



TWELVE

CHRISTMAS

SERMONS

EDITED BY JONATHAN POWERS



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uPDF ISBN: 978-1-62824202-7

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Introduction

We humans are quite fixated with time. Sitting here at my desk, for example, I immediately spot seven different devices designed to somehow mark time. Calendars, clocks, alarms, and alerts constantly surround us. It is impossible to escape time, though we often wish we could. However, time is also valuable to us. We are paid for our time. We pay others for their time. We write songs and poems about the passage of time. We regularly use strange phrases such as ‘have time,’ ‘make time,’ ‘get time,’ ‘kill time,’ ‘time flies,’ ‘time creeps,’ or ‘time is on my side.’ We cry about the passing of time, reminisce for times gone by, regret our use of time, and wish we had more time. No doubt about it, we humans are quite fixated with time.

Considering the magnitude of our preoccupation with time, it shouldn’t surprise us that God uses time to draw us to himself. He has chosen to reveal himself

to us in time through the events of human history. Moreover, God has chosen to save us via time. The gospel story is the account of how the Eternal One placed himself within the confines of time to show us the way to everlasting life.

If salvation is properly understood in the framework of time, then time must also be a central aspect of Christian worship. Instead of attempting to escape or ignore time, the church makes use of time in worship by structuring recurring rhythms of the day, week, season, and year. These rhythms are set within the context of a liturgical calendar – a yearly pattern of spiritual life that enables worshipers to commemorate and re-experience the acts of God upon which salvation is grounded. Every season of the liturgical calendar is a specific encounter with the One who was and is and is to come. In each, the church celebrates God's past actions, anticipates his desired future, and is formed in a distinct way of living in the present.

Much like Ebenezer Scrooge, it is in the reality of the past, present, and future that the church annually observes the Christmas season. Beginning December 25 and ending January 11, the church spends twelve days in worship, joyfully commemorating the mighty

acts of salvation established through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Christmas is a time for remembering his birth while also a time for acknowledging that his coming was for the purpose of setting right all that is wrong in the world. It is a season for looking back at the day when the Prince of Peace came to earth, while looking forward to that day when the Prince of Peace will establish all righteousness and justice. It is an occasion for rejoicing, for the Creator has become the created in order to usher in a new creation. It is the time of all time, the arrival of the year of our Lord.

Over the centuries, the splendor of Christmas has inspired the musings of some of the greatest minds in the church. This collection of Christmas sermons, taken from various eras of the church's history, is only a small sample of the immense collection of material that has been written. Twelve different sermons are included in the collection, one for each of the twelve days in the Christmas season. Some sermons are given in full, while others are only excerpts from longer sermons. Regardless, the timeless message enclosed in every sermon celebrates the coming of Jesus Christ, marvels at the mystery of the incarnation, and lingers in the love of God the Father for all of

humankind. As we celebrate this Christmas season, may these sermons reveal to us the goodness of our Eternal God, and may our hearts overflow in praise and adoration as we worship how the One who was before time entered into time to redeem us for all time.

Jonathan Powers
December 2014

Day 1 (December 25)

Saint Augustine of Hippo,
from “On the Mystery of the
Incarnation”

One of the most remarkable characteristics of Saint Augustine’s writings is his ability to hold the cosmic nature of God and the intimate character of God in tension with one another. This is especially true in his Christmas sermons. His reflections on the powerful event of Christ’s incarnation insist on a response of admiration, devotion, and worship.

For your sake God became a man

Everyone, wake up! For your sake God has become a man! Wake up, you who sleep! Rise up from the dead and the light of Christ will shine upon you!

I tell this to you again: it was for your sake that God became a man. You would have endured eternal death if Jesus Christ had not been born in time. You would have never been freed from your sins if he had not humbled himself to human form. You would

have suffered everlasting unhappiness if it had not been for this mercy. You would have never returned to life, had Jesus not shared your death. You would have been lost if he had not made haste to help you. You would have perished if Jesus never came.

Now, let us joyfully celebrate the coming of our salvation and redemption. On this festival let us celebrate that he who is the Great and Eternal Day came from endless eternity into our own short day of time. He has become our justice, our sanctification, and our redemption. As it is written, 'Let him who worships glory in the Lord!'

Truth and justice

Truth has arisen from the earth! Christ – the one who has said, 'I am the Truth' – was born of a virgin woman. Justice looked down from heaven because by believing in this newly born child we are justified not by ourselves but by God. Truth has arisen from the earth! The Word was made flesh. Justice looked down from heaven because every good and perfect gift is from above. Truth has arisen from the earth! It came as flesh from Mary. And justice looked down from heaven, for no one can receive anything unless it has been given from heaven.

