

December 2020

Congregational Devotions

“The Incarnation”



Christmas 2020

“God with us...,” can the mystery and joy of such a reality ever be exhausted? The implications of such truth are weighty and deep to absolutely every facet of life; when His love becomes light and His truth becomes grace to each of our souls. This is why our focus at Abundant Grace for Christmas 2020 is the celebration of the Incarnation.

New Year’s 2021

Just as surely as when a heart is given to Him and in one moment a life is transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the Kingdom of God’s dear Son—as surely as that transaction is accomplished by the Holy Spirit where one minute later is different from the minute before—we come together in a New Year in a commitment to Him to say, “Lord, we’re giving ourselves to You, as we step into a New Year,” confident that God will honor that.

December 1 - Tuesday

“Christmas – A Celebration Of Incarnation”

"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."**

Matthew 1:23

"God with us..." can the mystery and joy of such a reality ever be exhausted? The implications of such truth are weighty and deep to absolutely every facet of life; when His love becomes light and His truth becomes grace to each of our souls. This is why our focus at Abundant Grace for Christmas 2020 is the celebration of the Incarnation.

What is meant by term "incarnation"? It is the act of assuming flesh (Lat. *in* and *caro*, "flesh"). In theology, *incarnation* is the gracious voluntary act of the Son of God in assuming a human body and human nature. Christ takes our human nature into union with his Divine Person, became man, yet without sin. Christ is both God and man. A Divine Person was united to a human nature (Acts 20:28; Romans 8:32; 1 Cor. 2:8; Hebrews 2:11-14; 1 Tim. 3:16; Galatians 4:4, etc.). The union is hypostatical, meaning, it *is persona*; the two natures are not mixed or confounded, and it is perpetual.

The doctrine of the incarnation, therefore, is that the Lord Jesus Christ is one person with two natures permanently united, the one nature being that of the eternal Son of God, the other that of man, in all respects human, "yet without sin." The incarnation includes the miraculous conception and birth of Christ. The incarnation is absolutely without parallel in history.

Lewis Sperry Chafer (*Systematic Theology* [1948], 7:194) correctly places the incarnation as one of the seven greatest events that have occurred in the history of the universe: **(1)** the creation of the angels, **(2)** creation of material things, including all life on the earth, **(3)** the incarnation, **(4)** the death of the Incarnate One, **(5)** His resurrection, **(6)** His coming again, **(7)** His reign on the earth forever. That God in the Person of the Son should identify Himself completely with the human race, become a kinsman of the human family, and as the Kinsman-Redeemer lay down His life for their redemption from sin, as in the book of Ruth (cf. Leviticus 25:49; Isaiah 59:20), is in itself an event of immeasurable importance.

May we as a church family embrace the Celebration of Christmas – the Incarnation!

Pastor Bill

December 2 - Wednesday

“Christmas In Hebrews” Pt. 1

Hebrews 1:3

And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,

Hebrews 1:3

This Son perfectly mirrors God, and is stamped with God's nature. He holds everything together by what he says—powerful words! After he finished the sacrifice for sins, the Son took his honored place high in the heavens right alongside God,

To the author of this epistle our Lord is above all else – the Son of God in the most important sense of that word; and it is the divine dignity and majesty belonging to Him from His very nature which forms the fundamental feature of the image of Christ which stands before this writer's perspective. At the same time, it is this author who, perhaps above all others of the New Testament writers, emphasizes the truth of the humanity of Christ, and dwells with most particularity upon the elements of His human nature and experience.

The setting of the remarkable exposition of the divine worth of the Son overflows in Hebrews 1. Here the Son is declared to be "the radiance of his (God's) glory, and the very image of his substance," through whom the universe has been created and by the word of whose power all things are held in being; and His exaltation above the angels, by means of whom the Old Covenant had been inaugurated. The purpose of the succeeding statement is to enhance in the thought of the Jewish readers of the epistle the value of the salvation wrought by this divine Savior, by removing from their minds the offense they were in danger of taking at His lowly life and shameful death on earth. This earthly humiliation finds its *abundant justification in the greatness of the end which it sought and attained.*

