

The Growth Journal

Special Christmas Edition

DECEMBER 2020 VOLUME 5, ISSUE 2

Christ - The Beginning of the End – Lonnie Johnson

No Christian can deny that Christ's birth is extremely significant to us for a number of reasons. I would like to explore one particular reason below.

Everyone knows the famous last words of Jesus dying on the cross, "It is finished". These words symbolized His fulfillment of hundreds of years of prophecy. The actual Jewish word for this phrase is "*Tetelestal*". This Greek word was the equivalent of an Old Testament Hebrew utterance meaning the same. On the annual Day of Atonement a priest would go into the temple, make a special sacrifice for the sins of the people, then emerge and say, "It is finished". Wow! What a fabulous way for Jesus to communicate that He was the last sacrifice. Every Jewish person there

would have instantly understood the significance of that phrase. Jesus' work was done. Christmas is our celebration of Christ's birth. For me it commemorates the beginning of the end, God's earthly plan for the salvation of man. Everything that the bible teaches and talks about leads up to this moment. I am so glad Jesus took on this burden. I am so grateful that He stepped down from His throne to carry out this mission on earth so that I could have direct access to the Father. Because He began a great work here on earth, my life of condemnation, by the law, ended.

Christmas Gift Suggestions:

To your enemy give **forgiveness**, to those who are difficult give **tolerance**, to a friend give **your heart**, to your neighbor give **your service**, to a child give a **good example of how to be**, to yourself give **respect**, to all give **love**.

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Joseph – The Father of Jesus *By Pastor Mike Hernandez*

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year! I pray that this holiday season will be one filled with joy for you. I want to thank you for taking the time to read this newsletter and for reading my articles. I consider it an honor to share some thoughts with you every month.

In December we will discuss someone who is often overlooked in one the greatest stories ever told. His name is Joseph and he was the husband of Mary and the earthly father of Jesus. We will retell the story of Christmas from Joseph's view.

Joseph was a carpenter and lived in a little town called Nazareth. He lived in a time when Israel was under Roman rule and the nation of Israel hadn't heard the word of the Lord for over 400 years. However, being a good Jewish man, Joseph would have known about the coming Messiah. The nation was waiting for "the Anointed One" to come and deliver the nation from bondage.

Joseph was betrothed to a young woman named Mary. In those days, the betrothal process included several steps. First, the marriage had to be arranged, which was typically handled by the parents. Then a bride price was determined and the groom would pay the price. At this point, the couple was "betrothed", but they did not live together or have sexual relations. Typically the bride would continue living with her parents, sometimes for up to a year until the actual wedding date. During this time, the couple was considered "married" but they didn't consummate the marriage until their wedding night.

Most scholars believe that Mary was a teenager, but Joseph was anywhere between 18-30 years old. He was a carpenter so his business would have been comprised of serving the local community of Nazareth. Since most people stayed within their family's business, it's a good assumption that Joseph's father was also a carpenter and the expectation was that Joseph's children would continue in the trade.

"Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly." Matthew 1:18-19.

While in the betrothal stage and before marriage, Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth and was gone for three months (Luke 1:39 & Luke 1:56). When she returned, she communicated that she was pregnant and the baby was from the Holy Spirit. Can you imagine being betrothed to somebody and then find out they are pregnant and you know that you are not the father? And now the woman whom you are married to tells you that she has been faithful to you and not had sexual relations with anybody; rather she tells you that she was visited by an angel. This would be very hard to believe. Remember, God hasn't spoken through prophets for over 400 years. This claim from Mary that she is carrying the coming Messiah would be difficult to believe and maybe even insulting to Joseph (what kind of fool does she think I am?).

Here are the facts Joseph had to consider – Mary was pregnant. Mary was visiting her cousin Elizabeth for three months and returned pregnant. An obvious conclusion is right in front of him. And this idea that an angel visited Mary sounds like a very convenient excuse for the obvious. At this point in history, according to Jewish law, a person who committed adultery was to be put to death (Leviticus 20:10). However, Joseph didn't what Mary to face consequences for her pregnancy so he was going to divorce her quietly.