Since we are justified by faith, let us be at peace with God for justice and peace have embraced each other through our Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, Truth has arisen from the earth. Through Jesus we have access to the grace in which we stand. Our boast is in our hope of God's glory: for justice did not originate with us but has looked down upon us from heaven.

Give glory to God

Therefore give glory, not in anything human, but only in the Lord. For this reason, when our Lord was born of the Virgin Mary, the message of the angelic voices proclaimed, 'Glory to God in the highest, and peace to those of good will.'

How could there be peace on earth unless Truth had arisen from it? How could we have peace unless Christ was born of our flesh? He is our peace who made the two into one, that we might be men and women of good will, sweetly linked by the bond of unity.

Let us then rejoice in the grace of Jesus Christ! Let our celebration bear witness to our good affections by which we glorify the Lord. That is why Scripture says: 'He is my glory, the one who lifts up my head.' For what greater grace could God give than to send

his only Son to become the child of a human so that every human could in turn become a child of God?

Day 2 (December 26)

Saint John Chrysostom, from
“Christmas Day Sermon,
Antioch, 386 A.D.”

To read words written by John Chrysostom is to step into the awe and wonder of the splendor of God. Chrysostom’s sermon presented here is believed to be the first recorded Christmas sermon. In reading it, may you be overwhelmed in the beauty of the mystery of Christ’s birth.

The Shepherd’s song

Behold a new and wondrous mystery! My ears resound to the song of the Shepherd. It is no soft melody but a hymn chanted across heaven:

The Angels sing!

The Archangels blend their voices in harmony!

The Cherubim hymn their joyful praise!

The Seraphim exalt His glory!

All join together in praise at this holy feast, beholding God on earth and humankind in heaven. He who is from heaven, now for our redemption, lives with us here on earth. And those who are lowly are raised to heaven by God's divine mercy.

The celebration of Christmas

On this day, Bethlehem resembles heaven. It hears from the stars the singing of angelic voices. In place of the sun, the Sun of Justice penetrates every street and corner. Do not ask how it happens, for where God wills, the order of nature yields. For God did will this to occur. He had the power. He descended. He redeemed. All things move in obedience to him.

On this day, the I AM is born. The I AM becomes what he was not. For when he was God, he became human; yet he never was separated from the Godhead. He did not suffer any loss of divinity when he became a man, nor did he rise above humanity to become God. Being the Word, Christ became flesh though his nature remained unchanged.

And so kings have come and they have seen the heavenly King that has come upon the earth. He did not bring with him angels, archangels, thrones,

armies, powers, or principalities. Instead, walking a new and solitary path, he came from a spotless womb.

The garment of the Maker

What can I say to you? What should I tell you? I see a mother who has given birth. I see a child because of this birth. The manner of His conception I cannot comprehend.

Nature rested while the Will of God worked. O indescribable grace! The Only Begotten Son – who existed before time began, who cannot be touched or be recognized, who is simple and without body – has now put on my body, visible and prone to corruption. Why? He came to us that he might teach us, and in teaching, lead us by the hand to the things we cannot see. Since we believe that the eyes can be trusted more than the ears, we easily doubt what we do not see. He has lowered himself to show himself in bodily presence in order to remove all doubt.

Christ builds himself a living temple in the holy body and soul of a virgin. As He had willed, he was formed there as a man. Putting on flesh, on this day he was born. He was unashamed of the humbleness of our nature. It was not humiliating for him to put on what he himself had made. Let the handiwork of the

human body be glorified forever, because it became the cloak of its own Creator. When God first created flesh, man could not be made before God had taken the dirt into His hand. Likewise, the corruptible body could not be glorified until it became the garment of its Maker.

The meekness of Christ

What can I say? And how should I describe his birth? The wonder of it fills me with awe. The Ancient of Days has become an infant. The one who sits upon the glorious heavenly throne now lies in a manger. He who cannot be touched – he who is simple, without complexity, and incorporeal – now lies vulnerable to human hands. He who has broken the chains of sinners is now bound to the limitations of an infant. But He has announced that shame will become honor, disgrace will be clothed with glory, and total humiliation will be the measure of his goodness.

This is why he assumed my body – that I may become capable of His Word. Taking my flesh, He gives me His spirit. He bestows and I receive. He prepares for me the treasure of life. He takes my flesh to sanctify me. He gives me His Spirit in order to save me.

