

# PARTNERSHIP

# Advent Devotions



Equipping Lay Ministers,  
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# Dear Friends

As you read these articles, I am back home in California spending Christmas with my family.

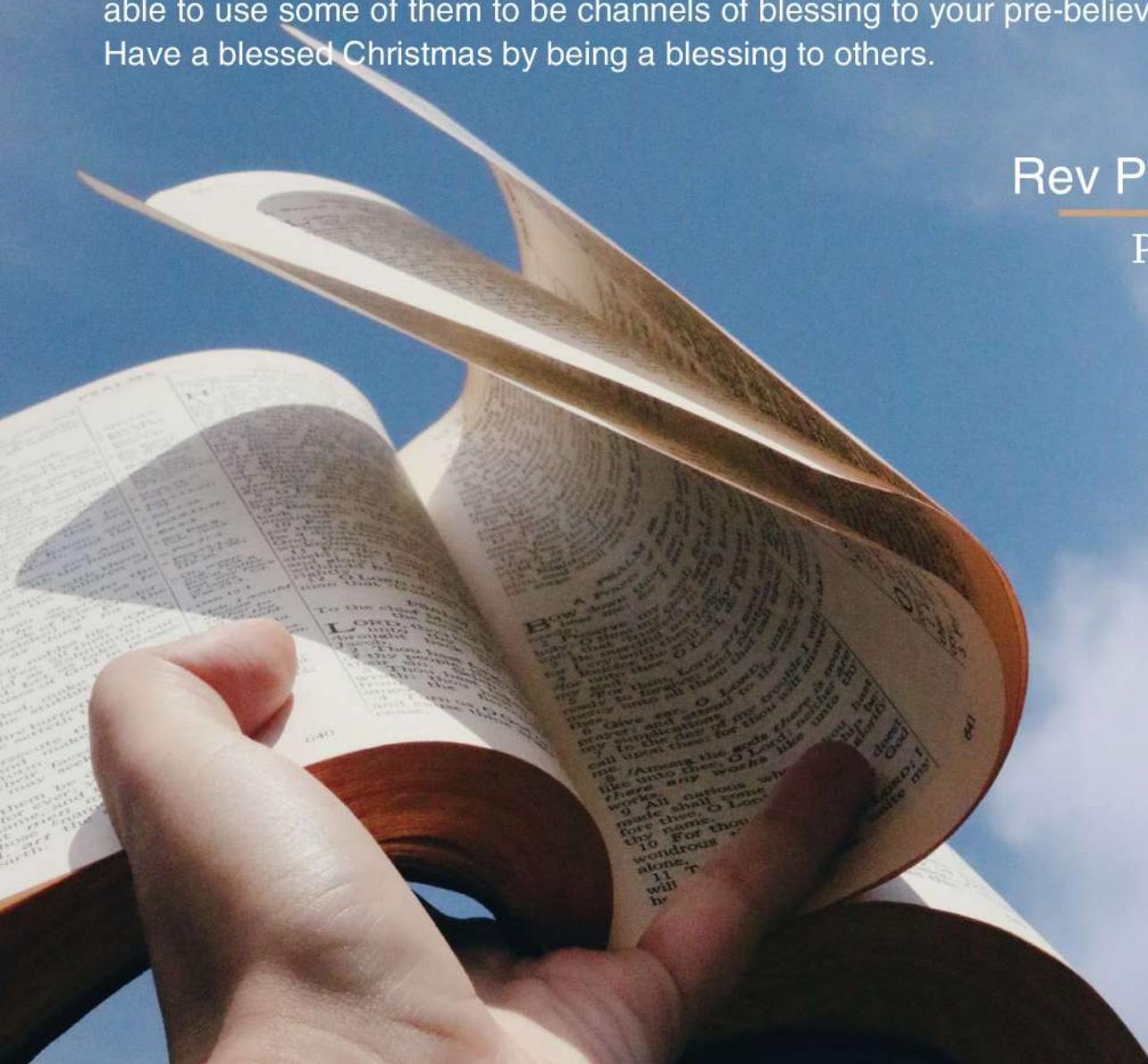
For many years, my Christmases were spent in Singapore where, even though we were among good friends, we felt a loneliness deep inside. As a pastor, Christmas is usually not a time to receive but a time to “give” – giving our time and sharing our resources. The result is that we are exhausted by the time Christmas is over.

