

PARTNERSHIP

The Incredible Gift

2023 Dec Issue



Equipping Lay Ministers,
Cultivating Missional Pastors to
Strategically Engage Asia's Harvest

Published by
Baptist Theological Seminary
1023 Upper Serangoon Road
#01-01 Baptist Centre
Singapore 534761
Tel: +65 6472 0091

www.bts.edu.sg

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Dear Friends of BTS:

Blessed Christmas greetings from all of us @ BTS.

I once saw a crystal Christmas ornament that had a special quality. As a light shone through it, the many faces of the crystal transformed the white beam into a beautiful spectrum of seven rainbow colours.

In this Christmas edition, our seven authors take the unchanging 'good tidings' of Christmas, and describe its beauty from different perspectives – from an uncommon Christmas practice in Japan to the essence of 'being home for Christmas' at any locale; from the incredible gift of fertility to the amazing story of being 'born again'; from the focus of enjoying Christmas in 2023 to preparing our hearts for the Second Coming; and from 'joy to the world' to the amazing story of God's plan.

I pray this edition will be a blessing to you and your friends. Please feel free to send the articles to your non-Christian friends to spread and magnify the beauty of the 'good news' of Christmas.

Emmanuel,

Rev Peter Lin

President



Countdown to Christmas!

Then What?

Rev Rodney Woo

Senior Pastor
International Baptist Church

Countdown to Christmas! This is one of the most eagerly anticipated and best-planned holidays of the year. Schools and businesses shut down, travel exponentially increases, and shopping lists are composed and completed: all for that glorious Christmas morning. Preparing for Christmas is a lot of fun and work, yet as we will all resoundingly confirm, Christmas is worth the wait. However, when the dust settles after our Christmas worship services – when the opening of presents is done and family gatherings are over – we are usually exhausted and depleted, ready to return to our routines. The next year, the cycle begins again. Yet, the first Christmas was never divinely designed simply to be celebrated as an isolated event once a year in an endless cycle. The first Christmas not only celebrated Christ's first coming, but also prepared His future followers for His Second Coming. We will discover that the participants and elements of the first Christmas are a prelude to what will happen when Christ returns.

In the first century Jewish context, there was growing expectation of the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah. The Old Testament prophets clearly conveyed eight specific prophecies concerning the Messiah's birth, such as that His birth mother would be a virgin (Is. 7:14) and His birthplace would be in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). In addition to the 351 Old Testament prophecies already fulfilled in Christ, there are other prophecies expressly pointing to the Second Coming, in which Christ will ultimately triumph over His enemies (Zech. 9:14-15). The fulfilled prophecies of His first coming guarantee the fulfillment of the promises of His Second Coming.

On the night of Christ's birth, angels descended from the throne room of heaven to the hillside theatre on earth to proclaim praises for the arrival of the Prince of Peace. According to Luke's account, only the shepherds were invited to witness the angelic anthem echoing out to those spiritually in tune here on earth. However, when Jesus returns, all believers are invited to join the angels in heaven singing, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing" (Rev. 5:12). The angelic adoration of the Christ child witnessed by the shepherds provided a foretaste of the adoration of all believers for the rest of eternity. The hillside praise prepared us for the heavenly praise to come.

The wise men travelled a great distance to see and worship the King of the Jews. The star over the small village of Bethlehem captured their attention and awe. Once they saw the Christ, "they fell down and worshipped," offering gifts fitting for the Promised One. While the entire Roman Empire was paying homage to the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus, this small group of foreigners fell at the feet of a Bethlehem baby. However, in the Second Coming of Christ, "every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:10-11). The first coming had a few foreigners bending their knees and hearts to this newborn King; the Second Coming will have all adoring the King of Kings.

The final element of the first Christmas is the Star of Bethlehem that guided the wise men to the Christ child. There are no indicators that other people witnessed the heavenly sign shining brightly over the birth of the Bright and Morning Star. It shone for all to see, but only a few in this realm of darkness perceived and pursued the true Light of the world. When Christ returns and takes His followers to their heavenly home, Scripture tells us that there will be "no need of the sun, for the glory of the Lord will illumine it, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Rev. 21:23). At Jesus' first coming, the star gave light to a few stargazers from a foreign land, but when Jesus returns, the risen Lamb of God will light all of heaven.