Day 3 (December 27)

Saint Athanasius, from “On the Incarnation of the Word”

There may be no theologian of greater importance to the Christian faith than Saint Athanasius. In a time when there were important questions about the nature of Jesus Christ, Athanasius set forth the foundation of the Christian faith, centered in the incarnation of Christ. Though every word of his work is of utmost importance, the excerpt presented here is a glimpse of why the incarnation is crucial to a proper understanding of both the person of Jesus Christ and his work on earth.

God with us

The Word visits the earth. He has always been present and knows its evil condition. He takes on a human body, born of a pure virgin in whose womb he makes human flesh his own. In this human flesh he will reveal himself, conquer death, and restore life. This

is his purpose, to restore creation, to suffer for us, and to appeal on our behalf to the Father. And so the bodiless and pure Word of God comes to our world. But he was never far from us, because no part of creation has been empty of his presence. He fills all things everywhere, while always being present with his Father. But he humbled himself, coming to show his love for us, and to visit us.

Christ's humble compassion

He saw the human race perishing and that death and decay ruled over them. He saw that the penalty for our sin gave corruption a firm hold on us. He knew that until the law was fulfilled this could not be changed. He saw how awful it was that his own work was passing away. He saw the great evil of humanity and how it had grown little by little to an unbearable degree. And he saw all humanity under penalty of death. Seeing all this, he took pity on us, had mercy on our weakness, and lowered himself to our corruption. He could not bear to let death be our master, to allow we creatures to perish, and to see his Father's handiwork come to nothing. So he took on a body, no different from ours.

A body like ours

He simply could have appeared to us, coming to us in a spectacular way, but this was not what he wanted. Instead, he took a body like ours, from a pure and spotless virgin who had never been with a man. He, being the powerful creator of everything, prepared his body in the virgin as a temple to himself, appeared in it, and lived in it.

Because we were all under the penalty of death, having a body like ours he gave it over to death in our place, offering it to the Father. He did this out of love, so that we who joined in his death might be free from the law that led to our ruin. The power of this law was spent completely in the Lord's body. No foothold is left against humanity.

The corruptible made incorruptible

The Word knew that he could not get rid of human corruption in any way other than death. Yet since he is the Word, being immortal and the Father's Son, he could not die. This is why He assumed a body capable of death. As the Word above all, he remained incorruptible as a human. By dying a sufficient death for all, he put an end to corruption for others as well, by the grace of the resurrection.

Surrendering his body to death, as an offering and sacrifice free from every sin, he abolished death for his human brothers and sisters. Since the Word of God was naturally above all, when he offered his own temple and body as a substitute for everyone's life, he fulfilled in death all that was required. Through this union of the immortal Son of God with our human nature, everyone was clothed with incorruption in the promise of the resurrection.

Christ's visible humanity

It is important that he did not immediately offer the sacrifice on behalf of all when he came. If he had surrendered his body to death and then raised it again at once, he wouldn't have submitted himself to our senses. Instead, he stayed in his body and let himself be seen in it, doing acts and giving signs that showed him not only as man but also as God the Word. As a result, the Savior did two things for us by becoming human: first, he banished death from us and made us new; and second, though he was invisible and indiscernible, He became visible through His works and revealed Himself as the Word of the Father, the Ruler and King of all creation.

Day 4 (December 28)

Saint Leo the Great, from “On the Feast of the Nativity”

Saint Leo the Great is historically remembered for two important accomplishments – turning back Attila the Hun from attacking Rome and developing the doctrine of the dual nature of Christ, divine and human, in one person. This sermon exemplifies Leo’s profound teaching by considering the significance of Christmas as the revealing of Christ’s true divinity and true humanity.

Victory on Christmas

Dear friends, this is the day when our lovely Savior was born: let us be glad! There is no proper place for sadness when we celebrate the birthday of the life of the one who destroys the fear of death and brings to us the joy of promised eternity. No one is prohibited from sharing in this happiness. There is one common measure of joy for everyone. Our Lord, the destroyer

of sin and death, finds none free from charge. He has come to free us all.

Let the saint rejoice because victory draws near. Let the sinner be glad for mercy is given. Let the gentile take courage in the call to life. In the fullness of time, which has been determined by the profound Divine counsel, the Son of God has taken on the nature of humanity. In doing so, he has reconciled human nature to its Author in order that the devil, the inventor of death, would be conquered through the same nature he had conquered. He accepted this conflict and the fight was fought on the great and wondrous rule of justice. For the Almighty Lord enters the fight with this fierce enemy not in his majesty but in our humility. He opposes him with the same appearance and the same nature, fully sharing our mortality, though free from all sin.