This year, one of our articles addresses the loneliness some people feel at Christmas time. Another article debates the question of whether the spirit of Christmas is “giving” or “receiving”. Even as I am waiting to spend Christmas at home, another article reminds me that it is God who is waiting for me this Christmas.

May these articles be a Christmas blessing to you. More importantly, may you be able to use some of them to be channels of blessing to your pre-believing friends. Have a blessed Christmas by being a blessing to others.

Rev Peter Lin

President



# Diversity in the First Christmas

Oftentimes we hear people say, “Christmas is a time for giving,” and yet the first Christmas was not just a time for giving, but more specifically a time when God gave the gift of His Son to the world. God came to us in a form that we could see and touch: God in the flesh. If He had not come to us, we would have no forgiveness, no hope, and no salvation. Now that God has come to us, He invites us to come to Him.

The gospels record two primary groups coming to see Jesus after His birth in Bethlehem – shepherds and wise men, peasants and kings. The first group, the peasant shepherds, were a despised group of the Jewish lower class. As a result of constantly dealing with sheep, they were unable to keep the ceremonial cleansing requirements, which prevented them from engaging in any religious services in the Temple. While they were immersed in their daily sheep-keeping routine, angelic hosts suddenly interrupted them with a surprising invitation to visit this newborn king. From the religious perspective, these peripheral peasants would be the last on anyone’s guest list to visit a king.

The second group of invited guests were the wise men from the East – students of the stars and philosophers who were eagerly looking for this Expected One. The second century Roman historian, Suetonius, describes the sense of expectation that a king was coming, “An ancient and settled persuasion prevailed throughout the east that Fate had decreed someone to proceed from Judea who should attain universal Empire.” The star over Bethlehem signalled to these stargazers that the Light of the World had arrived, which prompted a royal entourage to make its way to the King of Kings.



Both peasants and kings received signs – an angelic host and a star – shining brightly in their dark domain, with a simple invitation to come to Jesus. These two groups represent the wide range of first century society – poor and rich, learned and unlearned, local and foreigner, active seeker and unsuspecting commoner. The gracious invitation of our giving God is the same today: come, see and worship the King of Kings, the Light of the World, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Whether peasants or kings, both groups accepted the royal invitation to come and worship the newborn King. The shepherds left their daily work demands to offer their devotion to the One who is called the Good Shepherd. The wise men knelt in adoration as they offered gifts fit for a King. Both groups arrived, adored, and affirmed the Christ child.

