days until Christmas.

I'm certain that my counting had something to do with what I was hoping to get, but the whole experience had a completely distinctive pleasure about it. The house looked different, inside and out. It smelled different too. The live tree, the lights, the family and of course the presents. Boxes of decorations had been stored away for Christmastime as for no other time of the year. If you awoke from a long coma in our house, and it happened to be the last half of December, you really would have no need to be reminded what time of year it was.

I remember looking at the presents under the tree, but I think I was even more excited about thoughts of a generous and remarkably insightful Santa Claus. I slept well consistently on Thanksgiving Eve but I had some trouble going to sleep on some occasions on Christmas Eve. I still have trouble sometimes, but in adulthood it has been about what I was giving instead of what I was hoping to get.

I know that other families celebrated Christmas somewhat differently or not at all, but everybody seemed to celebrate something. Some new holidays or celebrations have been added but the common association as I grew up was unashamedly with Christmas. Schools had Christmas vacations. Christmas

was a federal holiday. It still is. There was a national and a White House Christmas tree. There still is. Communities, schools, states and the national government put up decorations. The stores certainly did. There were lights and music everywhere. On Christmas Day, the traffic seemed absent. After all, it was Christmas, and everybody knew that.

The common approach, for most people I knew, involved decorations, typically including some kind of Christmas tree. There was a wide range of other stuff, usually with some family things that had been kept over the years with various sentimental meanings. The family was gathered together. “I’ll be home for Christmas” had a strong obligatory sense to it. There were presents, with nobody left out, not even the dog. Music and food were important and so distinctive that they would have seemed out of place at any other time of year. We did unusual things for no apparent reason other than that it was the way things were done.

I knew from as far back as I can remember that we were celebrating the birthday of Jesus, but I’m not sure how much I understood about how all the trappings related to it. I don’t think I ever really tried to make sense of it all. It certainly seemed to be an important birthday. On my birthday I got presents. On His birthday everybody got them and everybody gave them. People talked about the “Real Meaning of Christmas” but, as I grew up, I was not sure precisely what that was. The stories were certainly nice. There were drummer boys and littlest angels. I had the notion that generosity had something to do with the whole idea. I certainly was in favor of people being generous with me.

And there was that Santa Claus guy. Some of my friends knew of him as Nick or Kris, but it seemed to be the same generous fellow that showed up at my house. I don’t remember feeling any deep need to analyze this at first. Nor do I recall making a thoughtful, reasoned decision to propagate the tradition when my own kids came along, but I did propagate it. It was simply the way things were done. Stockings just got hung. What Santa had to do with the birthday of Jesus was never clear in my young mind and it did not get much clearer with time. Something about the spirit of giving, I suppose, whatever that is.

Generations of people propagating a rich and pleasurable tradition can result in something called conflation. Conflation occurs when the added-on, ancillary stuff gets so inextricably intertwined with the real part that nobody

knows which is which anymore. There is no rhyme or reason or occasion for analysis. It's the birthday of Jesus. It's Christmas. Get some eggnog and put up the tree.

### The Birthday of Jesus

I grew up knowing that Jesus was born on December 25<sup>th</sup> and that His birthday has been celebrated for around two thousand years. I'm not sure when I became aware that it might not be quite that simple, but I don't believe I was prompted by that awareness to re-examine my annual experience with Christmas. That's the way conflation is. It is hard to think about, but let's have a go at it anyway.

The Bible describes the birth of Jesus along with some historical associations, especially in Luke 2. Augustus Caesar was the first actual Roman emperor and he was ruling in Rome at the time. We even know who the Roman governor of Syria was and can look him up, but we just don't know from the Bible what time of year that first Christmas was.

We know that Mary and Joseph kept track of His age like most parents do. He was taken to Jerusalem for a Passover feast during the time when He was twelve years old. It is not abundantly clear that the occasion marked His first Passover trip and it is not clear at all when His twelfth birthday was relative to Passover time.

There is no record in the Bible of any birthday parties being thrown for Him at any time of His life. Neither is there any record of birthday commemorations for Him within the early church in the early years after His death. Instead, the early church marked the Lord's Day as a commemoration of His resurrection. They did so not annually but weekly, every Sunday. There was no annual celebration of His birthday in those early years that is traceable back to the day of His birth like my family does for me or like I do for my family.

As the early church got more organized it developed observances of annually recognized dates relating to events in the life of Jesus. The Jewish feasts associated with some of those events provided calendar anchors in several cases, but there was apparently some considerable discussion about how to come up with a date for His birthday. It seems that some had the notion that

Mary's pregnancy would necessarily have begun at Passover time. This would result in the theoretically pleasing symmetry that conception and crucifixion would have occurred around the same calendar date. Such a construct would result in an expected birthday for Jesus around late December.

By whatever logic, some early church leaders eventually settled on December 25<sup>th</sup>. It seems that date was used for one celebration of Christ's birth under the Roman emperor Constantine in about 336 AD. Constantine was the first avowed Christian to rule the Roman Empire.

As best I can tell, December 25<sup>th</sup> was "officially" established as the birthday of Jesus at least by around 350 AD under a pope of Rome by the name of Julius I. The date seems to have stuck. It may or may not be the birthday of Jesus, but some would say that the important thing is that we are at least celebrating it.

Some have made much of the correspondence between the date for Christmas and various secular or even pagan winter festivals. A few suggest that one has co-opted the other. Similar arguments have been advanced concerning Thanksgiving in association with various harvest festivals, even though late November is a little late for harvest in most places. I suppose you could go down a similar track no matter what time of year you might have settled on for the birthday of Jesus. After all, there are always secular festivals. They have spring and summer ones too. There are a whole host of reasoned and unreasoned theories, advanced with varying degrees of confidence, that will presume to tell you on what date the "real" birthday of Jesus occurred. From what I can tell, there does not seem to be a good basis for choosing from among the theories. So we have a situation where the birth of Jesus is celebrated on a date that may or may not be his birthday.

The observance of the celebration made its way across Europe as Christianity did. St. Augustine apparently had much to do with establishing the celebration in England just before 600 AD. There were multiple church holidays that went along with Christmas through the year, one of which is called Epiphany. Epiphany has to do with the manifestation or appearance of Jesus as being the Christ, but different parts of organized Christianity identify different events in the life of Christ as the occurrence of that divine manifestation. Some would say His birth, others His baptism and others His first miracle at Cana. Epiphany was typically being celebrated in early

January. In the 1800's, Alfred The Great established the whole period from Christmas until Epiphany as a holiday, formally establishing the "Twelve Days of Christmas". We still sing about a pear tree being occupied by a partridge as a result.

The Christmas celebration got a lot more raucous in the 1500's with Henry the Eighth of England. After he appropriated the leadership of the Church of England from the Pope to himself, the twelve-day celebration took on more of the character of a drunken spree. It wasn't pretty, and the Protestant reformers were highly critical of the practice. Later that century the reformers came to power in England and put a stop to it by outlawing the observance of Christmas altogether. Among the reformers was a group in the Church of England called the Puritans. All this was going on during the 1600's while some members of the group were building the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the New World.

### The Evolution of the American Christmas

The English colonists coming to the so-called New World brought Christmas with them to varying degrees. Steeped in the tradition of the English Christmas, some continued to celebrate in their new homes. Some may have ignored it. Others continued the Puritan rebellion against behavior seen as scandalous. Christmas was actually "banned in Boston" for roughly twenty years beginning in the mid 1600's. This prohibition approximately paralleled a somewhat shorter ban in Cromwell's England when the reformers took over. Christmas celebrators in some times and places were virtual outlaws.

At the time of the Revolutionary War in the late 1700's, English rules were thrown off, including their taxation and various other controls. There was a general rejection of all things English that went along with the process. Christmas was included in the rejection for many people since it was seen as a part of the English tradition. Christmas just went out of style. Late December of 1800 in the United States of America looked pretty much like any other time of the year, only colder.

Styles change, however. What goes around often comes around. After 30 years or so, generational change had come about. Nostalgia for things English had crept in. Christmas was one of those things. A similar resurgence had developed in England. Christmas had been a bit muted there

since it had come back in the wake of the demise of the reformers and the comeback did not restore the dramatic excesses of the past. English families commonly celebrated Christmas in a quiet and pleasant fashion, although including many of the secular influences that had been added over the years.

An American author by the name of Washington Irving arrived on the scene about that time. You may remember him for stories about Rip Van Winkle and The Legend of Sleepy Hollow. He spent time in England and gained considerable popularity there too. About 1819, he published a collection of essays called “The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon Gent.” in the United States. The sketchbook presented attractive family life in England, serving to feed the growing American nostalgia for English traditions. The scenes of English family Christmas celebrations, with giving of gifts and other pleasantries, were particularly compelling.

About four years after Irving’s work, a poem was published anonymously in New York, later attributed to a professor in an Episcopal seminary by the name of Clement Clarke Moore. The poem was entitled “A Visit from St. Nicholas”. It begins with the words, “Twas the night before Christmas”. You may have heard of it.

The poem had legs. It became popular all over, even in England, and had a profound influence on the experience of the American Christmas. The outlines of Santa Claus/Saint Nick/Kris Kringle had been boldly drawn.

About twenty years later, in 1843, an English author named Charles Dickens published “A Christmas Carol”. Another profound influence was established on both sides of the Atlantic. Nobody wanted to be a Scrooge about Christmas. It was better for God to bless us, every one.

The deal was probably sealed later in December 1850. Queen Victoria of England had married Prince Albert from Germany. They married in 1840. Albert brought more than his clothes and his pipe to England because he had been raised in a Christmas-celebrating Germany with all kinds of secular traditions. Prominent among them was the use of decorated evergreen trees at Christmas. Deciduous trees just were not attractive at that time of year.

Around 1848, an engraving was done in England showing the Royal Family posed with their Christmas tree and looking regal. The engraving was published in the United States in December of 1850 in “Godey’s Lady’s

Book”. This is the same periodical which had such widespread influence of which we spoke earlier in our discussion of Thanksgiving. The editor was the very same Sarah Josepha Hale who had written “Mary Had a Little Lamb” and who had campaigned so tirelessly to make Thanksgiving a national holiday. Ms. Hale had an out-sized influence on the sense of fashion among American women, and derivatively among American men. People suddenly needed to have Christmas trees. It had become the way Christmas was supposed to look. Traditions have to start somewhere. The resurgence of Christmas had happened, and it had occurred almost in parallel in the United States and in England.

Christmas was still an informal celebration in the United States. It was not a formal holiday. In fact, there were no formal federal holidays in the United States, as we have noted earlier. The first, federal holidays were established by an Act of Congress in 1870, but only for the District of Columbia. They were extended across the federal government in 1885. The five holidays included New Year’s, George Washington’s Birthday, Independence Day, Thanksgiving and, of course, Christmas on the twenty-fifth of December. Thus, Christmas became a holiday for the United States just sixty years before I was born. When I came along, it seemed to me that it had always been so.

As you might imagine, some protested that Federal recognition of Christmas was unconstitutional. I think it even resulted in a Supreme Court case. The ruling came down that Christmas as a Federal Holiday did not violate the Establishment of Religion Clause (not to be confused with Claus) because there was a viable secular purpose: shopping. Christmas, you see, was not to be thought of as the birthday of Jesus. It was about all the other stuff. It had to do with jingle bells and Christmas trees, with Santa Claus and plates of cookies, with peace and good will toward all and with the critical gift-giving that boosted economic activity and required Thanksgiving Day not to come so late that it infringed on the shopping days.



## Keeping or Discovering?

There are some who have mourned the overwhelming commercialization of Christmas. You may have heard or seen people pleading to “Keep Christ in Christmas”. You may have seen bumper stickers with those words on them. I suspect that even some of those stickers were profitable for somebody. Is it even possible to reasonably argue for keeping Christ in Christmas? Can you keep something you don’t have? Or would you have to find it first?

When you come across a new gadget or a new idea that you recognize as unfamiliar, you tend to examine it to figure out what to think about it. Not so with the things that have “always” been there. You have seen them and done them so many times before that there is no occasion for examination. When you first looked at them with wonder, you may have been too young to start analyzing. That is the way Christmas is for many people. It feels good because it brings back emotional memories, some bittersweet. So we do it. Longstanding traditions are typically unexamined traditions.

Let’s take an example. Let’s take “Silent Night”. You have probably heard it. There’s a good chance you have sung the words or at least heard them sung. There is a good chance you can’t remember when you heard them for the first time. For many, if not most of us, the words have become simply a succession of syllables, almost like a foreign language. For most readers of this book, it was actually written in a foreign language. The carol was first performed on Christmas Eve 1818 in Austria at about the time Washington Irving was working on his Sketch Book in England. We typically sing the words in an English version but the original was in German by Joseph Mohr. Some of us have sung the German version as well. It is the quintessential song for my quintessential holiday. But what does it mean?

“Silent Night, Holy Night. All is Calm, All is Bright.” At some time after the actual birth it may have been calm, but probably not during the event. I have delivered a number of children in medical settings during my training. I have seen uncontrolled births as well. None were particularly silent or calm nor is there reason to think that the birth of Christ was any gentler than is typical. Certainly His death was not. Birth is full of sound and sweat and blood. It is not calm. I also suspect the stable was dimly lit, rather than the physically bright delivery rooms I know.

“Round Yon Virgin, Mother and Child.” What does that even mean? I remember singing those words as a child. I knew the words. I just didn’t have any idea what they meant. I don’t think I cared. I have heard about a kid who thought this meant Mary was overweight, but I never went that far. Now I think it may mean that all is calm and bright **around** that virgin mother over there, but I’m still not entirely sure.

“Holy Infant, So Tender and Mild.” That sounds nice, and it provides a pleasant alternative to some of the more difficult acts and words of Jesus that came later. Some find it easier to mentally deal with a non-threatening Baby Jesus than with one armed with a whip and throwing the money changers out of the temple. The truth is that Joseph Mohr’s original words in German don’t even say this. These English words are by an American Episcopal priest named John Freeman Young who did an English translation about 40 years later in 1859. Translating songs and poems is often hard because words don’t automatically rhyme when they are translated literally. The German words literally say something like “lovely boy with curly hair” (“holder knab’ im lockigen haar”). In German, “Haar” rhymes with “Paar” or “Pair” in English, referring to the “Mother and Child”. In English, “Mild” was chosen to rhyme with “child”. I wonder how “Silent Night” would go over these days with curly hair instead of tender and mild.

The curly hair probably sounded better in the Austria of 1818 than it does today because classical nativity art in those days often depicted the baby with curly hair. It is instructive to look at some of those paintings. There are some by Francesco Albani that provide good examples. He was active in the 1600’s. He painted several with a curly blond Baby Jesus reclining on a cross. I think he probably understood some truth there, mixed in with the extraneous blond curls. Curls and crosses are not a part of our American Christmas, but when we examine our unexamined traditions, we find all kinds of intermingled, extraneous stuff conflated with what we thought we knew and obscuring what we should know.

I’m not trying to ruin “Silent Night” for you. I like “Silent Night”. It brings back marvelous memories of those I sang it with. I’m not trying to ruin Christmas either. I love Christmas. I plan to celebrate it as long as I breathe the air of this planet. But I can’t keep Christ just there. I may discover Him there, but Christ bursts forth into the rest of my days. When He does, Christmas is transformed from a holiday into a Holy Day. That is by His doing, not mine. A Holy Day is not something that we plan or accomplish or

do by rote. It is something He does in us. It is something we experience when we experience the Christ Who Is. It is an experience transforming not just that day; it transforms all our days.

The word Christmas is a contraction of the term Christ's Mass. Mass is the ritual of sharing the body and blood of Christ. That brings us back once again to the Lord's Supper. The baby was born to go to the cross, and to offer His body broken and His blood shed for our consumption. This is what He came to give thanks for as we saw in the previous section of this book.

Instead of trying to keep Christ in Christmas, I think we should perhaps be more concerned with discovering the "Mas" in Christmas and the Christ who stands at the door and knocks. He was indeed laid in a manger for a time, but He did not stay there. He was nailed to a cross for a time, but He did not stay there. He was laid in a grave for a time, but He did not stay there either. He has come to keep us in Christ's Mass and to share Himself with us. That is the experience of the Holy Days.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE ROAD TO BETHLEHEM

#### O Little Town

In our Thanksgiving survey of the Bible, we concentrated on three great Thanksgiving feasts. We cannot do a similar thing here because there are no examples in the Bible of commemorations of Christ's birth. Instead, let's look at three familiar aspects that form part of the content of our traditional Christmas narrative and explore some of the Biblical and historical reasons they came to belong there. We will try to do some de-conflation. The first subject of our inquiry is the setting for Christ's birth, namely Bethlehem.

It is reasonably well known that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. "O Little Town of Bethlehem" is certainly less common than "Silent Night", but it has at least a familiar ring to it for lots of people. I suspect you could conduct a public survey in the United States general population and find that more people could name the birthplace of Jesus than could name the birthplace of George Washington or Abraham Lincoln or George W. Bush or Barack Obama. You probably would not find all that many people who could provide much insight into the significance of the location. Let's take a look.

Bethlehem is a small but important place. It means literally "House of Bread". The One born there later said that He was the Bread of Life (John 6:48 is one example). That certainly makes the name of the town appropriate, but the reason for its importance most people would probably give is that Jesus was born there. In fact, there is more to it.

A lot of things came together to make Bethlehem Christ's birthplace. Luke 2 tells us that the first real Roman emperor, a relative and adopted son of Julius Caesar who had taken the name of Augustus, required that a tax be levied on the entire Roman world. That included the Roman-controlled area in which Bethlehem was located. Neither the mother of Jesus nor the man to whom she was engaged lived in Bethlehem. They lived about seventy miles away, but Joseph was "of the house and lineage of David" so he had to go there. It was something like registering for the draft. You had to go and sign up so that your taxpaying could be tracked. They did it by family groups because

they did not have Social Security numbers. The timing was such that the trip coincided inconveniently with the end of Mary's pregnancy. They arrived in Bethlehem just in time for the delivery. The only reasons for Christ's birth to occur there would seem to be the tax thing, Joseph's family relationship and a quirk of timing. In fact, there is much more to it.

## The Coming King

We find ourselves back with David again, just as we did when we examined his Thanksgiving feast. It turns out that David's feast was in Jerusalem, not in Bethlehem, but Bethlehem was indeed David's hometown. Right after his feast in II Samuel 6, a remarkable thing happened that you can read about in chapter 7 of II Samuel. David had brought the ark of the Presence of God into Jerusalem but it was still being kept in a tent. David, on the other hand, lived in a solidly constructed, wood palace. Something seemed out of balance to David about these arrangements. He therefore resolved to build a house for the ark and the Presence of God. It occurred to David that God should be honored above David and not the other way around. It was an uncommon notion then and it remains so today.

At that point, God made an announcement to David through God's prophet Nathan that would pave the road to Bethlehem. He announced that, instead, God would build a house for David. He was not talking about a remodel job on the palace in which David already lived. He was promising him Jesus Christ.

God promised David something that He said would not occur until David was dead and gone. He said He would raise up a descendant after David whose kingdom would be established forever and who would be the One to build a house for God's Name (II Samuel 7:12-13). He was not talking about David's son Solomon who would succeed David as King and actually build the first Temple of God. He was promising him Jesus Christ.

God said He would establish the throne of this descendant's kingdom forever (II Samuel 7:13), but Solomon's throne did not even endure beyond Solomon's death when his kingdom was divided. More importantly, God said He Himself would be a Father to this man and this man would be a Son of God (II Samuel 7:14). How could one be born with both God and David as a Father? It would seem that an adoption would have to be involved. It was.

Long years later a direct descendant of David named Joseph functioned as the adoptive earthly father of the Son of God. Joseph was “of the house and lineage of David” which both drew Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem and fulfilled God’s promise of the coming Forever King whose Father is God and who is identified as descended from David as well. According to the Bible, this was literally true. Jesus was announced to Mary as a Child to be conceived in her by God’s Own Spirit and therefore the Son of God (Luke 1:35). At the same time, His adoptive father Joseph was a descendant of David according to the genealogies in Matthew 1 and Luke 3. Mary may have been of David’s line as well.

Many have grappled with the difficulties in trying to comprehend the Matthew and Luke passages when taken together and in the context of the Old Testament. The two genealogies don’t seem reconcilable. They follow different but intersecting paths and are of radically different lengths. A few have carried out strenuous mental gymnastics to try to explain the variations. I find no calling to enter that fray. I have become more content not to comprehend but simply to experience. There is much that I cannot explain about the Bible. For example, I cannot “explain” the love of God described in John 3:16, but I have been given that love to experience. The Matthew and Luke genealogies of Christ at least make it clear to us that Jesus is qualified to be a descendant of David and also to fulfill the promise that God Himself would be the Father of the Forever King.

### Tracing The Heritage

We can trace some aspects of the heritage that leads us to Bethlehem without attempting to explain everything. We can at least appreciate that the Child born there was derived from human stock and thus shared a heritage that necessarily goes back to Adam. The very name God gave Adam has to do with blood. Adam’s name literally means “the one who shows the blood”. The first recorded bloodshed was not associated with the blood at Cain’s birth or Abel’s death but rather the blood of the first sacrifice, performed by God Himself, when He prepared the animal skins to cover Adam’s sin. I like to think the skins came from lambs. That blood looked forward to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

For similar reasons, Christ's earthly heritage also necessarily came through Noah, another man saved by God's grace. We read in Genesis 6 that God had Noah prepare an ark in advance of the flood. This was a very different kind of ark than the one we have described earlier. It was still a box, in a sense, but it was a very large one in the form of a boat. The boat was probably larger than any other wooden ship ever made. It was to be covered inside and out with pitch. That makes good sense because pitch was needed to keep the water out. However, Genesis 6 is the only place that Hebrew word is translated as "pitch". The word is "kopher" and it appears seventeen times in scripture. Everywhere else, it is translated with words like "ransom". The Hebrew root is "kapher" (meaning covering) and appears over 100 times in the Old Testament, usually translated using words like "atonement", "cleanse", "pardon", and "reconcile". It is the word used to describe the blood of the sacrifices on the altar as a covering or atonement for sin. "Kopher" also can refer to a plant used as a reddish dye. It may be that the covering of the ark, inside and out, was not of dark pitch to keep the water out, but a red representation of Christ's atoning blood to keep the death out. In that sense, it would also have prefigured the blood of the Passover Lamb on the doorposts.

In the tenth generation after Noah, God chose to interact with a man named Abram on the basis of a faith relationship. The heritage of Christ must clearly be traced through this man as well. God renamed him Abraham and promised him the land including Bethlehem for an inheritance. Abraham moved his family to the land of that promise, passing through or near the site of Bethlehem during his travels. The middle part of Genesis describes multiple dealings God had with Abraham pointing to the promise of Christ. Abraham is buried near the town of Hebron on land he purchased for the purpose. His burial place is still revered by people of three faiths. It lies some thirteen miles or so from that little town of Bethlehem.

Abraham is a significant figure yet today. According to Pew Research, roughly 55 percent of the population of today's world is estimated to identify at some level, as Christians, Muslims or Jews. The Jews are by far the smallest group. Each of these groups looks to Abraham as a foundational figure in their history. Can you think of another person who lived more than 4000 years ago who maintains that kind of relevance? God had told Abraham that his name would be made great and, in him, all the families of the earth will be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3). His relevance as a blessing lies in Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of God's promise to him.