Truly God and truly human

Therefore, the Word of God became human for the purpose of delivering humanity from eternal death – the Word who himself is the Son of God, who ‘in the beginning was with God,’ through whom ‘all things were made’ and ‘without whom nothing was made.’ This true God was combined with a true human to

form one Lord. This is what we needed because of our situation, one and the same Mediator between God and humanity. The human Christ Jesus was able to both die with the one and rise again with the other.

Unless Christ Jesus was truly God, he would not bring us a remedy. Unless he was truly human, he would not be our perfect example. Therefore, when the Lord was born, the angel rejoiced by singing this song, 'Glory to God in the Highest,' and gave message, 'peace on earth to those of good will.' The angels see that the heavenly Jerusalem is being built out of all the nations of the world. When the joy of the heavenly angels is so great, how much more should humble humans rejoice over the indescribable work of Divine love?

Living in the birth of Christ

My dearly loved friends, let us give thanks to God the Father, through his Son, in the Holy Spirit. 'In his great mercy he has greatly loved us.' He has had pity on us. And 'when we were dead in our sins, he has made us alive in Christ' (Ephesians 2:4-5) that we might be in Him a new creation, made completely new. Let us then put off our old ways and our old deeds. Since we have received a share in the birth of

Christ, let us renounce all our evil works. Christian, acknowledge your dignity. Now that you are being formed in the Divine nature, refuse to return to your old ways of wrong behavior.

Remember the Head and the Body of which you are a member. Refuse to forget that you were rescued from the power of darkness and brought into the light of God's kingdom. By the mystery of baptism you were made into the temple of the Holy Ghost. Do not allow this inhabitant to leave you because of vile acts so that you become enslaved once again to the devil's bondage. The currency that purchased you is the blood of Christ. Since in his mercy he ransomed you, he will judge you in truth, he who with the Father and the Holy Spirit reigns forever and ever. Amen.

Day 5 (December 29)

John Donne, from "The Showing forth of Christ"

John Donne was an extraordinary thinker, wordsmith, and pastor. Though his life was filled with much anguish and strife, often due to discontentment with the church, his writings were full of some of the greatest religious metaphor, poetic paradox, and philosophic contemplation ever written. In this sermon, Donne looks at Christmas Day in light of the entirety of Christ's life, and its metaphorical value in the Christian life.

A continual passion

The whole life of Christ was a continual passion. Others die martyrs, but Christ was born a martyr. He found Golgotha, where he was crucified, even in Bethlehem, where he was born. In his tenderness at birth, the straws were almost as sharp as the crown of thorns at death, and the manger as uneasy at first as his cross at the last. His birth and his death were but one continual act, and his Christmas Day and his

Good Friday are but the evening and the morning of one and the same day.

Christmas in every appearance of Christ

Every manifestation of Christ to the world, to the church, to a particular soul, is an epiphany, a Christmas Day. Now there is nowhere a greater manifestation of Christ than in that which brought about this word: 'Master, you are now dismissing your servant in peace...' It had been revealed to Simeon (whose words these are) that he should see Christ before he died. And actually – and really, substantially, essentially, bodily, presently, personally – he does see him. So it is Simeon's Epiphany, Simeon's Christmas Day.

So also on this day which we remember and celebrate the general Epiphany, the appearance of Christ to the whole world in his birth, we have all received the body and blood of Christ in his holy and blessed sacrament, another Epiphany, another Christmas day, another manifestation and application of Christ to ourselves. The church prepares our devotion before Christmas Day with four Sundays in Advent, which bring Christ nearer and nearer to us and remind us that he is coming to enable us

through further examination of ourselves to depart in peace, because our eyes have seen his salvation.

Christ born in you

To conclude that you have had a Christmas Day – a manifestation of Christ – in your soul, you will have a whole Good Friday, a crucifying and an ‘it is finished’ moment, a measure of correction, and joy in correction. You will have temptations, a resurrection, and ascension. You will have possession of Heaven itself in this world, and it cannot be taken from you. Make good your Christmas Day so that Christ will be born in you, and he who died for you will live with you all year long, and all the years of your lives, and inspire you, and receive from you in your final breath this beautiful prayer, ‘Lord now let your servant depart in peace.’

Day 6 (December 30)

Fanny Crosby, "Sing Hallelujah!"