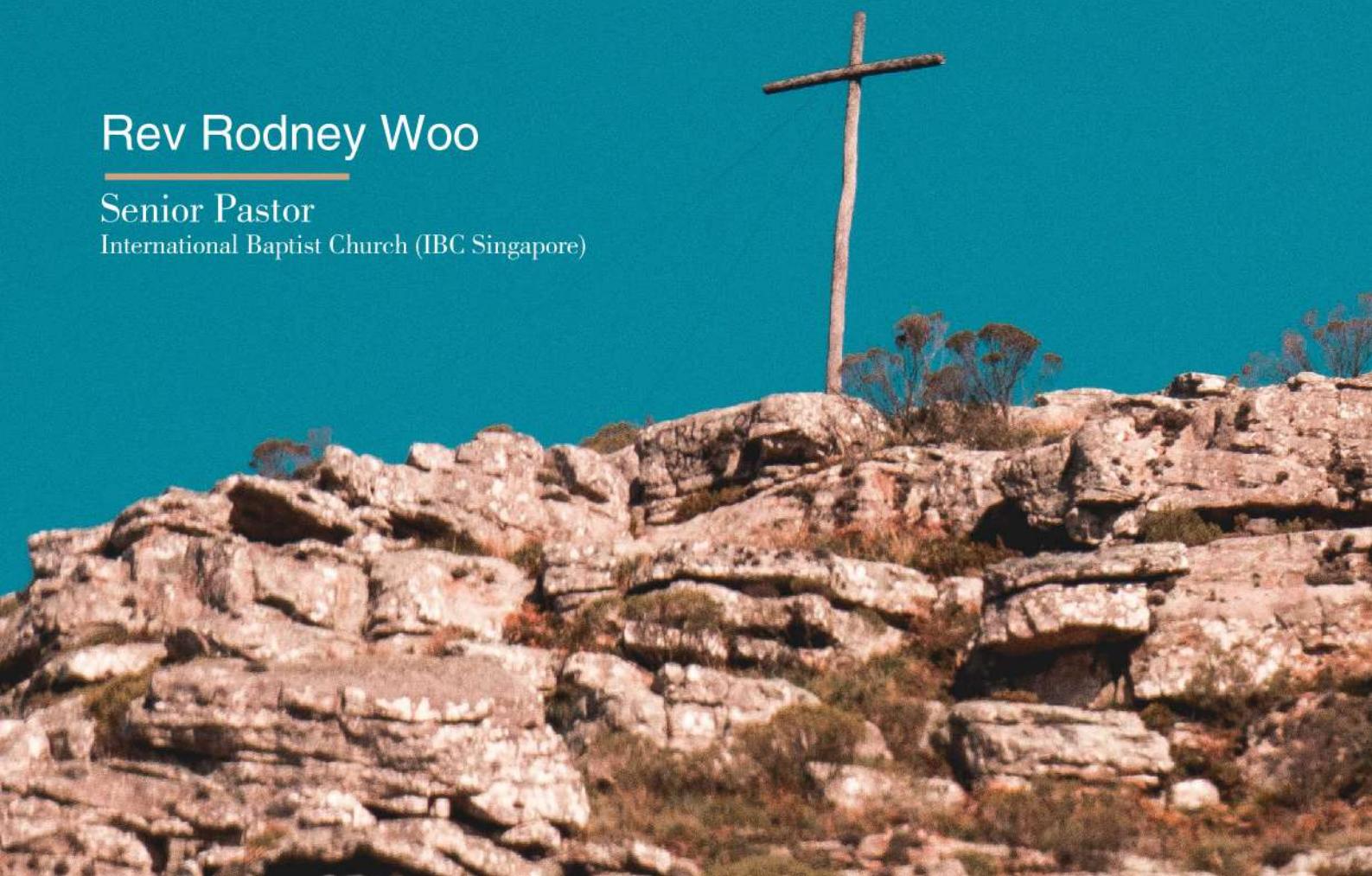
This Christmas, wherever you may be on the spectrum of society, the invitation is the same now as it was at the first Christmas. Peasants and kings, shepherds and wise men, rich and poor, learned and unlearned, local and foreigner, come and worship the gift of the Christ child, the hope of the world.

**Rev Rodney Woo**

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Senior Pastor

International Baptist Church (IBC Singapore)



For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich... Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

(2 Corinthians 8:9, 9:15 – NIV)

# The Indescribable Gift

On 19 September 2022, with indescribable grief, the people of the United Kingdom bid their final farewell to their queen, Queen Elizabeth II. During the funeral, many hymns were sung to glorify God. The focus was not on the Queen's achievements – rather it was to remind people that ultimately God is the One reigning and the crown of glory belongs to Him.



It is beyond description that our heavenly King was born in a humble manger, not at magnificent Buckingham Palace. He was rich and became poor, as mentioned by Paul... “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” (2 Corinthians 8:9) Jesus, who had immense riches, now became poor and lived among us. Like us, he accepted the sorrow and suffering that come from nature, political and personal emotions, and many unmanageable circumstances. Like a strong man who is sick and now requires caregiving, the Majestic King became a weak ordinary man. This is beyond description and comprehension.

When Neil Armstrong took the first step on the moon in 1969, he remarked, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind". President Nixon described this scientific miracle as “the greatest week in the history of the world since Creation!” Billy Graham corrected him that in truth, the greatest moment in history was not the moment of landing on the moon, it was when the omnipotent Christ came to this earth as a Nazarene.

As Paul said, “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” (2 Corinthians 9:15) The gift of grace is indescribable. It is beyond words and beyond comprehension. Nothing can be compared to it. Christ’s birth is an indescribable, incomprehensible Christmas gift. This is the true purpose of celebrating Christmas!

People mourn and grieve when their earthly kings and queens die, but how many celebrate the birth of our heavenly King? Do you? What do you feel? Are you willing to receive this indescribable gift? Let us reflect on this as we read the words of the hymn titled, “O Little Town of Bethlehem”:

“How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is giv’n!  
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heav’n.  
No ear may hear his coming,  
but in this world of sin,  
where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.”

Rev Samuel Ng

Executive Pastor  
Queenstown Baptist Church

# *Jesus Christ*

## God who Came in Truth

In these difficult times, many people have been searching for answers to two of life's foremost questions, namely: "Who is God?" and "What is truth?" The answers can be found in the first Christmas.