Abraham had children and grandchildren and so on through today. Many people are now living who can trace their ancestry back to him. Jesus even stated that God is able to bring forth children of Abraham from the stones around him, so adoption also appears possible there too.

A particular great-grandson of Abraham received a prophetic blessing stating that the position of authority would continue to derive from him until Shiloh (or the Peaceful Ruler) would arrive. The blessing spoke of the garments of that man being washed in wine. The blessing was spoken over Judah, one of the twelve sons of Jacob (or Israel). You can read about it in Genesis 49:8-12. Judah became the patriarch of one of the twelve tribes of Israel, the one who received his share of the Promised Land that included the Little Town of Bethlehem. Our passage in Luke 2 identifies it as being in Judea.

That brings us back again to David, because David was a direct descendant of Judah, as was Solomon and the line of kings who ruled over Judah. The scepter of authority continued to be passed through descendants of Judah until the captivity in Babylon. Even thereafter, the line of authority continued in Judah's descendants. Leading the return to the Promised Land was the man in that line named Zerubbabel to whom we have already referred. He is named in the line leading to Christ in both our Matthew and Luke genealogies. It should come as no surprise that the priest who was paired with that leader was a man named Jeshua, another Old Testament form of the name Jesus.

Jesus was not born in the place where David reigned as king. He was born in the place where David was born. He did not reside in a palace as David eventually did. In fact, He had no home in this earth. According to Matthew 8:20, He had no place to lay His Head. He did not die after a life of "threescore years and ten" as David did, in a ripe old age full of days, riches, and honor (II Samuel 5:4 and I Chronicles 29:28). Instead, He died at less than half that age on a rude cross, having no possessions but His clothes. But He was a King, and He still is. He was born in the Little Town of Bethlehem to fulfill the Promise of God that a King would follow David whose father would be God Himself and whose Kingdom would have no end. He died in the city where David died but He had no earthly children and no riches to leave to them. Instead, through the resurrection, His kingdom does not end. The honor and glory due Him is shared with us, because He still raises up heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ with whom to share all the riches of



the New Creation in Him. Bethlehem is not just a word or a place. It is the Promise of the Eternal King.

### A Landmark Along The Way

There is more. There usually is.

Another Biblical narrative sounds very familiar to us except for a few details. You may recognize the story of a man traveling south toward Bethlehem with his beloved wife who was pregnant and about to give birth. Before they even made it to Bethlehem, her labor began. They had to stop along the road and, with the help of a midwife, she brought forth her second-born son. She died immediately after the childbirth. Of course the man was not Joseph. The woman was not Mary. The man was Jacob. His wife was Rachel. The events occurred roughly 1900 years before the birth of Jesus. You can read about it in Genesis 35:16-20.

People may begin to appreciate a prophetic circumstance and suppose there to be a single one-to-one allegorical significance. Christ came from the line of Judah and completed God's promise to David of the coming Forever King. That must be that. But here we see a different prophetic circumstance that adds another dimension. The Promise of Christ inhabits all of scripture. Judah was the fourth son of Jacob and received the promise of the kingly line. The account we have just been discussing, Genesis 35, describes the birth of Jacob's twelfth and last son Benjamin, not Judah.

There is more than a passing relationship here. The first king over Israel, a failure by the name of Saul, was of the tribe of Benjamin (I Samuel 10:17-24). Furthermore, when the kingdom was divided after the death of David's son Solomon, the two tribes who stayed together under David's kingly line were Judah and Benjamin. But it is the birth of Benjamin that draws our attention back to Bethlehem.

When Rachel stopped along the road to have her baby and die, the midwife told her she had borne her second son. As she lay dying, she named her boy Ben-Oni, meaning Son of my Sorrow. However, after she died, Jacob called him Benjamin, meaning Son of the Right Hand.

Rachel had been the love of Jacob's life and he mourned her deeply. He set up a pillar along the road to mark where he had buried her. She was not taken to the family plot near Hebron where his parents and grandparents were laid to rest. Ultimately Jacob would be buried in that other, family plot with Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca and Jacob's other wife Leah, who had borne Judah to him. Rachel was buried alone, along the road close to Bethlehem. The Bible of Jesus's day recorded that the pillar over her grave still remained there to mark it.

What do you suppose Joseph and Mary thought as they travelled by that same spot on the way south toward Bethlehem roughly 1900 years later? Mary was about to give birth herself, having previously been told by the angel that her child would be called the Son of the Most High and that He would sit on the throne of His father David to reign forever over a kingdom with no end (Luke 1:30-35). What might Mary have thought about as she passed Rachel's grave, or perhaps as she pondered these things later? Might she have thought about the child she would bear as also being the Son of the Right Hand to be seated at the Father's right hand? Or would she also come to appreciate intimately the kinds of things contained in the prophesy of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53. The Judaic Benjamin, the Son of the Right Hand, would also be the Ben-Oni, the Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief (Isaiah 53:3). Most surely of all, the sorrows He bore would be our sorrows (Isaiah 53:4) so that we might be seated with Him at the right hand of the Father. The Bible actually says this explicitly in Ephesians 1:18-21 and 2:4-7.

As we experience Christmas, the thought of Bethlehem should bring forth all these things, and much more besides.

## CHAPTER 7

### THE SHEPHERDS OF BETHLEHEM

#### While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks

A staple item in our American Christmas celebration is to recall the angelic announcement to the shepherds who “were in the same country” “keeping watch over their flocks by night”. It has been read again and again from the second chapter of Luke. It forms the subject matter of many of our Christmas carols, either in whole or in part. It also is standard equipment in nativity scenes. There we typically see the aftermath of the announcement as the adoring shepherds gather with Mary and Joseph around the manger. There are flowing robes, shepherd’s staffs and sometimes a youthful shepherd carrying a lamb. Occasionally, we even see a little drummer boy inappropriately intruding on the scene. In the living nativities, groups may include live sheep milling around.

The announcement scene is harder to pull off. There is no unanimity among scene designers about what an angel of the Lord should look like. The shining of the Glory of the Lord around them generally seems drab in simulation. The multitude of the heavenly host is also a problem. Therefore, the announcement scene is generally relegated to carols and sacred music, relying on the music to point toward the grandeur and the wonder of it all.

Probably the greatest number of notes I can recall being assigned to one syllable occurs in “Angels We Have Heard On High”. “Glo-” always ran me out of breath before I could get to the “-ria”. For the longest time, I didn’t know what “In Excelsis Deo” meant until I looked it up: “To God In The Highest”.

Angels and shepherds have always seemed to me colorful and picturesque, but I wonder if much meaning comes through. Could it be that the message is simply that God was making His Gift known to the common person? That is surely part of it.

It is certainly true that the word did not reach the highly placed and the well connected. King Herod, at that point, was clearly unaware. The religious leaders of the time slept through the event. The same may be true in this day and age in a world where many are exposed only to the profitable and slick

ministrations of mass-market Christianity. Could it be that there is more to the shepherds of Bethlehem than is typically celebrated in our American Christmas holiday? Let's again turn to a broader view of scripture.

### The Coming Shepherd

It is peculiarly appropriate that the announcement should come to shepherds, because the One born in Bethlehem would eventually identify Himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10:11-15). He did not say "a" Good Shepherd, He said "the" Good Shepherd. The implication is clear: There is only One that merits the term. Why would such a thing be? For that we need to go all the way back to the Old Testament again, to Ezekiel 34.

God has had a long-standing problem with shepherds. It's not the ones watching over the ovine variety; it is the ones watching over the people of His creation. Ezekiel 34 begins with a vehement condemnation of the shepherds of Israel. He accuses them of exploiting the flock rather than feeding and caring for it. The flocks wandered as a prey both for the shepherds and other predators against whom they should have expected protection. Therefore, God pronounces judgment and states unequivocally that He is against the shepherds and will remove them from their positions (v. 7-10). The flock will be delivered out from under the bad shepherds.

Then He says a remarkable thing. Beginning in verse 11, God says that He Himself will be the Shepherd, and He will be Good. He could not be otherwise. When Jesus said that He is "the" Good Shepherd, He was surely referring at least in part to the fulfillment of the promise of Ezekiel 34. In fact, the promise in Ezekiel 34:12 and 15-16 that God as Shepherd will deliver the scattered sheep is effectively quoted in Christ's parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15:1-7. The Good Shepherd will seek out even the one lost sheep and carry that sheep home on His own shoulders.

It is not just the shepherds that God is angry with. God also has a problem with the sheep. Ezekiel 34:17-22 details His complaint. The selfish and stronger sheep are not only helping themselves to the best food and water, but they are also doing damage to the rest. They appear to be as bad as the shepherds, with similar results for the rest of the flock. Therefore, God will impose a similar judgment and accomplish a similar deliverance by installing

Himself as that Good Shepherd (verses 20-22). He will protect the helpless ones from the selfish members of the flock.

God refers again to David in verses 23 and 24 when He promises to set up a single Shepherd who will be His Servant David and who will feed the sheep Himself. At the time this promise was made in Ezekiel, David had been dead for hundreds of years, but the promise of the Coming King from David whose kingdom would have no end was still very much alive. Jesus Christ is both that King and that Shepherd.

The promise in Ezekiel echoes the earlier promise in Isaiah 40 that the Lord God Himself will come to rule and that He will also feed His flock like a shepherd, gathering up the young lambs and holding them to Himself (Isaiah 40:10-11).

The shepherds of Bethlehem were not among the shepherds that God condemns. They were not among those exploiting the flock for their own enrichment as we still see today. They were shepherds of ovine creatures who did not abandon their flock to wander unprotected from predators. They were out there at night keeping watch over their flocks when the fulfillment of a great promise was announced. When the angel brought them the “Good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people”, a promise was being fulfilled about the Good Shepherd passage in Isaiah 40.

Isaiah 40:9 introduces what we just read. It calls the bearer of good tidings to lift up his voice and say to the cities of Judah, “Behold Your God”. That’s what the angel was doing. Take a look for yourself at all three verses (40:9-11). You will find that to be precisely what the angel said to the shepherds of Bethlehem of Judea. It remained yet to be understood that He Himself was come to feed His flock with His own body and blood.

### The Shepherd with a Shepherd

The Christmas shepherds of Bethlehem were not the only ones who received a word from the Lord on those same hills. Has it occurred to you that the pastures for those shepherds and sheep were the very same ones that a shepherd boy named David had roamed to find green pastures and still waters for his flock hundreds of years before? How appropriate! How fitting that the announcement should come to shepherds in the environs of Bethlehem where

a young shepherd boy had grown to be the man after God's Own Heart. The coming Forever King and God-Shepherd was promised to David the king and to the kings who came after, but was also announced to shepherds on David's same hills, and potentially to shepherds who were David's relatives as well. Why would it have been otherwise?

Personally, I like to think that the Bethlehem shepherds were occupying the very spot where David's heart was touched by the heart of God with the knowledge that this shepherd boy had a Forever Shepherd of his own. I don't know exactly when David wrote down, or had someone write down, the Twenty-Third Psalm, but I think I know where and when God inscribed it on his heart. I believe it was, in the same country, where that young shepherd was abiding in his fields, keeping watch over his flock by night, long before he became a king. I believe God announced, and David received a startling truth: "The Lord is My Shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul..."

In point of fact, David received the same promise made to Isaiah and to Ezekiel. The Lord Himself would be the Shepherd, and Jesus identified Himself as that Shepherd. It was a promise to the cities of Judah to behold their God, and Jesus would say that the one who sees Him has beheld the Father (John 14:9). Not all have seen Him. Not all will receive Him, but as many as receive Him, to those is given the power to become the Children of God (John 1:12).

David was the shepherd who found that he had a Shepherd of his own who would bring him to dwell in the house of His Shepherd forever (Psalm 23:6). Good news indeed, and good tidings of great joy, broadcast to all, for unto us was born in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ The Lord. Glory to God in the highest! Glory in excelsis deo! You and I are offered a Shepherd too, but the word came earlier to the shepherds of Bethlehem.

### The Shepherd Who Was a Sheep

We have seen the blessed shepherds of Bethlehem and the shepherd boy of Bethlehem in whose footsteps they travelled. These should draw us most surely to the Great Shepherd of Bethlehem who fulfilled the promise of Psalm 23, Isaiah 40, and Ezekiel 34 among many others. He is the One the

celebration of Christmas is all about. He is the One who would proceed from that humble birth to be known as the Word Made Flesh, the One by whom the worlds were made, the Lord of All, the King of Kings, the Way, the Truth, the Life, the Light of the world, the Bread of Life, the Son of Man, the Son of God and the Good Shepherd.

He is a Shepherd unlike any other. He is qualified in a way no other shepherd could ever be qualified. That qualification would not have been expected in anyone, especially for a shepherd who was God Himself in human form. A King of Kings you would have expected. There remain some who look for another whose majesty would be more immediately apparent. To be a shepherd might seem too menial a position. You might as well be a washer of feet, but He was that too. No, He was indeed a shepherd but with the most unique and menial qualification ever seen for any shepherd ever conceived of: The Great Shepherd of Bethlehem was also a Sheep.

We heard about it early in the Gospel of John from another man named John who went about baptizing people who professed repentance from their sins. In John 1:29, when John the Baptist saw Jesus coming to him, he was quoted as saying, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (NASB). The One who was to tell us He is the Good Shepherd was first pointed out as a sheep. It was not a sheep that might provide wool for clothing, milk for cheese, or to function as breeding stock to build a flock, although He is a of kind of provision for all those needs and more. No, this Shepherd was a Lamb for sacrifice. Christmas has within it the seeds of the cross. Francesco Albani, our 17<sup>th</sup> century artist discussed earlier, was portraying an aspect of profound truth with his Christ Child reclining on a cross.

Once again, we find this truth has been defined from long ago. Isaiah 59 outlines the situation precisely. It is well worth reading the whole chapter. In summary, the chapter makes the problem clear as God says first that our sins have produced a separation from Him (verse 2). As a result, we are in darkness even though we might wish to see clearly (verses 9 and 10). God was not pleased with the situation and knew that there was no solution within His creation. The remedy for our sin could only come from the Creator so His own arm would accomplish our salvation (verses 15-16). A redeemer was therefore promised (verse 20). The Hebrew term has to do with the kinsman-redeemer who would have the right to adopt back the bereft relative.

That redeemer is the Christ of Christmas, made to be flesh like us so that He might buy us back.

The sin that has separated us from God is more than a matter of doing despicable things or doing what God has defined as off-limits. The word for sin has to do with missing the mark. The mark is none other than Christ. When we attempt to do a bit better or to meet our own definition of acceptability we still miss the mark of Christ. We still fall short of what only God can make us to be. We still need saving.

People don't like the idea of needing saving. In this country, we have typically been taught to stand on our own two feet. The problem for most of us is to actually do it. We first need to find a solid place on which to stand, before we even begin to try to rise up on our own two feet before the face of the God of all creation.

Salvation is the word for being saved. The salvation God has in mind for us is the only kind that is real. It is the one that we read about in Isaiah 59:15-16. It is the one that God accomplishes with His own arm. That arm was more particularly described in Isaiah 53.

The 53<sup>rd</sup> Chapter of Isaiah begins with questions. One of them asks to whom the arm of the Lord has been revealed (verse 1) and then goes on to start revealing Him. He does not come with the stately robes of majesty or the slick and studied appearance of a political candidate or a TV preacher (verse 2). He comes as a Man of Sorrows (verse 3) and the sorrows He bore were ours (verse 4). The piercing of His hands and feet and side was for our sins, not His. The whipping He suffered was so that we might be healed (verse 5). The sin of every human being was laid on Him (verse 6). He was a Sheep prepared for sacrifice (verse 7) and He died in the place of those who had earned that penalty (verse 8). He was buried in a rich man's grave (verse 9 and Matthew 27:57-60). His suffering, as a sacrificial offering for sin, pleased God (verse 10) and was effective for many (verse 11). He was counted among the sinners because He took upon Himself the guilt of my sin and yours (verse 12). He hit a mark beyond the comprehension of those who have missed them all. He was qualified beyond all measure to be the Good Shepherd because He had first taken upon Himself the experience of being a Sheep (Hebrews 2:17-18).



The Babe of Bethlehem was indeed born to be crowned King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He surely was the One who would be called the Good Shepherd. He was actually announced to the shepherds of Bethlehem as Christ, or the Anointed King, and also as the Lord, or the One who would be their leader. But the headline part of the announcement had to do with the sheep part: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ The Lord” (Luke 2:11, KJV). This Savior, by modern spelling, is the same Lamb of God, taking away the sin of the world, whom John the Baptist would later point out as Jesus. He is the Good Shepherd who came as a sheep.

When the shepherds received the news, they went to see and they did so in a hurry (Luke 2:15-16). You could hardly blame them. They had just heard the news from an angel who had a large heavenly chorus for back-up. Their experience of Christmas was not just a holiday. There were no trappings, trees or stockings. There was just a Savior, announced by God and visible only as a baby in a manger. His miracles and the cross still lay in the future, but their encounter with the Christ, even as a newborn, made it a Holy Day for them, one worth telling people about.

I have yet to physically hear that heavenly chorus, but the words, the miracles, the cross, and the resurrection are no longer in the future. The wildest expectations of the shepherds of Bethlehem have been far surpassed. The detailed foretelling through David, Isaiah, Ezekiel, John the Baptist and all the others have come to pass in startling ways. The good tidings of great joy have been published to all people, including me.

The shepherds of Bethlehem, all of them, inform and infuse my experience of Christmas. The experience has replaced a process of going through the motions of a holiday tradition with the real experience of a Holy Day. It is a call to enter the consistent experience of the Holy Days He offers me in the future.

## CHAPTER 8

### A WORD TO THE WISE

#### We Three Kings

We turn now to the wise men, another common aspect of the Christmas tradition that forms a part of the scenery for the Christmas holiday. Some would make a plea for a spiritual context here by observing that, “Wise men still seek Him”. On the whole, however, the narrative of the wise men and the star has become so conflated with tradition that the common understanding stands completely apart from the Biblical basis. At least a portion of the misunderstanding must derive from the influence of Christmas music and dramas.

It is difficult to go through the Christmas holidays without hearing “We Three Kings” sung. As is usual, only some of the words are recognized in a meaningful way. It was a long time before I came to understand what “orient are” might mean. I think I must have conceived of it as a country, somewhere in the Middle East, ruled by a triumvirate of well-to-do but generous men, each with an eye to the night sky. Now I think the “orient are” part comes from an alternative word order chosen to get a rhyme for “far”. “We are three kings of the East (Orient implying “toward the rising sun” in Latin)” may be what is being said. Then, maybe, “We, three kings of the East, **are** bearing gifts and we’ve come a long way.” Who really knows?

Clearly, however, the carol is not saying at all what the Bible account lays out. For one thing, nowhere in scripture does it say there were three wise men. Some people may actually think that they know their names: Melchior, Caspar, and Balthasar. Those names are not found in the Bible and did not show up until hundreds of years later. Three wise men are certainly convenient for Christmas dramas though. The notion of three may come from the listing of three types of materials contained in their gifts but it is an extrapolation to assume that each giver only gave a gift consisting of one of the materials. Two wise men could have just as easily each given some gold, some frankincense and some myrrh, but that would not fit the structure of the Christmas carol.

Neither does it say in the account in Matthew 2 that the wise men were kings. There is a prophetic statement in the Old Testament that might be taken to

suggest that they were kings, but that would require an interpretation which is by no means spelled out. (We will examine that passage later.) The only direct account of the visit is found in Matthew 2 and it calls them magi, a plural noun usually translated as wise men, so we can conclude there was more than one. It is actually the same Greek word from which we get the term “magician”. So “We Three Kings” employs undemonstrated assumptions for the “three” and the “kings”, but you wouldn’t have much of a carol if you started with simply “We” or “We more-than-one magi”. Tradition is a hard taskmaster.

It gets worse. Read carefully through Matthew 2:1-12 and see what you can conclude. Tradition, and our carol, would say the magi followed the star all the way from wherever they started right to the manger, but Matthew’s Gospel does not really say that. It says that they told of having seen His star in the East and had come to worship Him (verse 2). Verse 1 tells us that they had come from the East, and verse 2 makes it clear that they first saw the star back there. Nowhere does it specifically say that they followed the star from their starting point to Jerusalem. Their star-following certainly was happening at some point after they left Jerusalem but they had also been told Bethlehem was the place (verse 8), so they knew at least generally where to go from Jerusalem. It is never made clear how they already knew when they arrived in Jerusalem that this star they had seen meant the King of the Jews was born. Neither is it defined how they got to Jerusalem. If they were not doing star following until after they left Jerusalem, how did they decide to go to Jerusalem in the first place? Was it just because they were logically looking for the King of the Jews in the Jews’ capital? It’s getting complicated.

### How Did They Know?

I am drawn to the intriguing question of how they knew what the star meant and why they would come to worship this king. The question of how they knew what the star meant is usually ignored. If it is asked, shoulders are usually shrugged, but scripture is rich with a basis to consider what should be a pretty obvious question. We can certainly conclude their knowledge came by revelation because we do not figure Him out; He reveals Himself to us by His choosing. Let’s look to His revelation here by turning again to some helpful Old Testament background.

We will look at three kingdoms most prominent after the Egyptians and the Assyrians and largely before the Romans. These are the Babylonians and the Medes and Persians. Our study will require us to get better acquainted with our old friend out of David's tribe, the tribe of Judah, whose name was Daniel, meaning "Judge of God". Daniel will be of great significance in understanding how the wise men could come to know.

Before Daniel came on the scene, the Assyrians had conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel and had tried and failed to conquer the Southern Kingdom of Judah because God intervened. Then God raised up a more fearsome power in the region to punish the wickedness in Judah. Babylon, under Nebuchadnezzar, took over from the Assyrians and dominated Judah more than 600 years before the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. A combination of intimidation and at least two actual invasions by Babylon led eventually to the destruction of the Temple of God and of the city of Jerusalem with much of the population being carried away into captivity in at least two groups. You can read about it in II Kings 24-25 and II Chronicles 36, although it's difficult to sort out the details in the two accounts. What is clear, at least, is that early in the process, our previously introduced Daniel was among a group of selected citizens carried away into captivity in Babylon.

Now Daniel did not just languish in some inner city jail cell. Instead, he and his three friends were regarded as men with potentially valuable contributions to the Babylonians if they learned the language and had useful skills (Daniel 1:4-5). The Babylonians wanted to exploit what they could learn from their conquered territories. Daniel remained faithful to God, avoiding the food that was tainted by idolatry, and, at the end of three years was found ten times better than all the king's wise men. That's right, better than the king's magi (Daniel 1:19-20). Remarkably, Daniel continued in the king's court not just through Nebuchadnezzar's reign but also through his successors and through the transition through the Medes and on to Cyrus the Persian (Daniel 1:21). God gave him great staying power through these kingdoms and he continued to function among the kings' magi, often as their leader and sometimes saving their necks. You can read about it in the remaining chapters of the book of Daniel. Please note that the chapters are not in pure chronological order.