Not all sermons are written in prose. The lyrical compositions of Fanny Crosby have roused spiritual reflection and worship for the past one hundred years. Known as 'the Queen of Gospel Song Writers,' Crosby was able to skillfully capture the narrative of the Gospel story with the personal experience of one who has encountered God. In this song, Crosby reflects on the birth of Christ, concluding in a response of Christmas joy.

Come to the feet of our infant Redeemer,
Come where today in a manger He lies;
Lift up our hearts in a song of devotion,
Let our hosannas with gladness arise.
Over the plains and the mountains of Judah,
Prophets beheld and His coming foretold;
Sang of the love and compassion that moved Him,
Love that is purer and better than gold.
Tell how He came from His throne up in heaven;

Came to the world as a part of God's plan.
Hail and exalt him, the Son of the Highest;
Sing hallelujah, again and again!
Come to the feet of our infant Redeemer,
Come in the light of this beautiful morn;
Then in the hearts of the poor and the lowly,
Carry the tidings that Jesus is born. (He is born.)
Sing hallelujah,
Jesus is born!

Day 7 (December 31)

George Whitefield, from “The True Way of Keeping Christmas”

George Whitefield was an exceptional evangelist and pastor, a member with Charles and John Wesley of the Holy Club at Oxford, and one of the key figures in the British and American Great Awakenings. Though his sermons have often been criticized as being overly theatrical, they were deeply affective in the hearts of his hearers. Regardless, Whitefield’s one goal in preaching was for the glory of Christ to be realized in the lives of sinners. This excerpt from one of Whitefield’s Christmas sermons is a stirring reminder that Christ’s glory was fully displayed through his acts of humility and love.

The humility of Christ

The celebration of the birth of Christ is a day that most who profess Christianity feel is necessary to celebrate. We consider the humility and love of the Lord Jesus Christ, that he submitted to be born of a

virgin, a poor sinful creature. He knew how he would be treated in this world – that he would be despised, scoffed at, and ultimately die a painful, shameful, and disgraceful death; he would be treated as the scum of all humankind; he would be accepted not like the son of any man or woman, and, therefore, not at all like the Son of God.

Reflection on all of these things should make us admire the love of the Lord Jesus Christ, who was incredibly willing to offer himself as a ransom for our sins. When the time was right, Christ came, made of a woman, made under the law. He came according to the eternal guidance of the Father. He came, not in glory or in splendor, not like someone bringing full salvation. No, he was born in a stable and laid in a manger. Oxen were his companions. O, what amazing humility our Lord Jesus Christ has shown, to stoop to such low and poor things for our sake.

Completeness in Christ

What love is this? What great and wonderful love was here, that the Son of God should come into our world in so poor a condition to deliver us from the sin and misery that occupied us because of our fall in our first parents? The water that flowed from our

springs was muddy, because the fountain was muddy. But the Lord Jesus Christ came to put on our nature, to die a shameful, painful, and condemned death for our sakes. He died for our sins, to bring us to God. By his blood he cleansed us from the guilt of sin. He was complete where we were imperfect. And now, friends, we are able to approach him with boldness. He is the mediator between his offended Father and us.

Remembering Christ's birth

It was love, absolute love – it was free love – that brought the Lord Jesus Christ into our world. Why would we not remember the birth of our Jesus? Should we yearly celebrate the birth of a temporal king and forget about the King of kings? Should the only thing that should especially be remembered be completely forgotten? God forbid!

No, my dear friends! Let us celebrate and keep this festival of our church with joy in our hearts! Let the birth of our Redeemer – which redeemed us from sin, wrath, death, and hell – be always remembered! May the Savior's love never be forgotten!

The endless song

May we sing of all his love and glory as long as we live! And may we sing through an endless eternity in heaven! Without ceasing may we join the angels and archangels, the cherubim and seraphim in chanting forever and ever the wonders of redeeming love and the riches of free grace! And, my friends, as the time for observing this festival is approaching, let us consider our role in worshiping correctly – the right way for the glory of God and the good of immortal souls to celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ – for this is an event which ought to be held in eternal remembrance.

Day 8 (January 1)

Martin Luther, from “The Story of the Birth of Jesus and the Angels’ Song”

For Martin Luther, every sermon was a battle for people’s souls. The proclamation of the Word of God was a weapon of cosmic warfare. He believed Christian preaching should always present Christ, because when Christ is truly present faith becomes possible as Christ invades the lives of hearers. What greater example is there of Christ invading life than the story of Christ’s birth, where the Gospel was revealed in human form?