Joseph – The Father of Jesus Cont.

But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). – Matthew 1:20-23

Joseph had a dream and in this dream God communicated three things – do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, the baby that is conceived is from the Holy Spirit, and He will save His people from their sins.

The first thing the angel communicated to Joseph was “Do not fear to take Mary as your wife.” Why would Joseph be afraid to take Mary as his wife? Well, she was pregnant and the whole village knew so if Joseph took her as his wife, he was admitting to all that the baby was his. His reputation and his carpentry business would take a big hit if he married Mary. Most likely, the couple would have been ostracized from the village and from their families.

The angel also communicated that the baby is conceived from the Holy Spirit. This would be very hard to believe because this has never happened before (nor ever again). This is why the angel reminded Joseph of the prophetic scripture found in Isaiah 7:14. Joseph would have been aware of this prophecy so if he had the faith to believe, this could be true. The fact that an angel appeared to him in a dream helps, but I wonder if over the next six months he ever wondered if the dream was real or if it was the burrito he had for dinner that night.

Finally, the angel communicated that the baby boy is to be called Jesus and “will save His people from their sins”. I can imagine what Joseph thought about that...“I don’t even know how to be a husband, never-the-less a father and now I have to raise a child that will save us from our sins? This is too much!”

How much faith did Joseph have to have in this moment? His betrothed assured him that she had a visit from an angel and that she is pure, yet he could see the child growing in her belly. He had a dream and the angel assured him the baby was from God. He is betrothed but now he has to take Mary as his wife and raise the Messiah, despite the fallout with family and friends. This is a tough moment!

I believe we all face moments like this. What do we do when God tells us to do something that doesn’t make sense? I remember when God told me to quit my full-time corporate job at a bank to pursue full-time ministry. It didn’t make sense. I had four children between the ages of 7 through 14. The church I attended had recently let people go because of the economy and decline in church attendance. This wasn’t a good time to quit my job, yet the Lord was very clear.

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. – Matthew 1:24-25

Joseph obeyed immediately! What faith! What obedience! He knew the consequences coming his way. He knew that they would be ostracized by family and the village. He knew that his carpentry business would suffer. He knew everyone would think he was the father. But obedience to God was more important to Joseph than these consequences. He obeyed and stepped out in faith. Two other times, Joseph showed immediate obedience (Matthew 2:13-14 & Matthew 2:19-21).

Joseph – The Father of Jesus Cont.

Maybe you have heard the expression “trust & obey”. But I believe there are times when it is really the exact opposite – “obey & trust”. Joseph obeyed God and was going to trust Him with the fallout. I love Joseph’s immediate obedience! When he woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. He didn’t take time to think it over (and ultimately talk himself out of obedience). He obeyed immediately!

And then the Bible said “he knew her not until she had given birth to a son”. What this means is that he married her but did not have sex with her until after Jesus was born. This shows Joseph understood his role in this story. He knew the Prophetic Scripture had to be fulfilled - Mary had to be a virgin when the baby was born.

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. – Isaiah 7:14

As you know, the story doesn’t end when Joseph & Mary got married. A decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered (Luke 2:1).

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. – Luke 2:4-5

Only the male was required to go to register. So why did Joseph take his 9 month pregnant wife on a 90 mile trip on a donkey? Wouldn’t it have been better to leave her with her family to have the baby? I would think so...if that was an option. I think the fact that Joseph took Mary with him communicates that they were ostracized from family and friends (and the fact that they stayed in Bethlehem for up to 2 years after the birth instead of going back to Nazareth also communicates this).

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. – Luke 2:6-7

For Joseph, taking care of his family was a priority. Can you imagine the anguish he felt when he couldn’t find a room for his wife? Can you imagine the shame he felt when the best place for the child to be born was a stable? This baby is the Son of God! Every father has doubts about their ability to raise a child. However, none of us have ever felt the pressure of raising the Son of God! How did Joseph feel when he held Jesus in His arms that night? “Can I do this? Can I be a father to the Son of God? Can I protect and provide for my family?” I’m guessing the stress was overwhelming.