Countdown to Christmas! Then what? This is not the time to start another cycle of waiting for next Christmas, but the season to prepare for His return. Just as the Old Testament prophecies concerning His first coming were fulfilled, now we wait for the fulfillment of the prophecies announcing His Second Coming. Just as the wise men worshipped the one born King of the Jews, we can join the angels and a multitude of believers in this heavenly prelude to what is to come. As the Bethlehem star guided the wise men to the Christ child, we can let our light shine in such a way that those in darkness will come to the Light. Now we watch, wait, and work until He comes again.



The Incredible Gift

Rev Peter Lin

President
Baptist Theological Seminary

Christmas reminds us of new birth. Every new birth is a tremendously happy occasion, but the impossible births are the ones that bring happy tears to our eyes. One of my good friends, Pastor J, and his wife, went through seven years of infertility and tried many different methods to conceive, after which doctors told them it was impossible for them to have a baby. They were crushed. However, one day his wife started to throw up and the good news came – she was pregnant! They cried tears of joy.

The Bible describes a series of impossible births. The mothers of Isaac, Samson, Obed, Samuel, and John the Baptist were all barren. They pleaded with the Lord for a child and waited for a long time. When the gift finally came, I can imagine their flood of joyful tears.

One writer said that true thanksgiving needs three 'bene' elements – a benefactor, a benefit, and a beneficiary. In the above cases, the benefactor is clearly God, the benefit is the desired baby, and the beneficiaries are the parents, who have ample reasons to rejoice.

Of all the impossible births in the Bible, the most incredible is the birth of Jesus Christ Himself. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” At Christmas, we can rejoice because of the three clear ‘bene’ elements.

At Christmas, the benefactor is clear – God gave up His only son because He loves us and desires our best. The benefit is also clear – it is eternal life. We all fear death: eternal life describes a life that starts now and will go all the way to eternity. We all want a sense of belonging: eternal life describes a life that is lived in the family of God. John 1:12 says that God gave us the right to become His children.

But to truly give thanks, there is one final element – the beneficiary. I have to believe that I truly am an undeserving beneficiary in order to give thanks from my heart. If I believe I am good enough and deserving, then I will never be able to give thanks sincerely.

John addressed this point when he said, “To all those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become the children of God, who were born, not of blood, nor of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12-13). In other words, this eternal benefit in God’s family did not come about because of our parents (‘blood’), the good we have done (‘of the flesh’), or other important friends’ influence (‘the will of man’). It is an undeserved gift from God based on our simple trust and belief (of ‘all those who believed’) in what He has promised.

Jesus used two words to describe this process of accepting the benefactor God, receiving the benefit of living eternally in God’s family, and acknowledging our unworthiness as beneficiaries. He called it being ‘born again’. His audience (a Jewish rabbi) called it ‘impossible’. Jesus was not the last impossible birth in history – we are! Isn’t that incredible?

The five other impossible births described earlier led to sincere thanksgiving because their mothers knew clearly that they were barren and that the baby was a gift of undeserved grace.

This Christmas, will you give thanks sincerely as you dwell on the great benefit of Christmas, receive the sacrificial love of our benefactor God, and humbly acknowledge the fact that you (the beneficiary) could never be good enough to deserve such an outrageous gift?



A Christmas Gift for your Loved Ones

Deacon Daniel Soh

Chairman of the Board of Management
Baptist Theological Seminary

Do you have a practice of gifting presents at Christmas? Have you thought of what presents you would like to gift your loved ones?

There was once a lady who took a year to prepare a creative present for her husband. She made a list of all the things her husband had done that touched her and recorded everything meticulously, with dates and detailed descriptions of what had happened. Some examples are as follows: “7th December, he did not lose his temper at all the entire day; 22nd Sept, he played with the kids after returning from his business trip even though he was visibly tired.”

She gifted her husband the journal on Christmas Day and he sat down to read it immediately. After reading, he told a friend, “Reading this has motivated me to try to become the man that she wants me to be. I would also like to express my love for my wife in the same manner.” The wife thought she had simply gifted her husband a Christmas present. However, her journal not only affirmed her husband but also motivated him to work towards becoming a better husband.

Subsequently, the husband started daily journalling. He would wake up in the morning and spend some time before his daily prayers to reflect upon the previous day and record one kind thing his wife had said or done. After a month, he came to a realisation – for the past month, he had not prayed for God to change his wife. Instead, he would spend the whole day trying to remember something nice she had done and the positive things she had said. He decided not to record any unhappiness (if there was any) but to focus on looking for positive things about his wife. This then changed his perception of his wife by transforming the way he treated her and improving his attitude when communicating with her. It led him to appreciate her more and to express his appreciation in words of praise and gratitude.