Christmas is for many Christians and even non-Christians their favourite time of year, with all the romantic lights, attractive decorations, and giving and receiving of gifts. However, Christmas is not about Santa Claus, snowmen, reindeers, parties and gift-exchanges – it is the revelation of who God really is. It is a time to remember how God penetrated space-time history, not in the form of a wizard, conqueror or king, but as a tiny baby, needing His earthly father Joseph to nurture Him and His earthly mother Mary to nourish Him. Born of a virgin, Jesus came as the original 2-in-1, both as perfect Man and perfect God incarnated as Truth itself, full of grace, love and humility. I have been asked why I believe in Jesus Christ who claims to be God when I have not seen Him. My answer is simply that I was born 2,000 years after a historical event: because 2,000 years ago, God came into this world through Jesus Christ to live among men! In Him, the fullness of the Godhead dwells – full of glory and truth (John 1:14)!

Christmas is about a loving God who came into a messy and lost world where people were under a death sentence because of the incurable disease of sin. The Bible asserts that all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). Sin is not just about committing theft, murder, rape, fraud and violence – rather it consists of a mindset that says no to God, and yes to self (when men and women determine our own beliefs, behaviours and destinies).

How do we know there is sin in the world? We know because an agreement is not enough, we need a contract; a payment is not enough, we need a receipt; doors are not enough, we need to lock them; and laws are not enough, we need policemen to enforce them. It was into a world like this that Jesus, the Light of the world, came to reveal the darkness of life. He also came to show us what true, unlimited, unconditional love is all about by sacrificially taking on our sins, suffering and dying on the wretched cross 33 years later, and effecting forgiveness for all who put our trust in Him and His finished work. Yes, Christmas is about a loving God coming to live and to die for all mankind.

**Thus, Christmas is about Truth coming into the world to show the truth of the human condition and the truth of God's glorious love.** Jesus said His words are truth and knowing the truth will set mankind free (John 8:31,32,36 & 17:17) from the clutches of sin so that those set free will in turn set others free! What is truth? Someone once said: "Truth is the blending of idealism and realism!" It is not just about what the ideal is, it is also about being real in the fake and plastic world we live in. Knowing the Almighty God and living with Him through life and eternity need not be just a dream or wishful thinking, it can be reality because the incarnate Creator God came to live on this earth among men so that men who put their faith in Him might live through eternity with Him.

**Christianity is not a religion, it is a relationship, because the Creator came to live with the created.** Just as Jesus was born 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem, today He can be born in our hearts. He is just a simple prayer away. All it takes is a prayer of faith by which we open our hearts' doors and invite Jesus to come in to live with us as our Lord and Saviour, forgiving our sins and writing our name in Heaven's Book of Life. This is the miracle and meaning of Christmas, whereby the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth comes not just to live amongst us but to live in our hearts. It can happen right now and here, whoever and wherever you are, and whatever condition your life may be in. This Christmas can be the most special ever as you grasp its true meaning and return to the Lover of your soul!

Rev Edwin Lam

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Senior Pastor  
New Life Baptist Church

# Mary's Spoiled Child

During my teens, each time as Advent drew near, I would hear people belt out: “Mary’s spoiled child, Jesus Christ, was born on Christmas Day...” *Spoiled* child? That sounded blasphemous even to me, a non-Christian back then! Unable to contain my curiosity (and indignation), I finally looked up the lyrics, only to discover that it was actually: “Mary’s Boy Child.”

While a pause after sounding the letter “s” makes a massive difference in meaning, it is the tiny apostrophe “s” that speaks emphatically of belonging and identity.

If we do not belong or are not involved personally in the celebration of Christmas, then all that unfolds before us is just a holiday programme. This is true not only for people outside the Christian faith, but also for Christians who overlook the significance of Christmas.

Some church Christmas celebrations could rival the boisterous atmosphere of shopping malls—teeming with a festive mood that energises us with red and green decorations and stirring music, among other things. As spectators, we feel an adrenaline rush as the Christmas carols begin. The stage is set: we easily mistake God and church as products to be consumed. A worship service becomes religious fanfare we watch rather than a communal celebration of the birth of Christ in which we partake. Naturally, the response that follows is: “Did I enjoy myself? Do I even like it?”



If Jesus were a consumer product, then we would need all the more to taste and see that He is good (Psalm 34:8). But Jesus is no product—He walked on earth temporarily so that we might live with Him forever. To “taste” a person, metaphorically speaking, is to know a person *intimately*. This requires us to participate with an open heart and mind, despite our apprehension. Our personal involvement is vital because *intimate* knowing, where identity and belonging reside, is found in relationship.