The Gospel as a supernatural sermon

If the Gospel is properly understood, it is as a supernatural sermon and light, its only purpose to make Christ known. First of all, this is shown by the fact that it was not a human that made Christ’s birth known to others. Instead, it was an angel that came down from heaven and made the birth of Jesus known to

the shepherds, while no other human beings knew anything about it.

In the second place, it is pointed out by the fact that Christ was born at midnight. This time indicates that the whole world is in darkness and cannot see the future. Likewise, Christ cannot be known by reason alone. Knowledge about him must be revealed from heaven.

Third, it is shown by the bright light that shined around the shepherds, teaching us that there must be an entirely different light than that of human reason. Furthermore, when St. Luke writes that the glory of God shined around the shepherds, he calls the glory of God a bright light. Why does he say that? Luke is calling attention to the mystery and revealing the character of the Gospel – since the Gospel is a heavenly light that teaches nothing but Christ – in whom God's grace is given to us – it exalts only the glory of God. From now on, no one can boast of his or her own power for salvation but must give glory to God. It is only because of his love and goodness that we are saved through Christ.

A heart of Bethlehem

Wherever Christ and the Gospel are found, there is the fruitful Bethlehem and the thankful Judea. It is there that everyone has enough in Christ, and everyone overflows with thanksgiving for the divine grace. But while people are thankful for human teachings, such teachings cannot satisfy. They leave a barren land and deadly hunger. No heart can ever be satisfied unless Christ, who is rightly proclaimed in the Gospel, is born in it. In this way, the soul comes to Bethlehem and finds Jesus. It also comes to and remains in Judea, thanking God eternally. Here it is satisfied. Here God receives his praise and confession. Outside of the Gospel there is nothing but ungratefulness and starvation.

Preach the Gospel

But the angel clearly shows that nothing is to be preached in Christianity except the Gospel. The angel even takes upon itself the office of a preacher of the Gospel. The angel does not say, 'I preach to you,' but instead proclaims 'glad tidings I bring to you.' I am an Evangelist. My word is good news. The meaning of the word Gospel is, 'a good, joyful message preached in the New Testament.' What does the Gospel testify?

Listen! The angel says, 'I bring you glad tidings of great joy.' My Gospel speaks of great joy. Where is it? Hear it again, 'For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.'

Consider what the Gospel is – namely, a joyful sermon concerning Christ, our Savior. Whoever accurately preaches Jesus Christ preaches the Gospel of pure joy. How is it possible for someone to hear of greater joy than that Christ has given himself to be our very own? We do not only say 'Christ is born,' because Christ also makes his birth our own by saying, 'to you a Savior...'

Therefore, the Gospel does not only teach the history of Christ, but it also enables all who believe it to receive it as their own. That is how the Gospel operates, as has just been explained. How would it benefit me if Christ had been born a thousand times, even if it was sung beautifully into my ears, if I were never to hear that he was born for me and was to be my very own? If the voice speaks this lovely sound, even if it is in a simple phrase, my heart listens with joy because it is a magnificent sound that penetrates my soul. If anything else like it were ever to be preached, the evangelical angel and the angelic evangelist would have already said it.

Day 9 (January 2)

Charles Wesley, “Hark, How All the Welkin Rings”

No theological concept fascinated Charles Wesley more than the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God in human form. Over the span of his life, Wesley composed numerous lyrics on the consequences of Christ’s incarnation. This hymn (originally entitled “A Hymn for Christmas Day” and now known as “Hark the Herald Angels Sing”) has survived as one of Wesley’s most popular. The lyrics are presented here in the original text in order to show the profundity of Wesley’s theological reflection and the beauty of his lyricism.

Hark, how all the welkin rings,
‘Glory to the King of kings;
peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!’

Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
join the triumph of the skies;

universal nature say,
'Christ the Lord is born today!'

Christ, by highest Heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord:
late in time behold him come,
offspring of a Virgin's womb!

Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see,
hail the incarnate Deity!
pleased as man with men to appear,
Jesus, our Emmanuel here!

Hail, the heavenly Prince of Peace,
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
risen with healing in his wings.

Mild he lays his glory by,
born that man no more may die;
born to raise the sons of earth;
born to give them second birth.

Come, Desire of nations, come,
fix in us thy humble home;

rise, the woman's conquering Seed,
bruise in us the serpent's head.

Now display thy saving power,
ruined nature now restore;
now in mystic union join
thine to ours, and ours to thine.

Adam's likeness, Lord, efface,
Stamp thy image in its place.
Second Adam from above,
Reinstate us in thy love.