Pastor Bill

December 3 - Thursday

“Christmas In Hebrews” Pt. 2

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil,

Hebrews 2:14

The establishment of His divine majesty in chapter 1 had taken the form of a description of His infinite exaltation above the angels, the highest of all creatures. His humiliation is described here therefore as being "made a little lower than the angels" (Hebrews 2:9). What is meant is simply that He became man; the phraseology is derived from Psalm 8. The adoption of the language of the psalm to describe our Lord's humiliation has the secondary effect, accordingly, of greatly enlarging the reader's sense of the immensity of the humiliation of the Son of God in becoming man: He descended an infinite distance to reach man's highest conceivable exaltation. As, however, the primary purpose of the adoption of the language is merely to declare that the Son of God became man, so it is explained (Hebrews 2:14) as an entering into participation in the blood and flesh which are common to men.

The proximate end of our Lord's assumption of humanity is declared to be that He might die; He was "made a little lower than the angels because of the suffering of death" (Hebrews 2:9); He took part in blood and flesh in order that through death" (Hebrews 2:14). The Son of God as such could not die; to Him belongs by nature an "indestructible life" (Hebrews 7:16 margin). If He was to die, therefore, He must take to Himself another nature to which the experience of death were not impossible (Hebrews 2:17). Of course it is not meant that death was desired by Him for its own sake. The purpose of our passage is to save its Jewish readers from the offense of the death of Christ. What they are bidden to observe is, therefore, Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels because of the suffering of death, 'crowned with glory and honor, that by the grace of God the bitterness of death which he tasted might be to the benefit of every man' (Hebrews 2:9), and the argument is immediately pressed home that it was eminently suitable for God Almighty, in bringing many sons into glory, to make the Captain of their salvation perfect (as a Savior) by means of suffering. The meaning is that it was only through suffering that these men, being sinners could be brought into glory.

Pastor Bill

December 4 - Friday

“Christmas In Hebrews” Pt. 3

In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety.

Hebrews 5:7

It is not implied that during this human life—"the days of his flesh" (Hebrews 5:7)—He had ceased to be God, or to have at His disposal the attributes which belonged to Him as God. That is already excluded by the representations of Hebrews 1. The glory of NT life consists precisely in the bringing of its revelations directly by the Son rather than by mere prophets (Hebrews 1:1), and it was as the splendor of God's glory and the express image of His substance, upholding the universe by the word of His power, that this Son made purification of sins (Hebrews 1:3). Indeed, we are expressly told that even in the days of the flesh, He continued still a Son (Hebrews 5:8), and that it was precisely in this that the wonder lay: that though He was and remained (imperfect participle) a Son, He yet learned the obedience He had set Himself to (compare Phil. 2:8) by the things which He suffered. Similarly, we are told not only that, though an Israelite of the tribe of Judah, He possessed "the power of an indissoluble life" (Hebrews 7:16 margin), but, describing that higher nature which gave Him this power as an "eternal Spirit" (compare "spirit of holiness," Romans 1:4), that it was through this eternal Spirit that He could offer Himself without blemish unto God, a real and sufficing sacrifice, in contrast with the shadows of the Old Covenant (Hebrews 9:14). Though a man, therefore, and truly man, sprung out of Judah (Hebrews 7:14), touched with the feeling of human infirmities (Hebrews 4:15), and tempted like as we are, He was not altogether like other men. For one thing, He was "without sin" (Hebrews 4:15; Hebrews 7:26), and, by this characteristic, He was, in every sense of the words, separated from sinners. Despite the completeness of His identification with men, He remained, therefore, even in the days of His flesh different from them and above them.

Pastor Bill

December 5 - Saturday

“Christmas In Philippians” Pt. 1

“who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped”,

Philippians 2:6

Paul, in Phil. 2:5-30, is not formally expounding the doctrine of the Person of Christ; he is alluding to certain facts concerning His Person and action perfectly well known to his readers, in order that he may point out Christ's example. He is exhorting his readers to unselfishness, such unselfishness as esteems others better than ourselves, and looks not only on our own things but also on those of others.

Precisely this unselfishness, he declares, was exemplified by our Lord. He did not look upon His own things but the things of others; that is to say, He did not stand upon His rights, but was willing to forego all that He might justly have claimed for Himself for the good of others. For, says Paul, though, as we all know, in His intrinsic nature He was nothing other than God, yet He did not, as we all know right well, look greedily on His condition of equality with God, but made no account of Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; and, being found in fashion as a man, humbled Himself, becoming obedient up to death itself, and that, the death of the cross.

