

If only...
Christmas yearnings



DayOne



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If only ...

The wonderful thing about Christmas is that it has that unerring ability to transport us back in time and, often, to provide precious memories of our lives before they became tense, complicated and stuck in a rut. Christmas brings out the child in us.

The resident cynic within is given a few days' break and we are free to dream dreams of a world where peace, happiness and security can be experienced.





As a child, I loved Christmas Eve. The tree was decorated, and the presents had been wrapped and were hidden from prying eyes. Then there was the waiting, the anticipation. Perhaps we would be taken for a walk, leaving the warm living-room filled with the lovely smells of the pine tree and cooking turkey, and we would go out into the night with its dark blue sky illuminated by jewel-like stars and with the cold night air biting ears and nose. There really did seem to be magic in the air.





What I experienced was the 'Christmas yearning': that longing deep inside a child's heart for something more. That 'something' never actually arrived the next day, no matter how happy Christmas Day may have been. As the years went by, the yearning faded and attention then became focused upon wrapped-up things. But where was the magic?



Was this growing up—or giving up?

This booklet explains simply how it is possible to find that ‘something more’, the hope that each Christmas fails to deliver. It is a joy that is literally out of this world—and it can become more than wishful thinking!



Inner yearning







Settling for less

Although we may not acknowledge it, that Christmas yearning deep within us was placed there by God our Maker.

The Bible tells us that God **'has ... set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end'** (Ecclesiastes 3:17).



We instinctively long to dwell in a world of love, joy and peace instead of one where sighing, fear and regret seem to be the common experience. Tragically, we are so often willing to settle for less, and rather than accept God's solution for our ills, we make do with a few days of cheerful escapism. Many have concluded that the message which speaks of a God caring so much for our poor world that he actually entered it personally, is just impossible so cannot be true.







'Anxious, cynical and frustrated'

This is how a newspaper once described the young people of our nation. But surely those words might well describe how people of all generations are feeling just now. What on earth has happened to make us this way? In the UK, we were once a carefree, positive-minded, open-hearted bunch, but now we seem riddled with a gloomy cynicism that even Christmas can't dispel.



Lies, lies, lies!

The Bible speaks about difficult times when **'truth has stumbled in the streets [and] honesty cannot enter'** (Isaiah 59:14).

It would seem that many of us are unwilling to trust anyone and we shrink from making ourselves vulnerable in any way, simply because we have been let down and lied to so many times. We have long been suspicious of politicians and now we are bombarded daily by fast-talking salespeople at our doors, on our phones and in our local stores. We've been stung once too often. On a more personal level, so many of us have been hurt deeply by failed relationships which have simply caused us to pull the shutters down firmly and erect impenetrable barriers in order to keep out any further pain and betrayal. There is no place for trust any longer. Cynicism rules!







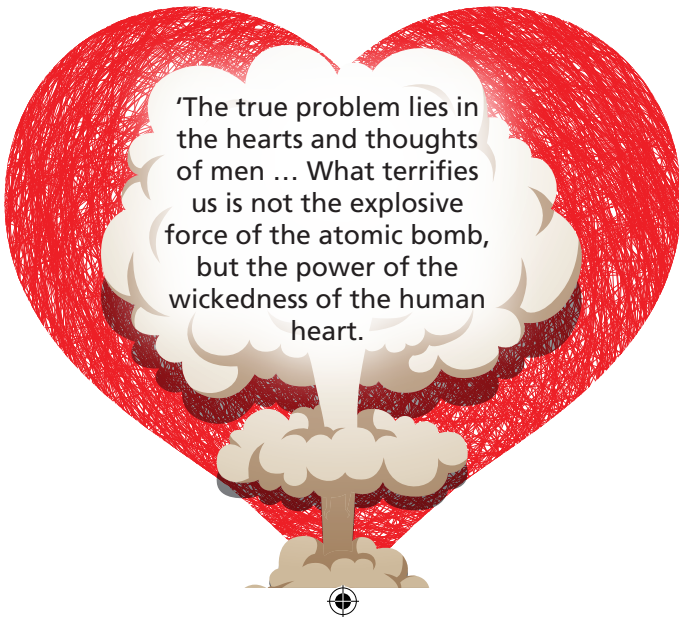
Outward distress



'I wish it could be Christmas every day!'