Let us thee, though lost, regain,
Thee, the life, the inner man:
O, to all thyself impart,
Formed in each believing heart.

Day 10 (January 3)

Saint Bridget of Sweden, from “The Revelation of St. Bridget”

Saint Bridget is one of the most charismatic figures in the mystical tradition of the church. Late in life, Bridget received a series of glorious revelations that illustrated intimate details of the life of Jesus Christ and the life of his mother Mary. This excerpt is taken from Bridget’s revelation of the birth of Christ.

A revelation of prayerful adoration

In this revelation, I was present by the manger of the Lord in Bethlehem. I beheld a Virgin of extreme beauty wrapped in a white mantle and a delicate tunic. Then she produced two small linen cloths, and two woolen ones of delicate purity and fine quality. She brought the wool linens to wrap around the Child when he was born, and the two other small cloths to cover His head. She put all of these cloths beside her. When everything was prepared, the Virgin knelt with great adoration in an attitude of prayer.

Welcoming the Christ child

Then, with her hands extended and her eyes fixed on the sky, she stood as in complete joy, lost in contemplation, in bliss of divine sweetness. While she stood like this in prayer I saw the Child in her womb move. Suddenly, in a moment, she gave birth to her own Son. From him radiated such overwhelming light and splendor that the sun was not comparable to it. So sudden and instant was the birth that I could not discover or discern how it had occurred. All of a sudden, I saw the glorious Infant lying on the ground, naked and shining, His body was pure from any soil or impurity. Then, I heard the sweet and beautiful singing of the angels. When the Virgin realized she had borne her Child, she immediately began to worship Him. She clasped her hands in honor and admiration saying, 'You are welcome here my God, my Lord, my Son.'

Worshiping at the manger

Then, as the Child cried and trembled from the cold and hardness of the floor where He was lying, He stretched out His arms begging her to raise Him to the warmth of her motherly love. So His Mother took Him in her arms, pressed Him to her breast and

cheek, and warmed Him with great joy and tender compassion. She then sat down on the ground, laying the Child on her lap, and at once gave Him much care. She began to wrap His small body, His legs, and His arms in long cloths, and covered His head in the linen garments. When this was done, the old man entered, and bowing down on the floor he wept for joy. Mary and Joseph then put the Child in the manger, and worshipped Him on their knees with immense joy.

This revelation confirms what has been taught and written. How can any doubt the wondrous miracles associated with Christ's Incarnation and Nativity?

Day 11 (January 4)

Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, from "A Christmas Sermon"

Saint Gregory is respected as one of the most talented preachers of the early church. His skills in profound theological reflection and personal exhortation have seldom been matched. Some of Saint Gregory's most beautiful orations spoke to the mystery of Christmas. It is difficult to not be drawn in to celebration, gratitude, and worship while reading the magnificence of Gregory's words.

Rejoice!

Christ is born – glorify Him! Christ has come from heaven – go out to meet Him! Christ is here on earth – be exalted! Sing to the Lord all the earth. Let me join both heaven and earth in one voice, let the heavens rejoice and let the earth be glad. The one who is from heaven is now on earth. Christ is in the flesh! Rejoice with trembling and with joy. Rejoice

with trembling because of your sins. Rejoice with joy because of your hope.

The Messenger of the Father

Again, the darkness is past. Again, Light is made. Again, Egypt is punished with darkness. Again, Israel a pillar gives Israel light. Let the people who sat in the darkness of ignorance see the great Light full of knowledge. Old things have passed away, and behold all things have become new. The letter gives way as the Spirit comes to the front. The shadows flee away as the truth appears on them. Melchizedek is concluded.

He who was without a Mother becomes one without a Father. (He was without mother in His former state, and is without a father in this second state as a human.) The laws of nature are upset since the world above must be filled. When Christ commands something, let us not set ourselves against Him. O clap your hands together all you people, because unto us a Child is born, and unto us a Son is given. His government is upon His shoulder (for it was on His shoulder that he carried His cross), and His name is The Messenger of the Father's Great Counsel.

A beautiful conversion

Let John cry out, 'Prepare the way of the Lord!' I will also cry out the power of this day. He who is not carnal has become Incarnate. Jesus Christ, the Son of God – the same yesterday, today, and forever – has become the Son of Man. Let unbelievers be offended. Let the doubters scoff. Let heretics talk until their tongues ache. They will believe when they see Him ascending into heaven. And if not then, they will believe when they see Him coming out of heaven and sitting as Judge.