When I quit my job, I remember that overwhelming stress. I remember times of weeping before the Lord because the pressure was more than I could handle. I would hold my bills up before the Lord and tell Him He needed to pay for them because I was doing my part in walking in obedience and now He needed to do His part and provide for my needs (Matthew 6:25-34). I went 16 months between full-time employment and we never were late on one payment! God supernaturally provided! When I obeyed and trusted, God was faithful to do His part. I imagine this was the same faith that Joseph experienced. He obeyed and trusted and God was faithful to do His part.

Joseph was a man of faith! He was humble and was committed to obeying God. He is one of the unsung heroes of the Bible. His obedience paved the way for the coming of the Messiah! As we celebrate Christmas this year, let’s remember Joseph’s role in this amazing season.

Mary – The Mother of Jesus *By Janel Hernandez*

My oldest child was born 24 years ago, right before Christmas. I had never truly thought about what Mary, the mother of Jesus, had to go through until this time in my life. I was in a hospital, on a nice soft bed, being taken care of by nurses when I imagined what it must have been like for Mary giving birth in a stable with only her husband to help her. I remember the pain I endured giving birth and can't imagine what it would have been like to go through that by myself in a barn. Mary has become one of my heroes as I have studied her throughout the years, so I am excited to share the things God has taught me about her. The story of Mary is found in Luke 1:26-2:52. We are going to talk about Mary's life, her faith and her character.

Mary was an incredible woman of God. It is said that she was a young teenager (12-14 years old) at the time she was betrothed to Joseph. A betrothal was the period between the engagement and the wedding and usually lasted around a year. During this time, an angel visited Mary. "In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you"" (Luke 1:26-28). I don't know about you, but I would be pretty scared if an angel showed up and spoke to me. The next verse says, "But she (Mary) was greatly troubled at the saying and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be" (Luke 1:29). In verse 30, the angel says, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." This was twice that the angel said that Mary was favored by God. God knew Mary. He was pleased with her faith, humility, obedience and servanthood.

"And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you"" - (Luke 1:31, 34-35). If women were found to be pregnant before marriage in the culture that Mary lived in, they were most likely stoned to death. Mary had to have known this, but her desire was to serve God, no matter the cost. She believed that God would take care of her since He was the one who called her to carry, deliver and raise His Son.

Mary's faith was strong. Being in the Jewish culture of her day, she would have known all about the God of the Old Testament and about the coming Messiah. After the angel told Mary she would be with child, he said, "Nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:35). Mary's response to this was "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). She had simple faith, she simply believed that what God said He would do, He could do. Mary was quick to obey, something I wish I was better at. When God spoke to her, she was obedient to do what He said.

When I think of Mary, I think of humility. She was very humble. I have heard it said that being humble doesn't mean that you think more of yourself or less of yourself, it means that you don't think about yourself. We see this humility in Mary when she gives God the glory in her moment of glory. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1:46-48). We never hear Mary complain. I believe she was happy to be used by God and to serve Him.

There is no proof of this in the Bible, but I believe Mary was a prayer warrior. She knew God, she believed in God, and she loved God. She had to have talked to God consistently to be the woman of faith that she was. I love how it says in Luke 2:19 & 51 "But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart." Mary remembered all the things that God did during the time of Jesus' birth and when He was growing up. She kept those things in her heart as they were dear to her. We need to always remember what God has done for us in our lives as it builds and strengthens our faith.

Mary was a woman of integrity. She is an example of what we need to strive to become. We all need to be more like Mary, full of faith, humble, obedient, a servant and a prayer warrior. I would like to wish you all a very "Mary" Christmas!