This portion of Philippians contains three sections: First, a presentation of Jesus, the Son of God Who became a Servant (vs. 5-11) with the objective To show people what He is really like – His Lordship is the fruit of the pathway of service.

Second, is a summons to you and me as servants (vs. 12-16). The purpose of this section is for us to see and then make humility and serving a fact in our lives.

Finally, the third, is an illustration of people who serve in the spirit of the servant (vs. 17-30). These three illustrations become the “centerpiece” of this teaching from Phil. 2:5-30. Our focus will be on the first – the Presentation of Jesus which we will discuss tomorrow.

Pastor Bill

December 6 - Sunday

“Christmas In Philippians” Pt. 2

“who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped”,

Philippians 2:6

The Presentation Of Jesus’ incarnation in this Epistle can be articulated best by a brief understanding of the words:

Form: no reference to shape of physical object. It refers to the outward expression of the inmost nature – not external imposition.

Existed: “being” – Paul informs us the Lord’s possession of divine nature did not cease when He came to earth. He gave expression to deity not only before being man but after. A key point here – *He did not empty Himself of His Deity in the incarnation.*

God (1st usage): w/o the definite article – therefore refers to divine essence. The Lord to His nature is the possessor of the divine essence of Deity – co-participant with God the Father, Holy Spirit.

God (2nd usage): no article – if preceded it – means equal with God the Father. Refers not to the three persons of the Trinity or equality in possession of divine essence.

Robbery: unlawful or a treasure to be retained. He did not consider it should be retained at all hazards but He waived His rights to that expression.

Now we can add verse **2:7 (NASB)** “but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men”. He set aside ***the outward the expression of His Deity*** and ***gave outward expression of Himself to a bond-slave***. This is the meaning of “emptied Himself”. The verb “taking” indicates a remarkable factor – the act of taking the form of a bond servant preceded and was the cause of the act of emptying, emphasizing the Lord’s commitment to serve us.

Finally, our Lord was the Master of death – He died as no other – He died of His own volition (vs. 8).

Pastor Bill

December 7 - Monday

“Christmas In The Gospel Of John”

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

John tells us that it was the Word, eternal in His Being, God's eternal fellow, the eternal God's self, that, as "come in the flesh," was Jesus Christ (1 John 4:2). "And the Word became flesh" (John 1:14), he says. The terms he employs here are not terms of substance, but of personality. The meaning is not that the substance of God was transmuted into that substance which we call "flesh." "The Word" is a personal name of the eternal God; "flesh" is an appropriate designation of humanity in its entirety, with the implications of dependence and weakness. The meaning, then, is simply that He who had just been described as the eternal God became, by a voluntary act in time, a man. The exact nature of the act by which He "became" man lies outside the statement; it was matter of common knowledge between the writer and the reader. The language employed intimates merely that it was a definite act, and that it involved a change in the life-history of the eternal God, here designated "the Word." The whole emphasis falls on the nature of this change in His life-history. He became flesh. That is to say, He entered upon a mode of existence in which the experiences that belong to human beings would also be His. The dependence, the weakness, which constitute the very idea of flesh, in contrast with God, would now enter into His personal experience. And it is precisely because these are the connotations of the term "flesh" that John chooses that term here, instead of the more simply denotative term "man." What he means is merely that the eternal God became man. But he elects to say this in the language which describes what it is to become man. The contrast between the Word as the eternal God and the human nature which He assumed as flesh, is the hinge of the statement.

Pastor Bill



December 8 - Tuesday

“The Incarnation is a Thing Too Wonderful” Pt.1

Some things are simply too wonderful for explanation--the navigational system of the Arctic tern, for example. How does it find its way over twelve thousand miles of ocean from its nesting grounds in the Arctic to its wintering grounds in the Antarctic! Ornithologists have conducted all sorts of tests without finding the answer. Instinct is the best they can offer--no explanation at all, merely a way of saying that they really have no idea. A Laysan albatross was once released 3,200 miles from its nest in the Midway Islands. It was back home in ten days.

The migration of birds is a thing too wonderful.