As you do your Christmas shopping and immerse yourself in the atmosphere of Yuletide and candlelight, remember to unfold the biggest story ever: God’s love for humanity. Only God’s unconditional love brings eternal joy in our days of worry and woes. If you are weary of ephemeral hope, His love endures forever (Psalm 136). If you are wary of fake love, then embrace God’s love together with His community—those who have experienced firsthand a divine love that is real.

Discovering the correct song lyrics and laughing at my own silly assumption was only a step towards my greatest discovery. I realised that misconceptions are easily formed at a distance, based on my own limited view of Jesus. So, I went on a search to know Jesus up close and personal. The Gospels unfolded for me the story of the magi’s search for the baby Jesus, the Messiah (Luke 2:11-14). Their worship echoed my reverence and reservations—reverence in approaching the Divine which was, honestly, beyond my comprehension, and reservations at what being a Christian might bring. The magi found Mary’s Child and I found my Saviour. We found the same Joy.

And Joy is the Person Jesus Christ. This Christmas, it is likely that you will hear “Mary’s Boy Child” reverberate in the air. Even as you sing and enunciate the apostrophe “s”, remember the significance of that tiny letter.

Remember also, to taste, see and receive the eternal Joy who is Jesus.

“for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

(Luke 2: 11-12)

Dr Kris Chong

Faculty  
Baptist Theological Seminary

## *Loneliness and Emmanuel*

A British medical doctor named Ishani Kar-Purkayastha shared a story about his interaction with Doris, an 82-year-old hospital patient. Two days before Christmas, Doris seemed healthy and ready for discharge. But for some reason she kept complaining about inexplicable health issues. Dr Kar-Purkayastha wrote: "Yesterday it was her arm that was hurting, before that her hip. Truth is, Doris is an incredibly healthy 82-year-old, and we can't find anything. I have no doubt that it will be the same today." When the X-rays came back normal, he told Doris that he would have to stick to the plan of sending her home. Doris looked down at the floor and quietly said, "I don't want to go home .... It's just that I'm all alone and there are so many hours in the day." Then after a long pause, she sighed and asked, "Doctor, can you give me a cure for loneliness?"

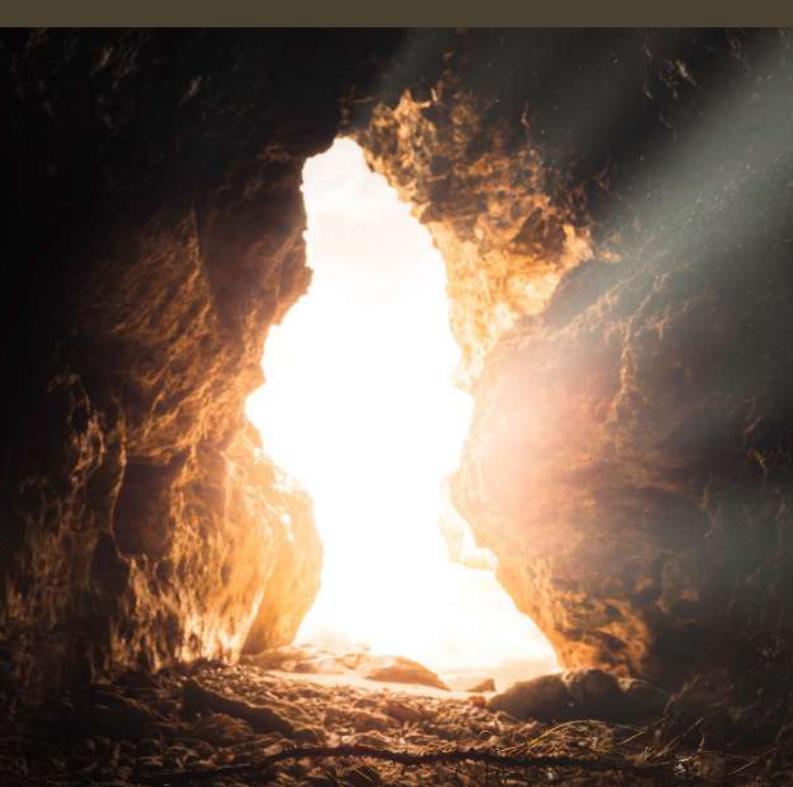
Festive seasons are often times of loneliness. When we see families getting together, celebrations, and laughter with loved ones, we think of what we are missing out on. But loneliness can occur even when we are in the midst of people or parties. This is because what we desperately need is on the inside. If only there were a cure for what is inside. On the outside, we may look as if we have successful careers, but on the inside, we are desperately seeking for meaning and significance. On the outside, we may often be around people, but on the inside, we feel desperately unknown. On the outside, we may have all the trappings of a happy life – a house, a nice car and a family – but on the inside, we are desperately trying to numb the pain of a broken marriage or a sense of inadequacy. On the outside, we may seem respectable and in control, but on the inside, we detest ourselves because we are desperately fighting addictions to alcohol, anger, porn, drugs and what have you. We are running away from the fear that one day we may be exposed.



