

CHANGE YOUR LIFE. CHANGE YOUR WORLD.

ACTIVATED

Vol 17 • Issue 12

FINDING CHRISTMAS

How to rediscover the season's spirit

God Outdoes Himself

Eight miracles of the first Christmas

The Sand Clock

Divine coincidences



EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION LIVING THE ANGELS' MESSAGE

In this weary world of ours, it's hard not to be overwhelmed by the recurring bad news of terrorism, war, natural disasters, and suffering. The message of Christmas—peace on earth and goodwill toward men—has never been more relevant. And yet I know I sometimes feel my

efforts are like a drop of water in the ocean of what needs to be done to truly make a difference.

I'm sure the shepherds felt a little out of their depth being given a message by a host of angels on Christmas night and wondered how they were supposed to spread that message "to all people." They didn't let that stop them, though: they spread the good news to others, who in turn spread it to others, and on it went.

Doing our part to bring peace on earth can work in much the same way. Changing the way we see others, being considerate to those who cross our paths, doing kind deeds when opportunities present themselves without expecting something in return. Sometimes it just takes a kind word from someone at the right time or a helping hand to make this a beautiful world for someone all over again.

This Christmas, let's ask God to help us find ways to share happiness with others through His message of love, peace, and goodwill toward all.

From all of us at *Activated*, may God bless you and your loved ones with His love and a very merry Christmas!

Samuel Keating
Executive Editor



For information on *Activated* and other inspirational products, visit our website or contact one of the distributors below.

www.activated.org

Activated Ministries

P.O. Box 462805
Escondido, CA 92046-2805, USA
Toll-free: 1-877-862-3228
Email: info@actmin.org
www.activatedministries.org

Activated Africa

P.O. Box 2509, Faerie Glen
Pretoria 0043, South Africa
Tel: 0861 888 918
Email: activatedAfrica@activated.org

Activated Nigeria

P.O. Box 9009, Aggrey Road P.O.
Port Harcourt, Nigeria
Cell: +234 (0) 7036963333
Email: activatednigeria@activated.org

Activated Philippines


P.O. Box 8225, Paranaque Central P.O.
1700 Paranaque City, Philippines
Cell: (0922) 8125326
Email: activatedph@gmail.com

EDITOR Samuel Keating

DESIGN Gentian Suçi

© 2016 *Activated*. All Rights Reserved.
Printed in China.

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. Other Bible quotations are from the following sources: Contemporary English Version (CEV). Copyright © 1995 by American Bible Society. Used by permission. The Living Bible (TLB). Copyright © 1971 by Tyndale House Publishers. Used by permission. New Living Translation (NLT). Copyright © 1978, 1996 by Tyndale House Publishers. Used by permission. New International Version (NIV). Copyright © 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission. GOD'S WORD (GW) is a copyrighted work of God's Word to the Nations. Quotations are used by permission. Copyright 1995 by God's Word to the Nations. All rights reserved.



There are some of us ... who think [to] ourselves, *If I had only been there! How quick I would have been to help the Baby. I would have washed His linens. How happy I would have been to go with the shepherds to see the Lord lying in the manger!* Yes, we would. We say that because we know how great Christ is, but if we had been there *at that time*, we would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem. ... Why don't we do it *now*? We have Christ in our neighbor.

—Martin Luther (1483–1546)

THE GIFT

BY KEITH PHILLIPS

CHRISTMAS CAN BE LIKENED TO A CHRISTMAS GIFT, where the giver is God, the gift is Jesus, and the recipient is both the whole world and each of us personally. The analogy is based on what is probably the best known and most important verse in the Bible, John 3:16. I'd heard the analogy many times over the years and even used it myself, but the following email from Paloma Sridhar in Bangalore, India, added a surprising twist:

I had set out to teach John 3:16 to my youngest sister, Rosie, six, but instead came to a milestone realization myself. Our conversation went something like this:

“Did you know, Rosie, that it only takes one verse from the Bible to explain to people how they can be sure they'll go to heaven when they die?”

“Which one?” Rosie asked.

“John 3:16. It goes like this—‘For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son’”

“I know that one!” Rosie interrupted.

“All right then. Can you say it for me?”

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only forgotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. John 3:16.”