Many things happened during Daniel's long life in multiple royal courts besides the lion's den thing. Along the way, Nebuchadnezzar and a number of other kings were taken out of the way, some having first been brought to the point of acknowledging the greatness of Daniel's God. King Cyrus,

perhaps influenced through Daniel, but certainly by God's Spirit, also eventually issued the proclamation for the people to return to Jerusalem. All the while, Daniel stood as God's wise man among the magi of the east, interpreting dreams, prophesying, and seeing visions from God of things that were to come.

Daniel is rare among the men about whom we know a fair amount in that he does not show the episodes of failing and falling away that characterize the lives of so many of the people of God described in the Old Testament and even today. Daniel stands firm, and it is testified of him that he is a man greatly beloved of God (Daniel 10:10-11).

Daniel did not operate in a vacuum. Nebuchadnezzar had made him the head over all the wise men and magicians or magi of Babylon (Daniel 5:11). The word actually can refer to those who diagram horoscopes, but that was not Daniel's source of information. Nebuchadnezzar was one of those brought to the point of acknowledging the God of Daniel, "The King of Heaven, all whose works are truth" (Daniel 4:37). King Darius the Mede later said much the same thing after the lion's den episode, decreeing that those in his kingdom should fear the God of Daniel who works signs and wonders (Daniel 6:25-27). Daniel clearly received multiple revelations from God described in the book of Daniel.

But there was more. There were the books, the scrolls. The treasures of the Temple of God had been carted away to Babylon with Daniel, and he pored over them, seeking God's truth. How do we know? Look at Daniel 9:1-2. Daniel "observed in the books" that the captivity of the people in Babylon would last for seventy years. This did not produce complacency in Daniel, quite the contrary. It drove him to his knees, confessing the sins of the people and pleading for restoration, as described in the rest of that chapter. As a result, God gave some specifics on the promise of the coming Anointed One, including information on the timing.

It is interesting to notice the particular book that Daniel's information came from. Daniel 9:2 says the source was the prophesy of Jeremiah. You can actually read it yourself in Jeremiah 25:11-12 and 29:10. You don't need to do any fancy calculations to come up with 70 years. A remarkable thing, however, is that Jeremiah produced these prophecies after Daniel had already been carried away to Babylon. Jeremiah was left behind to publish the advance news of the later destruction of Jerusalem and ultimately the final

restoration by the new solemn agreement of God with His people through the coming of that same anointed Forever King and Shepherd (Jeremiah 31). Daniel's library had necessarily been supplemented some time after the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem!

So now we can see that the one who had charge over the magi, the wise men of Babylon, Media, and Persia, had access to the written Word of God. I have no doubt that the library was further supplemented, before Daniel died, with the recording of God's revelations to Daniel too. The wise men under Daniel's authority for so many years were given the opportunity to know of the coming King of the Jews and even something about the timing. The wise men from the East had a reason to know.

Again, there is more. Among the writings in the temple treasury would have been a passage in the old book of Numbers. You can find it in Chapter 24, verse 17. It says this: "I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; A star shall come forth from Jacob, a scepter shall rise from Israel" (NASB). The King was coming and His arrival was to be announced by a star. It actually says that. I'm not making this up.

The magi from the east had received a word to the wise. Since they were not distracted by television, movies, or football games, they had time to ponder it and they had good reason to do so. They had seen the revealed Word of this God, and some of them had been delivered from execution by it. I suspect the word of Daniel's exploits did not die with Daniel. For around 500 years that revelation of God through His Word remained stored up so that, when the time came, there were some who had the best of reasons to know and to attach significance to a star coming forth, visible in the west, after the setting sun.

### Some Possible Names

Before we leave our discussion of Christmas and the wise men, I am going to briefly describe an unconventional possibility. I am not speculating about a conclusion you should adopt. I am simply raising a possibility for your consideration. If there actually were three magi it is possible, in God's design, we might know their names.

There is nothing in the Bible that is specific in this regard, but there are interesting scriptural parallels. Consider first the passage in Luke about a man named Simeon. You can read about it in Luke 2:21-38. The passage describes how Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day and then, when He was forty days old, presented at the temple in Jerusalem. The days of a woman's purification referred to in Luke 2:22 are defined in Leviticus 12 to be forty days (7 + 33) for a male child. The timing for this trip to Jerusalem, and the subsequent return to Nazareth, throws some water on the common notion that Mary and Joseph promptly fled the stable for Egypt based on the narrative in Matthew 2:7-23. The timing and itinerary for these trips is apparently somewhat more complex.

Anyway, when the five-week-old child Jesus arrived in Jerusalem to be dedicated to the Lord, there was a man waiting for Him whose name was Simeon. The Holy Spirit of God had made it clear to Simeon that he would not die before seeing the promised Christ, the Messiah. When Jesus arrived, Simeon was given to recognize that He was the One. Simeon was now fully freed to depart this earth in peace. The Bible does not record how old Simeon was at the time. He could have been quite old. There was a woman there who also recognized Jesus as the means of redemption. She was eighty-four at the time.

God can keep people around a long time when He chooses. Methuselah lived 969 years, possibly dying in the flood as can be seen when you add up the years in Genesis. Noah was already 600 years old when the flood came. It is true that the world before the flood was a very different place than the world we know now. People started living shorter lives for a number of reasons after that transformative event, but the One who hung the stars does as He chooses.

Consider also the provocative passage at the end of John's Gospel. You can read about it in John 21:18-24. When Peter had just been given to know something about what would happen to him in this life, he asked about what would happen to his fellow disciple John. Jesus answered with a surprising statement: "If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?" Instead of worrying about someone else, Peter was encouraged by the Risen Lord to simply follow Him. John was quick to point out that Jesus did not say specifically that John would actually stick around that long, but that God could make it to be so if He chose. It raises the question as to whether He

might have chosen to do so for others beside Simeon (and that eighty-four-year-old woman named Anna).

And that brings us back to the magi. If there were actually three of them, it may be noteworthy that we know the names of three magi of the east. The names are Hananiah (meaning “God has been gracious”), Mishael (meaning “Who is what God is?”), and Azariah (meaning “God has helped”). Great names indeed! These were the three, along with Daniel (meaning “God is my Judge”), who were incorporated into the Babylonian magi, when Nebuchadnezzar carried off the first set of captives from Judah. All four were of the tribe of Judah and potentially were descendants of David. You can read about them in Daniel 1:1-21.

It is interesting to me that Daniel is commonly known today by his original name, rather than Belteshazzar, but people seem to know the other three by the names given to them by the Babylonians. Shadrach is probably more generally recognizable than Hananiah, but Hananiah has real meaning to us as a name. Similarly for Meshach and Abednego.

At any rate, Daniel lived a long time, as we have seen, surviving through the Babylonians, the Medes and at least into the Persians. He was specifically given information on timing for the coming of the Messiah. You can read about it in Daniel 9:20-27, because he wrote the information down. Many have speculated and argued over these prophecies. Some have noted that the 70 “weeks” (literally seventy “sevens”) add up to about the time of Christ’s coming if taken to be seventy sets of seven years. It’s sort of like Christ’s direction that your brother’s sins should be forgiven not seven times but seventy times seven (Matthew 18:21-22).

We would be presumptuous to try to figure this all out on our own. In fact, at the end of the book of Daniel, when more timing is discussed, God told Daniel that the words are “concealed and sealed up until the end time” (Daniel 12:8-9). Only God unseals that which God has sealed.

In the last verse of the book, Daniel is told to go on until the end, after which he will rest before standing again in his allotted portion at the end of time. His death is not recorded in the Bible. Neither is the death of our other three Hebrew magi.



There is more that we know about them, however. You can read about it if you read the third chapter of the book of Daniel. These three were the ones who were thrown bound into the fiery furnace for refusing to worship Nebuchadnezzar's image. By all expectation, it should have been the end of them. It was not. They were delivered out of certain death. They were loosed from their bonds and walked freely and unhurt in the midst of the flames, but they were not alone. There was a fourth with them in the fire. The fourth one appeared different to Nebuchadnezzar's eyes. He looked to him like a Son of the gods. I suspect He looked to Daniel's three friends like the One who would go to the cross for them.

The Bible does not record whatever interaction may have taken place in the furnace. We do not know what Jesus said to them. Clearly, however, the three magi came forth alone. They were elevated to greater power. They had access to many of the riches of God's Word along with Daniel. They would be expected to have received the specific prophecies of the coming of the Messiah first given to Daniel, if they were still around at the time. And they already had met the Messiah in the furnace. They knew what He looked like, because they had had a personal experience and a potentially unprecedented purification. Malachi 3:1-3 describes the sudden coming of Christ as a refining fire who would purify the sons of Levi (the priestly line) so that they could present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Could God have also purified these three sons of Judah (the kingly line) for a similar purpose?

Could God have chosen to keep these purified three around to worship Him at His coming? Of course He could. If there were four wise men, could Daniel be the name of the fourth? Sure. Would it have provoked considerable furor in Jerusalem if three or four ancient old men arrived looking for the newborn King? Most assuredly it would. They would have been over 500 years old, but younger than Noah when the flood came. Could the magi of Bethlehem instead have been physical or spiritual descendants of these early Hebrew magi? That too is possible. There are all kinds of possibilities and no logical mental basis for choosing among them. I'm not offering a conclusion.

What is abundantly clear, however is the answer to the typically unasked question of how the magi, whoever they were, knew to come and worship. The only possibility is by the direct revelation of the Word of God. It is the same way you and I can know to do the same.

## Come Let Us Adore

How did the wise men know? I believe they knew in precisely the same way we can know. We have been given the same library of God's Word to which Daniel and his magi had access, as well as a whole lot more. They had no New Testament, but they did have the same Spirit of God moving among them. We do not have to go look for Him. He shows us Himself. Jesus says in Revelation 3:20, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." There are many who do not hear or who refuse to open.

What did the wise men do with their knowledge? They did precisely what I believe we are drawn to do. They said they saw the star, and that they had come to worship (Matthew 2:2).

The church leaders of the time in Jerusalem were largely clueless. They had some "head knowledge" but their hearts were in another place. When Herod asked his own wise men where the Anointed One was to be born, they actually knew the answer from scripture (Matthew 2:3-8). The wise men from the east may not have had a copy of Micah.

They had probably come to Jerusalem expecting celebrations to be in progress. All they found was someone who knew Micah 5:2. It says One will go forth for God out of Bethlehem to be ruler in Israel. He is not referring to David, who had been dead 250 years or so when Micah wrote it. It was the Forever King who would come after. The rulers in Jerusalem had no idea that it was happening right in front of their noses. The wise men from the east were the ones who knew and who had come to worship. They carried on to Bethlehem, with the star involved in the revelation, and they did just that.

I suspect that the wise men of the east had read Isaiah, particularly chapter 60. "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you" (Isaiah 60:1). The One who would call Himself the Light of the world (John 8:12) had come, asking us to arise and shine forth that light, because He would also tell us that we would be made that light of the world too (Matthew 5:14 and John 12:36). Isaiah 60 goes on to say that deep darkness will cover the people (verse 2) as it did those in Jerusalem. But verse 3 says that nations will come to God's Light and that kings will come to the brightness of His rising. (I mentioned that there is a potential Isaiah basis for the "kings" part of "We Three Kings".)

Verse 6 of Isaiah 60 talks about camels and of those from Sheba bringing gold and frankincense as gifts as they bear the “good news of the praises of the Lord” (NASB). Once again, I am not making this up. Verse 16 says, “You will know that I, the Lord, am your Savior and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob (NASB). God Himself was coming as the Good Shepherd, and as the Lamb of God.

Worship for the wise men was not an option. It was an imperative. The notion of worship did not cross Herod’s mind. Thus has it always been and thus it remains today. Worship is not something where we go through some motions. Worship is the only response the heart can make when it has received the touch of God.

We have probably sung the carol that calls us to come, let us adore Him. The words roll easily off the tongue and the music sounds in our ears, but real worship, real adoration, is not our response to words, music, emotion or belief systems. It is the response to the received revelation of God as He reveals Himself to us in the Person of the King of Kings and the Good Shepherd of Bethlehem who also was the Sheep who died that we might live. His touch and revelation reaches even to wise men in the east. Even more surprising, it reaches to me. My only response is to worship.

The wise men from the east heard and came to Jerusalem asking where they might find the coming King so they could worship Him up close. They were not content to worship at a distance. The religious of Jerusalem were closer than ever they knew but they had not heard. They had the Word of God on their shelves and some had it in their minds. Some even wore parts of the Word of God written in tiny print and placed in small boxes tied by bands to their foreheads, but they had not heard. When the Word of God was made flesh to dwell among them, they did not see Him and they did not behold His glory. A few did, but only when they received His revelation (John 1:14 and 29). Those came, and they worshipped Him up close, following in the footsteps of the shepherds of Bethlehem and the wise men of the east.

Isaiah’s prophecy asked the question in Chapter 40: Haven’t you heard intelligently? Hasn’t it been made clear from the very beginning? Have you not understood from the creation that it is God and only God (Isaiah 40:21-25)? It is the God who was made to be the Holy One of Israel at Bethlehem.

Look at verse 26: “Lift up your eyes on high and see who has created these stars” (NASB). The wise men looked up and they saw.

The first chapter of John explains it. Verse 10 says that the One who came into the world is the One who made that world. The first chapter of Colossians declares clearly, in the 16<sup>th</sup> verse, that Christ was the One through whom and for whom every last particle of the whole creation was made. These are not isolated scriptures. The truth has to be that the Child King the wise men came to worship is the same One who hung the star that guided them to the place where the young child lay. Haven’t you heard?

Isaiah 40 in verses 27 through 31 asks the same question again: “Do you not know? Have you not heard?” (NASB). The answer is that it is God Himself who is to be known and heard. He does not get tired and men cannot figure Him out, but He is the strength and the hope of those who wait for Him. The wise men had waited, and when the time came they received the revelation and came to see and to worship. Have you heard? Have you heard not with your ears from the words of men but with your heart experience with Him? If you have, Christmas has changed from the celebration of a traditional holiday to the experience of a Holy Day in Him that leads us into the Holy Days to come.

The last two verses of the book of Jude are words of praise to the One whose birth we celebrate at Christmas. They call us away from a do-it-yourself Christianity and into the richness of an experience with Him: “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to make you stand in the presence of His Glory blameless with great joy, to the One God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen” (NASB).



# **PART III: THE EXPERIENCE OF NEW YEAR'S**

## **CHAPTER 9 MARKING TIME**

### Celebrating Time

New Year's is a very different holiday from Thanksgiving and Christmas. It is not a day originally set aside for the special purpose of giving thanks. Neither is it the commemoration of a particular event in the way that Christmas is. Instead, in its essence, New Year's simply celebrates the passage of time.

Ordinarily we celebrate, or at least recognize, milestones having some personal significance. We might set aside a day to remember an event such as a birth or death. The event might have larger group significance such as Independence Day or 9/11. A day may be designated in a recurring way to recognize some group or other as Mother's Day, Father's Day or even Valentine's Day. New Year's, however, has to do just with the passage of time.

The frequency of the recurrence is based on the way we measure time. The units we use range from the large to the small. We use years and multiples thereof such as decades, centuries, millennia and even larger. It then ranges down to months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, seconds and fractions of seconds down to extremely small fractions of those seconds.

The units we have chosen are based on observable, recurring events. The day is most prominently observable and was based on the repeating pattern of night and daylight. The month was based on the repeating pattern of the phases of the moon. The year was based on the observed repeating pattern of

the seasons. People eventually learned that these patterns were correlated with the reasonably consistent motions of heavenly bodies that we could observe and study: the rotation of the earth, the revolution of the moon about the earth, and the revolution of the earth about the sun. It was confusing for a while, but we eventually figured it out to some degree of satisfaction.

One of our units of measurement is not based on anything astronomical. The week comes only from God's definition. It actually goes back to the creation in Genesis 1, but it was defined for us first in Exodus 16 with the manna and then, more completely in Exodus 20:8–11 with one of the Ten Commandments. The Bible refers to the Sabbath (our Saturday) and the Lord's day celebrating the resurrection (our Sunday). It is surprising how widespread the week is across much of the civilized world. It seems to fit our needs in such a way that protesters have not chosen to campaign for its abolishment. We seem to need our weekends. But I digress.

The year unit has worked well for celebrations. It just would not be the same if we threw a party for each new month, each new week or each new day. So we celebrate birthdays, Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's on an annual basis because the calendar refreshes annually.

Since we are just celebrating New Year's as the passage of time annually and not some specific event, it begs the question of when we should do it. The earth has been going around the sun for longer than humans have been on the earth. What is the starting and ending point for each revolution? Not all would agree. You may have heard of the Chinese New Year or Jewish New Year or others. Why do so many people operate with January first?

The answer is at least as complicated as getting our dates for Thanksgiving and Christmas. There is no unique, discernible starting point for the earth's orbit around the sun but there are some logical candidates. The earth's rotation axis is tilted rather than perpendicular to the plane of its orbit around the sun. That means that the North Pole points somewhat towards the sun for part of the year and somewhat away from the sun for the other part. That is what produces our seasons, more noticeably the further north or south of the equator you go. It also results in changes in the length of the day and changes in the perceived path of the sun during the year. Twice a year, you pass a point where the midday sun is seen directly over the equator. This is known as the spring and fall equinox, when day and night are about equal.

Because the tilt angle of the earth's rotation axis is a bit over 23 degrees there are also two times each year where the midday sun is seen directly over points about 23 degrees north or south of the equator. These are the tropic lines: The Tropic of Cancer to the north and the Tropic of Capricorn to the south. When the sun stands over these points, its apparent motion north or south stops. These times are called the summer and winter solstice when the days are generally longest in one hemisphere and shortest in the other. Any of these four times would be logical, astronomically-based starting points for the year, but northern hemisphere people and southern hemisphere people might not come to agreement on which to choose. Equator people might want to celebrate semi-annually.

The real story of how January first was selected actually has more to do with how people came to grips with a number of other repeating cycles not aligned with the year and also with another holiday not so far included in our list. To explore these things, we will need to get a little more technical than we have thus far. Don't be concerned. The math is not that scary.

### Aligning the Incongruous

People have been perplexed with the observable creation for a long time because it is not as tidy as they would have liked it to be. The fundamental repeating cycles they observed as measures of time just do not fit together. People tried, very hard. Even from very long ago, people observed and began to understand the cycles observable in the heavens. Crude observatories were constructed that marked out the changes. The ones who watch the sky and began to discern the patterns in the stars were among the first of the wise men because they could predict some things.

Perhaps our most fundamental repeating pattern is the cycle of day and night. Even that basic cycle proved confusing. The sun doesn't rise and set at the same time each day. Without clocks, it was not apparent to the most casual observer on a day-to-day basis, but the watchers began to understand. One sunrise to the next was not exactly 24 hours, but who knew? Finally, someone noticed the apparent motion of the so-called "fixed" stars was more regular than that of the sun. On average the regularity of the sun over a year corresponded with the more consistent regularity of the stars day to day. The hour eventually became a division of  $1/24$  of the fixed star, or average sun, period with minutes and seconds as commensurate smaller divisions.



Thoughtfully observant people eventually figured out the day, but it just did not fit with the other patterns.

Consider the cycle of the moon. It takes between 29 and 30 days between full moons, averaging about 29.53 days. It actually varies because the moon's orbit is not circular and because the continuing motion of the earth and moon with respect to the sun changes the timing of the sun's illumination of the moon as seen from the earth. As a result, other cycles are different. For example, the time for one orbit of the moon around the earth's center is only about 27.32 days, but the angle to the sun changes during that time.

Needless to say, people found it very difficult to track "moonths" (months) in terms of days. They often defined various combinations of months with 29 and 30 days in an attempt to average things out, but nobody could come up with a good scheme that would stay "in sync" indefinitely. Some people would just look at the moon and start a month when they could first see a crescent moon, for example. If a string of cloudy days occurred at month's end, they could start a new month presumptively after 29 or 30 days, correcting things whenever the weather cleared.

The problem was compounded when it came to years, because years don't last precisely 365 days. The exact number of days varies once again, depending on how you define it. An orbit of the earth around the sun takes about 365.256 days, but because of some variations of the earth's motion, the length of the year as defined by seasonal change is only 365.241 days. Early people did not know this. They just observed that a year of twelve lunar months averaging 29.5 days kept coming up short, because a twelve-month calendar year was over about 11.241 days sooner than it should be. In three years you were more than a month off with your annual calendar even if you kept up with the moon phases by varying your months.

The solution, of course, was to add in an extra month (a "leap month" if you like) every two or three years. They defined the need for a leap month on the basis of when crops ripened and/or when the equinoxes occurred. They found pragmatically that this required the insertion of a leap month about seven years out of every nineteen, because seven times 30 days is about the same as nineteen times the shortage of 11.241 days. They made it work, sort of.

This still did not solve the problem of when the year should start. You could choose a point in summer, fall, winter, or spring, and people did, and still do,

using all kinds of calendar systems. The year's beginning might vary depending on who was in power. Some kings saw the beginning of years as coinciding with the time of year of their coronation. The next king might change it again. People did whatever they felt like doing.

God changed all that. Months had been tracked all the way back to Noah in Genesis 7:11, but God defined the beginning month in Exodus 12. In the second verse God declared that the month of the institution of Passover would be the beginning month of the year. So here we are back to the Passover again, for about the third time, along with the Lord's Supper and the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. Exodus 13, in the fourth verse identifies that month as Abib, also called Nisan. Abib means fresh, green ears of grain. It is in the northern hemisphere spring.

Hebrews were not the only group with their spring beginning for the year. Even the very early Romans did similarly, using a ten-month calendar in which the winter months of January and February just were not counted at all. Around six or seven hundred years BC, about the time between the conquest of Israel by Assyria and the conquest of Judah by Babylon, Rome under one of its early kings went to a twelve-month lunar calendar. Most people had tended to do this simply because a set of twelve lunar months is closest to a year. Of course it still was too short and the Romans were not consistent about tossing in extra months so they eventually got about three months off.

Julius Caesar came to power in the Roman Republic (not yet the empire, so he was never an emperor) in about 45 BC. He instituted a new calendar system, apparently based on knowledge he had picked up in Egypt. The system was based on the same twelve months that were then being used, with the same Roman names, but all attempts to keep track of moon phases were given up. That allowed annual harvest festivals to occur at harvest time. Not all months had the same length, but they averaged out to be longer than what you would get with lunar months. The days of the Julian calendar added up to 365 so a leap day was added every four years.

Julius Caesar was not likely aware of God's definition of the year's beginning nor would he have cared. The year continued to start in January, probably named for the Roman god Janus (Latin for door), the two-faced Roman god of beginnings and transitions. As Rome took over much of the known world, the basic approach of the Julian calendar was widely imposed by the time

Christ was born. Some still use it today. It has made dates in these ages easier to reconcile for historians than under prior systems.

You would recognize most of the twelve names for months in the Julian calendar. The first six months are recognizable Latin forms of January through June. Months seven to twelve were Latin forms of the numbers five to ten, harking back to the old ten-month Roman year. The two months that were added to the beginning had set everything off by two so that the tenth month is called October (for 8 as in “octet”) and the twelfth month is called December (for 10, as in “decimal system”). After the death of Julius Caesar, the seventh month was renamed from “five” to July in his honor and the eighth month's name was later changed from “six” to August for the first Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus, grand-nephew to Julius, whose taxation program sent Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem.