But there is a cure for what is on the inside. Jesus – He is Immanuel, God with us. At the first Christmas, Mary faced the isolation of her situation. Who could she tell? Who would understand? She was betrothed to be married and now pregnant with a child. How would her fiancé and family respond? She would face the isolation of a life of shame, or perhaps even death. Joseph, her fiancé, certainly felt the loneliness of betrayed love when he received news of her pregnancy. He had to bear the weight of the world by himself when he made a decision to quietly put her away. But mostly Jesus left the glory of heaven to be born as a carpenter's son so as to walk the path of the cross by Himself, a journey that only He could make. He faced the sorrows of Gethsemane by Himself. He faced divine loneliness upon the cross, when there was a cosmic divide within the Godhead, as Jesus bore the sins of the world. He came to face loneliness, so that we do not need to be alone. He came to be with us so that we no longer need to be lonely or empty but that we may find our significance, security and identity in Him. This is what Christmas is about. Beyond the jingles and the Christmas trees, beyond the hollies and the jollies, is the greatest gift of Christmas – Immanuel, God with us.

The angel appeared to Joseph and said to him in the Gospel of Matthew 1:20-23 (NASB):

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,” which translated means, “GOD WITH US.”



Rev Isaac Teng

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Senior Pastor  
Queenstown Baptist Church



*God Waiting  
at Christmas?*

But when the set time had fully come,  
God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law.  
(Gal 4:4)

When you think of Christmas Eve, what is the first word that comes to mind?

Children will say “waiting” – for gifts; grandparents will say “waiting” – for reunions; parents will say “waiting” – for children’s smiles; and church staff will say “waiting” – for rest.

The Jews on the first Christmas Eve probably felt the same way. Heaven had been quiet after the prophet Malachi spoke some 400 years earlier. They had been waiting for a long time for the coming of the Saviour.

Waiting has two kinds of effects on people. On the one hand, waiting magnifies our desire and makes us more thankful when the gift arrives. The words “I can’t wait ...” describe this positive effect. On the other hand, too long a wait can kill desire, with the result that we give up. We may even be troubled when the gift unexpectedly arrives. The words “I refuse to wait any longer” describe us giving up.

At the first Christmas, you can see both these effects. Mary, Simeon, Anna and Elizabeth were “waiting” people. They were ecstatic at the good news of the Christ child. They couldn’t wait! However, Zechariah and the chief priests were the “un-waiting” people. The Bible said they were actually troubled by the news and refused to believe that the waiting was over.

Both groups desired the great gift of the Christ child – the Saviour of the world. Why did one group give up and the other hold on?

The Bible repeats the idea of “waiting on the Lord” throughout – Ps 40:1; Ps 37:7; Ps 130:5; Is 30:18; Is 40:31. What is waiting?

Henri Nouwen described “waiting” in a book called *Sabbatical Journeys*. In it he wrote about some friends who were trapeze artists. They said that there is a special relationship between the flyer and the catcher on the trapeze. “The flyer is the one who lets go, and the catcher is the one who catches.” As the flyer swings on the trapeze high above the crowd, the moment comes when he must let go. He flings his body out in mid-air. His job is to keep flying and waiting for the strong hands of the catcher to take hold of him at just the right moment. One of the flying trapeze artists said, “The flyer must never try to catch the catcher.” The flyer’s job is to “wait” in absolute trust for the catcher to catch him.

I don’t know about you. But when I am the flyer flying through adverse circumstances, I believe I know when is the best time for God to catch me. Waiting means letting go of what I think is best and trusting that God has a better best. I will not last long in waiting if I do not trust that God knows what and when is best.