Surrendered and Satisfied *By Chastity Stemmons*

This time last year I squeezed into a too little jumper that was already two sizes up from my “healthy weight” and truthfully, I needed a bigger size to fit my body properly. My marriage was basic and boring and my children had a little more mouth (sassy) than my liking. I realized in that moment, I needed to make some serious changes in my life. I had given focus to only one area of my life and the other areas were literally falling by the wayside.

I was not only unhealthy on the outside but I was unhealthy on the inside as well. I ate my emotions, pain, struggles, and anything that I didn’t want to deal with head on. Then one day in prayer, I asked the Holy Spirit to help me put my life back together again. I literally surrendered my will to HIS. I was tired of doing things my way. I was tired of running from what God called me to. I threw in my towel on my plan and picked up my sweat rag to do His!!!

Let me be clear, I was a Christian but just because you know Jesus doesn’t always mean you’re living for JESUS. I wasn’t always on the wrong track in my Christian journey but when I stopped making HIM the priority I became my own God. I slowly was spending less time with Him, reading my Word, and asking for His divine guidance and my life showed it.

Proverbs 29:18 *When people do not accept divine guidance, they run wild. But whoever obeys the law is joyful.*

Refuse to be a Wild One (Surrender)

When you don’t do it God’s way you’ve simply made yourself an idol and the king of your own life. My question to you is, “where are you, still running your own life?” Are you seeking the Lord for divine guidance? If you’re not, I can bet your bottom dollar, you’re living an unfulfilled and unsatisfied life like I was. Here’s a hard truth, if you’re trying to live your life, your way, you’re denying God’s plan for your life and you’re running wild; you are one of the wild ones without restraint!

Proverbs 14:12 *There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.*

Write the Vision Down

When was the last time you asked God about the plan and vision for your life? The vision God has for you can’t come to pass without knowing what God wants for you. Let me be clear, you have to start by talking to God and through those conversations He will impress on you His vision. Now that you’re ready to live out His vision and purpose, grab your pen and paper and start writing down what He shows you through His Word and what He puts in your heart.

Habakkuk 2:2 *And then God answered: "Write this. Write what you see".*

Write it out in big block letters so that it can be read on the run. This vision-message is a witness pointing to what's coming. It aches for the coming-it can hardly wait! And it doesn't lie. If it seems slow in coming, wait. It's on its way. It will come right on time.

Surrendered and Satisfied *Cont.*

Take Action

When God gives you a vision, He also wants to give you an action plan to be successful. His plan will not be an overnight process and it will require daily obedience on your part. He isn't looking for perfection but He will require your faith to align with an action. His grace will accompany you and His Holy Spirit will guide and lead you along the way! There will be days you will want to resort to doing it your way but just take a second to remember how your way came with frustration, failure, and fruitlessness.

James 2:17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Satisfied

It's was a year ago around this time that my weight was out of control, my marriage was boring, and my children needed more structure. I did what I'm asking you to do, consider living your life according to God's plan. I can proudly say, "I've stuck with the plan He laid out for me even denying myself the right to have an opinion about His plan" (not always easy). I took one day at a time asking the Holy Spirit to help, lead, and guide me. I laughed, cried, and considered giving up on the hard days. However, I've seen major changes in all the areas of my life.

I want you to know you can change your life too with God's help! I did it and I'm not anything special... I'm just a woman who surrendered to God. In that process, I lost 23 pounds, my marriage is anything but boring now, and my children have less sassy mouths. I can honestly say, "I'm not who I use to be and I'm living a more surrendered and satisfied life."

I want to encourage someone today that no matter where you are in life, you can start again... doing it His way! You can take the first step to living "for" Jesus by stating a simple "YES" to His will and way! I need you to know His plan is FAR GREATER than yours. I promise.

Blessings,
Chastity

GOD KNOWS

This is the season for holiday cheer,
To have loved ones and friends so near.
But, think of those who don't have that fate,
They experience loneliness and sometimes hate.
They wonder how it feels to be surrounded by those we love,
They wonder if God hears their prayers in the heavenly skies above.
They see the lovely Christmas Trees and pageant string of lights,
They wonder if they are thought about since they are out of sight.
God sees them in their loneliness and acts without delay,
He sends his Holy Spirit to brighten up their day.
He wraps His arms around all of us who suffer in this season,
To implore us to trust in Him without fully knowing the reason.
So, if you look around this season and your heart is feeling low,
Pick up your Bible and read His work, and your spirit will start to glow.