Of course there is more. Most of the world no longer operates on the Julian calendar. It still gets out of synchronization by running progressively ahead since it averaged 365.25 days, using a leap day every four years. That is not off much but over time the error builds up. The principal concern arose in the Church of Rome during the mid 1500's AD. By then, the spring equinox was off by about ten days from what it had been at the time of an influential church council about 1200 years before. That Council had discussed the time for Easter, based on the spring equinox and the Julian calendar and the moon. Easter was happening at the wrong time of year and the church did not like it.

Pope Gregory XIII promulgated the Gregorian calendar in early 1582 A.D., but it had been in the works since 1563. Technical experts had studied the problems and had come up with a plan to minimize the drift. The plan was to cut down on the number of leap years to bring the average length of a calendar year closer to the correct value. A day would be added to the year on almost all years that were multiples of four. The exceptions were the even century years that were not also multiples of four hundred. This made things very close indeed, but of course it was not exact. They dealt with the ten-day error that had already accumulated by imposing a one-time, giant, spring-forward, daylight-savings-time-type correction, except it occurred in the fall. People lived the day of October 4, 1582 but the next day was not the fifth. The next day was October 15, 1582. Think of the birthdays that were missed! Cleverly, since October 4, 1582 was a Thursday, they made October 15, 1582 a Friday instead of the Monday it was originally scheduled to be. That way, the weekdays did not skip a beat and the weekend, including the Sabbath on

Saturday, came on time. You don't want to fool around with a person's weekend.

Gregory did not have the power to impose his will outside the Church, but his plan was widely adopted and now is the standard calendar for most of the civilized world. Those marking the beginning of the year at a time other than the first of January eventually fell into line with the practice that originated in Rome well before the time of Julius Caesar. It probably has something to do with the beginning of the office terms for the Roman Consuls during the Roman Republic as of about 100 years before the Julian calendar.

Well, that seems to be why the New Year celebrations progress westward as December 31 changes to January 1 in the various time zones around the world. Had it not been for some concerns about when Easter should be, we could now be celebrating 13 days later. Either way we are not celebrating a fixed point in the earth's orbit around the sun. We are celebrating fixed points in time as marked by a revised calendar with constant drift and periodic corrections.

Allow me two incidental observations. First, the year numbers we assign for our celebration derive from an attempt to calculate dates based on what people believed to be the date of the birth of Christ. Anno Domini, or A.D. is a Latin term for "In the year of our Lord", while B.C. refers to before Christ. There have been those who have protested the reference to "our Lord" when they do not consider Him to be. As a result, there has been a substitution of C.E. (and before C.E.) to refer to the "Common Era" or "Current Era" although others have still insisted on "Christian Era". Either way, only the name has changed. The numbers were too well established in the history books and are computed from a supposed date for the birth of Jesus. Where else would you start?

The second observation has to do with the time of day in which to celebrate the changeover. Why midnight? The Hebrews considered the day to begin with the evening, at sundown. There was a reason for it that goes all the way back to Genesis 1. In verse 5, it says that there was evening and there was morning on the first day of creation and Genesis continues to reiterate that sequence for subsequent days. So the Hebrew day starts with evening instead of midnight. The world celebrates the New Year in the middle of the night sequentially in about 24 different zones as the earth rotates with respect to the sun. It would be too inconvenient to observe one time simultaneously for

everyone in the world because nobody would want the 4 AM timeslot and revelers elsewhere might not be in the mood at noon. The terms AM and PM stand for the Latin for before the middle of the day and after it, with the middle taken as noon. If noon is the middle, then surely midnight must mark the end and the beginning. Should that be 12 AM or 12 PM?

We see then that the world celebrates a day and a time of day that one might not understand as being Biblically sourced. It is not celebrated in the spring month of Abib (or Nisan), as Exodus 12 specifies, and it does not occur at sunset, as Genesis 1 would seem to imply. In fact, there is no encouragement to be found anywhere in the Bible for us to celebrate the fact that some period of time has simply passed. The things we are to celebrate have more to do with commemorating the mercies of God upon us. There is no more scriptural support for celebrating January 1st than there is for celebrating the fourth Thursday in November for Thanksgiving or December 25<sup>th</sup> for Christmas. It clearly does not matter to the world. More people around the globe wholeheartedly celebrate the New Year's holiday than either of the other two.

I suppose January 1st might be taken as a time to celebrate something in scripture that most neglect, at least if December 25th is taken to have the significance we attach to it. If you count Christmas as the first day and count forward to New Year's Day, you have reached the eighth day. That is the day for the circumcision of a male child as prescribed in Genesis 17: 9-14. It is the act of keeping the covenant God had made with Abraham. There are churches in this world that celebrate January 1st as the Feast of the Circumcision of Jesus the Christ, and well they should. That was the day when Jesus was presented to be circumcised. The bearer of the New Covenant was first keeping the Old Covenant for us. You can read about the event in Luke 2:21-38.

The passage tells us that there was a man celebrating that day like never before in his life. His name was Simeon. We have met him before, in our discussion of the wise men. God had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Christ (verses 25-26). God drew him to the temple as Mary and Joseph brought Jesus there (verse 27). Simeon took the baby into his arms and rejoiced saying that now, at that moment, he was fully set free, just as God had promised (verse 28 to 29). He announced that he had just seen with his own eyes his salvation from God in the Person of this Child who was, at that moment, being named with the name announced by the angel to Mary and separately to Joseph (Luke 1:31-33, Luke 2:21, Matthew 1:21).

The name was Jesus, which means God's Salvation, because He would save his people from their sins. Simeon was one of those people who would be saved. It was a different kind of New Year, if it actually happened on January 1<sup>st</sup>. It is always something worthy of profound celebration when someone actually sees this Jesus as Savior.

This is not the common experience of the New Year's holiday, but this would be the suitable experience of the day God makes holy. The more typical experience is simply to celebrate the passage of time.

### What Is Time?

When we celebrate the passage of time, what is it that we are celebrating? What exactly is time? You may have heard somewhere that time is of the essence, but what is the essence of time?

To hear us talk, time must be a very odd thing, if it can be considered a "thing" at all. Time can be had, if we have time, or not had if we don't have time. Time can be saved, if we save some time or spent, if we spend some time. Time can be lost, if we're losing time, or found, if we find the time. I can give you some of my time or take some of yours. I can make some time for you. I can make up lost time or I can waste time or even just kill some time. We can have a good time, an OK time or a bad time. It seems that it can even be the best of times and the worst of times, at the same time. I remember my mother telling me often, "It is time", but it might be this time, that time, the other time, homework time or just bedtime. Time can move. It can move slowly and drag or quickly and fly. Time can pass, flee, disappear or even seem to stand still. There can be a first time for anything and the last time too. We talk about anytime, we talk about every time and we talk about no time at all. We can measure time and keep time, but sometimes we don't have enough time, particularly when other people keep stealing our time. But what in the world is it?

Time is the stage on which our lives take place, but we have no capacity to examine it, manipulate it, experiment with it, or understand how it works.

Time appears to have something to do with change. We measure time by observing changes, particularly repeating cycles of change such as days and years as discussed in the last section. If nothing at all changed at all, we

would not have an awareness of time. In fact, we would not have an awareness whatsoever because we would not exist. The stage on which our lives take place would have been pulled out from under us.

Another aspect of the stage on which our lives take place is the space we occupy. In some interesting ways, the space around us has some similarities with time. Space is also difficult to examine, manipulate, experiment upon, or understand how it works. Space and time are fundamentally different from some of the other necessities of life such as water, carbon and oxygen. We can observe those and experiment upon them. They are things. We are not as sure about what time and space really are. Those who choose to only believe in what they can see or touch must not believe in time or space.

There is something else that is as profoundly fundamental to our lives as time and space, posing similar difficulties to our understanding. That fundamental something is light. It may be a "thing" but we are not all that sure. If it is, it is a thing unlike all others but it may have a lot to do with all others. Light may also "shed some light" on how to think about time and space.

Let's begin with the observation that light moves freely through space and takes time to do so. It does not take much time because it moves very fast indeed. In fact, we have come to believe that nothing ever moves faster than the speed at which light moves through empty space. Light's speed looks the same to anybody, whether that anybody is moving or not. The situation is different for other things like trains. If a train is moving along a track at 100 miles per hour (mph) and I am moving along a parallel track in the same direction at 50 mph, then the train would be going only 50 mph relative to me. Not so if the train were a light beam instead. The speed of the light beam would not appear to me to be slowed by 50 mph.

Light slows down somewhat when moving through something other than empty space. It may slow down by around 25% in water and around 33% in some glass. That's fundamentally why a lens can "bend" light. Light can even be absorbed and transformed by some materials, but light has never been observed to just stop so we can just study it. Light keeps moving along.

That's one way that light is similar to time. They both just seem to keep moving along and, unhindered, they seem to be going at the same speed without regard to what we are doing or even whether we bother to notice. Not even glass or water, or a glass of water, seems to cause time to slow down.

Boredom can seem to do it, but it doesn't really...

God told us from the start that light was fundamental to His creation, long before physicists were around to study it. You don't get far into Genesis before God starts His creation off with the words, "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3).

Here is how fundamental we have discovered it to be. We now know the physical, material things we can touch are, in a real sense, made of light. That conclusion is based upon a simple observation. When mass disappears, it turns into light. That's how nuclear weapons, nuclear reactors and the sun work. When an atom splits into two smaller atoms in a nuclear fission reaction, the combined mass of the smaller atoms adds up to less than the mass of the bigger atom. The "lost" mass is released in the form of energy. That's why a bright flash of light and heat occurs when an atom bomb goes off. Remarkably, in the opposite direction, when small atoms fuse together to form a larger one, the situation is not reversed. The mass of the larger one is less than the combined mass of the smaller ones. Once again, energy is released in proportion to the lost mass. All the heat and sunshine coming from the sun in all directions means that it is getting smaller during the fusion reaction by losing some mass.

In a very real sense, the entire physical universe is made out of packaged light. This gives an entirely new meaning to statements in the Bible such as "God is Light and in him there is no darkness at all" (I John 1:5, NASB), and the words of Jesus saying, "I am the Light of the world" (John 8:12, NASB). God chose His foundational creational act to bring forth a handiwork that was to reveal something of His character to men and women yet to be created.

We had not begun to understand, even tentatively, any of the details of this until relatively recently. Albert Einstein concluded that energy and mass were equivalent, proposing that the proportionality constant had something to do with the speed of light. His famous equation says,  $E=mc^2$ . That means that there is an awful lot of energy crammed into each little bit of mass because  $c$ , the speed of light, is an awfully large number even before you multiply it by itself.

You can use Einstein's equation to get an idea of how much light is packaged into a physical, human body, and of course I have. I estimated how the energy packed into my body mass would compare to the energy from the sun directed



at the entire state of Texas at noon on a hot summer day. I discovered I could replace the sun for all of Texas for well over two and a half hours. Now Texas is a big place and the sun can feel pretty hot here, but then I may weigh more than you do. If you aren't that familiar with Texas, try this. The energy in my body mass could provide the total United States electrical power consumption for over 7 months, but that is based on old 2012 consumption data.

One of the most remarkable things about Einstein's equation is its simplicity. The kinetic energy of a mass moving at a velocity of  $v$  is given by the equation,  $E = \frac{1}{2} mv^2$ . Therefore, the energy packed into each bit of matter is exactly twice as much as the energy it would have if it were moving at the speed of light, because there is no one-half in Einstein's equation.

As it turns out, you cannot experiment with objects moving at the speed of light because only light itself can move that fast. We just don't have anything we can use to look at light with. As people began to explore how to accelerate things up to faster and faster speeds, they found that the speed of light was not just as fast as you could go, it was faster than you could go. It was faster than any "thing" could go. It was an unreachable limit. But as you got to really fast speeds, strange things were found to happen. For really fast moving things, time was experienced to slow down. In fact, for light moving at the speed of light, time apparently does not pass at all. That helps explain why a photon of light does not lose any of its freshness or energy as it moves among the stars. Light and time and space are all interrelated.

The furthest known galaxy appears to scientists to be over 13 billion light-years from earth. That means its light recently reaching the Hubble telescope orbiting our earth would have apparently taken over 13 billion years of our time to cover approximately 76 trillion billion miles. As far as the light was concerned, it took no time at all. If the photon making that trip had a clock in it, the time on the dial would still be the same as it was when it left, because nothing in that clock could move or it would be going faster than light. It would be already going at the maximum speed there can be. Not a single New Year's Eve would have taken place for that photon. We have seen that mass and energy are understood in relation to the speed of light. It now appears that time must be understood in relation to that speed as well.

Now we may attach new meaning to some other Biblical passages, if the earlier ones about God and light mean what I think they do. Consider the one that says one day is like 1000 years to the Lord and vice versa (II Peter 3:8,

Psalm 90:4). It is not a fixed ratio because the Psalm 90 reference says that the thousand years could also be considered as a watch in the night, a period of three or four hours, depending on which army you were in. Time does not have the same meaning to God as it does to us, nor should we expect it to. Created light truly does have depth of meaning with regard to revealing something about God.

There is more. If you carefully observe a non-spinning tennis ball striking a backboard, you will see that the tennis ball slows down, comes to a stop and then accelerates back up to a speed almost as great in the opposite direction. There is a delay when it bounces. Light does not do that. When light is reflected from a mirror, the difference is not just that its speed coming off is exactly the same. The most remarkable difference is that it never slows down during the reflection. If it slowed down and stopped, it wouldn't be light. The time I measure for a pulse of light to go to a mirror and come back again is just the travel time there and back at the speed of light. The reflection takes no time at all. From the perspective of the light, traveling to the mirror and back doesn't take any time either. These observations have astonishing implications.

Let's examine one. Suppose a photon from our beam of light that we saw from the furthest known galaxy were to be reflected back to where it had come from. That photon would have made the round trip, from its perspective, in no time at all. In fact, it could theoretically go throughout the universe, going to everyplace there is in no time at all. The photon could be in every place in the universe at the same time, for it, from the beginning of time and into the infinite future without being affected by time at all. These implications could cause us to find new meaning in passages such as Jeremiah 23:24 where it says, in part, " 'Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?' declares the Lord." (NASB) It is not a question without an answer. It is a declaration. (The other part of that verse is important too and worth a look, along with the rest of that chapter.)

God does indeed fill His creation, in ways we do not understand, just as the creation is full of light, in ways we cannot appreciate.

When we say we have seen the light, we are not really telling the truth. We can't see light. What we "see" is not "light" but something that was light that has been absorbed in our retinas. In effect, we are seeing light at its end, literally and figuratively. We cannot see light from the side as it goes by.

Try the following experiment, or think back when you last did something like this. Go outside into an open field on a clear, dark, moonless night away from city lights. It can be really dark all around you out there, but you can look up and see what looks like millions of stars. The impression would be wrong, by the way. Even with good dark adaptation and excellent viewing conditions, the unaided human eye can only see a few thousand. If you close one eye, the stars are still there and it is still pretty dark all around you. Now move over a foot or two. All those stars are still streaming their light into your one open eye just like they were before, but now it looks dark over there where your eye used to be. You will find that it doesn't matter where you move your eye as you look up. It becomes abundantly clear that every little part of the whole dark field is literally full of an abundance of light from all those stars and from far more than billions of additional stars and galaxies too dim for your eye to see as discernible sources of light. You just can't see their light streaming by you in the darkness. The same is true throughout all the inky blackness of space. It is full of a profusion of light coursing all through it from every direction. You just can't see the light because you can't see light from the side.

God is like that. He fills the heavens and the earth even more than the physical light does. In Him is no darkness at all. What we know of Him is what we absorb when we turn our eyes toward the Source. We cannot know Him from the side, but as we are moved into the experience of Him by His direct revelation, the One who transcends time touches us. He really can see all of us and hear all our praying and our cursing.

### What Time Is It?

It is a commonly asked question. You have asked it and you have had it asked of you again and again. It seems innocuous enough and usually easy to answer, if you have a working watch or, these days, a cell phone. The question of what time it is turns out to be harder than we thought and ultimately unanswerable. Let's see why.

When we celebrate the passing of time at New Year's a lot of people keep asking one another, "Is it time?" Nobody wants to celebrate at the wrong time for their time zone. That would look silly. People have various aids, besides watches and cell phones. In New York, a lighted crystal ball is lowered from

a building in Times Square, but it's hard to tell precisely when it stops and sometimes they can even be a little off. Is it time? In Australia they have timed displays on the Harbor Bridge in Sydney. Similar problems. You can watch Big Ben in London or all kinds of other displays, but when is it really, precisely, the time to celebrate the passing of time?

What time is it, exactly? There is simply no way to tell. If there was an absolutely accurate clock in existence with a digital display with no lag time, there could never be enough digits in the display to allow us to know, exactly. Almost all the digits would just be a blur to us anyway.

We might get clever and try to know precisely when midnight arrived by waiting and watching for the display to turn over to the next hour. We would still miss it. By the time the light from the change over of the accurate display reached our eyes, it would be past midnight. By the time the reaction took place in our retinas it would be even later. By the time the neural signal reached our brains and percolated into our consciousness it would be later still. By the time we formulated and said the words "It is time" and those words were transmitted by vibrations through the air at the speed of sound and then received by someone's ears and converted into impulses transmitted at nerve conduction velocities to that person's brain, eventually percolating into their consciousness, it would definitely not be time. It would be past time.

The very question, "What time is it?" begs the further question of what you might mean by "it". "It" apparently can be time, at least according to my mother, or "it" can be past time or not time yet. This question about "it" can probably be answered. The "it" is a reference to the idea of "now". We understand the unanswerable question to be "What time is it, now?" The reason it is unanswerable comes down to the recognition that we can't really experience "now". We can consider the past and contemplate the future, but each "now" will be over with before we will know that it is here. The very passage of time we celebrate at New Year's cheats us out of actually experiencing "now".

Dare I say that it is "time" to look into this a little further?

## CHAPTER 10

### JUST FOR NOW

#### The Unknowable Now and Forever

At New Year's, people always say, "Out with the old; in with the new". The prior year is portrayed as tired and old, with a long beard. The New Year is the fresh, smiling baby in diapers and a numbered sash. 365 days later, or 366 in a leap year, plus or minus some occasional small adjustments, he will have grown a long white beard and a crop of wrinkles. How soon we forget.

The truth is that the old is not "out" and the new "in" only at New Year's. It is actually happening with every passing moment without the fanfare that we attach to the process on New Year's Eve or a birthday. As we have seen, January 1 happens to be our transition day probably because of a long ago choice of the date for the change in the terms for Roman officials and fundamentally because of the time the earth takes to orbit the sun. The process of "now" turning into "then" is a process that is going on continually. Sometimes the process seems faster than we would like and sometimes it seems slower.

We remain people with close horizons, whether we are looking forward or looking back. We can only think realistically about a few tens of years at most. The rest is ancient history or the unthinkable future. Some have trouble planning beyond next Saturday. Nobody can soak in the now because it goes by too fast. When we think we are thinking about now, we're really thinking about the fairly immediate past and extrapolating to the fairly immediate future. The now remains fundamentally unknowable.

Have you ever heard someone say, "I wish this moment could last forever"? Perhaps you have said it yourself. For the most part, it would not be good for those wishes to come true. Take a perhaps memorable example: "I wish that kiss could last forever." No you don't. Forever is a long time. In fact, it is more than a long time. The both of you would grow very tired of that kiss before even a few days had passed. You would get hungry. You would get lip cramps. Morning breath gets worse and worse on the second and third morning. You would need to go to the bathroom. Are there really any moments you would want to last forever? The infinite is very hard to

contemplate for people limited by close horizons.

These ideas raise new issues to contemplate regarding time. How much is there going to be? Does time just go on forever? Has it already been going on forever as we look back in the other direction, whatever that means?

Big, unanswerable questions like these usually occur to us not while looking at our feet but while looking up at the stars on a clear, dark night like we did in the last chapter. That kind of experience seems to cause thoughts of the infinite to spring forth in our minds, and those thoughts are strange to work with. If we are to more fully consider time and it's passing at New Year's however, we are going to need to try. Bear with me. Here comes some technical stuff.

Infinity cannot be understood as just a very, very big number, because you could always add something to any big number, or double it, and make it bigger. Forever is not just a very, very long time. Just wait, it can be longer. We may have been brought up hearing about characters living "happily ever after". No they didn't. The meaning of eternal life is beyond comprehension because our experience is so rooted in time and because aging takes place. We may first observe the aging process only in others, like grandparents. Eventually we will begin to notice that growing up has turned into getting old. It changes the way we celebrate the passage of time when we have become the grandparents, or the great-grandparents. It also changes our view of the infinite as the perceived range of our own possibilities narrows.

Children can have remarkably unsophisticated appreciations for what they are saying when they throw the word "infinite" around. "How much ice cream do you want?" "Infinity!!" All the candy on earth is not an infinite amount.

Adults aren't significantly more sophisticated, because all the money on earth, or all the grains of sand or all the atoms on and in the earth do not constitute infinite amounts either. Any of these quantities can be generously estimated using finite numbers. When someone professes to another that their love is infinite, all they can reasonably be saying is that they perceive no bound at the moment.

One of the few ideas legitimately invoking the concept of infinity is the notion of time. Even the notion of infinite space is considered in terms of infinite time: "Does space go on **forever**?" Forever has to do with time. Even

the mathematical concepts we use to deal with infinities invoke the notion of time: "if we count **forever**..."

Our mathematical constructs lead us to the conclusion that we reach the same infinity whether we count by ones, by twos, by hundreds, or by sixteenths as long as we count forever. We can even construct more complex, non-countable, forever-series that can be shown to arrive at a whole hierarchy of higher order, larger infinities, if they go on forever. We can manipulate the numbers, but it is not clear how much practical understanding is gained in the process. Forever keeps being involved.

Consider the following example. Suppose I have a piece of 10-pound-test monofilament fishing line exactly one foot in length and suppose I cut it precisely in half and discard one of them. Further suppose that I just keep repeating the process on the remaining half. If I did that **forever**, my piece of fishing line would, mathematically, be infinitely small. Now I don't propose to actually try to cut forever. I don't have time. But let's just start a little ways down the path. After one cut, I have a six inch length. Since my fishing line is about 0.012 inches in diameter, after only 10 total cuts, the length of my piece is about the same size as its diameter. Cutting is becoming very hard indeed. If I could keep cutting it somehow, after 4 more cuts, my remaining piece, viewed with a microscope would look proportionately like a thinner version of a penny. After only 31 total cuts (17 more), my length would be smaller than a hydrogen atom. It certainly would not be fishing line anymore. After 48 total cuts (17 more), my length would be smaller than a proton. After that, it becomes unclear not only what to cut with, but also what is being cut. After 114 total cuts, my length would have become smaller than the Planck length (which is about  $5.3 \times 10^{-35}$  feet), which physicists say is the smallest length there can be, and I would only be 114 steps on my way to forever.