“Very good! But God doesn't have an only *forgotten*...”

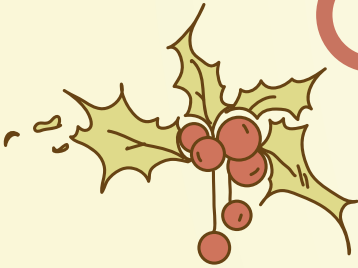
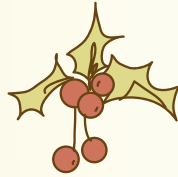
I stopped myself mid-sentence. How easy it is to get so caught up in the rush of daily living that we don't give Jesus so much as a passing thought!

How true—and how sad, especially on His birthday! Just think how you would feel if on your birthday everyone partied and gave one another gifts, but left you sitting alone in a corner unnoticed. This Christmas, let's remember to thank God for His incomparable gift to the world, Jesus.

KEITH PHILLIPS WAS *ACTIVATED'S* EDITOR-IN-CHIEF FOR 14 YEARS FROM 1999 TO 2013. HE AND HIS WIFE CARYN NOW WORK WITH THE HOMELESS IN THE U.S.A. ■



GOD OUTDOES HIMSELF



BY SAMUEL KEATING

THE BABY'S FIRST CRY RINGS

OUT, the umbilical cord is cut, and the proud parents and everyone else present—whether it's an obstetrician and attendants in a gleaming hospital or a tribal midwife in a thatched hut—rejoice at the wonder they have

1. Luke 1:26–28,30–31 CEV
2. Luke 1:34–35 TLB
3. Isaiah 7:14
4. Luke 1:36–37
5. See Luke 1:5–25,57–66.
6. Matthew 1:19 NLT
7. See Deuteronomy 22:13–14,21.
8. *Jesus* is the Greek form of *Joshua*, which means *The Lord saves*.
9. Matthew 1:20–21,24–25 NIV
10. Micah 5:2 CEV

just witnessed. The birth of Jesus on the first Christmas was all of that, but also involved at least eight more miracles.

ANGELIC PRONOUNCEMENT

To begin with, Jesus' birth was announced before He was even conceived. "God sent the angel Gabriel to the town of Nazareth in Galilee with a message for a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to Joseph from the family of King David. The angel greeted Mary and said, 'You are truly blessed! The Lord is with you.' Then the angel told Mary, 'Don't be afraid! God is pleased with you, and you will have a son. His name will be Jesus.'"¹ Miracle number one.

MIRACULOUS CONCEPTION— TIMES TWO

It is, of course, one of the best-known and most outstanding miracles that at the time of Jesus' conception His mother, Mary, was a virgin. The Bible is very clear on that:

"Mary asked the angel, 'But how can I have a baby? I am a virgin.' The angel replied, 'The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of God shall overshadow you; so the baby born to you will be utterly holy—the Son of God.'"²

This event was foretold 700 years earlier by the prophet Isaiah: "The Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive

and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel [‘God is with us,’ in Hebrew].”³ In every sense, Jesus is the Son of God. Miracle number two.

Gabriel also told Mary that her cousin Elizabeth, who had been barren and was now past childbearing age, would give birth to a son: “Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible.”⁴ Elizabeth gave birth to a boy who grew up to be John the Baptist. Everything happened exactly as Gabriel had announced.⁵ Miracle number three.



ANGELIC CONFIRMATION

What about Joseph, Mary’s fiancé? What was he to think when Mary returned from visiting Elizabeth and he found out that she was three months pregnant? As can be expected, his first reactions were mixed. “Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.”⁶



Joseph wanted to spare Mary humiliation and possible death—the punishment for adultery under Jewish law⁷—but we can imagine the pain he must have felt, believing that his betrothed was bearing another man’s child.

That’s when God sent an angel to Joseph also, as much to reassure and comfort him as to clarify the situation, no doubt. “An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and

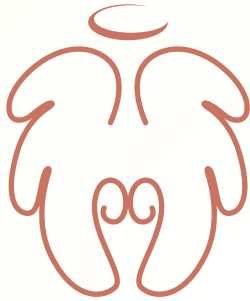


said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.’⁸ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.”⁹ Miracle number four.