On Christmas Day the next year, it was his turn to hand his wife a journal as a gift. It left her speechless: well, almost. She exclaimed incredulously, "You've found 365 positive things to say about me? Even when I was being unlovable?" At that moment, their eldest daughter added, "Wow! Daddy, you're great! This is something we only see in movies and you did it!" This brother had spent every day of the past year searching out and recording his wife's best qualities.

Dear readers, a sincere expression of love does not require you to spend a bomb on a meal in a posh restaurant or buy an expensive present. It can take the form of being the first to apologise after an argument, cooking noodles for your hungry loved one, or holding hands on an intimate stroll. The small gestures of daily life that demonstrate undivided devotion add up to tangible proofs of the love between a husband and wife.

Love is priceless, be it the love between family members, between a man and a woman, or amongst friends. In any relationship (marriage or otherwise), love is expressed by letting the other party know that you are protecting the relationship and investing in the life you lead together. Today, would you make a start on jotting down things your significant other has said for which you are thankful, or things they have done that touched you? Give them this journal as a gift at Christmas, or on any other suitable date. If you are single, you can also do this for a family member or a dear friend. It will be a most meaningful gift to present them with this journal as an expression of your love, and only takes a few minutes of your time each day, so why not try?

May this Christmas remind us that God is in control despite all the chaos that is happening in the world around us. He has already given us the best Christmas present possible – salvation. Truly, the greatest blessing in our lives is to know Jesus Christ and allow Him to lead us every day.

Merry Christmas, and may God's blessings be upon you.



Far As the Curse is Found

Rev Eugene Low

Lead Teaching Pastor
Grace Baptist Church

“Joy to the World” is one of my favourite Christmas carols. It is an exultant celebration of the coming of the Lord. Nature is personified as breaking out in song, as “fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains repeat the sounding joy”. The arrival of the King is an occasion for great rejoicing, for He comes as a Saviour to reign over all the earth. We sing this at Christmas to celebrate the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ and proclaim, “Let earth receive her King!”

Despite its popularity during the Advent season, this hymn was not intended to be a Christmas carol. Written by well-known hymn writer Isaac Watts in the 18th century, it is based on Psalm 98. This psalm speaks of creation’s joy before the LORD, because “he comes to judge the earth”. He will deal decisively with all the wrongs of this fallen world when He “judges the world with righteousness and the peoples with equity” (Ps. 98:9). The LORD is the King who will finally make all things right.

What is wrong with the world? Watts' hymn supplies the answer in the third stanza:

**No more let sins and sorrows grow,
nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
far as the curse is found.**

Ever since the rebellious disobedience of the first human pair in the garden, this world has been under the curse of sin. The curse is God's righteous judgement against sin. Although God created all things very good, things are not what they should be because humanity has turned away from its Creator. Instead of worshipping the One whose image we bear, we have fashioned gods in our own likeness. We have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory. Brokenness is all around us.

But humanity's rebellion will not persist forever. As Psalm 98 points out, the coming King will see to that. Although it is sung as a Christmas carol, the psalm actually focuses on the King's Second Coming, not His first. Thus, this psalm confronts us with a question of eternal significance: how will sinners like us be able to greet the King who is coming to judge with joy rather than terror?

Praise God, for He has first sent His Son not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him (Jn. 3:17). This is the good news of Christmas. In the fullness of time, the eternal Son took on flesh. Although He is fully God, He humbled Himself by taking the form of a servant. He was born of a woman, subjecting Himself to the weakness and suffering of this broken, sin-sick world. Jesus came on a rescue mission to save sinners and reverse the effects of sin. To redeem us, He became like us. Jesus came to bring joy for sorrow, life for death, blessing for the curse.

Jesus saves through judgement. In His amazing grace and the wonders of His love, He offered Himself as a sacrificial substitute for undeserving sinners. Jesus died the death we deserved, bearing God's judgement for us if we repent and trust in Him to save us. Christ became a curse for us (Gal. 3:13), that we might receive God's blessing in Him. Jesus became a man of sorrow that the world might have joy by knowing Him.

Therefore, let the earth receive her King! Let every heart prepare Him room! As we celebrate Jesus' birth, let's give thanks to God for how Jesus was born to die that we might live through Him. And, let's praise God for how He has raised His Son from the grave. The tomb could not hold Him. The risen, victorious Christ has inaugurated the new creation. One day, all things shall be made new. Sin and sorrows shall no more grow. We look forward with eager anticipation and hope to that day. We also cast a grateful look back to the very first Christmas in history. Hallelujah! For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given. He reigns as King forevermore. Through Him, the blessings of God's grace now flow to the ends of the earth, 'far as the curse is found'.