Well, since cutting seems so difficult let's try the other direction. Suppose instead that we start again with another one-foot length of the same fishing line and just start doubling the length. That would be two feet, then four feet, eight feet and so on **forever**. You might suspect that we will need more than a very, very large reel of line because the length will turn out to be infinite. Again, let's not try the full forever thing but just start a ways down this new path. After 10 doublings, we have over a thousand feet of line. After 26 doublings, our line is longer than the earth's diameter. After a total of 39 doublings, our line would more than reach to the sun. After 92 total doublings of our one foot string we would have almost  $5 \times 10^{27}$  feet of line. That's five

octillion feet. We even have a name for the number. It would be enough line to reach across almost twice what scientists say is the diameter of the whole observable universe, which they tell us is about 93 billion light-years or about 2.88 octillion feet. That's not infinite, but I still find it hard to think about. At a density about 1.6 times that of water, the line would weigh about 390 billion, trillion pounds if you could put it on a scale and weigh it on earth. You could not actually do that because the line would be much more than twice the mass of the moon. The total volume of the line would be over five times the volume of the moon even if you could wind the line in a ball with no wasted space which you can't do either. It would require an incomprehensible cast to get it all out, if you could manufacture such a length. Just think of the potential snarl you could develop with that much line! This time, we are only 92 steps on our way to forever and we could certainly keep at this for quite a while, at least conceptually, without getting infinite.

We can get far more dramatic, depending on how we count. The numbers can get out of hand very quickly. Consider the following simple series:

$$1^1 + 10^{10} + 100^{100} + 1000^{1000} + \dots$$

And so on "forever". The first term just has a value of 1. The second term,  $10^{10}$ , has a value of 10 billion. We don't have a simple name for the value of the third term. The precise number can be written down easily. It is just  $10^{200}$  or ten times itself 200 times. That is a big number, but just how big is it? Scientists have estimated the number of atoms in all the planets and stars in all the galaxies of the universe that we can observe with our best instruments. Their estimate is about  $10^{80}$ . They could be a little off, but how much bigger is  $10^{200}$ ? If you double the atoms-in-the-universe estimate, it would only be  $2 \times 10^{80}$ . Ten times as big would only be  $10^{81}$ . Ten billion times as big would only be  $10^{90}$ . If you were to square the scientific estimate of all the atoms in the universe (in other words, multiply it times itself) you would only get  $10^{160}$ . That would mean counting all the atoms in the universe not just one time, but doing it again and again until you had counted them all once for every atom. You would have to multiply that number by 10 billion four more times in order to get  $1 \times 10^{200}$ . In other words, you would take the estimate of all the atoms in the universe and then multiply it by 10 billion again and again for twelve successive times to get the value for the third term in our series. I don't want to talk about the fourth term. Suffice it to say that it would be a lot bigger... Are you getting a headache?



Well, OK, let's just make one observation about it. The fourth term of our series,  $1000^{1000}$ , could be expressed using the ridiculously large third term of our series, which we have found to be  $10^{200}$ . It turns out that  $1000^{1000}$  happens to be  $10^{200} \times 10^{200} \times 10^{200} \times 10^{200} \times 10^{200} \times 10^{200} \times 10^{200} \times 10^{200} \times 10^{200} \times 10^{200} \times 10^{200} \times 10^{200} \times 10^{200} \times 10^{200} \times 10^{200} \times 10^{200}$ , exactly. That's the number. In shorter form, that's  $10^{3000}$ . What do you think about it? Why don't we just stop with this and regroup, because people can write stuff down without having any idea what it means. They do it all the time. Our series still has a lot more than four terms for us to think about. We could go on forever, or could we?

Of what practical value is the number like even the relatively modest third term of our series? It is much too big to be used to count anything in the universe, even all the atoms, but it is not infinite. It is therefore too small to count the centuries in a kiss that lasts forever.

Our notion of eternity is indeed juvenile. The old hymn says:

“When we've been there ten thousand years,  
Bright shining as the sun,  
We've no less days to sing God's praise  
Than when we'd first begun.”

That thought doesn't really convey much to our minds about the enormity of eternity but, as I have grappled with the task, I have begun to realize that I have been looking for eternity in the wrong direction. I am coming to see that the unknowable now and the unknowable forever are unknowable for much the same reason. We need to look beyond big and small numbers that we can't understand. For that, we need to turn back to the word of God. We will now do that in the context of New Year's.

### The Obsolescence of New Year's

The American Thanksgiving holiday is not celebrated around the world, although some have similar traditions. In its essence, it purports to be the celebration of an activity: the giving of thanks to God. There are more people across the world who celebrate Christmas, although there are still many who do not recognize it as a holiday and more who do not recognize it as a celebration of an event: the birth of Christ. Overall, studies show more of the world's population identify themselves as Christians today as compared to

any other religion or to those who consider themselves unaffiliated (Pew Research Center, April 2, 2015, "Religious Composition by Country, 2010-2050"). Estimates indicate that over 2 billion persons of the 7 billion or so in the world might be expected to celebrate Christmas in some form or fashion at some point in the year. Many others who would count themselves as unaffiliated might also join into the Christmas festivities at some secular level. New Year's, however, probably takes the cake in terms of the number of holiday participants who celebrate neither an activity nor an event, but simply the passage of time. Some might choose a different point in the year, but New Year's would be likely the most ubiquitous of holidays around our world.

People just seem to like the idea of the old being out and the new being in as we start using a new number or name for our year. There's not much thinking about eternity. A one-year horizon, looking forward or back, seems quite enough. As we grow older, looking back just one year may not seem adequate at all and looking forward a year can begin to look problematical. Infinity remains less likely to intrude on our calculations.

For some reason, our thoughts broaden a bit when it comes to decades or those hundred year milestones, and even more for a change of millennia. Because most of us are on the decimal system, we think things ought to change more at such times. We're usually wrong. The old is not as out as we might like for it to be and the new can have a disagreeable sameness despite all the technological cosmetics.

Most of us will not experience the passing of very many century transitions. My parents did not see any. I have seen one. I have never met anyone who has seen two, but there is no shortage of predictions for the technological innovations that will change our experience before the next one, which most people alive today will not see.

I remember reading George Orwell's 1949 book named "1984" while in school in the 1960s. It had striking descriptions for the future, but I also remember celebrating New Year's on January 1, 2000 with 1984 long past. The predictions and the reality were different.

People argued over whether the millennium turned over when the year 2000 began or when it ended, but people just celebrated the passage of time, "big-time", anyway. You don't have to study infinity carefully to believe that the

next century will occur. Many people are hopeful that things will get better. Some pray that they do. The Bible offers a different perspective.

While we may assume time on this earth to continue as an unending parade, even our current scientific understanding would deny such a construct. The fusion process by which the sun gives light is limited in time because there are limits on the material it has available to fuse. It will “burn up” and undergo violent transformation, if the other observable stars can be learned from. The earth as we know it is time-limited. Of course, there is no immediate cause for alarm, at least for the sun and possibly for the earth, due to these processes. It will apparently take years beyond our ability to conceive. For you and for me, however, our time on this earth has a much more limited duration. We are quite capable of conceiving of our own, individual limits if we choose to be realistic.

For us there is no need to consider whether the expanding universe might eventually contract or whether there could be another Big Bang. Who knows? Again, the Bible offers a more immediate and different perspective.

My reading of the Bible speaks to things getting worse instead of better in coming years. It says there will be wars and so-called "natural" disasters like earthquakes (Luke 21:7–11). The church, the body of Christ, will be persecuted rather than honored (Luke 21: 12-19). Times will get more difficult rather than easier (II Timothy 3:1–5). These are the things that have happened and they are happening now. The twentieth century was pretty ugly as centuries go.

The book of Revelation in Chapter 6 talks of the sun being darkened and the moon becoming like blood (verse 12). The thirteenth verse talks of the stars of the sky falling to the earth like figs from a tree. How literally might this be describing nuclear fusion events, like those processes in the stars, suddenly occurring across the earth in the form of thermonuclear warfare? But who knows?

By whatever means it arises, Matthew 24 talks about a period of difficulty and suffering greater than any in the history of the world (verse 21). That sounds worse after our two world wars than it did a few centuries back. That's the direction of our progress.

At the end, Christ will return. The earth and the entire physical creation will cease to exist (Revelation 20:11). You may recall our current understanding that all matter can be thought of as "packaged" light energy. The package will be unwrapped. II Peter 3:10 actually says this: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed (or "melt" in the King James version) with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up" (NASB). The bang at the end will be bigger than the one we conceive of at the beginning. No more New Year's.

According to the Bible, time for this earth has a limit indeed. Chapter 10, verse 6, of the book of Revelation speaks of a coming point in which time shall be no more. People have grappled with this passage. Some would argue that it simply means that there will be no more delay at that point before God renders his judgment, but the Greek word is "chronos" from which we get our word for "time". A chronometer is a watch. It measures time. A watch won't be a useful item in heaven.

The Biblical description of heaven also does not comport with our typical notion of the infinite years of eternity. Revelation 21 describes a new and very different heaven and a new and very different earth after the old ones are passed away (verse 1). The holy city of God and his people are part of that new creation. The first things have completely passed away (verses 2–4). Time does not appear to be exempted. God says He **is** making, not that He will be making, all things new (verse 5). The new creation is already in progress. Our Revelation reference may allow us to understand something more of our II Corinthians 5:17 statement that if anyone is in Christ, that person **is**, not will be, a new creation.

The New Jerusalem has no need of sun or moon because God's Glory provides its light (Revelation 21:23). Verse 25 goes on to say it will always be daytime. There will be no night. How then might one count the days, the months, and the years? Our time cannot be compared to the eternity God describes, nor can eternal life be measured out meaningfully in terms of our old millennia. It appears that we will not be there even for ten thousand years, because there will be no such thing as years.

What is coming is fundamental change. I Corinthians 15:50–53 tells us we will all be changed, and that it will happen in no time at all. There is a coming obsolescence. It is coming in time, but when it does, it will come suddenly.

After it comes, "after" will not be a useful word, because time, as we think of it now, will have become obsolete along with the entirety of the old creation. We are told that time is not known by God as we know it here. We will not know time that way either as citizens of God's new creation if we are to truly do our "knowing" just as we are known by God (I Corinthians 13:12).

### Living In The Now

We have seen that the God of the Bible offers an eternity in which God the Father and Christ the Son do not just provide our light; they are our light (Revelation 21:22). There clearly will be no countable succession of days (Revelation 21:25) and therefore no countable succession of months or years. It will always be today: always the Lord's Day. We can "live like there is no tomorrow" because there will literally be no tomorrow.

We have no experience in living without reference to time. How can we even think about a time without end in which there is no such thing as time? God's Word does not equip our brains to think on these things and figure them out, but I believe we can be drawn into the experience. We can be moved beyond both the celebration of the passage of time and the contemplation of infinities. I believe God draws us into the previously inaccessible experience of the now because therein is where His Eternity is to be found.

Others have grappled with these ideas. I recall reading a book fifty years or so ago by Paul Tillich entitled "The Eternal Now" containing a sermon with the same title. I am not the first to think about the notions of now and eternity, but only God is able to touch us with His Reality.

We are not acquainted with living in the now. The moment of transition from one year to the next does not linger long enough for us to meaningfully live in it. Therefore, as we mark the passing of time, we look primarily to the future. Some of us make New Year's resolutions, settled decisions about what we will do in the next year. As we do so, we generally look away from what we actually did in the previous one.

Resolutions have never worked out very well for me, so I stopped making them quite some time ago. My resolve seems more robust when applied only to future actions. It wanes by the time now flashes onto the scene. I look back and observe that I did not do what I had resolved to do and I had done what I

had resolved not to do. The now had caught me again, largely unaware. I keep finding myself caught in an unfulfilled web of good intentions. The rosy future keeps turning into a past with a notable population of disappointments of my own making. It makes me wonder why the passage of time should be such a cause for celebration or refreshed optimism.

The Bible speaks eloquently to this human condition. So eloquently in fact that some have taken it to depict the experience God has designed for us. It is not. Romans chapter 7 talks of being in bondage to the nature we were born with (verse 14). Paul expresses his confusion, not understanding why he could not put into practice what he desired to do. Instead, he kept doing what he despised (verse 15). It is worth reading the next few verses through verse 23, wherein he concludes that sin itself must be in charge within him. It is the very passage from which we get the old adage that the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.

The problem is summed up in verse 24: “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?” (NASB). There is an answer to the question in the next verse: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (NASB). God has provided deliverance in the Person of Christ. The passage goes on to say that we are well and truly stuck with two conflicting masters if we try to serve God in our minds because, in our physical selves, we end up serving what is completely apart from God. There the chapter ends and we might conclude that we have the summation of the matter. We don’t. Paul did not divide his letters into verses and chapters. People did that later. We must continue reading into what has been put into chapter 8.

Romans chapter 8 takes us much further indeed. There is another possibility in Christ, quite apart from operating either mentally or physically. We are told that there is now no condemnation if we are truly in Christ because the law of the Spirit in Him has set us free from all that had been working against us (verses 1 and 2). A life lived only on a mental and physical plane leaves us in the same insoluble human condition. God has reached out to touch us on another level and make us entirely different.

In John 4:24, Jesus told the woman at the well, “God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth” (NASB). How do you accomplish that? I confess that I have spent a lot of time trying on my own initiative to worship mentally, emotionally and physically.

In John 3, just one chapter earlier, Jesus told a man named Nicodemus that he must be born again if he was to see the Kingdom of God (verse 3).

Nicodemus responded with the same consternation that has provoked many to deride the very notion of “born-again Christians” (verse 4). Jesus made clear that He was referring to a work of God by water and the Spirit (verses 5-7) making us new creations in Christ (II Corinthians 5:17) and enabling the worship of God in Spirit and in truth. You may recall our discussion of how the old creation, according to the first few verses of Genesis, had been formed out of water by the Spirit of God. It is fitting that the new one is formed in water and in the Spirit of God.

It may seem that I am getting way off topic here when we started out addressing the idea of living in the now. Look back again at Romans 8:1: “There is **now** no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (NASB, emphasis added). The Greek word translated “now” is “nun”. It literally means “now”, the very instant present. It turns out we don’t have to mentally parse “now” out of the flow of time. Instead, we are offered a Spiritual experience in the God of Now.

The God revealed in the Bible is truly the God of all now. You might recall our previous discussion of verses such as Psalm 90:4 where we saw that time is not to God what it is to us. The experience of Him that He offers us in the New Creation is not countable in days, months or years (Revelation 21:23-25). He is the God of the present.

There is much more. Consider the name God gave to Moses by which He was to be known. His Name refers to the now. God said to tell the people who wanted to know that “I AM” is the One who had sent Moses to lead them out of Egypt (Exodus 3:13-14). “I AM”, is the One Who Is, right now, and He does not change (Malachi 3:6). Time, being our measure of change, is appropriately irrelevant for the God who changes not.

The now always seems to take precedence with God, for that appears to be where He lives. We see evidence of His Work in the past, from our perspective within time. From the same perspective, we may also trust in His presence for our future, but we are most fundamentally offered an experience with the God of Now.

Take a look at Revelation 3:8. The Lord God first says that He is the beginning and the end, but then He chooses a different order of statements

than we might have expected. We would probably have logically said He is the God who was, who is, and who is to come. Instead, He says He is the God “who is, who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” (NASB) The God who **IS**, right now, is the God we must also recognize, from our view, as the God who was and is to come. We must know Him first and foremost as the God of Now.

God encourages us to know Him in the instant present. There are some who only remember an encounter with Him sometime in the past. Others try to believe that a God they have never met must be out there somewhere or near us somehow. These people would seem to expect to meet Him sometime in the future, maybe when they go to heaven. But God makes clear that our experience with Him is to begin and continue in the now. Consider the urging in II Corinthians 6:2. We are told to look and see that now is the acceptable time and now is the day of salvation. Again, the Greek word is “nun”. Our experience of Him is to be now, this instant.

Jesus said in Matthew 6:25-34 we are to seek His Kingdom and His Righteousness first and foremost (verse 33). We are not to be concerned about the future, especially about what we will eat, drink, or wear (verse 31). We are to live in the now. In Matthew 10:19-20 we are told not to plan out our defense when we are arrested. God will speak in us at the very moment when speaking is required. Our past cannot hold us back or drag us down. The past has been wiped away and the old is gone if God has made us new. The future cannot prevent us or cause us to tremble if we have become citizens of God’s unending now.

The now is what the Christian has been given to celebrate instead of the passage of time. Out with the old and in with the new at New Year’s is illusory rather than a reality because time continues to have its way with us. God offers the Real.

If anyone is in Christ he is indeed an entirely new creation, so much so that all the old has passed away and everything has become entirely new (as we see in II Corinthians 5:17 again). The next verse is just as striking. “Now all these things are of God...” (II Corinthians 5:18, NASB). All the new of the new creature in Christ derives from the One who inhabits now and eternity, something both lasting and worthy of true celebration.



## The Knowable Now

Living in the now is hard to do when it flashes by too quickly for us to perceive. It is fully as hard to experience “now” as it is to comprehend the eternal. God however, has not left it up to us to do it. He offers us an intimate relationship in which we share an experience of now and eternity. While our bodies still live on a temporary earth, the Bible tells us that, even now, we have been raised up with Christ and we are seated with Him in the heavenly places (Ephesians 2:4-7). You need to look at this carefully. It does not say that we shall be seated with Him someday in the future. It says now. It is something accomplished by God in His Now. That is part of what it means to be in the world but not of the world (John 17:13-16).

I think the greatest prayer ever offered up on our behalf is recorded in John 17. The last quote was taken from it. We should read and reread His prayer. Jesus, on the way to the cross, is praying to the Father for us. If you have come to know Him through any part of the Bible, you will notice in the prayer that you are the one He is praying for. There is every reason to expect the Father to answer His prayer fully. Look at verse 3: “This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (NASB). We experience eternity in our experience of Him, right now. It is not some separate thing given to us. It is part and parcel of abiding in Him, of knowing Him, and of Him abiding in us by the Spirit (John 15:4). In Him is Life, and that life defines and informs our new being (John 1:4).

This is not a mental, emotional or physical experience although it will affect our minds, emotions and our bodies. At its heart it is purely spiritual and can only be known spirit to Spirit. God is Spirit, as we have seen Jesus tell the woman at the well in John 4:24. We are spirit if we have been born again of the Spirit, as we have seen Jesus tell Nicodemus in John 3:5-6. We know Him by the very spirit He makes us to be. We don’t have to figure out now or eternity. Simply to know Him is eternal life, now. There is only one step to glory, and He has already taken it by drawing near.

How do we know that we know Him? How do we know our experience is real? The knowledge comes in precisely the same way. It is by the Spirit, coming close. Why would we conceivably expect validation to come from any other source? Organizations, people or our own reason all fall far short in

comparison to the God of all creation. He is able to make Himself known unmistakably. The Romans 8 passage explains clearly that the Spirit of God informs our newborn spirits that our parent in this new birth is in fact God (Romans 8:16). That is what verse 30 is saying when it describes God's purpose in Christ, the only begotten Son of God, is for Him to be the firstborn of many siblings. It is all God's doing. We are not our own parents, not for our first birth and even more certainly not for the new one.

How do we find Him in order to strike up this relationship? We don't. Many would picture some noble "journey" of discovery in which we find what we have been looking for. It may be our "purpose for being here". It may be our "calling". It may be God Himself, but we are not the ones who find Him. God is not that passive or that approachable by our effort. He has found us. In John 6:44 Jesus says that nobody comes to Him without God the Father having drawn each one to Him. In Revelation 3:20, Jesus says we only have to respond because He is standing there knocking at the door. It does not take much of a journey.

A relationship with God is individual and spiritual. Aspects can certainly be had in common with other people but it generally does not correspond to the various group models put forth by the commercial churches. There are many paid professionals who are only too happy to tell you divergent versions of what you need to do, what you need to believe, what "purpose" will "drive" your life, which books you should buy, how much you will be blessed and to whom you should make out your check. The spiritual is often confused with group emotion, music or some vague mysticism.

Jesus reserved His most vehement criticism for the religious leaders of His day (Matthew 23:13-33) and His most violent confrontations for the religious profiteers (Matthew 21:12-13).

The various flocks that follow the commercial religious leaders and profiteers of our day are more likely to give their own leaders a pass, criticizing only the more flagrant leaders among their competitors. Those not in a flock may see reason to criticize them all as part of their blanket rejection of the idea of knowing God personally. His knocking at the door is often unheard or ignored.

However, just as was the case in the early Church, it seems to me from the whole of Scripture that God in fact does have individual spiritual relationships

with people all over. Just as then, they are sprinkled through the various walks of life, social positions, economic strata and denominational affiliations or non-affiliations. These people may or may not be recognized as being part of the church. They may or may not appear on someone's membership roster. They may be mocked by the self-sufficient. Sometimes they become recognizable to one another. They may even become recognizable to some outsiders when it becomes apparent that self-sufficiency, if that's all they had, should have run its course.

The beginning of our eternal encounter with God is our first experience with the now. It seems to me that the early experience can be a tentative one. Mine was. I recall being unsure about what was going on. I felt I was on unfamiliar ground. I felt I was being profoundly drawn to a place in which I was profoundly uncomfortable, but God was there. He was real in a way I had never known. His Presence touched me, with no exchange of words taking place. It was my first experience with the Peace of God and it was indeed beyond my understanding, just as Philippians 4:7 would describe.

All this occurred when I was a nine-year-old child. It was not in a church building. Nobody was preaching or singing. I was in bed on a Sunday night in May of 1954. The lights were out. I was alone, and suddenly I wasn't. In a very real sense I had reached up my hand and Someone took it. God was there. My world had changed. I had been changed.

So had my praying. Before that night I had only prayed prayers. I had repeated written or memorized or extemporaneous combinations of words that I was under the impression God wanted to hear. When I did I often did so with others, on cue. Occasionally I did so alone, usually when I was scared or wanted something. That night was the first time I had actually prayed, as I have come to know prayer. I was simply responding, with His enabled response, to an initiative He had taken with me. It was my first time spent with Him when I was both acutely aware and also participating.

As I said, it was tentative at first on my part. In some ways it still is. I was not sure what had happened. I had received no certificate. I recall trying to understand. Sometimes I would later try to reproduce the feelings, trying to get back to the same place. I have heard of some who attempt to live out their whole lives on the basis of remembering one or two brief encounters with God. I think I can understand how that might occur.

For the most part I went about the business of life for a nine-year-old kid, and then ten and then eleven. I'm sure I was curious and selfish and happy and sad. I felt frustrated when I could not get my way. But, from time to time I was caught up short by interruptions in which I recognized the same God from that night drawing near again. Sometimes I just turned away and tried to hide. Other times I responded and participated again. When I did it was a new encounter rather than a replay of that first night, but it was recognizably the same One who had touched me at first. I did not need anyone to point that out for me. God required no speech from me. Only a few words were exchanged in our times together. These have not been cases of something happening to me. Some One is happening.

I have come to realize that those first profound experiences were my first steps in the spirit. It was decidedly not something that I did. It was something that God did, both provoking and enabling my response and my participation in accordance with His Desire.

I think mental realization in this process comes not by figuring things out, but by our spiritual experience with God informing our minds of His Presence. It is always God's doing rather than mine. As Proverbs 3:5-6 advises, we do not rely on our own understanding, but as we acknowledge God in all our ways and trust the experience of Him that He offers, the whole basis and direction of our lives are changed. We find the Now. His name is Jesus.