PLACE OF BIRTH

It was also a miraculous fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, since His parents lived in Nazareth, some days’ journey away. “Bethlehem Ephrath, you are one of the smallest towns in the nation of Judah. But the Lord will choose one of your people to rule the nation.”¹⁰

The Roman emperor Augustus Caesar had decreed that an empire-wide census should be taken, and Jewish tradition required that for any such business each man return to the place that he considered his ancestral home. For Joseph, a direct descendant of King David, that



meant returning to Bethlehem with his pregnant wife, and she gave birth to Jesus shortly after they arrived. Miracle number five.

ANGELIC ANNOUNCEMENT

Shepherds keeping watch over their sheep on the hillsides surrounding Bethlehem were visited by an angel, who told them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!’”¹¹

The shepherds left their flocks and went to Bethlehem, where they found the Messiah exactly as the angel had told them. “After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone

11. Luke 2:10–14

12. Luke 2:17 NLT

13. Matthew 2:9–11

14. 1 John 5:11 GW

what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child.”¹² What this means is that, from day one of His life on earth, there were people testifying to the fact that the Messiah had come at last. Miracle number six.

SIGN IN THE HEAVENS

Wise men (according to tradition there were three, but the Bible doesn’t specify how many) from the East (the Bible also doesn’t specify where in the East, but possibly Arabia, Persia, Babylon, or even as far away as India) observed an unusual occurrence in the heavens, which they interpreted to signify the birth of the “King of the Jews,” and they went to worship Him.

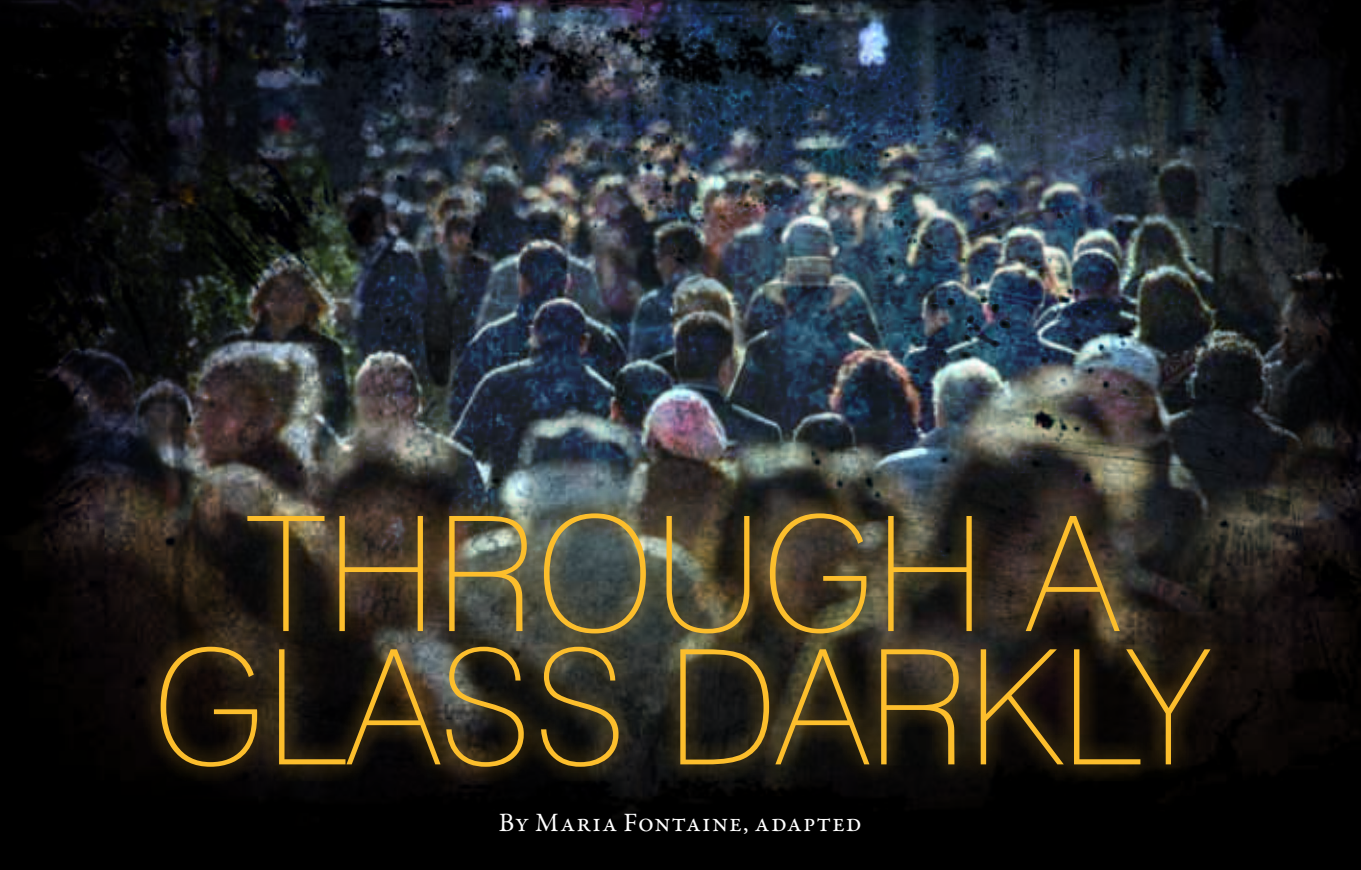
Travel in those days was difficult and slow, and based on other Scriptures, it may have taken the wise men up to two years of preparation and travel before they arrived in Judea and gave their gifts to Jesus. “Behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over the house where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young

Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”¹³ Miracle number seven.

BEST BY FAR

The supreme miracle of Christmas, however, is not about angels or wise men or a sign in the sky. It’s about God’s only begotten Son taking on the form of a weak, helpless baby in order to understand and sympathize with us in a unique way through all that He suffered and experienced, and to eventually die for you and me. “God has given us eternal life, and this life is found in his Son.”¹⁴ ■





THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

BY MARIA FONTAINE, ADAPTED

THE BIBLE TELLS US that we see through a glass darkly. This refers to our limited ability to grasp the full spiritual realities of heaven, but I believe that our limited perception also affects our ability to fully understand the hearts of others who we encounter here and now. We often fail to see others as Jesus sees them, as His beloved whom He would have paid any price for. He sees in them a beautiful spirit that He has created and He sees what they can become in Him.

We look at others many times and see the flaws—things like anger, selfishness, pride—rather than the sorrow and suffering and hopelessness they may be struggling with. We so often see the outward appearance rather than the great need of a lost and lonely person who longs for hope and support. We often miss seeing the eternal glimmer of life, that part of God that burns within them as surely as it glows in our own heart.

When we think of the lowly stable in Bethlehem, let's remember that there are multitudes of "stables" housing countless lives right where we are today. The Christ child can work through each of us to shine His light on their darkness, just like His arrival lit up that original stable.

Jesus wants us to look at each person as a priceless soul whom He died for and whom He longs to bless with His peace and salvation. He asks us to go to them in their sorrow and depression and hopelessness so that He can shine His life and love into their hearts.

He went, and it brought us into His kingdom. Mary looked beyond the circumstances in the stable to the angel's promises and saw God's gift to all mankind fulfilled before her eyes. The hosts of angels saw the reality beneath the humble beginnings of the Son of Man on earth, and the heavens couldn't contain their rejoicing!

Let's allow His brilliance to enlighten the darkened view of our earthly perceptions so that we can see the hearts of those He beckons us to love and care for. He saw past our shell of humanity and reached out to draw us into the brilliance of His Spirit. Can we do any less for the One who has given His all for us?

MARIA FONTAINE AND HER HUSBAND, PETER AMSTERDAM, ARE DIRECTORS OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL, A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY OF FAITH. ■

The Sand Clock

BY CURTIS PETER VAN GORDER



I WENT TO MY DESK ON CHRISTMAS EVE MORNING to find that our beloved sand clock glass had somehow broken. I threw it away, then fished it out again to take one last dramatic photo.

Sand clocks have always held a fascination for me, especially this one. It was a gift to my wife last Christmas, meant to represent “the gift of spending time together.” It also reminded me of a story and play I had written based around the symbolism of the sand clock.

I thought nothing more about it and went to my job that day as Santa at a corporate Christmas event. As I was going around the offices and taking photos with the employees and their children, I spied an exquisite sand clock in one office. We entered and took photos there with all the small children standing on the manager’s desk. I remarked to him how superb the sand clock looked and the significance that kind of clock has for me.