Optimism and a positive attitude can only take us so far! The stark reality is that we live in a failing world, and at times we feel unable to take any more images of violence, illness, abuse and greed. There seems no escape from the sheer ugliness that confronts us daily. The most painful part is that we see the very same potential for ill in our own hearts, too.


We may think that 'sin' is an archaic word, but in fact it accurately describes the root cause of all the sorrow upon the face of our planet. Albert Einstein was surely right when he said,






Let's start at the beginning ...

Yet this world has not always been as it is today. That longing within us is a yearning for the world as it was in the beginning. In the Bible, we read that when God looked upon his new, pristine creation, he **'saw all that he had made, and it was very good'** (Genesis 1:31).



The explanation for how things went catastrophically wrong can be summed up in one sad sentence: **'sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin'** (Romans 5:12). Every tear that has ever been wept in this world can be traced back to one momentous event when the first human, Adam, snatched the reins from God's hand, seeking to seize control of his own destiny. The effects of his rebellion were immense and immediate. He and his wife, Eve, were suddenly overwhelmed with guilt, shame and fear and wanted to run from, rather than to, their Maker, the One who is the source of all goodness and happiness. And whether we like to admit it or not, this sin remains our greatest problem to this day.



All are affected

Sin is a global disease. It is nothing to do with education, culture or money (or lack of it); rather, it is a *spiritual* thing. Whether rich or poor, black or white, male or female, we have all inherited, and are therefore affected by, this disease, which is the most dreadful of all diseases upon the face of the earth. We would love to place the blame for all our problems at the door of someone else, but God will not have it: he points the finger straight at *us*. The disease is self-inflicted. *We* are guilty. The evidence around us today just confirms what the Bible said centuries ago: **'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23)**. We fail to live up to our own standards, let alone God's.

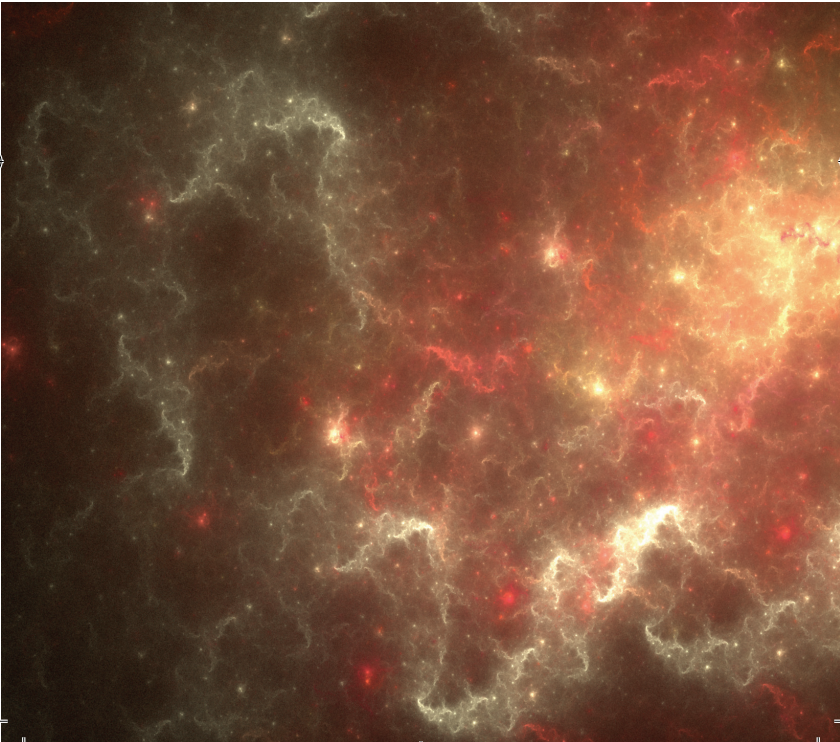
'We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition, when infinite joy is offered to us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because we cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea' (C. S. Lewis).