The “waiting” people mentioned earlier had learned to let go of their own bests and to trust God’s best. Mary let go of the fear of teenage pregnancy. Elizabeth let go of potential disappointed hope. Simeon and Anna let go of the fear of their unfinished bucket list. And they experienced what they had waited for – Immanuel – God with them: cleansing their lives, forgiving their sins, and giving them new hope and meaning. Christ’s birth was well worth the 400-year wait.

Today, 2000 years after the first Christmas, God still calls us to “wait on Him” with a promise – “But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles.” (Isaiah 40:31). I don’t know your circumstances, but God knows. He is calling you to let go of what you think is best and trust Him for a better best. As at the first Christmas, He will catch you at the best time. “But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law.” Those who waited on Him back then thrived. Would you like to join their ranks? Trust Him to know the better best.



# *"Giving or Receiving at Christmas?"*

Christmas is special. It is a special day for people of all races and religions. Perhaps its allure lies in its proximity to the New Year and its association with an extended period of rest that we all desperately need. It is a time when we can cast our troubles aside and decide to worry afresh next year. The Bible records this special day well.

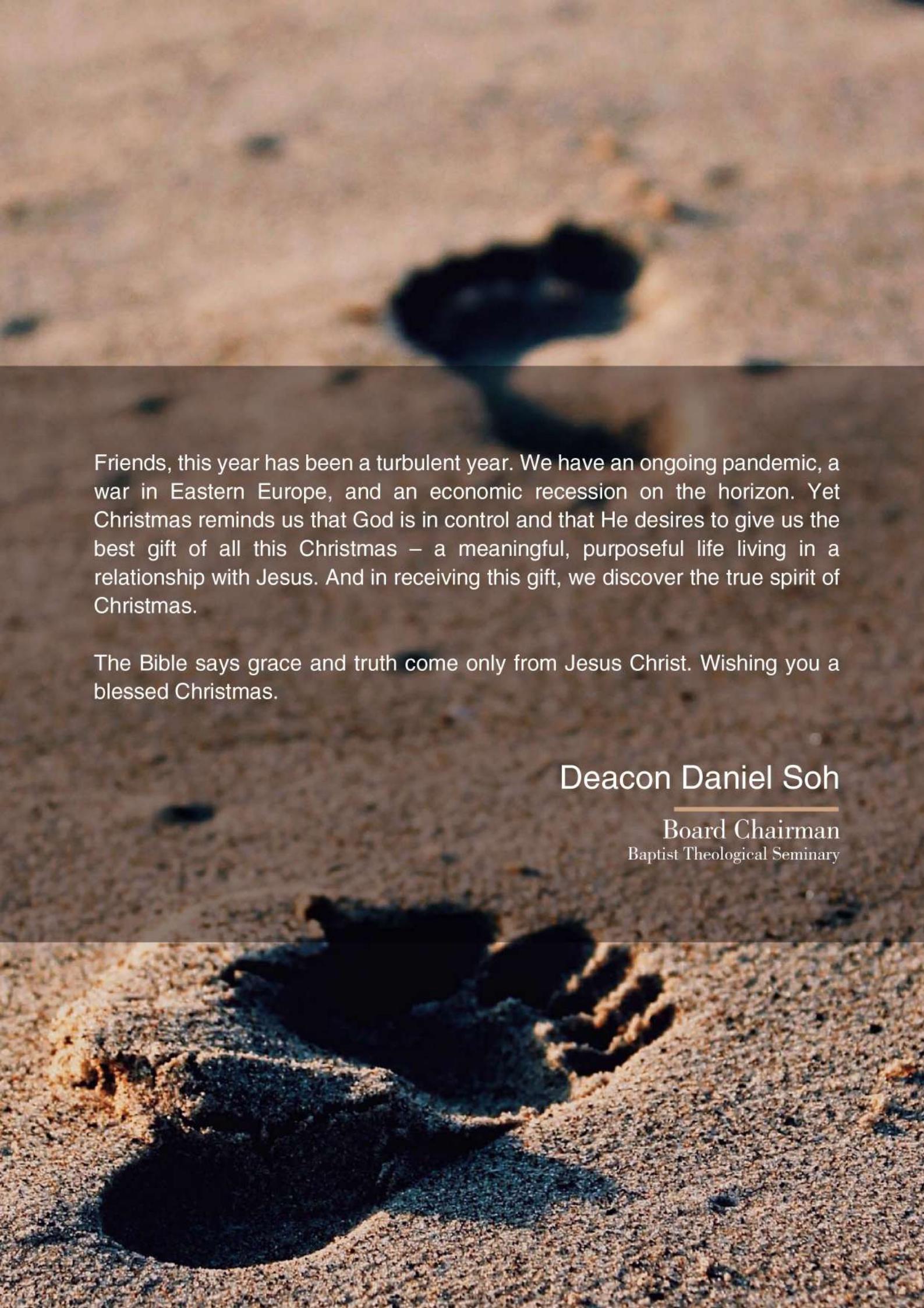
Among the four gospels, Luke and Matthew give a detailed blow-by-blow description of what happened at the first Christmas on earth. The gift-bearing scenes at the inn, the visitation by the magi, and the shepherds' worship are all vividly portrayed. However, the apostle John takes a very different angle. He records not just a baby in a crib of straw but His true identity – the Creator God.