“I use it to make sure meetings are kept to under 30 minutes,” he replied.

“Did you get it in India?” I asked, hoping to replace my broken one. (I was living in India at the time.)

“Yes, I’ll give you the address where I bought it.” I was making my exit when he had a sudden inspiration. He handed me the sand clock with a smile that rivaled Saint Nick’s and told me, “This is a Christmas gift from me to you.” I thanked him profusely and promised to send him my Christmas sand clock story.

1. <http://elixirmime.com>

I came home with my new sand clock in hand, bubbling over to tell my story. It was about midnight before I arrived in our parking lot from a nearly two-hour journey across town. To my surprise, my daughter and my wife arrived in the parking lot at precisely the same moment. It was a good thing, because only one of us had a key to our house. If either of the others had arrived earlier, they would have had to wait outside. Three cars from different locations and times arriving at the exact same minute! What are the chances? You wouldn't be able to pull off such a feat in the mayhem of Mumbai traffic even if you arranged it beforehand.

So what does that have to do with my sand clock? I wasn't exactly sure, but like a detective, I felt there was some connection. After pondering it further, I came to the conclusion that they were both examples of a power behind the scenes that cares deeply about the details of my life. I mulled over the amazing events that had unfolded. Had it all been a coincidence? It was all too wonderful to have been by chance. If not by chance, then what?

For some, these "coincidences" are just random events that they brush past and continue on their way. I too could have dismissed both of the incidents of that Christmas Eve as mere random "good luck." But when looking back, I remembered many other Christmases when things just seemed to click like the tumblers of a safe that is opened. I take them to mean that God loves me and is concerned about showing me His care in the details of these occurrences.

Most of the time I don't see what God is doing behind the scenes, and sometimes what He's up to *is* baffling, but it's a wonderful boost to my faith when miracles happen to me as they did this Christmas Eve. It is at times like these that I get a glimpse of His handiwork.

CURTIS PETER VAN GORDER IS A SCRIPTWRITER AND MIME ARTIST¹
IN GERMANY. ■



In life, we must make all due allowance for chance. Chance, in the last resort, is God.—*Anatole France (1844–1924)*



CHRISTMAS GOALS

Author unknown

Christmas is an ideal time to rededicate ourselves to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, the one who gave His life for us, that we might be connected to God. "He longs for that sweet communion, that union of heart with heart."

Another goal would be to share the real meaning of Christmas with others by giving them God's love and gift of eternal life. We can share a truly "Merry Christmas" by pointing others to the peace, happiness, and joy of the love of Jesus Christ.

During the Christmas season, most people become more open to others and mindful of their needs. It's a time of reflection, when many stop to think about the true values in life. It's a time when people are often more receptive to the story of Jesus and why He came to earth.

Don't let this golden opportunity pass you by! Make it your personal goal to bring another soul within the circle of Jesus' love. ■



Giving CHRISTMAS

BY LILIA POTTERS

IT WAS CHRISTMAS EVE. I was in a hurry, trying to finish my work early and prepare for the evening with my family and friends, when the phone rang. I answered impatiently, “Yes, hello?”

“Merry Christmas, Lilia!” the voice on the other end cheerfully exclaimed in accented English.

“Cecilia?” I asked. “Merry Christmas! How are you?” After the usual greetings and small talk, Cecilia explained that she was on night duty at the hospital where we’d first met. As the senior midwife and a single woman, the lot had fallen on her to take the night shift this Christmas. Normally, she traveled south to

spend Christmas with her family and attend Mass in the small village she comes from, and she sounded dejected and disappointed.

As a natural childbirth coach, I befriended Cecilia while assisting during a delivery. I stayed in touch and visited her at times, and we’d become friends.

Cecilia had never married but had raised the children of her younger brother who had been killed in a car accident about twenty years earlier. When the children moved out, Cecilia was left to live alone.

I felt a tug on my heart to tell her I’d come and see her that night. She sounded pleasantly surprised

and even excited, but told me not to worry if I couldn’t make it. After all, it was Christmas Eve and I should spend this special time with my family, she said.