Sherelle Simmons

Forgive Me

Father forgive me for I know I have sinned.
Without you Father I know I can't win.

Battered soulless and confused,
Broken from all the rights I have used.

A lost soul wandering from place to place,
That's until I found God's Grace.

Devil, I rebuke you. You are no more.
I refuse to open an already closed door.

I carry the Word that cuts like a sword.
My father walks beside me and His love endures.

I take refuge in God's grace.
Father keep me steady at your pace.

Take away the worry, forgive me of my sins.
I am all yours, the devil won't win.

Robert H., Lansing

You...Are a Gift

Even though some days you feel low and can't accept that role. You... are a gift.

Lift your head up and don't allow no one, no situation, no poor decisions you made, to define you in a negative way.
I say...You are a gift.

God made you...Intentionally and He gives second, third, fourth, and more chances specifically for You...are a gift

He gave you today to raise your head up high...Renew your mind...Make the most of whatever time you have left.
YOU ARE A GIFT!

Open yourself up and unwrap your past. Put a bow on it and ask God to help you surpass the rejections, the imperfections, the hurt, the pain, YOU ARE A GIFT!!

God gave you the gift of today...Receive His gift of forgiveness...Forgive yourself, forgive others...My sisters and my brothers I say...

YOU ARE A GIFT!!! Believe it! Receive It!

Anthony Butler

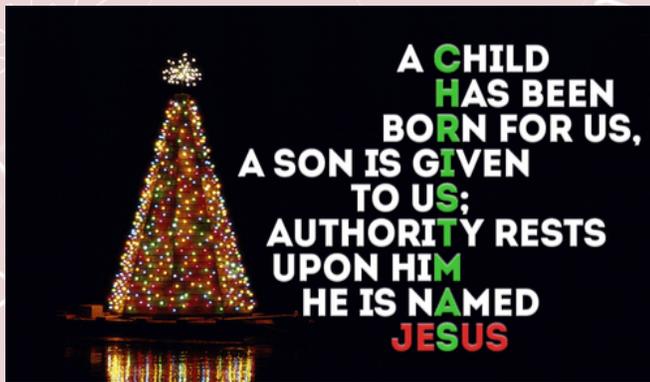
Words to Grow By

Christmas Blessings

As you embark upon this Christmas Season, we want you to know
There's **no storm** that God won't carry you through.
No bridge that God won't help you cross.
No battle that God won't help you win.
No heartache that God won't help you let go of.
He is **SO** much bigger than anything you will face during this season.
Leave **EVERYTHING** in **His Hands** and embrace this time confidently knowing
That **He WILL** take care of You and Yours.

The Blessings of Peace,
The Beauty of Hope,
The Spirit of Love,
The Comfort of Faith.

May these be your gifts this Christmas Season.



John 3:16

Women Empowering Women

Three Wise Women

Would have asked directions,
Arrived on time,
Helped deliver the baby,
Brought practical gifts,
Cleaned the stable,
Made a casserole,
And there would be Peace on Earth.

**May the Joy and Peace of Christmas be
with you all through the Year.**

**Wishing you a season of Blessings from
heaven above.**

2 Corinthians 9:15

What Am I Doing Here, Lord? *By Ana Jensen*

As humans many of us often find ourselves asking the question, “What am I doing here?” And this may not have been only once, but many times in our lives. No one is exempt from the experience, even Christians. We go through times and seasons over the years that lead to asking that question. From elementary school, playground competitions where you find yourself the last chosen for a team, to adult life, when you have a job that you do not like and feel unappreciated.

Some may ask God, “How did this happen?” or “Am I a victim of circumstances that led me to this place?” We may say, “My life doesn’t matter.” We become frustrated with no answers on how to change the situation for the better. We wonder if God hears our prayers. And many become hopeless with few friends for comfort.