It is truly remarkable how consistently we tend to substitute reliance on our own understanding in place of acknowledging God, despite the warning in Proverbs 3. Please be aware that this book is most assuredly not a call to a deeper understanding of God. There are certainly a few passages that question the adequacy of what we may presume to understand about a number of things. However, I offer no basis for a deeper understanding of God or His Creation. Instead, I am simply passing along His invitation into a full experience of His Presence by the Spirit.

Through many fits and starts over the last sixty years or so, it is becoming clearer to me that my Christian life cannot and will not be based on my ability to understand or to follow Him. It can only be based on His ability to lead. He does that leading by drawing close and provoking a response to know Him more consistently. It is that unspeakable interaction with the One who hung the stars that changes my now and therefore my eternity.

The God of the now invites us to know Him not just in occasional, isolated encounters that we must look back on or look forward to. He invites us to draw near consistently (James 4:8), so that we may know Him in all our “nows” and therefore forever. I think that is what Jesus was calling us to receive when He said that eternal life is simply to know Him, as we read in John 17:3. That is precisely why Paul prayed so fervently just to know Him in Philippians 3:7-11. That is becoming more surely my desire. To simply know the One Who Is introduces us to the knowable now.

The celebration of the New Year’s holiday can only invite the illusion that the old is out and the new is in. It does not make our days any more Holy than the ones that came before. Neither is it in our power to make them any more Holy through rededicated effort, settled resolve or correction of our belief systems.

A Holy Day, as opposed to a holiday, must be Holy in the sight of the God of all creation. For Him to “see that it is good” as in the Genesis creation, it must be unmistakably the new work of His own loving hands. We do not need guidance or reminding; we need Him. Our instant experience of Him and with Him is the experience of the Holy days. Therein we find that the old has truly gone. We behold that all things have indeed become new when they are all the new work of the God of Now.

# PART IV: THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD

## CHAPTER 11 THE HOLY

### The Problem of the Holy

In general, holy has a bad name. People don't like the idea of holy all that much. It seems to bring up the idea of the "holier-than-thou" crowd. It is not just the fact that it is unattainable. The bigger concern may lie in the question of why you would even want to try. Would you really want to walk around with a halo hanging over your head? It seems off-putting. It would separate you and it would be very limiting.

That may begin to explain why the world is more comfortable with holidays than it is with holy days. Despite the technical equivalency of the terms, we don't treat them that way. A holiday is just a day off. It is not constraining; it seems freeing. We can do as we please. Our responsibilities are lifted from our shoulders, if only temporarily. A holiday is substantially about what we do not have to do. A holy day conveys a sense of obligation, or so it seems to us. A holy day seems to be substantially about what we ought to do but can't, and may not want to.

The truth is that we don't do Holy. It is not in our repertoire. We don't even simulate it very well. God is the One who does Holy because that is who He is. He produces Holiness simply by His Presence because the unholy cannot abide there.

Isaiah speaks of this experience in Isaiah 6:1-7. He saw the Lord and his reaction was to realize that he was done for. He immediately saw that he was not clean before God's Presence. There was not a thing he could do about it, but God took the initiative. God accomplished what Isaiah could not. Isaiah

was made completely clean by the work of God. He used the fire from the altar of sacrifice. That altar looked forward to the sacrifice of Christ. Isaiah was truly “done for”, but it was Christ who did the costly doing at the cross, for Isaiah and for me.

Incidentally, the name Isaiah in Hebrew means salvation is Jehovah, or is of Jehovah. Isaiah’s name is Jesus, sort of spelled backwards. Seems fitting, doesn’t it?

It is always an instant and continuing work of God. Philippians 2:13 makes clear that it is God who is the One at work in you. He does not show us His Will and then coax us to do it. The verse says He is the One who both wills and works to accomplish His Good Pleasure in us.

When I am doing the work out of myself, the result never satisfies even my own good pleasure. It always falls short of my best aspirations. It certainly does not stand up to the revealing Light of the Presence of God. God’s new creation of us in Christ is different. As was the case in the first creation, His All-seeing Presence sees that His work in us is good. Jude, verses 24 and 25, tells us that this God is able to keep us from stumbling. It says He is able to make us not shrink back but to stand completely without blame or criticism in the presence of the Glory of God. I can’t make that happen, but the God of all authority does so in and through Jesus Christ. He tells us His authority is not just in the past and for our future but for now.

Whenever we try to do it ourselves, we experience something other than Holy. It is when we come as little children, relying on an all-capable Father instead of our own capacity, that the experience of the Holy begins.

Do you really believe God expects to be doing a perfect work in us right now? Are we not merely human beings subject to human weakness? Let’s ask the question another way. Do you suppose that God would really choose to do an imperfect work in us? As we have seen, His Word has told us any person in Christ is a new creation with all the old passed away and everything newly created by Him and for Him (II Corinthians 5:17-18). That is not just human, that is a new creation of the Creator who pronounces His creative work to be thoroughly good.

I suppose it could be a once-for-all decision to look entirely to God for Him to do, from then on, what I cannot. For me, however, it has not thus far turned

out that way. I keep usurping God's authority to move freely in my experience of life and He does not force me. I have these do-it-myself moments in which I choose my own way, sometimes with good intentions and sometimes with selfish ones. Some of these blind alleys may take a while to explore, but I never find them freeing.

It is also true that I keep finding new light being shown onto old do-it-myself habit patterns I had not considered before in His light. It seems we are not equipped with full awareness of all the things dragging us down or holding us back. It makes it very hard to place everything in God's hands in a single, considered decision when we have trouble considering everything all at once.

My experience of God has not been based on a single, settled decision on my part. It is based instead on an initial, definitive encounter with Him. That encounter was initiated by Him and received through a response He provoked in me but in which I willingly participated. The relationship has continued, often haltingly on my part, through more and more of these encounters. Each required a response to the same recognizable God and each has taken place in an intimate spiritual reality I had not known before I met Him. The spiritual reality is not distinct from the God who calls me. He is that reality.

My experience of God is not a describable or definable event. It does not rely on an activity, attitude, posture or mood on my part. When I would presume to initiate it, I find that I am actually responding to His initiation. The experience is deeply personal but it can occur in settings where aspects are shared with some others. It would seem to have something to do with prayer, although it is prayer where words are often not involved. It would certainly seem to have something to do with worship, although it is a worship provoked by His Presence rather than offered as a means to seek it. It is the experience of the Holy, strangely peaceful and frightening all at the same time.

We do not define Holy. Holy is simply what God is. Maybe that is why it disturbs us so much.

Why should we imagine that Holiness, this very nature of God, should in any sense characterize the nature of our days? If Holy is what God is, why should I aspire to it? As we may begin to expect, God provides the answer and the answer, again, turns out to be Christ.



Tucked away in the book of Leviticus is a surprising command. You can find it in Leviticus 11:44. It comes at the conclusion of a section detailing rules concerning what must be considered unclean. God tells the people to be set apart, consecrated or sanctified (the Hebrew word “qadash”). He tells them they shall be holy (the Hebrew word “qadosh”) because, God says, He is holy (same word). Verse 45 repeats it, “For I am the Lord who brought you from the land of Egypt to be your God; thus you shall be holy, for I am holy” (NASB).

Both the Hebrew word translated as “consecrated” (qadash) and the Hebrew word translated as “holy” (qadosh) derive from the same Hebrew word (qodesh) which has to do with difference and apartness. God is different from humans, which might be expected since God made humans. He made them in His Own Image, that’s true (Genesis 1:26-27), but they are not the same. He is God; I am not. So why does He tell me I am to be holy for He is holy?

How am I to take this? Is the onus on me to be just like God? If so, I should well consider myself to be as doomed as Isaiah felt. I might try to be holier than you or you might try to be holier than me, but I don’t think either one of us would confidently set out to become Holy in the way that God is, but that is what He tells us we will be.

There is another potential meaning for all this. It may not be at all like a champion tennis player telling me that I will be a great tennis player because he is a great tennis player. God could be making a momentous statement by telling us that, in His Presence, we will be made Holy not by our doing but only because of who He is.

## The Foundation of Holy

This is not just an Old Testament concept. In I Peter 1:14-16 we are encouraged not to be conformed to the old way that was ours before we knew Him. Instead we are told, “like the Holy One who called you, be (or become) holy yourselves also in all your behavior” (NASB). The word really does mean “all”. As basis for this, Peter quotes our Leviticus passage: “because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (NASB).

Peter did not use the Hebrew word for holy (qadosh) when he quoted Leviticus because he wrote his letters in Greek. He used the Greek word “hagios” as the translation and it is a good one. “hagios” also derives from the

idea of being different. It means set apart, holy or sacred. The question remains. How is this to be done, especially for all our behavior?

Peter addressed the question in his second letter. He said Holiness is accomplished in us simply through knowing Jesus Christ. It comes by the unmerited favor of God who bestows it as a gift of His Love to us. Look carefully at II Peter 1:2-4. Peter prayed that God's grace and peace be multiplied to us in knowing God in Jesus Our Lord. He called our attention to a remarkable truth: the divine power of God has already given us everything that has anything to do with life and Godliness. He said these gifts come to us through the knowledge of the One who called us by His Glory. This is not knowledge about Him but personal knowledge of Him. Finally, verse 4 tells us these gifts from God carry with them special promises by which we may become partakers of the Divine Nature. His Nature is Holy.

We are called, therefore, to be Holy in the manner of the very nature of God. God calls us to know Him in Jesus Christ. In that knowledge, God gifts us with His Transforming Presence by which we experience the very nature of the Heart of God. We do not do it. He does.

Jesus also said it this way: "Abide in me and I in you..." (John 15:4 NASB) When we do, we bear fruit that derives from the vine we have become a part of, but, "...apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5 NASB). It is not do-it-yourself.

Paul talked of it this way in Colossians 1:25-27. He pointed to the revealing of a deep mystery that, up to that point, had been hidden from human understanding. Simply stated, the mystery is "Christ in you, the hope of Glory" (NASB).

For much of the world the mystery remains hidden. It remains under wraps for the do-it-yourself, commercial Christianity of the world. To keep things under proper control, organizers keep feeling the need to define the acceptable outcomes and the acceptable techniques to achieve them. Many are willing to set out the procedures in such detail that adherents are able to sign up to the required beliefs, go through the prescribed motions, live by the derived principles and encourage one another that God approves and stands by to help if needed. The meager expected results are often achievable whether God moves or not.

Such was the condition of organized religion when Jesus came to this earth and directed His scathing criticism at its leaders. That criticism is surely earned today by those who would build intrusive, organized structures borrowing the name of Christ.

The primary troubles with organized religion are that it is organized and that it is religion. It is organized using approaches corresponding to those in other human enterprises. That requires the work of human hands, leaving human fingerprints and insuring that the divergent results of the different organizations are at odds with one another. It is also religion, meaning that it is essentially a human endeavor, subject to human frailty. It ends up exhibiting human characteristics.

An experience with God is not so. It is wholly different because it is Holy different. God makes it so. In that experience we bear His fingerprints because an individual experience in Christ is of His making.

Christ called people to leave what they had, and even who they were, and walk with Him. Many did, from all walks of life. They were not all blessed financially, protected from physical harm or indefinitely healed from disease or aging. They did, however, become works of God in the midst of an uncertain world.

Some who responded were religious leaders, soldiers, intellectuals, bureaucrats or common laborers, but they followed, and were touched by the Holy. They still do today and they still are. Today, some are still religious leaders, soldiers, intellectuals, bureaucrats or common laborers. They are the rich and the poor. Some are pastors or priests. Some are members of various organized churches, but they are not limited by their structures. Some may suffer from physical, mental or emotional ills or even birth defects, but their limitations do not limit God's ability to make Himself known to them because He is their Maker.

I have known some afflicted with Down's syndrome in whom I was given to see evidence of His Presence. I also remember a dear and accomplished man with whom I had shared a profound Christian fellowship despite a large age difference. Late in his life he proceeded into dementia before he died. He eventually did not appear to know me at all but, whenever his wife asked him, he could name the fruits of the Spirit from Galatians 5:22-23. The fruits were still in evidence, despite his mental incapacity. He may not have known me,

but he still knew Him, and he smiled a lot. The spirit of the new creation in Christ does not fall ill.

In caring for comatose patients on occasion, I have wondered if some of them were not so protected from the distractions of life that they were freed to experience a completely overwhelming knowledge of the One who was calling them to Himself.

The Holy is the incomprehensible work God does in us as He draws near by the Spirit. What He does is never distinct from who He is. It is this Holy God with whom we have to do. He touches us with the transforming touch of His Presence.

### The Word of God, the Human Mind and the Spirit

The human mind does not have the capacity to comprehend the Word of God, whether that mind is dull or finely tuned. Mental capacity does not determine God's ability to show Himself to us, else there would be some smart ones with special access to His Glory. Matthew 11: 25-26 gives the impression that the reverse is more likely the case. God has indeed loved the world so much that He calls to us all, but it is on His own terms, not ours. Those terms are spiritual, not mental.

Just as with the Holy, we have a problem with the spiritual, because we have no prior basis to know what the spiritual is. The spiritual is not accessible to our mental inquiry or experiment.

When Jesus told Nicodemus he must be born again to see and enter the kingdom of God, He also told him we have no familiarity with where that new birth of the Spirit comes from or where it is going. We can recognize some of its effects, just as we can hear the sound the wind creates, but we do not see an origin or a destination with our physical eyes (John 3: 3-8). As a result, according to I Corinthians 2:14, the natural human does not accept the things of God's Spirit because they seem like complete foolishness. There are many natural men and women who would agree wholeheartedly.

People are not terribly perceptive about who and what they are. God, having made them, might be expected to have greater insight. People can see and touch a physical body and they can experience a mental and emotional

consciousness that seems to differ qualitatively from physical trees, bacteria and cats. But God says there is potentially a third part of us. That is the part by which we may know Him. It is the part that would make us alive.

God, we are told, made humans in His own image (Genesis 1:26-27). Adam, made in that image, walked and talked with God. He was told, however, on the very day he chose his own independent way, he would surely die. I have the distinct impression that God is not given to exaggeration. Adam did choose his own way and on that day he died. He kept walking around for a while, but life had departed. Independence from God is the precise definition of death. Adam's physical descendants were spiritually stillborn. The part that had truly borne God's life image was no longer there.

There is a widespread misconception about God's fresh gift of eternal life. The gift is distinctive not primarily because it is eternal. The gift is first and most distinctive because it is life. What the world knows as breathing, conscious existence is not properly characterized as life because it can be experienced independent of the Living God. Independent of God, we are left only with what Adam's descendants were born with. That is precisely why we need to be born again.

The human mind seems to operate in an insular self-consciousness we interpret as our "life". We can notice or ignore some things of God, but our minds do not constitute a medium for a relationship with God who is Spirit. To bridge this gap, God touches us by His Spirit and makes us spiritually alive. We experience His Presence within that life of the spirit. Our minds are not left behind in the process because they are informed and renewed by the touch of God experienced in our newly alive spirits.

The Bible describes the process in the book of Romans. It says the mind grounded in our worldly inheritance is dead and fundamentally hostile toward God. That mind cannot be otherwise (Romans 8:6-8). The only deliverance for us comes when God's Spirit lives in us (Romans 8:9). Those born again by God's doing in Jesus Christ are free to experience Him intimately in a new life that is separate and apart from what we had previously considered to be life. The new spirit life in us informs our minds of the reality of God's Presence (Romans 8:1-5). Our minds are transformed by the knowledge of God that comes directly from Him by His Spirit rather than from intellectual endeavor or human teaching (Romans 12:1-2).

It is almost precisely the opposite of our human assumptions. Our minds do not and cannot find our way to God. God is the One who touches us by His Spirit and introduces Himself to the rest of our being. The choice of entering into the experience of Him may well be considered the first act of our newborn spiritual life. From there forward, God invites us to live in the experience of Him as the new creatures He has made us to be. We operate far beneath this high privilege when we choose to rely on anything else by attempting life within our old patterns and out of our old mental resources.

How could someone possibly move from the mental consciousness we are born with and enter a spiritual experience with God? Can we figure it out with our minds or read about it in a book or have it explained to us by someone? Or is it to be based simply on firm belief? I think it is actually none of the above. Belief is also just an exercise of the mind. God has to do it if the doing is to be His.

The Bible says the true answer is by His Grace alone, meaning His gift or favor bestowed without any merit or earning act on our part. If we earned it, it wouldn't be grace. Ephesians 2:1-10 makes that pretty clear, especially verse 8. It is not out of us in any sense. It comes by the act of God through what the Bible calls faith, in most English translations.

### Faith as a Relationship

Faith seems to be another widely misunderstood concept. Some think of faith as strong belief that God exists. People think of faith also as a mental certainty, or at least a mental disposition, that things will work out in some way that is pleasing, or at least satisfactory to us. I think that is not so. Faith is relational. The word is derived from the word for being persuaded. Unless you are God, being persuaded requires a persuader. It also has something to do with entrusting ourselves to the relationship. That is why the Bible can say God is faithful (I Thessalonians 5:24 as one example). God's faithfulness does not mean that He strongly believes I exist and everything will surely turn out fine. It means God is committed to the relationship He initiates with us.

By His own Grace, God calls us to trust Him in a faith relationship. He is not calling us to trust a set of concepts or principles. We do not have faith, develop faith or exercise our faith. We do not have faith that this or that will happen. Faith has nothing to do with my initiatives or my desired outcomes. It just has to do with God. He calls us by His Presence to experience an intimate

spiritual relationship of trust with the One who persuades us. For me, I find His call and His persuasion must and does come again and again, persistently, not just once.

How does He call us out of a fallen world if our spirits are not alive and all we have to work with are our minds? I think He does it through His personal Word. That Word is not just words on pages in a leather-bound book. As we have seen, God's Word, the very expression of God to His creation, is none other than Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.

His Word may come to us while we are trying to figure it out with our minds or reading about it in a book or having it explained to us by someone, but it is not the figuring or the reading or the grasping of the explanation. It is the initiative of God, personally to us. His Word may come to us in the midst of fear or despair or uncertainty or even boredom, but it is God's doing. He is the One at the door.

I have seen a person wave a Bible in the air and proclaim, "It's all in the book!" He claimed I just have to read it and do what it says. I have come to know it is not all in the book. It is all in Jesus Christ (Colossians 3:11). A book may be put back on the shelf. Christ cannot. Unless He touches us directly, we will remain untouched.

We always misunderstand when we operate out of our minds instead of by the spirit. No matter how reasonable and logical we may consider ourselves or someone else to be, we remain mired in the mental. We mistakenly try to "apply what we have learned", when we haven't really learned anything and could not apply it if we had. Jesus Christ is the One who gives us the instant experience of knowing Him. Knowing Him by the Spirit gives life.

To know Him is to participate in an intimate and personal love relationship. It is not a mental construct but a direct heart knowledge by the Spirit. You cannot really love someone you do not know. You cannot be engaged in an intimate love affair with the idea of God. The Bible says we love God because He first loved us (I John 4:19). He loved us at the cross and He loves us now. Ephesians 5 tells us that our relationship with Him has comparisons with the love between a wife and a husband. We cannot enter such a relationship with someone we have just read about in a book.

## Responding to His Word

The Bible is very important to me, as you may have gathered by now. I have taught from it for years. God has used that written Word as a part of drawing me to Him and He continues to use the Bible in showing Himself to me. It is not because I have figured the Bible out. I haven't, certainly not with my mind.

There seems to be a subtle worldly imperative for me to take a position on what I believe about the Bible rather than to give a testimony about how God has used it in the times of my experience with Him. I choose to do the latter. I have been given an experience in the God of the Bible, but a printed edition of the Bible, regardless of the translation, is not my God.

Many take large sections of the Bible as prescriptive. They would say that the Bible tells us what we should do or not do; we should just get after it. I disagree. I find those passages descriptive rather than prescriptive. They describe the fruit that a life yields when lived in the experience of Christ. They also describe the ugly result of a life lived apart from that relationship, even when we have the best of intentions. The real prescription is to truly live in the Vine that can only bear the good fruit of Holiness.

God must be active in us if we are to find God in the Bible or anywhere else. I remember first hearing Hebrews 4:12 in the King James translation when I was a young person. It says, "For the Word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword..." (KJV). I was not familiar with some of the more arcane English word usage in the King James Version, so I assumed God's Word must be fast. Of course the verse is saying something else and far more profound. When someone says, "the quick and the dead", they mean the living and the dead, not the fast ones. When you cut your fingernail down to the quick, it means not the speedy part but the living, sensitive part. The passage is telling us God's Word is alive, as most of the modern translations render it.

We memorize passages, debate translations, make applications, extract principles to live by, and fashion doctrinal constructs as if God's Word is a body of knowledge. We may believe it to be the right book and the "good book" but many may consider it a book, to be quoted as authority for our divergent interpretations. It is not. It is alive and it is God. The Word made flesh is still the Word who is God.



Jesus said the Spirit is the source of life and the very words that Jesus spoke to us **are** Spirit and they **are** life (John 6:63). The Word, made in human form, tells us His spoken words were and are alive. The expression of God to us is a part of God to us. The Word of God transcends the mind and speaks to our spirits. It is not to be argued over. Jesus as the Living Word is to be experienced in the intimate center of our new being.

As part of a prayer to God, Psalm 119, verse 129, says, “Your testimonies are wonderful; therefore my soul observes them” (NASB). We can read right past these words without hearing them, in part due to our misuse of the terms, but in greater part due to our over-use of our minds to try to receive the experience of God. We are apt to describe a meal or a day as “wonderful” when we mean simply pleasant or enjoyable. The Hebrew word “pele”, rendered here as “wonderful”, is not so bland. “Pele” means “wonder” or marvel, in the sense of an astonishing miracle. Moses used “pele” as he sang God’s praises after God’s miraculous deliverance of His people through the Red Sea. He sang, “Who is like You, majestic in holiness, awesome in praises, working wonders?” (NASB)

Psalm 119:129 does not imply my soul can observe God’s Word because I think it is really neat. The reason I can observe God’s Word is that His Word is a continuing, living, miraculous work of God in me.

I’m saying these things in the midst of a discourse that might be taken as an appeal to mental understanding or an attempt to interpret. Please don’t take it that way. Follow on to the references. They are not there simply as authority for the descriptions, but instead to suggest your direct examination. You will see and experience Him there because His Word is alive.

You may be drawn to spend more time in the context or you may be drawn to other passages. I do not know what He will do with you in His Word. I am overwhelmed with what He does there with me. At whatever level God draws you, He will meet you there. As you respond, it will be a spiritual experience in the living Word of God your mind will marvel at.

All this will seem awfully open-ended to some. It appears many prefer to have an up-front definition of the parameters of their “religious” experience, or have those parameters defined and displayed by a group. We want to know in our heads just what to expect before we make any commitments, don’t we?

As a result, people want to approach God's Word tentatively and with the mind.

II Timothy 3:1-7 says people will eventually become even more full of themselves. They will embrace forms of religion but will be in denial of a God who moves in them with power. They will be "always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (NASB).