Everyone arrived and I temporarily forgot about Cecilia as we enjoyed each other’s company, sang Christmas carols, sipped hot chocolate, and enjoyed homemade Christmas cookies. It was close to midnight when something jolted my memory about my promise to Cecilia. The Christmas carol we’d just sung, “He Only Left Heaven for Love That Night,” made me feel ashamed for not putting more priority on leaving my little bit of heaven to cheer up a lonely soul.



At Christmas, and every other day of the year, all of us within whom the Spirit of God dwells are in a sense an extension of “God” in our community—to our friends and neighbors, our coworkers, the people who serve us in shops and restaurants, and strangers He brings across our paths. The love we show through our interactions with others, the words we speak and actions we take, the kindness and generosity we show, the helping hand we offer, reflect the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. Others can sense something uncommon and special in us, and when we explain that God is with us and can be with them as well, we help to fulfill the ultimate reason of Christmas.—*Peter Amsterdam*



Christmas is the spirit of giving without a thought of getting. It is happiness because we see joy in people. It is forgetting self and finding time for others. It is discarding the meaningless and stressing the true values.—*Thomas Monson (b. 1927)*

I quickly filled a thermos with hot chocolate, wrapped some of the cookies in a red Christmas napkin, and prepared a homemade card with a message of love and appreciation for Cecilia’s faithful care of all the women who give birth at her hospital. I grabbed a decorative Christmas candle to give as a gift and a box of matches to light it with and left shortly before midnight.

The hospital was quiet and nearly deserted, the nursing station for the delivery ward dark. *No deliveries tonight*, I thought. *I wonder if she’s already asleep*. I quietly knocked on the door.

“Who is it?”

“Cecilia, it’s me, Lilia!” After a few moments of silence, the side door to the nursing station burst open and Cecilia rushed out with open arms, her face beaming. Embracing me, she exclaimed with tears, “I knew you’d come! I knew it!” I fought back my own tears and silently thanked God that I’d heeded His nudge to visit her.

“Cecilia,” I said, “I brought some hot chocolate. Let’s celebrate Christmas together!”

“I’ll get some cups,” she said as she hurried off. When she returned, the look of joy and gratitude on her face was all I needed to confirm how lonely she’d felt that night.

We sat together, sipping hot chocolate and enjoying the Christmas cookies. We talked, laughed, and even attempted to sing a Christmas carol together. Cecilia exclaimed again and again that she would never forget this Christmas, and that it was the best one she’d ever had.

Before leaving, I asked if I could pray for her. I had hardly finished when she in turn poured out her heart in thanks to Him. On and on she prayed, while a tear ran down her cheek. It was clear that this little bit of love and concern had gone a long, long way.

LILIA POTTERS IS A WRITER AND EDITOR IN THE U.S.A. ■



Finding Christmas

BY MARA HODLER

JUST ABOUT EVERYONE IS EXCITED TO RECEIVE A GIFT.

There is something wonderful about knowing that someone cared enough to think about what you would like, shopped for it or created it themselves, and gave it to you.

There is also a special joy in *giving* gifts. When you find a gift that you know the recipient will love, it's fun to present it to them. The recipient's delight becomes a gift to *you* and inspires you to keep giving. But stop and think for a moment of all the gifts you've received in your life so far, and which ones have stood out.

You might have been beside yourself with excitement when you received the video game you were begging for, but does it still bring you that same joy after a couple of weeks? The gorgeous top you just

“had to have,” how often do you wear it now?

There are a lot of Christmas traditions, and they vary by families, but it seems the one tradition most families share is gift exchange. Stores know this, so they prepare months before Christmas by flooding the shopping floors with potential gifts and pictures of happy people receiving the store's wares as gifts. They aggressively offer deals, sale days, shopping rewards, incentives, and layaway plans in an attempt to earn your holiday budget. Everyone from the car dealership to the discount store offers ideas of what you can get your loved ones for Christmas.

I grew up in a missionary family, where Christmas didn't equal an abundance of fanfare and gifts, either for me personally or for the average people I was around. The first Christmas that I had the opportunity

to “go all out” and do tons of shopping for my loved ones and family, I was so excited! I spent days shopping at the mall, hours researching “best” purchases online, and more hours perfectly wrapping gifts and tying the packages with beautiful bows.