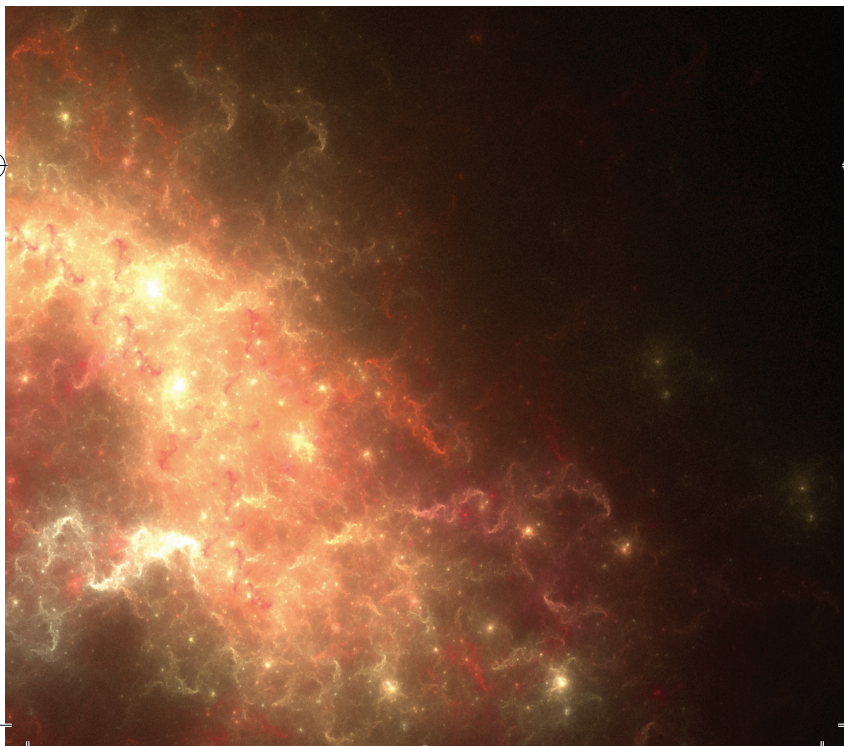
Extraterrestrial?

If we are to have any genuine and lasting hope at all, it has to come from *outside* this fallen and failing universe—from somewhere that is not tainted by sin and imperfection. This is the wonder of the Christmas message: that God himself left heaven and came into this world in the person of Jesus Christ. He was born of God and of a virgin, and was therefore **'blameless, pure, set apart from sinners'** (Hebrews 7:26).





Only this 'Special One' would have the necessary qualifications to be our Saviour. He alone would be capable of living the life of perfect obedience we all have failed to live. His death alone would be sufficient payment for the colossal debt of sin that we each have racked up. And he alone would then be qualified to offer freely the precious gift of salvation to our dying human race. **'For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 6:23).**



Waiting for the special baby!

Although many infants were born to anxious parents around the world on 22 July 2013, it was the baby who would be known as His Royal Highness Prince George of Cambridge who caused a global media frenzy on that day. It was the climax to nine months' speculation and patient, yet unavoidable, waiting.

However, the birth of the Saviour of the world was predicted centuries before the event—and it was clear that this long-awaited child, born to be king, would be like no other.



The Old Testament promise

'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel [God with us]' (Isaiah 7:14).

'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' (Isaiah 9:6).



The New Testament fulfilment

Waiting for a baby to arrive is always a test of our patience. But the wait for this promised child lasted many centuries! However, God kept his word. In the New Testament we read how the eternal God entered the world, taking human form, in the person of Jesus Christ:



**'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (John 1:1).
'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us' (John 1:14).**


'[God] appeared in a body ...' (1 Timothy 3:16).

Every mother thinks her child is special, but surely none would be so bold as to present her child at the local Parent and Toddler group as **'Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace'!** So, without doubt, this promised child coming into the world would have to deliver the goods!




Just another sales pitch?