Jesus said He actually **is** the truth (John 14:6). The knowledge of the truth referred to in the II Timothy reference is therefore the knowledge of Christ, not of things about Him. In the same verse He said He is the way. He does not provide directions to find the way or principles by which to navigate the way. He **is** the way.

In the same verse Jesus said He is the life. He did not say He would pass out packets of extra life of the sort we have previously known. He **is** the life and He is ever new. Life is who Christ is and Christ is who life is. The gift of God in the Person of the Word of God is to behold His Glory, up close and starting now. He said we will know the truth and the truth, the One we know, will set us free (John 8:32).

There are others who would say this whole approach is thoroughly unworkable. Who knows what people would become convinced of and attribute the source to God? People can think God is telling them to do all kinds of horrific acts. It seems necessary for proper people to keep things organized and defined to avoid error. But would you really trust the organizers and definers in preference to the Living God?

People can and will say all kinds of things and attribute them to God. However, for you and for me, the experience of the Word of God in the spirit can only be unworkable if God's invitation to know Him is a lie or if God is unable to make Himself known and change us into His likeness. I believe His invitation to know Him is real and He is able to make Himself distinguishable from all the world's background noise.

Furthermore, Jesus clearly said we will be made able to recognize the fakers. He said we would recognize those who know Him by the fruits evident in their lives (Matthew 7:15-16). He said a good tree does not bear bad fruit (Matthew 7:17-20). An experience of the Presence of God necessarily produces peaceable, good, and holy fruit in the willing participants.

Jesus is the only one who has ever lived a real Christian life on this earth. He remains the only One capable of doing so even now. He offers to live that life in you and me. It is not a work of the mind. It is a spiritual experience of the Holy One.

In I Thessalonians 5:23-24 God has produced for Paul a marvelous summation. We were just told in verse 19 not to quench the spirit. The meaning is not to extinguish or suppress the life of the Spirit in us. Then here Paul prays for the God of peace to completely sanctify us. In other words, he is asking God to make us entirely Holy and for our spirits, souls and bodies, all three, to be preserved complete and without any blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. That was verse 23. Verse 24 seals it. "Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass." It is God who does the work by His Spirit. It is a thoroughgoing work, producing the continuing and consistent experience of the Holy.

## CHAPTER 12

### ASSESSING THE ALTERNATIVES

#### The Experience of Reality: Where Are You?

The Bible says the righteous will live by faith (Habakkuk 2:4, quoted in Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11 and Hebrews 10:38). As we have seen, faith is a matter of being persuaded, not by our own reason but by the in-dwelling Spirit of God. That's not the way people generally prefer to live their lives, however. Commonly, people would apparently rather live by accepted narratives corresponding to their own lights - by what they can observe, feel and figure out. I have been educated with that orientation. To various extents, I think most of us have. It really does not even require a formal education.

People operate on the basis of what is familiar to them or that which suits their interests. For many, the only real and relevant things are those capable of being seen, touched, heard, smelled, or tasted and, most particularly those bringing pleasure when we do so. Reality is defined by our physical senses or by what we have been told, as long as it seems in accordance with our senses. Narratives have power. We operate on the basis of narratives from shortly after birth. Our thinking is largely shaped around concepts not far removed from our familiar environment.

We adopt life strategies facilitating opportunity for pleasure and avoiding discomfort or pain. As we grow, some learn pleasure in the longer term may sometimes be enhanced through enduring temporary discomfort. Some may even learn the enjoyment of temporary pleasure may also lead to longer-lasting pain.

Our basic, mental orientation to a shared reality is so fundamental that it is used to assess the functional state of a normal person. People living in reality are generally expected to maintain orientation to person, time, place and situation. In clinical settings I have often been required to assess the state of mental alertness of a person whose brain function may have been affected by a condition such as a head injury. I might ask questions such as "Who are you?", "What day is it?", "Do you know where you are?" and "Do you know why you're here?" The questions are actually much harder than they seem.

Let's examine one of the questions that might seem especially straightforward: Do you know where you are? Why sure. I'm right here. I have my feet planted on terra firma or, perhaps, my backside planted in this chair. I am grounded in the physical reality of what I can sense and I am right here in this place. I might modify my thinking somewhat if my chair is in an airplane at cruising altitude as I am sipping my coffee and reading a book, but not in my favorite chair at home. There, I am confident of my spot in this world. The spot, however, is not fixed. Deep down I may realize that, but it is not in the forefront of my oriented mind. Let's take a technical side trip here and look a little deeper.

The deeper reality is abundantly clear if you are willing to think about it. A spot on the surface of the earth does not occupy a single, fixed point in the space around us. I am not likely to be the center of the universe. I don't have to be in an airplane to be moving.

Consider yourself standing on a spot at sea level on the earth's equator. Because the earth is rotating on its axis, that spot moves all the way around the earth's circumference and back in about 24 hours. The earth rotates fairly slowly (about a quarter of a degree per minute) but the circumference around which the point travels is fairly large (about 24,902 miles at the equator). Therefore, the speed of that point with respect to the earth's center is about 24,902 miles per 24 hours. That's over 1,037 miles per hour. Your head is going a little faster than your feet, because it's making a longer trip, but you won't feel the difference.

At 1,037 miles per hour in an airplane at low altitude, you would be going supersonic. Where I am sitting, as I write this in Rockport, Texas, I am at latitude just over 28 degrees north of the equator, so I am hurtling through space at only about 915 miles per hour but that's still a supersonic equivalent. The trip around gets shorter as you move further north or south of the equator, but the time for the trip is the same so the speed decreases. In fact, a spot at the north or south end of the earth's rotation axis would just be rotating at about a quarter of a degree per minute but not moving through space at a translational speed with respect to the earth's center.

All this simply means that I can be a little more oriented to reality than I was before. I'm still here, but "here" keeps moving, with respect to the earth's center, through new parts of the space around me at about 915 miles per hour. The direction of my velocity is constantly changing at about a quarter of a

degree per minute. Someone with a “here” on the other side of the earth at my latitude and altitude is moving at a similar speed in the opposite direction. In about twelve hours I will be doing what that person is doing now and that person will be doing what I’m doing now, again with respect to the earth’s center. If you want, you can figure out approximately what is happening at your location by looking up your latitude. Then look up the trigonometric cosine of your latitude angle and multiply that by 1037 miles per hour. To be more exact, you may need to make a small correction for your altitude.

There is obviously more to this story. Join me. We know the earth is not just rotating around its center of mass. It is also moving along an orbital path around the sun. You may know that the sun is about 93 million miles away. That means that the diameter of the earth’s orbit around the sun would be twice that distance if the orbit were circular, which it nearly is. The orbit is actually an ellipse, but not a very stretched out one. Using the circular approximation, we can multiply the diameter of about 186 million miles by pi and come up with a path length for the whole circle of about 584.3 million miles. That is the approximate distance our “here” travels every year with respect to the center of the sun.

We are not used to thinking of speed in millions of miles per year, so we need to do a few more calculations to get the speed into more familiar terms. We can divide by 365.25 days per year to arrive at about 1.6 million miles per day. Divide again by 24 hours per day and we find a surprising, but understandable, average figure of approximately 66,655 miles per hour. Our speed is more than 67,000 miles per hour around midnight, since the orbital path further out from the sun is slightly greater, but also because our speed from the earth’s rotation adds to the orbital speed. When the sun is directly overhead, we’re going less than 66,000 miles per hour because the adjustments are in the opposite direction.

Now we can be even better oriented to reality. We’re still here, but our “here” is moving through space at an average speed of about 66,655 miles per hour with respect to the center of mass of the sun. The average direction we are going is constantly changing at a rate very close to one degree per day, so about half a year later, we will be headed in the opposite direction at about the same speed. I suppose a lot of us were at least peripherally aware that these motions were happening, but most don’t think about how fast we are going because we do not see, feel, or think about them. Our lack of awareness or our inability to sense the reality does not change the reality.

Sorry, but there is still more. We are not just in a solar system. The solar system is in a galaxy, a huge collection of stars and other objects. We call it the Milky Way galaxy, but we do not know its real name. Galaxies do not come with labels and it would be presumptuous of us to assume we have the naming rights. We call it the Milky Way because we can see a milky glow in a band across the sky on a clear moonless night when we get away from artificial light sources. That glow is part of our galaxy, but then so are we.

It seems you can see jillions of stars out there. However, as we have discussed, unless you have binoculars or a telescope you are able to see less than 10,000 or so. A very few of what may look like stars really aren't stars. Some can be satellites made by earthlings. Others are planets or other galaxies. Every true star we can see with our eyes is a star in the Milky Way with us.

The milky glow in a band across the sky comes from looking along the plane of the disc shape of our galaxy at light too dim to be appreciated as individual stars using our feeble eyes. The band is brighter as we look toward the center of the galaxy but it is hard for us to tell which way that is just by looking at the sky. Astronomers estimate that our galaxy contains perhaps 100 billion stars or so. That means for every single star we can see in the sky with our eyes, there are apparently at least 10 million more in our own galaxy that we can't see as stars.

All this may be mildly interesting, but what does it have to do with knowing where we are? Well, as it turns out, galaxies including our own, are apparently slowly rotating and we are going along for the ride. This ride, however, is much more difficult to assess than the simple calculations I just went through for earth's rotation and its revolution around the sun.

What makes it particularly hard is our inability to stand away from our galaxy, observe its shape, see where we are situated in it and measure the rotation rate with precision. There are those, perhaps smarter than I, who have studied the problem based on observing the galaxy from within and observing other galaxies. I am admittedly not in a position to verify their work. Their analyses are not all in agreement anyway.

The general sense, however, is that the diameter of our galactic disc is in the range of 100,000 light-years. A light-year is a unit not of time but of distance,

namely the distance light travels in a year. It is about 5.87 trillion miles. We are therefore talking about 587 quadrillion miles across our galaxy. That is over a half million, trillion miles. It is very big. Estimates place us about halfway out from the center, or about 293 quadrillion miles for the diameter of our “orbit” around the center, making the distance for a complete trip around the galaxy for us of around 920 quadrillion miles. Estimates for the galactic rotation rate range a bit over 200 million years for a full rotation. If all these estimates were reasonably accurate, the estimate for our speed would be on the order of 525,000 miles per hour with respect to the galactic center, neglecting more minor contributions from various intra-galactic rearrangements. That’s over half a million miles per hour.

We can calculate numbers like this, write them down and read them, but it is much harder to meaningfully think about them as a means of getting closer to reality. The estimates could be more than a little off. It is abundantly clear, however, that our little solar system cannot be sitting stock still with respect to the center of our galaxy. We have to be whizzing through parts of the universe we’ve never been before at extremely high speed, perhaps on the order of a half million miles per hour based on the estimates we just discussed. The direction of our velocity is constantly changing, perhaps at a rate of 1.8 degrees or so every million years.

So the reality is not what I have perceived with my senses. I’m not sitting still as I write this. I’m moving over 900 miles per hour with respect to the center of the earth, over 65,000 miles per hour with respect to the center of the sun and perhaps a half million miles per hour with respect to the center of the galaxy. You are doing something very similar as you read this. But we are still not done with this, because the center of our galaxy is not just sitting there on a rock either.

How could you possibly figure out how fast our galaxy is moving with respect to the center of the universe? That is a very tall order, to some degree because nobody seems to know exactly where the center of the universe happens to be. The universe is a whole lot bigger than our galaxy. In fact, some say the universe contains about 200 billion galaxies, about twice as many galaxies as there are stars in our galaxy. Others say many more than that. The universe is bigger than big. Some say it’s about 93 billion light-years across. That’s almost a million times the diameter of our galaxy or about a half billion quadrillion miles across. If the universe were spherical, there would be plenty of room for all those galaxies.



Now if you knew where the center of this gigantic universe was, how would you measure our speed relative to that elusive point? Well, as you might expect, there are people out there willing to tell us. Whether they are smarter than we are has yet to be demonstrated, but here's what they say. They conclude that all the galaxies we see out there are moving with respect to one another. They reach this conclusion in part on the basis of observed frequency shifts. The problem of finding a reference point remains.

To get around that problem, some would point to observations of the cosmic background radiation that seems to be coming from all around us, they think not just from other galaxies. They postulate that, if we were not moving, the radiation characteristics ought to be the same in any direction. Things ought to be uniform, they say, if nothing was moving, but things are not uniform.

The whistle of an approaching train sounds like it has a higher pitch than does a receding one. For similar reasons, some scientists say the different characteristics of the cosmic background radiation, when observed in different directions, must mean something is moving. They are pretty sure it must include us. That motion is not likely to derive just from our galaxy's rotation because they deduce a speed on the order of a million miles per hour, well above what galactic rotation should produce. Now that is much less than 1% of the almost 670 million miles per hour speed of light, but a million miles per hour is arguably pretty fast, particularly for somebody just sitting here.

No, we are still not through. Who's to say that the whole universe is not moving too and, if so, how fast and with respect to what? What is beyond the border of the universe? Is more and more space waiting to be occupied by light or by us, or is space simply defined by what occupies it? Is space three-dimensional or multi-dimensional? Is it linear or curved? Will our motion eventually take us back to the beginning? How are we to think on these things when we don't have the wherewithal to do so?

So let's get back to where we started on this little riff. Let's get back to our so-called reality. Do you know where you are?

Suppose they bring me to the emergency room after I get a knock on the noggin in a car accident. The ER doctor comes in and asks me, "Do you know where you are?" I say, "Well, I'm in the Memorial Hospital ER, but the

hospital and everything in it is actually zipping through space at a speed likely to be dramatically above a half million miles per hour, maybe more than a million, and in a constantly changing direction.” As I am being admitted for close observation, it will not be because I am disoriented to reality. Sometimes, even ER doctors just don’t know what’s really going on.

### The Gravity of the Situation

Despite our tenuous legitimate acquaintance with reality, many have little hesitation about deciding and taking a position about what is real. Some would argue for the existence of God. Others would argue against the idea. I am not arguing here about an idea. I am testifying that, for me, reality is to be found not by my limited understanding of the creation but in my experience of the God of that creation.

Experience too has a bad reputation. We can find all kinds of people with all kinds of experiences but not a lot of consistent understanding of what those experiences mean. Experience, however, is a potentially powerful word and a potentially most powerful thing. Experience has to do with direct observation and direct participation as the basis of perception and knowledge.

As we have just seen, our perception and knowledge of our surroundings is dramatically limited because a large proportion of our observation is indirect or non-existent. It is hard to be grounded in a reality we do not perceive. As we have seen, our physical senses are woefully inadequate to the task. Let’s consider one further example.

Gravity is one of the most fundamental parts of our existence on the earth. Gravity is what keeps us on the earth. Few would doubt the existence of gravity. It may come as a surprise to most that gravity is something we cannot feel directly. That may be the reason we did not even begin to start figuring it out until Isaac Newton came along well after the Pilgrims had their feast. We still do not understand it very well even today.

Consider the astronauts orbiting the earth in the International Space Station. People say they are in “zero gravity”. They are clearly not. If there were no gravity acting on them, their speed would carry them away from the earth in a straight line and they would just keep going. It is the earth’s gravity that keeps them in orbit. If you calculate the gravitational force acting on those astronauts, using the well-established gravity equation (and I have), you will

find the force on them to be nearly 90% of the gravitational force acting on you right now. It is not zero. Gravity does not stop at the upper bounds of the atmosphere. That's why the moon doesn't fly away. The astronauts just can't feel the gravity with their senses as they float around their spacecraft. Neither can you as you sit right there.

What we "feel" is not gravity. What we can feel derives from all the direct, mechanical forces that are imposed, or that we may impose, to resist the force of gravity. We feel the force on our backsides from the chair, the force on our feet from the floor, or the force required in our bodies to hold up an object like a book or perhaps an arm or head. In contrast, gravity applies a force to every atom in our bodies precisely proportional to the mass of each one. Therefore, unopposed gravity produces no deformation in our bodies that would stimulate nerve endings and produce sensation. The local, non-gravitational, mechanical forces are the ones that do that. The astronauts and their spacecraft are effectively in free-fall in their substantial, non-zero gravitational field, so no "feelable" mechanical forces are being applied to resist it. On earth we interpret the feelings from some of the mechanical forces being applied to us as being "gravity", because some of those forces indeed oppose gravity. Besides, that's the way we have been taught.

This may seem like a revolting development. Our sensations and thought processes are not as grounded in reality as we would like to think they are. We cannot sense everything there is to know. We could not comprehend and consider all the complexity even if we could. We therefore simplify things by accepting simpler narratives of how things are, how they "ought" to be, and how to live within our accepted version of the world. A prominent difficulty, when we do this, lies in the fact that everyone does not subscribe to the same narrative. Each person wonders how those who don't subscribe to their chosen version of reality could possibly be so stupid. After all, it's the right thing to do, according to our narrative.

Take just one minute to consider what we have just been talking about. You will have travelled through space for a distance of well over 10,000 miles, and maybe a lot more, during that minute. You will not be able to point out to anyone which way you're headed or which way you're coming from. You will not have felt gravity. You will not know exactly what time it is. You will probably have the notion that people in other parts of the world will perceive it to be different times of the day or night, but you somehow have the general idea that their "now" in each location is identical to yours. However, you do

not have any idea what time it is on the other side of the galaxy or the other side of the universe. You don't know whether "now" over there is the same as "now" over here or even if the question has any meaning.

In the 1600's, a lot of today's rational thought had its foundations laid in the writings of Rene Descartes. He was the brilliant Frenchman who wrote, in French but also in Latin, "Cogito ergo sum". It basically means, "I think, therefore I am". He was surely a profound human thinker. However, if our thinking is so profoundly limited by the unknown and the unknowable, what does that imply about our existence? If I think incompletely, do I exist incompletely?

The God of the Bible does not say, "I think, therefore I am". Instead, He says simply, "I AM" (Exodus 3:13-14). In effect, He says, "I AM, therefore all else". That "all else" includes not only our ability to think, but also our very existence and the reality of the universe of galaxies, space, and time we inhabit. If that is true, how foolish of us to suppose we could comprehend or deny the Maker of a universe whose handiwork alone is beyond our comprehension! That is the God who says He reaches to us with the offer of the direct experience of reality through the experience of the One Who Is.

So the experience of the Holy Days is the experience of the Holy One. Within that faith experience He persuades us that reality **is** the "I AM". The whole creation, testifying so eloquently of His majesty, will pass away according to II Peter 3:10-13, among many other Scriptures. The enduring reality is only God.

The conclusion of the matter is the righteous will live by faith because nobody can be righteous or live in a true experience of reality outside of a relationship with the God who is both righteous and real.

### Conforming with Narratives

Before we go on to the last section of our discussion, let's take a brief look at the character of the narratives that shape the common experience of the world. The narratives morph over time, but both religious and secular narratives fundamentally define the acceptable choices we should make and the ways we should think if we are to fit in. That is what a narrative is. It shapes our thinking and defines common understandings. It may start in childhood

playgroups and backyard “clubhouses” or gangs and sometimes doesn’t get much more sophisticated than that in adulthood. We have spent some time examining the prevailing current narratives that define our Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year’s activities. To a large extent, a wide variety of narratives shape the ways we go about our lives.

In the secular realm, there are diverse, competing narratives across the world with radical differences in what factors determine them. Some secular societies and nations are built around forms of religious determinism, where a religion determines everything else. They prescribe what god or gods should be served and in what ways. Other societies advocate secular choices having nothing to do with religion. Typical examples include the various systems of economic or political determinism. Whichever factor is considered determinative is generally fixed and held in common while the other factors are allowed to float, at least for those not in charge. Other central organizing principles can be applied, including racial or cultural identity or the personality of a leader or ruling family, among others.

Here’s how it works. Each group sets forth prescribed beliefs and behaviors to serve the group, its leaders, or the notion of humankind in general. Each group promulgates a narrative for general acceptance, typically changing over time. Those not subscribing to the narrative are just wrong.

In the religious sphere, there are also substantial differences in how things are supposed to be done, even within a defined area such as Christianity. What people consider to be a Christian experience in today’s world is both remarkably wide-ranging and remarkably insular. There are large and small islands of adherents who share some degree of local consistency, but discomfort results if somebody happens onto the wrong island. If nothing else, the music, the dress, or the level of demonstrativeness just isn’t right.

What ought to constitute a Christian life? Some would emphasize differing lists of what should not be done. The lists of what should be done also differ and are often shorter. Those lists frequently include entries stating what you are supposed to believe, usually formulated as statements you must agree with if you are to be part of the group. Some entries in these lists considered vital by one group may be considered disqualifying by another.

Adherents generally continue to do at least some of the things they are supposed not to do, at least some of the time. At a minimum they may have

some desire to do so and they may just enjoy thinking about doing the things on the prohibited list that seem most attractive. Neither do all adherents do all the things on the “supposed-to list” all the time. It’s just hard to remember them all and usually harder to do.

Some group members can profess to agree with all the statements of belief without fully understanding them or appreciating their implications. When the statements are inconsistent, or when they are changed or supplemented, it can make it harder to agree with a changing target.

It has been so almost since the beginning. The notion of Holiness seems to have little to do with any of it.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the Jews were in much the same situation. The Pharisees, Sadducees and other groups held competing positions on topics such as what happens when you die and how you are to conduct yourself until you do. Much the same still exists in all the world religions.

The Christian and Islamic groups now claim the largest proportion of adherents across the world, ranging from devout to casual in their enthusiasm. Other world religions define varied belief systems with regard to deity or deities and prescribe varied behaviors for their groups. Emperors and others have proclaimed themselves to be gods, defining how they are to be worshipped. New religions keep cropping up. Innumerable voices declare with great certainty how to reach out to and serve some being outside themselves. The service is generally portrayed as resulting in some kind of reward or the avoidance of some kind of punishment. The probability seems vanishingly small that all of them could be right.

What is a person to do? If we are going to follow secular and/or religious narratives, how should we choose from among them?

Some stick with whatever their family or their group has accepted. Others rebel and adopt alternatives accepted by friends or respected, friendly outsiders. In the religious sphere a few energetic people attempt to explore through the world religions. Others simply chuck it all, concluding that everybody must be wrong. They might conclude there is no god and nothing makes sense in this world, but then that too is a narrative. Sincerity is usually considered of value so they will at least be sincere, whatever that means.

Many would simply join with some group that feels comfortable to them and operate at what feels like an acceptable level within it. Even the most innocuous religious narrative will usually address, to some extent, any creeping concern about death and what might come after. What is a person to do? It is hard to choose if all your choices are only narratives.

I have been through a few. On the secular level, I distinctly recall the threat of war hanging over me in my early years. I remember foxhole drills, as a child, in trenches located outside our base housing in Japan during the Korean War. Later the cold war was being waged. Armageddon had migrated from the Bible to the newspapers. The arms race was on. Some schoolchildren practiced sheltering under their desks. By that time in the early 1960's, I was in high school and my father was a senior Air Force officer involved in atmospheric nuclear testing in the Pacific Ocean. It was all very real and very personal. Later still, in the late 1960's, I was a graduate student at MIT working on the guidance system technology for our intercontinental, nuclear-armed missiles and then doing the same as a young officer in the Air Force. It was all very real and even more personal. The narrative invoked "mutual assured destruction". We hoped enemies would not destroy us because of our ability, and professed willingness, to simultaneously destroy them.