As Christmas drew near, I heard myself a few times saying, *I can't wait 'til this is all over*. I had never felt anxious for Christmas to be over before! Sure, we were tired by the end of it, but I had never felt any dread associated with the season.

Now here I was participating in a “traditional Christmas,” and instead of it being a joy-filled time, it was becoming stressful. I realized I was surrounded and consumed by Christmas but had the feeling that I was missing Christmas altogether. I powered through anyway, right up to the most hectic Christmas Eve celebration I had ever experienced. Piles of

1. www.just1thing.com



gifts were exchanged and trash bag upon trash bag of wrapping paper and packaging was gathered. I sat there in the aftermath of “Christmas” feeling so terribly underwhelmed. I felt like I had missed the grand finale of a great movie and just skipped to the part where the credits roll. Where had Christmas gone?

All those thoughtfully purchased gifts? As the weeks and months rolled by, I happened upon various gifts I had given, stashed in the back of a drawer or sitting on a shelf gathering dust. I also found some of the gifts I had received were useless. We had collectively spent a lot of money on gifts, and a few weeks later, it seemed like no one was any better off for it.

Before I sound like the Grinch, I want to make it clear that I am not against the giving of gifts. I just hate to see Christmas eclipsed by a frenzy of shopping and stressing. On that

disappointing Christmas, I learned that the real spirit of Christmas, the joy that makes Christmas special, is something you have to seek out. It doesn't just come because it's December and you're buying gifts, decorating a tree, and listening to Christmas music.

Here are some of the ways I plan to spread the spirit of Christmas:

- Sending Christmas cards to loved ones near and far
- Sharing inspiring Christmas stories with my kids and friends
- Posting thought-provoking, joyful, and meaningful Christmas messages on my Facebook page
- Sending donations to mission works that are making Christmas special for kids and families in need
- Practicing random acts of kindness in my community
- Making Christmas treats for teachers and friends

- Avoiding the mall
- Keeping Christmas simple: less fussing and more meaning
- Spending as much time as possible with family and friends
- And the gift I am giving Jesus? Gratitude!

December is here. Join me in taking time before the Christmas frenzy is in high gear to think of how we will make this beautiful season meaningful, and how we will “find Christmas” this year.

MARA HODLER IS A FORMER MISSIONARY TO THE FAR EAST AND EAST AFRICA. SHE CURRENTLY LIVES IN TEXAS WITH HER HUSBAND AND CHILDREN, AND RUNS A SMALL FAMILY BUSINESS. THIS ARTICLE WAS ADAPTED FROM A PODCAST ON JUST1THING,¹ A CHRISTIAN CHARACTER-BUILDING WEBSITE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE. ■

BY KOOS STENGER

FATHER TO THE FATHERLESS

Do you want God to be your Father too? All you have to do is ask Him in:

Please come into my life and fill me with Your love and light. Help me to learn more about You and Your Son, Jesus. Amen.

“**GOD IS YOUR FATHER,**” the young man said. “He came down at Christmas in human form. Through Jesus, you can know what God is like.” He looked at me with hopeful eyes, but I wasn’t convinced. “A father cares,” he continued. “A father watches over you and is always there.”

I stared and shook my head. He was wrong. My father never cared, never watched over me and was never there. He left when I was three and it stained and wounded my heart. Mother did a great job, but Father...? No, I had no idea what it was like to have a father.

“That God is my father means nothing to me!” I answered. “I never had one.”

Now the young man stared at me. I could see him think I was a hopeless case. And in fact, I *was* pretty hopeless. As soon as I was able, I

had left my home country of the Netherlands in search of truth and happiness and was now in France. But so far, I had only found more loneliness. I was bedraggled, hungry, cold, and above all, fatherless.

It was no wonder that the young man didn’t know what to do with me. He mumbled “Happy Christmas” and left in a hurry.

Not that I had any problems with Jesus. All I had ever heard about Him were good things. He was kind, He healed the sick, He forgave people. I wouldn’t mind knowing His Father. But how?

I heard church bells and realized it was Christmas Eve. Should I go to that little country church so I could flee my present darkness, if only for a moment? I did.

The soft lights and the singing lifted my spirit. And although I didn’t understand the service, since it was in

French, my thoughts drifted to God.