**YOU
ARE
LOVED**

The Gift Of Life

Rev Adrian Lim

Senior Pastor
Singapore Thomson Road Baptist Church

Christmas is celebrated all over the world every year by both Christians and non-Christians alike as the birthday of Jesus. However, it is more than the birthday of our Lord Jesus Christ. John 3:16 tells us that ***“God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*** In other words, God not only loves us, but He wants to give us eternal life. This promise was made by God long ago through the prophet Isaiah. ***“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)

Why must God send His Son to give us eternal life? To answer this question, we must first be willing to acknowledge that we are prone to do bad things (sinful nature) even without anyone teaching us to do them. Scripture tells us that it is through one man (Adam) that sin entered the world. It also tells us that through one man (Christ) we can be saved from sin. But for Christ to save us He must be without sin, as a sinful man cannot save another sinful person. We think this means that only God can save us, because only He is sinless, but the truth is that our Saviour must also be a man to qualify to save us from the penalty of sin, which is death. Secondly, He must be born as a man and not change His place of residency from heaven to earth. Thus, Jesus is unique, being a divine person and being born as a man to qualify to save us.

However, man must recognise and admit he is sinful and unable to save himself before he can believe and receive Jesus as his Saviour. Salvation is not earned but believed and received by faith through the grace offered to us by Jesus. This is what Jesus told Nicodemus when He spoke about needing to be born again to enter the kingdom of God. “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” (John 3:5) Upon hearing what Jesus said, Nicodemus asked, “How could a person be born a second time?” In the same passage, we learned that Jesus was talking about a spiritual birth and not a physical one.

A person becomes a citizen of a country in two possible ways. First, by being born in the country where his parents reside, and second by immigration to a country and changing his citizenship. The latter is not applicable to citizenship in God’s kingdom. As Jesus said, citizenship in God’s kingdom comes by being ‘born again’. This spiritual birth is implied in the account in Matthew 18:3 when Jesus called a child over to illustrate to His disciples how a person can enter the kingdom of God. “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

This saying of Jesus is often taken to mean that a person must have simple faith like a child to enter God's kingdom. Yes, we need faith, but never simple faith: even children ask, "Why?" when they are asked to do something. In the larger context, Jesus began His ministry calling people to enter the kingdom of God and at the end of His ministry He was still calling people to do so. Thus, in using a child for illustration, He was still consistently saying that to enter God's kingdom one must be born again (spiritual birth) just like how a child is born into this world.

The kingdom of God can only be entered by being born again (spiritual birth), and the reason that God sent His Son into the world was so that we may have eternal life. Just as Christmas is necessary for us to be born again, Easter is also necessary for us to have the gift of eternal life! If you wish to enter the kingdom of God and to have the gift of eternal life, all you need to do is ask Jesus into your life. You can receive this Christmas gift freely from Him today!



(Not) Home for Christmas

—remembering the homeless in faraway lands this festive season

Luke 2:1-20

Dr Kris Chong

BTS Faculty

“I’ll be home for Christmas.”

For sure, this is one of the most commonly heard phrases in December every year. Crowded airports, crammed train stations, busy highways all testify to people crossing vast distances just to be home to celebrate Christmas with their families.

Ironically, no one was home on the very first Christmas, be it in the heavenly realm or on earth.

The writer of the Gospel of Luke reveals that Joseph and Mary were far away from their home in Nazareth. They had to move to Bethlehem in Judea, Joseph’s ancestral town, because of Caesar Augustus’ decree (Lk. 2:1-20 NLV). In other words, the couple were away on foreign soil when they welcomed the arrival of the holy infant.

Meanwhile, the shepherds were “staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep.” (v. 8). Shepherds are always looking for rich and good pasturage for their flocks (1 Chr. 4:39). Hence, to “stay in the fields” instead of covered wagons or caves (often described as shepherds’ residences) reminds us of this simple fact: they were not home.

Additionally, even the angel of the Lord who appeared to the shepherds (Lk. 2:9-10), and later, “a vast host of others (angels)” (v.13) also were not at their heavenly abode. In fact, they had come a long way from their spiritual expanse to deliver good tidings of God’s kingdom to all humankind! Just like earthly beings, the angels also were not home.