The narrative in the United States has changed dramatically since then. The cold war is over. The nuclear threat has receded. We have made great strides, technologically and otherwise. Many things never thought of before are now commonplace. For some unclear reason, many things previously unacceptable have now gained general acceptance. We have entered a new century and progress is the order of the day. Violence and war are no longer acceptable ways of settling differences among peoples. At least that is the way the narrative goes. What about reality?

Consider the following frequently voiced statement from the prevailing narrative, "Now we are certainly not going to solve all our problems overnight." It is really hard to disagree with that kind of statement. In fact, is there a single, solitary soul who really expects to wake up in the morning with all our problems solved? The statement has not conveyed a single, solitary bit of usable information, but it has served an important function for the prevailing narrative as a rhetorical device. We nod in unanimous agreement that we are not going to solve all our problems overnight, but many are lulled into accepting the unrealistic, implied notion that we are indeed going to solve

them all. It is just going to take some time, working together in trust. Do you really think so? Let's look briefly at just one problem.

The threat of war I remember from my childhood has certainly been one of our problems. Many have suffered in wars and yearned for them to end, but dating back into dim prehistory, they have not. Today's narrative tries to paper that over. We are told that all wars must end, even as we fight them. We are told that war is just not acceptable or necessary in the twenty-first century.

The narrative does not explain why our use of the decimal system, the fundamental reason we have centuries, should drive the solution of the war problem. The notion is particularly striking in view of the fact that the wars and genocides of the twentieth century likely have killed more people than in any previous century in the whole of human history. We are clearly making progress with the war problem, but not towards a solution.

Our progress in such fields as information technology has been matched or outdone by our progress in the technology of killing people. The cold war is over but the weapons for a hot war still exist. They are not just tactical drones operated from consoles in air-conditioned rooms either.

Nuclear weapons are now possessed by more nations than in cold war days. Some of those nations are arguably less stable and arguably more likely to use them than were the earlier possessors. This is all the more concerning when we recall that the original possessors, namely us, did in fact find it in our interest to employ them in war.

I suspect the average person could not tell you how many nations today are nuclear capable and which ones they are. As I write this, there are nine nations today that are reasonably certain to be nuclear-armed, with others at least desirous of joining the group. Nations come and go, so the future chain of custody of current stockpiles is not well defined.

It should not escape our notice that the previous decision to use nuclear bombs against population centers was not made in a collective, national vote nor was it decided on the basis of a looming existential threat. I think we must realistically conclude nuclear weapons are currently or prospectively in the hands of those potentially willing to use them in the future.



The narrative says the threat of nuclear war has diminished. Reality says the threat may be greater than ever. Seeking safety in the narrative may be less protective than hiding under the school desk.

One narrative says the greatest threat to humankind is global warming. We are encouraged to listen to the scientists. I suppose we should, but we also need to listen to the historians. Global warming comes and goes. Some earlier occupants of our planet welcomed global warming as they emerged from the last ice age. War, on the other hand, has been a consistent activity of humans since before the dawn of history. There is no compelling reason to expect the dawn of the twenty-first century to provide any cure.

Some scientists, perhaps deserving our attention, tell us we already have a cure for global warming, sitting on the shelf and ready to be employed. They call it nuclear winter. The atmosphere will become so filled with debris from nuclear war that much of the sun's warming is blocked. The historians might indicate the cure is likely to be administered well before the disease takes full hold. The scientists tell us the cure will likely be worse than the disease.

Undaunted, the narrative goes on to say most everything is getting better through our efforts. We just have to do more work. We are told there will be solutions to our problems of violence, oppression, racism, unequal distribution of wealth and man's inhumanity toward man. History says these issues have characterized every civilization on the planet. Wealth, for example, has never been equitably distributed to everyone. It was not the case in ancient Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece or Rome. It has never been the case in China, Mongolia, Japan, Russia, India, Africa, Europe, the Mideast, the Americas or the Pacific. Antarctica did pretty well for a time until people showed up. It is not man's inhumanity to man, or woman's either for that matter. This is just what our humanity looks like. We are what we are, not what we wish we were. Yes, it is what it is, and it isn't what it isn't.

Some would say we have simply lost our way, but that isn't true either. They wish we could return to the glorious experiment of our founding fathers and the self-evident truths of all men created equal with a firm hold on the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Be very careful what you wish for. Those words were written, and signed up to, by a fair proportion of men who owned slaves. Men were only equal if they were men, free and property owners. Women, slaves and the poor need not apply for political equality. Those people could not vote. Women could not vote for most of our national

history. We accept the myth rather than the reality, just like with Thanksgiving Day or space or forever.

People continue to be surprised and dismayed when their assumptions and the prevailing myths and narratives prove false. We are shocked by outbreaks of violence, mass shootings, terrorism, war and genocide, sometimes involving thousands or even millions of deaths, because we have chosen to believe the world to be other than it is. Shocking things like these can also occur in our own neighborhoods. Haven't you seen scores of local television interviews where the bystanders at each event say they never thought this could happen, especially **here**, of all places? They will probably be saying the same things after the next nuclear detonation(s).

Myths and narratives we accept must do something for us, whether they are the secular ones or the religious ones. They must make us feel better in some way. Otherwise, we would probably adopt different ones. Most of them provide a framework for what "should" be. You have heard leaders tell us something must be done or started or ended because it is "the right thing to do". The right things for Republicans tend to be different from the right things for Democrats. The differences get bigger when we consider the right things according to the Russians, the Iranians, ISIS, North Korea, Adolf Hitler or an isolated tribe of cannibals in some remote jungle.

### The Right Thing to Do

What is the right thing to do? If the universe is a random accident made from nothing by nobody, there would seem to be little basis for defining what is "supposed" to happen in our little corner or what our role "should" be. And yet, there is virtually consistent human agreement on a few "right things to do" that we all generally endorse as good across the world. There are not many. The love of a parent for a child is one. It may sometimes get harder after 15 or 20 years, but it is generally considered to be right and parents generally keep at it no matter what. The love of a parent for an adopted child can seem particularly sweet, especially to the one adopted. There is rightness to that.

A less commonly occurring, but still a consensus choice, would be the sacrifice of one's life to save another. Most all of us on all sides would consider such an act to be heroically right, but we might question whether we would do it if it came to that.

Why should there be such agreement on things such as these? Perhaps we should notice that these consensus choices have something in common with the revelation of the character of the God of the Bible. That God is sufficiently powerful that He does not seem to need us to go about killing those who don't believe in Him. Instead, He portrays Himself as a loving Father desiring to adopt us and draw us close. To accomplish this, He sent His Son to the cross to die for me that I might live. Narratives have indeed sprung up about this God, but I am not talking about the narratives. I'm talking about the reality and the rightness of His Presence.

## CHAPTER 13

### EXPERIENCING HIS PRESENCE

#### The Experience of the Holy

And so it comes down to this. We look now to the experience of the Holy. As we do, I do not propose to attempt any examination of the disciplines or the characteristics of Holiness because Holiness is not something to be sought or attained. Holy is what God is. If our days are to be Holy, they must be lived in the direct experience of Him.

We typically have not had close-up experience with what we would think of as truly Holy people. One reason may be that we are not too sure what they would really look like. Another reason may be those who might seem to qualify, when viewed from a distance, often look a lot less holy the closer and more intimately we get to know them. Those with that “holier-than-thou” pretense may be the least likely to withstand scrutiny.

What we may know for certain is evident as we look inside ourselves. We are not Holy. We know that to be true whatever true Holiness might look like. Neither would we have any idea how to make ourselves Holy if we had the desire. We would just rather not think about it. We are much more comfortable with holidays.

We cannot get there from here because Holy is what God is. That is why the whole thing makes us uncomfortable. Only those who have had an initial experience with God have been made most acutely aware that they are not what God is. He is Holy. We are not. But then a remarkable thing occurs as God draws us further into the experience of Him and as we respond. Within that experience God begins changing us into His Likeness. We discover that we are not to desire after our holiness or even after some improvement on our condition. We are to desire after Him and the experience of His Holiness. It is only about Him. He is the One who chooses to be about us.

Let's go back again to Isaiah's initiating experience of God. Isaiah actually saw God, heard Him and responded. It is worth reading Isaiah 6:1-7 right here:

1. *In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord, sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple.*
2. *Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.*
3. *And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy Holy, is the Lord of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory."*
4. *And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke.*
5. *Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts."*
6. *Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand which he had taken from the altar with tongs.*
7. *He touched my mouth with it and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven." (NASB)*

When Isaiah saw God there was no need for someone to point Him out to Isaiah or for God to wear a nametag. God is God. God is Holy. God **Is**. Isaiah had just met Reality.

Neither was there any need for God to make a detailed case pointing out Isaiah's shortcomings. The experience with the Holy God was fully sufficient for Isaiah to know who and what he was in that Holy Presence. God is Holy. Isaiah was not. And there was absolutely nothing Isaiah could do about it. He was done for, and he acknowledged it.

There is, however, something God can do and He has. It is a Someone, not a something. His Name is Jesus the Christ. I believe that is the One Isaiah saw in the temple. The cleansing Isaiah experienced from the sacrificial altar in the Presence of the Lord was a promise of the cross and of the resurrection. Jesus told His disciples in John 15:3, "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you" (NASB). He is that Word.

Isaiah did not immediately initiate some series of steps or launch into the practice of religious disciplines to somehow undo his undone situation. It happens now as we accept an act of God. I receive God's unmerited favor as God's act of grace. It is **God's Righteousness At Christ's Expense**. That's

how you spell “**GRACE**” as some have said. God so loved Isaiah that He gave His only begotten Son that Isaiah would not perish in the Presence of the Holy God but have everlasting life, as John 3:16 would later imply. The Bible says personally knowing Jesus Christ is the definition of eternal life (John 17:3).

### The Solution to Our Feeble Attempts

Once again, it is never do-it-yourself. We can’t even do repentance out of ourselves. God must be active. Repentance means to turn away. Our efforts usually involve only a shrinking from the consequences of our sin instead of turning away from the reality. That’s why we may get into the odd habit of repenting and asking forgiveness for our perceived “big” sins and never feeling the guilt lifted and never experiencing assurance that we are freed from them. We just keep asking again and again for forgiveness that never seems to come. That’s also why we may repent from our perceived “smaller” sins and then keep doing them so consistently that we might even pray for forgiveness in advance. We’re not very good at turning away. We are more prone to doing 360’s, leaving us facing in the same old direction.

The Bible says, if we confess our sin, God is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from **all** unrighteousness (I John 1:9). We are never moved to true repentance until we see our sin in the glare of the Presence of God. As He did for Isaiah, God makes us acutely aware of the enormous totality of our sin, not just some individual sin act we might notice some pain from. God is then uniquely involved in turning us away from sin itself and towards Him for instant and continual cleansing. It is the exact opposite of what we are typically taught. It is impossible to lean on the Everlasting Arms while trying to stand firmly and evenly on our own two feet.

The Bible tells us to call on God to turn us and we will be turned indeed (Psalm 80, especially verse 3, and Lamentations 5:21). It is not a 360, but it is even more than a 180. He turns us inside out.

We find it somehow easier to intellectually accept the idea of God accomplishing our complete future salvation, dependent on His doing alone. But we may hold to the idea that present sanctification is partial and substantially dependent on us. The Bible says we already have been sanctified

and God is the One who has done it in Christ by the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 6:11). Why can't we trust God to do what He can do but we cannot?

We will never see Holiness by looking within. Holy can be seen only in God. We may try to convince ourselves that we are at least making progress. I may or may not think I am holier than thou, but at least I might try to think I am holier than I used to be. I am not. God alone is Holy. We see Holiness only in seeing Him. As we do, we experience Holiness too because the unholy cannot abide in His Presence.

The very notion of partial holiness makes no spiritual sense at all because God is not partially holy. He is the One who said we are to be Holy for He is Holy. God does not dispense Holiness in dribs and drabs. He is Holy and He is completely so. We experience the Holy only when we move from believing in a God out there to directly knowing the Holy God in here. Jesus said we would be in Him and He in us (John 15:4). God dispenses Himself.

It is never to be academic or second-hand knowledge. It does not come from our initiation of meditation on the characteristics of God or by our convincing ourselves through somebody's analysis or experience. We don't discover God's spiritual gifts to us by filling out a questionnaire or by reading a book, this one included. It is always and only a direct, first-hand, personal, spiritual experience with the One who laid the foundation for all creation.

I find relatively few preachers trusting God to be Holy and fully capable of revealing Himself individually, completely and creatively not just to the preacher but also to the rest of the flock. More commonly it seems they train converts on the prescribed procedures for living a life dedicated to Christ. They provide lists of what to believe, what to remember and what to do. The lists may not be wrong to do, but if the doing comes out of ourselves instead of our relationship with Him, it accomplishes little or nothing. Psalm 127:1 explains it vividly: "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it..." (NASB). God described the new covenant in Jesus Christ in Jeremiah 31:31-34. He said people would no longer teach one another to know the Lord because they would all know Him, from the least of them to the greatest of them. His ranking order of the least to the greatest will probably surprise us as well.

Many great writers, preachers, teachers and just people have been used of God to introduce men, women and children to Christ. Some readers and

hearers, however, have only hung onto the words of introduction instead of following on to know the Lord as Hosea 6:3 counsels. As a result, the allegiance of some is better described by the name of a philosopher, preacher, movement or belief system than by the Presence of Christ. Popular doctrines can be formulated by those without a personal knowledge of the Savior. The Way is truly narrow that leads to life and not all find it (Matthew 7:13-14).

I can't define in human terms what God does in the one who knows Him or how He does it. He is simply God. In knowing Him intimately, He changes us into His Likeness. If He were not who He is, nothing would happen. Since He is, He is able to work in us that which is well pleasing in His sight (Hebrews 13:20-21).

I don't know how God will approach you or what you should say when He does. If you respond to Him as He enables, I don't know exactly what He will bring forth in you from day to day. I don't know how He will grow your relationship with Him over time. From what I have found, I expect the experience may sometimes feel painful. I do know the outcome of an intimate experience with Him will be the unmistakable, peaceable fruit of righteousness (Hebrews 12:11). You will be made Holy, for He is Holy.

### The Present Reality of the God Who Is

As we have seen, misconceptions and contradictions abound in the ways we understand and experience even the simplest and most familiar aspects of reality in our surroundings. We have spent some time in this book discussing some basics of Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day. We have also addressed some technically complex aspects of time, space, physical light, the universe and eternity. It has been a wide-ranging discussion. All of these subjects pale in comparison to the awesome Reality of the Holy God come to know us where we are.

Surely Thanksgiving takes on a whole new nature when it wells up out of the intimate relationship initiated by God and when that thanksgiving is poured out directly, personally and consistently at the feet of the One who washes ours (John 13:5-17).

Christmas too takes on a whole new nature when the birthday celebration wells up out of a newly born heart in which Christ has taken up personal



residence (John 15:1-9) as the One in whom we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28).

New Year's celebrations are superseded when the Christ who makes all things new initiates an unending new and Holy Day in an intimate association with those He has made to be new creations in Him (Revelation 21:1-5).

This God of all creation is beyond all comprehension, more so than the universe we inhabit and the forever we contemplate, but He reaches into our experience and defines reality for us. How could we choose to attempt to live beneath this unspeakably high privilege?

Many of us still settle for making the attempt out of ourselves. Some think there must be a God out there somewhere who will be pleased with us, if we only order our minds to believe He exists. We may cultivate fond thoughts about Him, study the Bible, go to meetings, read or hear what others tell us about Him and mentally or audibly recite prescribed sets of words we think He wants to hear. We try to do better than we have done before. We make or listen to music. We may get emotional, especially with a group. All these things can be done while God remains a distant concept to us, far removed from any practical experience on our part with the Holy.

These techniques don't even work among humans. How lonely a child would be if the relationship with their father consisted only in believing that he exists! How cold a father would be if he kept his child at a great distance, sending an occasional gift or doing an occasional favor instead of taking that child into his loving arms! The God of the Bible describes Himself to us as a personally involved Father and as an intimate friend (I John 3:1-3 and John 15:15). He offers the loving and close relationship that He created earthly fathers to pattern for us. The child, however, eventually has to be willing if the relationship is to occur.

Many prevailing religious narratives offer far less. Consider a technique I first encountered in the early 1970's I think. People were wearing buttons that said "WWJD" on them. The letters stood for "What would Jesus do?" That approach never worked for me. I think it was deficient on multiple levels.

In the first place, the question was not easy for me to answer. I knew some things Jesus had done in the past, but it was not at all clear what He would do when it came to a specific decision I was facing. I suppose the One who hung

the stars was more resourceful and creative than I could figure out, even when I was reminded by the button.

There was a deeper deficiency. The question brought with it an implied conditional that was very wrong. When you ask, “What would Jesus do” the implied, unstated conditional is, “...if He were here?”

Jesus is the One who said He would never leave us and would never forsake us (Hebrews 13:5, quoting both Deuteronomy and Joshua). If He is here within us by the Holy Spirit, working in us to do His instant will in us, He changes everything. You might think I would prefer the question to be, “What **will** Jesus do?” It is actually even deeper than that. The basic question posed to me is, “**Who** will Jesus **be** in my experience?” If He is Lord and Master, friend and brother, joint-heir with me of the Father, indwelling life sharer and new Creator; **if He is I AM, I am not** left to figure out what He would do if He were here.

And that is how our praying is changed. We are no longer left with torrents of words and lists of what our will is for us and for those we feel concern for. We are no longer spring-loaded to pray automatically for healing in every circumstance. We have a tendency to pray all the more fervently as situations become more desperate until we finally transition suddenly to the “Lord, just take him/her.” The loving presence of God delivers us from that cycle.

We begin instead to rest in His Presence. We are invited to make our requests known to Him but then He gently begins easing our will into His. God does not give us the desires of our unchanged hearts. That would be hurtful. Instead, He gives us the transformed desire of our new hearts and that desire is for Him. He gives us Himself liberally.

Prayer becomes a creative process carried out in us by the Creator.

Romans 8:26-27 tells us God’s Spirit powers through our weaknesses because, left to ourselves, we have no idea how to pray. God steps in and prays both for us and with us, in deep groaning beyond any words. His praying in us, the text says, is fully in accordance with His Perfect Will.

I am convinced that He does not keep His Will hidden. As we participate with Him, our will is transformed into His. We come to know His Will as it becomes our own. If the Lord delays His coming and I am called to be with

Him through some illness in this body of mine, I do not expect to die calling out desperately for healing but rather resting confidently in the assurance that His Will is being done to His Glory. I am coming to desire after that.

### Entering the Experience of God

Consider Jesus not long before He went to the cross. You can read about it in Luke 19:41-44. Jesus looked out over Jerusalem and wept over it. A few days earlier He had said He had desired for a long time to draw His people into a very close, personal relationship with Him. He had used the example of a mother hen gathering her chicks under her for closeness, warmth and protection (Luke 13:34). There is nothing arms-length about that!

The tragedy is, as the verse makes clear, the people continued to refuse His invitation. The miracle is, He went on to the cross anyway. He died there and rose again to provide us a boundlessly more intimate relationship than we could imagine, but people still refuse and choose their own, lonely way (Isaiah 53:6). They say, “This is just the way I am” and reject the true I AM who desires to know them in a relationship that changes them into His Holy Likeness.

What are we to do? The answer is uniquely found not in us but in who He is.

So let me conclude with a look at one last passage. You can read it in Matthew 16:13-17. Jesus was talking with His disciples and asked them who people thought He was. There were several answers. Different ones had identified Jesus as being one or another of the historical or promised prophets who had returned again or who had finally arrived. Then Jesus made it far more personal. He asked them point-blank, “Who do you say that I am?” I get the impression there may have been a bit of a pause there. Then Peter looked at Him and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

Jesus tells us in verse 17 that Peter’s declaration did not come from any worldly source. Nobody told Peter who Jesus is and Peter did not come up with the idea on his own. God personally lifted the veil for Peter.

The question Jesus asked remains controversial. Many in today’s world have no opinion, some because they have never had the question posed to them, at least not by flesh and blood. Some would not recognize the name of Jesus and would not know who was being referred to, although there are those who

have met Him and have known Him directly without ever having heard His name from human lips.

Many in our world would definitely recognize the name but would disagree perhaps vehemently, or even violently, with Peter. They would voice the strong opinion that He is not the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One, and certainly not the Son of God.

It appears the majority of the world would fall into the “disagree” or “no opinion” camps.

Many millions remain in this world today that would say they are in agreement with Peter. They would voice the opinion, tentatively or resoundingly that He is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Many would add to that declaration active personal and financial support to various groups and individuals proclaiming Jesus and saying that He is the Christ.

It would probably come as a surprise to many if they were told their position is not really in agreement with Peter’s declaration at all. In that foundational moment, Peter did not say, “He is the Christ.” Instead Peter said, “You are the Christ.” The difference is beyond profound. It is of eternal significance.

We are not in agreement with Peter if we just say, “He is the Christ.” That would be arm’s length at best. We might learn to say those words from what we experience in the world. Flesh and blood can reveal enough for us to come to that conclusion, tentatively or resoundingly. We are quite capable of saying those words, and doing a host of activities, without having been drawn by the Father into the Holy Presence of Jesus. God must personally lift the veil for us just as He did for Peter.

It is only in His Presence that the words can first well up from deep within us. It is the same intimate and continuing confrontation that I first experienced in bed at the age of nine when His Hand reached down to touch me. Out it comes, spirit-to-Spirit, “**You** are the Christ, the Son of the Living God”, sometimes with no words at all, only worship within His arms.

That is the beginning of the experience of the Holy Days, because that is the beginning of the experience of the Holy.

Christ is the One who touches us with the experience of Him. The Christ who made this universe and who reached through eternity to touch me with His Presence is surely sufficient to take me from here.

## Postscript

I do not often write prayers; I pray, but in ways not often reducible to sentences or sometimes even to conventional words, as Romans 8:26-27 defines. As I conclude this book, however, the following is something of the substance of what wells up within me:

O Righteous and Holy Father, how overwhelmed I am by your love for me! How grateful I am for your incomprehensible work of forgiveness on the cross and in the resurrection of Jesus the Christ. Apart from Your Love, I would remain apart from You, ever imprisoned in my work of self. Lord, that I may know You more surely in the Person of the Risen Christ by the Holy Spirit. Create that clean heart in me that only You can produce and continually renew a right spirit within me out of my false starts. Would You show Yourself unmistakably to me and to these whom You call close to You? Provoke in each of us that sweet response of worship, eternally well pleasing in Your sight. So let it be, Father, and it is in the Precious Name of Jesus I ask, for You have caused my prayer to spring forth to You through Him.

(Please don't pray that one. Let Him give you your own, eternally new and just for now...)

JHR





## Experiencing the Holy Days

*This book is about some of the things I thought I knew but didn't. It is also about what I thought I couldn't know. As it turns out, I can know the Christ who is able to make all our days Holy.*

*Some of the book putlines historical perspectives causing me to reassess long-held notions about traditions like Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's. Other parts present simple scientific and mathematical ideas about time, space, light, gravity, infinity and the now. At its heart, the book is a Bibilical discussion challenging some of the prevailing secular and religious narratives about what is real. It is an invitation to intimately know the Holy One and celebrate Him in all our days.*