Was He there? Did He understand?

God, they say You are a Father. I don’t know what that’s like.

I closed my eyes and stared into my own nothingness.

And then there was light. It shone into my darkness and touched me—warm and invigorating, serene and calm and undeniably real.

Then a voice spoke to my heart. Not audible, but clear and distinct, firm and loving. *I am the Father of the fatherless.*

I was speechless. There, surrounded by people I had never met and whose language I barely spoke, I learned that my true Father is really always there and that He loves me like no other father can.

KOOS STENGER IS A FREELANCE WRITER IN THE NETHERLANDS. ■

BY JESSIE RICHARDS

A MULTIFACETED SAVIOR



I'VE BEEN THINKING how Christmas traditions vary not only from country to country, but from family to family.

THE FOOD

In some countries, the classic main dish is a ham or roast pork; in others, a turkey, goose, duck, chicken, codfish, tamales, pierogis, or an assortment of cheeses. An asado (barbecue) of a whole lamb, calf, or pig is common in countries in the southern hemisphere where Christmas falls during the warm months of the year.

The side dishes, desserts, and beverages are even more varied,

and within each family, specific and multi-layered. Many families combine several traditions.

THE PRESENTS

Some children get their presents on December 24th, others on the 25th, still others on January 6th. Some families spread them out across a couple of days, or even twelve days. When I visited my mother's very large extended Polish family for the first time, I learned about their particular Christmas tradition of having one of the uncles dress up as Santa and give presents to all the children after dinner on Christmas Eve.

Almost everyone loves Christmas, but *how* exactly they love it, what it means to them, and how they interact with the holiday and with one another during the season, varies from person to person. I think that's a bit like Jesus Himself and what He means to each of us. He makes Himself known to us, speaks to us, and works in our lives according to who we are and what we need. And

yet, the core of who He is always remains—God's Son, our Savior.

In the Bible, Jesus is referred to as many things—"the Good Shepherd,"¹ "the bread of life,"² "the light of the world,"³ "the way, the truth, and the life,"⁴ and "the resurrection and the life,"⁵ among others.

He is also a healer,⁶ a defender of the vulnerable,⁷ and my favorite—a friend.⁸ One can imagine Jesus saying today "I am your confidant," "I am your therapist," or even "I am your BFF." God's original introduction to Moses was simply "I Am who I Am."⁹ He *is*, and He is in each of our lives, and He comes to us in the way that we need Him—at Christmastime, and all year long.

JESSIE RICHARDS HAD A ROLE IN THE PRODUCTION OF *ACTIVATED* FROM 2001 TO 2012, AND HAS WRITTEN A NUMBER OF ARTICLES AS AN *ACTIVATED* STAFF WRITER. SHE HAS ALSO WRITTEN AND EDITED MATERIAL FOR OTHER CHRISTIAN PUBLICATIONS AND WEBSITES. ■

1. John 10:11,14

2. John 6:35

3. John 8:12

4. John 14:6

5. John 11:25


6. E.g., John 9

7. See John 8:1–11.

8. See John 15:13–15.

9. Exodus 3:14



A red heart is nestled inside a white, textured knitted mitten. The entire scene is set against a background of soft, white snow. The heart is the central focus, with its vibrant red color contrasting sharply with the white surroundings.

FROM JESUS WITH LOVE

A SEASON *for* LOVE

Christmas is “the season of joy” and “a time of cheer.” But as Christmas comes around, do you find yourself experiencing things far from joy and cheer?

If you look at each Christmas as needing to be bigger and better than the last, you’re probably anxiously filling up every moment with preparations toward that goal. But sometimes less is more.

The less you worry about creating the “perfect” Christmas, the more time you’ll find to enjoy it. The less stressed and pressured you are, the more happiness and joy will fill the time you and your loved ones spend together.

Christmas is best enjoyed when it isn’t centered on decorations, gifts, or festivities, but when love is at its core. Christmas is about taking quality time with your family and friends; it’s about cherishing and celebrating the love you share and the greatest gift ever given to humanity. It was My love for you that brought Me to earth and gave Me the impetus to walk your world and be one of you, to live and die for you. Focus on My love this Christmas and enjoy a truly fulfilling occasion!