When the angel Gabriel told Mary, "You will be with child and give birth to a son," she had a simple question about the natural: How can this be, since I am a virgin?!

The answer had to do not with the natural but with something far more mysterious than the tern's navigation--something, in fact, entirely supernatural: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the Most High will overshadow you" (Luke 1:35, NIV). That was too wonderful, and Mary was silent. She had no question about the supernatural. She was satisfied with God's answer. The truth about the Incarnation is a thing too wonderful for us. Who can fathom what really took place first in a virgin's womb in Nazareth and then in a stable in Bethlehem!

At the end of the book of Job, instead of answering his questions, God revealed to Job the mystery of Who He was. Then Job despised himself. "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know" (Job 42:3, RSV).

In one of David's "songs of ascents" he wrote, "My heart is not proud, O Lord, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me" (Psalm 131:1,2, NIV).

Elisabeth Elliot

December 9 - Wednesday

“The Incarnation is a Thing Too Wonderful” Pt.2

A close and fretful inquiry into how spiritual things "work" is an exercise in futility. Even wondering how "natural" things are going to work if you bring God into them--how God will answer a prayer for money, for example, or how your son-in-law is going to find a house for eight in southern California (on a pastor's salary) is sometimes an awful waste of energy. God knows how. Why should I bother my head about it if I've turned it over to Him? If the Word of the Lord to us is that we are "predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with his purpose" (Ephesians 1:11, NIV), we may apprehend this fact by faith alone. By believing that God means just what He says, and by acting upon the word (faith always requires action), we apprehend it--we take hold of it, we make it our own. We cannot make it our own by mere reason--"I don't see how such-and-such an incident can possibly have anything to do with any divine 'plan.'"

Why should we see how! Is it not sufficient that we are told that it is so? We need not see. We need only believe and proceed on the basis of that assured fact.

Mary's acceptance of the angel's answer to her innocent question was immediate, though she could not imagine the intricacies and mysteries of its working in her young virgin body. She surrendered herself utterly to God in trust and obedience.

Do you understand what is going on in the invisible realm of your life with God? Do you see how the visible things relate to the hidden Plan and Purpose? Probably not. As my second husband Addison Leitch used to say, "You can't unscrew the Inscrutable." But you do see at least one thing, maybe a very little thing, that He wants you to do. "Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult [other translations say too hard, too wonderful] for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven.... nor is it beyond the sea.... no, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it" (Deuteronomy 30:11-14, NIV).

Let it suffice you, as it sufficed Mary, to know that God knows. If it's time to work, get on with your job. If it's time to go to bed, go to sleep in peace. Let the Lord of the Universe do the worrying.

Elisabeth Elliot

December 10 - Thursday

“The Incarnation” Pt. 1

For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;
And the government will rest on His shoulders;
And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:6 (NASB)

It was unthinkable that God, the Father of Truth, should go back upon His word regarding death in order to ensure our continued existence. He could not falsify Himself; what, then, was God to do? Was He to demand repentance from men for their transgression? You might say that that was worthy of God, and argue further that, as through the Transgression they became subject to corruption, so through repentance they might return to incorruption again. But repentance would not guard the Divine consistency, for, if death did not hold dominion over men, God would still remain untrue. Nor does repentance recall men from what is according to their nature; all that it does is to make them cease from sinning. Had it been a case of a trespass only, and not of a subsequent corruption, repentance would have been well enough; but when once transgression had begun men came under the power of the corruption proper to their nature and were bereft of the grace which belonged to them as creatures in the Image of God. No, repentance could not meet the case. What—or rather Who was it that was needed for such grace and such recall as we required? Who, save the Word of God Himself, Who also in the beginning had made all things out of nothing? His part it was, and His alone, both to bring again the corruptible to incorruption and to maintain for the Father His consistency of character with all. For He alone, being Word of the Father and above all, was in consequence both able to recreate all, and worthy to suffer on behalf of all and to be an ambassador for all with the Father.