Without hope or comfort, we may believe we will not live meaningful lives. We may turn to fruitless activities, meaningless work, or destructive habits. At times we isolate ourselves from others, just when our true need is for the companionship of a trusted friend or an advisor for us to get perspective on our lives.

We may feel powerless to find answers within us. They are found in other sources that help us see how others see us. Specifically, how God sees us and in ways that are beyond our own limited resources of knowledge or reasoning. There are foundational scriptures that help us anchor to something, or someone outside ourselves with true perspective on life, the universe and how we fit within His creation and history.

The foundations are so simple, we may dismiss them as meaningless. But they are most meaningful since they are from the one who created us and placed us in this world at this time and for His purposes to show how He has a plan for our lives. See Jeremiah 29:11 – *I know the plans I have for you to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.* We can know we do have meaning and a specific purpose for living. There are three concepts we can always hold on to and remind ourselves regularly that God knows us and is only waiting to know that we will respond to His eternal love.

First, God has a love for his creation that it is His will that we all come to know Him and develop a trusted relationship with Him through His Word, prayer and our devotion and trust in His eternal love for us. He genuinely wants the best for us and to have meaningful lives of love and joy. Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 2:40 that it is God’s will that all come to a knowledge of His love and opportunity for salvation through Christ. The God who created the world and the universe knows each of us uniquely and has a purpose for our lives.

*For I know the plans
I have for you
declares the Lord*

Jeremiah 29:11

What Am I Doing Here, Lord? *Cont.*

Second, once we have made His son, Jesus, our Lord, and Savior, we can put our past lives, mistakes and hurts behind us. For some, it may take time and a trusted counselor to help us work through how to forgive others and ourselves. Some painful mistakes and memories may take years to heal. But with God's help and the love we find through Jesus we can come to a place of healing and reconciliation. It is His will for us.

Finally, when we begin to doubt ourselves or our circumstances, we can turn to scripture to assure our hearts. One of John's letters was written for that purpose and the scripture that can anchor our souls to His truth. 1 John 3: 19-20, this is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in His presence: 20, if our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Even God knows that we may find ourselves in need of comfort. A friend of mine recently told me of a frightening dream she had when she was going through a time of self-condemnation and doubted God's love for her. The dream focused on a deceased relative several years after the funeral and an attempt to open the casket by the funeral director. She woke sitting up in bed and gasped out loud to the Lord, "What was that about?" Clearly, she heard in her spirit, "Quit digging up dead stuff!"

Eventually we grow to learn that once we have put past hurts, memories and doubts behind us we can avoid the temptation to dig them up to justify that we are not worthy of God's love and forgiveness (condemning our hearts).

These principles can sustain us and remind of God's love and a hope for a good future. Keep these thoughts in mind. Remember your past and what you learned from it but set the pain aside in forgiveness. Embrace your present as a time of learning. Ask God what He can be for you now that He has not been before. And finally look to your future with hope. God has a purpose for each of us and the more we learn to trust His love with our futures, the more he can hope in our present.



The Good Shepherd by Nicholas M, Lansing

4 What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?
5 And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing.
6 And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost.
7 I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.

Luke 15:4-7

As I was reflecting on recent events in my life, I acknowledge that I have been feeling as if I have lost my way. I know it is not cool to say that, especially when you are seen as someone blessed with wisdom. One of the reasons is, I have sometimes continued down a path which leads me further away from the straight path. Because, in this wilderness that is prison, I find myself separated from the right guidance. Perhaps you may be able to take a long, hard look at your existence and determine that you are right on track to meet whatever righteous goals you've set for yourself. I cannot. I know I have fallen short, and wish that it was simply a matter of getting up and dusting myself off.