This is our present Festival – it is this that we celebrate today. God has come to humanity so that we may go forth, or to be more accurate, that we may go back to God, that we may put off of the old self and put on the new. And that as we died in Adam we may live in Christ, being born with Christ, crucified with Him, buried with Him, and rise anew with Him. I must undergo such a beautiful conversion. Since pain brings the realization of bliss, bliss must come out of pain. For where sin abounds grace abounds even more. If a taste of sin condemned us, how much more does the passion of Christ justify us? Therefore, let us keep the Feast, not in the same way as those who are not religious, but in holy ways. Not in the

patterns of the world, but in a fashion that stands above the world. Not as our own, but as those who belong to Him, our Master, who is also ours. Not as people of weakness, but as people of healing. Not as those who are part of creation, but as those who are part of re-creation.

Day 12 (January 5)

John Wesley, from “The More Excellent Way”

This sermon excerpt from John Wesley is not a Christmas sermon, per se. Though it does make an allusion to Christmas, the primary focus of the sermon is on the use of money. Since the Christmas season tends to be a time of charity, and since in the days that follow tend to be a time of making new resolutions for the coming year, perhaps Wesley’s words provide a good challenge to discover the more excellent way of living in the humility of Christ, the one who emptied himself for our sake.

Giving money

There is one point that still needs to be considered – that is, the use of money. Specifically, we must ask ourselves, what is the way that Christians generally tend to use money? And is there not ‘a more excellent way?’

Generally, Christians tend to set apart something yearly for charitable uses – perhaps a tenth or even one-eighth of a part of their yearly income or salary. I have known very few people who, like Zaccheus, have said, ‘Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor.’ O, how pleased God would be to see an increase in such friends of humankind, such benefactors!

In addition to those who have set a standard amount of giving, there are thousands who give large sums of money to the poor, especially when a compelling and heart-moving story or situation arises before them.

I praise God for all of you who do this. May you never grow tired of doing such good! May God restore in your heart seven times more than all that you have given! However, let me still show you a more excellent way.

Blessed to be a blessing

God is the owner and giver of all things in heaven and earth. You may consider yourself as someone to whom God has given some of his goods, that you might give those goods away according to his direction. His direction is this – that you should see yourself as one of a certain number of needy persons

who are to be provided for, and you should do it out of only a portion of the goods he has given you. You have two advantages over everyone else: one, that 'it is more blessed to give than to receive;' two, that you are able to serve yourself first and then others. This is the light with which you are to see yourself and others. To be more precise, if you have no family, after you have provided for yourself, give away everything else that remains so that

*Each Christmas your accounts may clear,
And wind your bottom round the year.*

A living example

This was the practice of all those at Oxford who were called Methodists. For example, one of them had thirty pounds a year. He lived on twenty-eight and gave away the other two. The next year, when he received sixty pounds, he still lived on twenty-eight and gave away the other thirty-two. The third year he received ninety pounds and gave away sixty-two. The fourth year he received a hundred and twenty pounds. Still, he lived on only twenty-eight pounds and gave away ninety-two pounds to the poor. Was this not a more excellent way?

Treasures on earth, treasures in heaven

If you do have a family, seriously consider before God how much each member needs for life and godliness. In general, do not allow them less and do not allow them more than you allow yourself. This being done, make it your purpose to 'gain no more.' I charge you in the name of God, do not increase your standard of living! As it comes daily or yearly, allow the extra to go. Otherwise you 'lay up treasures upon earth.' Our Lord forbids this as flatly as he forbids murder and adultery. By storing up such treasures, you would be 'storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.'

But what if it was not forbidden? How can you, on the basis of reason, spend your money in a way that God may possibly forgive, instead of spending it in a way that he will certainly reward? You will have no reward in heaven for what you lay up. You will have a reward for what you lay out. Every pound you put into the earthly bank is sunk. It brings no heavenly interest. But every pound you give to the poor is put into the bank of heaven, and it will bring glorious interest. Indeed, it will accumulate for all eternity.

Who then is the wise person, and who among you is endowed with wisdom? With the Lord's assistance, let that person resolve on this day, in this hour, in this moment to choose from what is stated above – the 'more excellent way.' Let that person steadily keep to the way with regard to sleep, prayer, work, food, conversation, and amusement. And may it especially be true in regard to the employment of that important item – money. Let your heart answer to the call of God, 'From this moment, with God as my help, I will lay up no more treasures on earth. This one thing I will do – I will lay up treasure in heaven. I will give to God the things that are God's. I will give him all my goods and all my heart.'



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