In fact, even 700 years before the penmanship of John, the prophet Isaiah foretold the true identity of this baby in the manger. “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Is 9:6) He was not just any ordinary baby in the manger but the alpha (beginning) and omega (destiny) of the universe.

Whereas Luke and Matthew record that men brought gifts to the baby Jesus, John records that Jesus came to give something very precious to us – the wonderful gift of eternal life. We know from Matthew and Luke that not everyone welcomed the baby Jesus, but in contrast, John records that the baby Jesus, this Creator King, welcomes “everyone” who comes to Him with the gift of life.

So, this Christmas, are you “giving” or “receiving”? You can give by doing good. You can try to be good by visiting a church. You can give yourself the gift of purpose by scaling a career, building your resume and adding zeros to your bank account. And yet in doing these things you may be missing the essence of Christmas, for as John said, Christmas is truly about Jesus giving you a meaningful, purposeful eternal life: all you have to do is simply receive it.

We all know that a gift is not yours until you have received it. How? By inviting Jesus to come into your heart and having a relationship with Him. And in the process, you will discover a life full of meaning with His guidance.



Friends, this year has been a turbulent year. We have an ongoing pandemic, a war in Eastern Europe, and an economic recession on the horizon. Yet Christmas reminds us that God is in control and that He desires to give us the best gift of all this Christmas – a meaningful, purposeful life living in a relationship with Jesus. And in receiving this gift, we discover the true spirit of Christmas.

The Bible says grace and truth come only from Jesus Christ. Wishing you a blessed Christmas.

**Deacon Daniel Soh**

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Board Chairman  
Baptist Theological Seminary

Blessed  
Christmas  
to All!



祝愿大家圣诞蒙恩！

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

"在至高之处荣耀归与神！  
在地上平安归与他所喜悦的人。"

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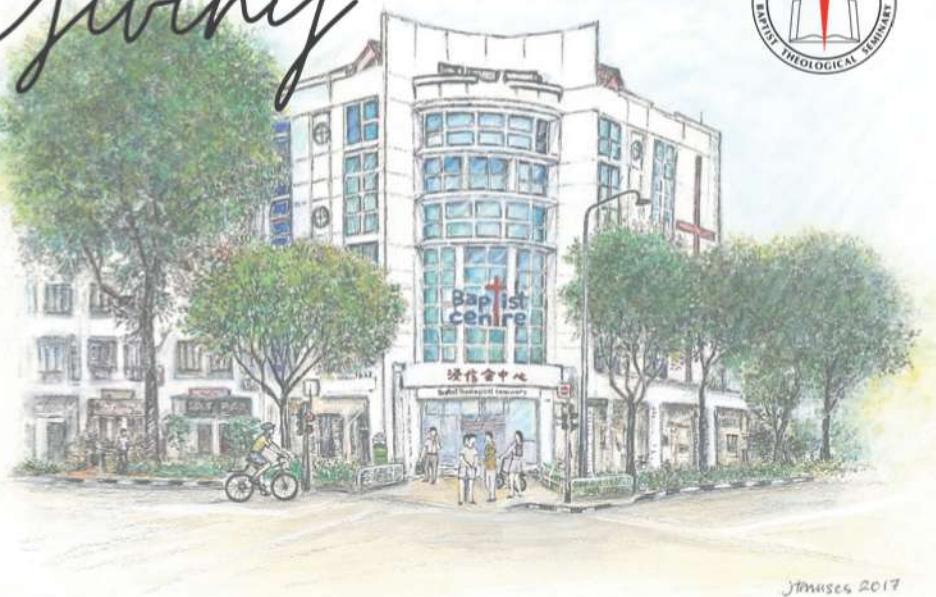
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