Sometimes, in our zealouslyness to protect our communities, we isolate from those whom can benefit from the knowledge, wisdom, and understanding which God has blessed us with. This seclusion is often justified by our desire to see our organizations or churches not succumb to stagnation. In this, I humbly believe that we are woefully mistaken. If we look to the example of Jesus and what it means to be a good shepherd, it was stated "This man (JESUS) receiveth sinners and eateth with them." Instead of separating himself from them, He socialized with them in an effort to minister to them. Should we not use HIM as our ultimate example of how we should live?

We, sometimes, become frustrated that others don't seem to be overcoming their demons as quickly as we would like. We forget that sheep are notoriously difficult to be led in the right directions, but easy to be misled. We forget that those who have fallen short of the Glory of God, are just as valuable in His EYES as the Mighty Right Reverends. Salvation is a ladder that stretches from the heart of man to the heart of GOD. Let us look to embrace those who are struggling, no matter how long the process may take. Let us not forget that the race goes not to the swift but to those who persevere to the end. Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future. Let us not forget how great the Joy in Heaven will be for those who are lost now, when they find within themselves the true purpose of life. I know that I rejoice that God has blessed me with Mother Linda, Brother Lonnie, and my entire GMI family for their unwavering faith and support of me despite my failings. I can finally see the Promised Land from this wilderness that I have been lost in. And if it be God's will, I will be found.

SINCERELY,

KHALIL

"Salvation is a ladder that stretches from the heart of man to the heart of GOD." ~Khalil



Enjoy our holiday word search created by our Executive Director. Good luck!

GMI Christmas Word Search

M L M I T T E N S F Y T M Y R R H E N J
 N J I P W Q B G R E E T I N G S M E T F
 L D O N K E Y Z K J F L J O J C L O O O
 M S C H I M N E Y M O I Y O A H H B B O
 A T K D S W I C P A N W R M S E B I J M
 R A U S T A B L E G S R E E D E S R G E
 Y R X A D J R F Z I Y C A L P R P T I R
 G G I N G E R B R E A D H E V L K H F R
 A T H G S B C S D A M D E R X E A K T Y
 S R Y E B V P E H C N I N M I R S C S Q
 F E Z L R X N K M U E K S G M S L Y E X
 L E Y N H O T G Q B H L I T N A T I I J
 T S T O C K I N G S E F E N L Q N M S R
 J H A E W K I N G S L R S B C E F U A A
 O A R B E T H L E H E M M A R E T V E S
 Y O W E K C R D M L F P C R N A N O D L
 I J S I E E S H E P H E R D S T T S E G
 Y P W I N T E R S X F V B B F J A E E O
 V W J E S U S U Q Q Q X N A T I V I T Y
 K V L R G N V V T E K E L B S L E I G H

- | | | | |
|--------------|-------------|-----------|-----------|
| Frankincense | Gingerbread | Celebrate | Christmas |
| Mistletoe | Stockings | Shepherds | Fireplace |
| Greetings | Bethlehem | Emmanuel | December |
| Chimney | Sleigh | Nativity | Stable |
| Donkey | Three | Winter | Myrrh |
| Gifts | Elves | Cheer | Joseph |
| Jesus | Santa | Kings | Angel |
| Mittens | Merry | Birth | Star |
| Magi | Mary | Tree | Joy |



I'M SORRY GUY, I KNOW THAT YOU'VE GOT A GOOD HEALTH PLAN AND YOU GIVE OUT FREE GIFTS AND ALL, BUT JESUS REALLY DOES HAVE A MUCH BETTER PLAN



AT LEAST WE CAN SAY THAT HE WAS BROUGHT UP IN A STABLE HOME



CAN YOU CHECK SANTA'S NICE LIST ... I'M PRETTY SURE I'M ON THAT ONE

Q: What kind of Christmas music do elves like?

A: "Wrap" music

Q. How do Christmas angels greet each other?

A. "Halo!"

Q. What did the peanut butter say to the grape on Christmas?

A. "'Tis the season to be jelly!"

Q: What do snowmen call their offspring?