Meanwhile, several eastern astrologers embarked on a journey to locate the future ruler of Bethlehem (Mt. 2:1-12). They arrived at their destination after carefully ‘stargazing’ along the way so that they could bow down and worship Jesus, offering their gifts. Although these Magi might not have adored the Saviour at the same time as others, they still celebrated the occasion away from home.

One thing is certain: for a place to be cherished as “home”, people must be involved. Our souls are nourished by the irreplaceable bonds of human interaction, not by lavish furnishings or prized possessions. Consider Mary’s situation for a moment. She was pregnant when she made the difficult journey to Bethlehem, and in addition she had to be alert to the possibility of her baby’s premature birth. One can only imagine the agony and anguish Mary would have had to endure if she did not have Joseph’s constant support.

Simply put, the key characters of the Nativity story—both celestial and human—were “not home for Christmas”. This nuanced factor once again testifies to the fluidity of what “home” means. Home might be a building in which we dwell, it could be our birthplace, or it could be a location where we spent significant moments of our lives. Home can even be the emotional space in our hearts.

Daily news on the current events in the Middle East and incessant natural disasters cut me to the quick. This Christmas, where is home for the people whose homelands have been invaded and destroyed? Home is where the **heart** is, it is said. But let us not forget that for those unfortunate ones who suffer from domestic violence, home is also where the **hurt** is.

Incomprehensible as it is, Jesus Christ, the protagonist of the Christmas narrative, was born not in His heavenly home but on earth. This truly is great tidings for all nations—for God has come to dwell in human hearts. The Word Incarnate has made the once Invisible, visible. He who was Spirit has taken human form. Jesus left home to lead all who are “homeless” back to God the Father, so that you and I now can shout in joyful exuberance, “I’ll be home for Christmas!”

If you feel you are all alone, or perhaps someone dear is no longer by your side, do remember you have Emmanuel God with you, as well as members of the Christian community. "Home sweet home" is never confined to one locale, or strictly to people genetically related to us.

This Christmas, let us pray for those who are living in fear of war, and others who are facing insurmountable challenges:

"This season, may our God, who brought freedom to those enslaved in Egypt and brought forth water in the desert, bring life and light to all of us in Jesus Christ. For people and places ravaged by war, let the light of Christ pierce through the darkness and become a living hope to all. (Jn. 1:4-5)

In God, may all who are living in desolation, poverty and pain find a truly warm, spiritual home. As Mary pondered the angel's message in her heart, may we ponder on how Christ has come to find room in our hearts. Our hearts are home when God makes them His dwelling place. In the Name of our Lord Jesus, Amen."





Uncommon Christmas in Japan

Rev Yorie Ito

Senior Pastor
International Japanese Church of Singapore

"The light was the true light, which gives light to everyone, and was coming into the world." (John 1:9)

It is estimated that the proportion of Christians in Japan, including Catholics, is less than 1%, and the percentage of those attending worship services is only 0.5%. In Japan, there is a strong negative perception of religion and faith. Most people equate religion and faith with heresy and generally consider religion as something dangerous that should be avoided. Nevertheless, Christmas is still regarded as a joyful holiday in Japan, and it is also the easiest time to invite people to church. In particular, the candlelight ceremony on Christmas Eve provides a unique opportunity to draw people into Japanese churches.

I first attended a candlelight ceremony on Christmas Eve in 1974, two months after my baptism. The Bible verse read that day was John 1:9, "The light was the true light, which gives light to everyone, and was coming into the world." It was my first exposure to the meaning of Christmas.

During the candlelight ceremony, candles representing Jesus Christ are lit, and the lights are passed on to participants. Each participant receives the light and then lights the candle of the person next to them until all the candles held by all the participants are lit. The ceremony includes prayers that the light of Christ may be spread to our neighbours.

Sitting next to me that day was my father, who was attending the candlelight ceremony for the first time. My father was originally a devoted Buddhist, but that day, something seemed to linger in his heart. He realised that the truth was in Jesus, so he began to explore the Christian faith and was baptised in July 1978. Until he passed away at the age of 83, the Lord continued to guide his faith, and through him, the light of Christ was passed on to others, one by one.

Preaching the gospel in Japan is indeed a challenging task, and the number of people attending church gatherings continues to decline. However, God still loves Japan and continues to shine His true light on this land. By lifting up the light of Christ through Japanese churches, the light of Jesus will also be passed on this year, one person to another.

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