But this is where our indwelling cynic kicks in again and threatens to cut off the branch we're sitting on. We refuse to believe that a love so pure exists and could go to such lengths. And if it did, it would be aimed at worthy and deserving objects, not a selfish race of dying people on a dying planet.



Sadly, because of a wealth of bad experiences, it is possible that we miss out on the most genuine offer we could ever receive. But surely it is possible to exercise a little faith at this time of year: belief that there really is a God who made, loves and desires us; a most beautiful, pure, all-powerful Being who is personal, trustworthy, loyal and faithful; One who actually keeps his word. Yet maybe it all seems so distant, unreal—even impossible.





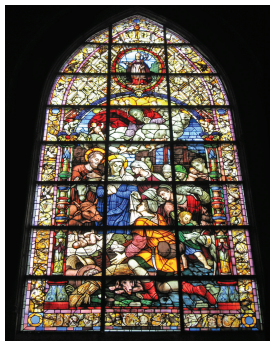
A church minister was once visiting a man in his home to talk to him about spiritual matters. When asking the man who he thought Jesus Christ was, he received the reply, 'Oh, he was a wonderful man. He was the greatest man who ever lived.' The minister replied, 'Let me tell you something I believe will startle you. According to the Bible and the historic Christian faith, Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter of Galilee was and is the eternal Creator of the universe, the omnipotent and almighty God!' Instantly, the man's eyes filled with tears and he said, 'I've been in church all my life and have never heard that before. But I always thought that that was the way it ought to be: that God ought to be like Jesus.'



'But I ain't religious!'

Stained-glass windows, angelic-looking choirboys, men and women with pious expressions—it's no wonder most of us feel uncomfortable with religion.

I remember, as a young child, being painfully dragged around Salisbury Cathedral, looking up at the enormous arches and thinking, 'If there is a God, he'd be much too important to care about a kid like me.' That is why the Christmas story is so breathtaking: when we consider the mindset of God in the way that he sent the Son he loves into this hostile world to be born, not in a palace, but in a crude stable in the back of beyond. In that very act alone we can see that God is for the underdog! Christ was born into poverty so that no one need feel inferior and excluded.



'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich' (2 Corinthians 8:9).



'Why, then, does God seem so distant?'

This is a question many people ask today. Why does God seem so far away, if not altogether absent? Could I really know this God personally?



Personal response



A time to hope

Christmas is a time of great spiritual opportunity: a time when we are tempted to open our narrowed cynical eyes and world-weary hearts and begin to hope that anything is possible. But could it really be true—a visitor from another world? Dazzlingly awesome angels? Adoring, lowly shepherds? Wealthy, worshipping wise men? And could God really dwell on earth as a fragile baby and then die forsaken on a shameful cross to be our Saviour?





A time to turn

At Christmas time we never tire of watching the hard, mean Ebenezer Scrooge melt into a warm, loving, open-hearted man. But Scrooge is not alone when it comes to the need for a change of heart! The Bible teaches us that we all need this. It calls this 'repentance'. In a nutshell, repentance is a change of mind about sin, about self and about the Saviour. It means coming clean, owning up to our failure in God's sight and having a wholehearted willingness to turn from our ways and follow his.





A time to trust

Christmas is an opportunity for us simply to believe that the baby of Bethlehem was the Lord of glory who entered our world specifically to die on a cross where he would pay the penalty in full for our sins.



The real mystery of Christmas

The heart of the timeless Christmas message speaks of a gift that was given for all mankind—nothing less than God wrapped in human form and coming as our Saviour: love incarnate, love divine. That profound mystery is revealed in one short Bible verse:

'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16).

One lovely old carol puts it poetically like this:

*Thou who art God beyond all praising,
All for love's sake becamest man;
Stooping so low, but sinners raising
Heavenwards by thine eternal plan.
Thou who art God beyond all praising,
All for love's sake becamest man.*

*(Frank Houghton, 'Thou Who Wast Rich
Beyond All Splendour', 1894-1972)*


By simple childlike faith in Jesus, multitudes have found in him the fulfilment of that God-given inner yearning of their hearts. Why not you?

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