A: Chill-dren

Q. Which of Santa's reindeer has the worst manners?

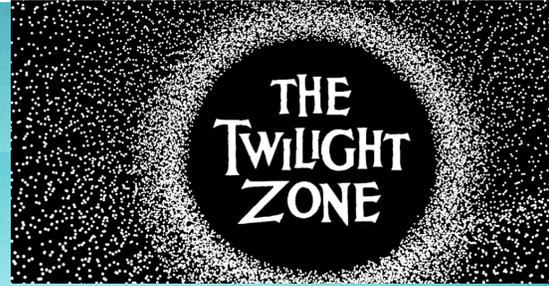
A. RUDE-olph, of course!

Q. What's Santa Claus's favorite type of potato chip?

A. Crisp Pringles!

Enter the Twilight Zone

Imagine, if you will, a world that did not know Christmas. What if, by some crazy chance, Mary decided to have an abortion because Joseph said he did not want to marry a woman and raise a kid that was not his? Or what if Herod would have been successful at finding and killing Jesus when he was a baby?



No Christmas trees, no gifts, no taking the day off from work. But what about some of the other things we would be missing? We would not have a High Priest sitting at the right hand of the Father advocating on our behalf all day, every day. We would not have someone asking God to forgive us every time we messed up.

We would still be bound to "The Law". A law that would require we be stoned to death for adultery, homosexuality, deciding to worship another god, or cursing out our parents. This law would make us miserable because we would actually sin more because we could never satisfy it. Most people would just say, "Why should I try?"

Also in this world without Christ we would not be able to have ...

- a personal relationship with God
- the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us to overcome our trials
- an abundant life here on earth
- peace that surpasses all understanding
- the ability to do all things through Christ
- all things working for our good
- freedom from any condemnation
- the ability to be more than conquerors
- the promise of "ask and you shall receive, knock and the door will open, seek and you will find"

These are just a few of the things you would be missing that we probably take for granted as Christians. Many people probably don't even know we have such power and privilege.

I don't know about you but I don't want to live in this Twilight Zone World. I love that Jesus was born and then gave His life so that I would have the life I have today. I am grateful for all the benefits I have as a Christian. I love that He loved us so much that He was willing to take on all our sins. Mine, yours, the people that lived before us and the people not even born yet. I am so grateful that because of the price paid on Calvary, I can have eternal life in a way I never could before Christ.

Christmas means a lot more than holly, Santa, big dinners, gifts and all the other "stuff" that we know it as. It means that you and I get to live a life on earth and in heaven that we probably would not have been able to earn otherwise.

Merry Christmas!!!



What must I do to be saved?

If you've never accepted Christ as your Lord and Savior, or if you've turned away from Him for a life of unrighteousness, then take a moment and say this prayer:

“Lord, I confess that I am a sinner and ask your forgiveness. I believe that your son Jesus died on the cross for my sins and was resurrected with all power. I invite Jesus to be the Lord of my life and your Holy Spirit to come into my heart to guide me for the rest of my days. Amen.”

Romans 10:9 says that *if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.*

If this is you, please write Growth Ministries and we will gladly help you start your new life in Christ.

Growth Ministries, Inc., Attn: Executive Secretary, P.O. Box 4375, Olathe, KS 66063

Please do not send any correspondence directly to our Executive Director as he is a volunteer at Lansing and cannot write you back due to policy for volunteers.



Write Us

We would love to hear from you. If you have a testimony, a prayer request, or a question about your walk with the Lord, send us a letter. We would love to pray or rejoice with you. Maybe you are a writer and you have a spiritual word of encouragement for the readers of our newsletter. We would love to review your article to see if we can use it in our newsletter. We also like to share poems from you more artistic sisters and brothers.

We also ask that you be mindful of what you send to us as there are some things that are prohibited for print:

- Inappropriate Verbiage/Profanity
- Sexually Explicit Verbiage/Images
- Political opinions
- Opinions regarding social/systemic injustices
- Demeaning or Offensive Views
- Legal Information/Advice
- Photographs

Thank you so much for adhering to these guidelines and we look forward to hearing from you.