Athanasius – The Council of Nicea¹



¹ “The Incarnation” by Athanasius

December 11 - Friday

“The Incarnation” Pt. 2

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law,
Galatians 4:4 (NASB)

The incorruptible and immaterial Word of God entered our world. In one sense, indeed, He was not far from it before, for no part of creation had ever been without Him Who, while ever abiding in union with the Father, yet fills all things that are. But now He entered the world in a new way, stooping to our level in His love and Self-revealing to us. He saw the reasonable race, the race of men that, like Himself, expressed the Father's Mind, wasting out of existence, and death reigning over all in corruption. He saw that corruption held us all the closer, because it was the penalty for the Transgression; He saw, too, how unthinkable it would be for the law to be repealed before it was fulfilled. He saw how unseemly it was that the very things of which He Himself was the Artificer should be disappearing. He saw how the surpassing wickedness of men was mounting up against them; He saw also their universal liability to death. All this He saw and, pitying our race, moved with compassion for our limitation, unable to endure that death should have the mastery, rather than that His creatures should perish and the work of His Father for us men come to nought, He took to Himself a body, a human body even as our own. Nor did He will merely to become embodied or merely to appear; had that been so, He could have revealed His divine majesty in some other and better way. No, He took our body, and not only so, but He took it directly from a spotless, stainless virgin, without the agency of human father—a pure body, untainted by intercourse with man. He, the Mighty One, the Artificer of all, Himself prepared this body in the virgin as a temple for Himself, and took it for His very own, as the instrument through which He was known and in which He dwelt. Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death instead of all, and offered it to the Father. This He did out of sheer love for us, so that in His death all might die, and the law of death thereby be abolished because, having fulfilled in His body that for which it was appointed, it was thereafter voided of its power for men. This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned back to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection. Thus He would make death to disappear from them as utterly as straw from fire.

Athanasius – The Council of Nicea

December 12 - Saturday

“The Incarnation” Pt. 3

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

John 1:1 (NASB)

The Word perceived that corruption could not be got rid of otherwise than through death; yet He Himself, as the Word, being immortal and the Father's Son, was such as could not die. For this reason, therefore, He assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word Who is above all, might become in dying a sufficient exchange for all, and, itself remaining incorruptible through His indwelling, might thereafter put an end to corruption for all others as well, by the grace of the resurrection. It was by surrendering to death the body which He had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from every stain, that He forthwith abolished death for His human brethren by the offering of the equivalent. For naturally, since the Word of God was above all, when He offered His own temple and bodily instrument as a substitute for the life of all, He fulfilled in death all that was required. Naturally also, through this union of the immortal Son of God with our human nature, all men were clothed with incorruption in the promise of the resurrection. For the solidarity of mankind is such that, by virtue of the Word's indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all. You know how it is when some great king enters a large city and dwells in one of its houses; because of his dwelling in that single house, the whole city is honored, and enemies and robbers cease to molest it. Even so is it with the King of all; He has come into our country and dwelt in one body amidst the many, and in consequence the designs of the enemy against mankind have been foiled and the corruption of death, which formerly held them in its power, has simply ceased to be. For the human race would have perished utterly had not the Lord and Savior of all, the Son of God, come among us to put an end to death.

Athanasius – The Council of Nicea



December 13 - Sunday

“The Incarnation” Pt. 4

For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all,
therefore all died;

2 Corinthians 5:14 (NASB)

This great work was, indeed, supremely worthy of the goodness of God. Therefore, the Word of the All-good Father was not unmindful of the human race that He had called to be; but rather, by the offering of His own body He abolished the death which they had incurred, and corrected their neglect by His own teaching. Thus by His own power He restored the whole nature of man. The Savior's own inspired disciples assure us of this. We read in one place: "For the love of Christ constrains us, because we thus judge that, if One died on behalf of all, then all died, and He died for all that we should no longer live unto ourselves, but unto Him who died and rose again from the dead, even our Lord Jesus Christ." And again another says: "But we behold Him Who has been made a little lower than the angels, even Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that by the grace of God He should taste of death behalf of every man." The same writer goes on to point out why it was necessary for God the Word and none other to become Man: "For it became Him, for Whom are all things and through Whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the Author of their salvation perfect through suffering. He means that the rescue of mankind from corruption was the proper part only of Him Who made them in the beginning. He points out also that the Word assumed a human body, expressly in order that He might offer it in sacrifice for other like bodies: "Since then the children are sharers in flesh and blood, He also Himself assumed the same, in order that through death He might bring to nothing Him that hath the power of death, that is to say, the Devil, and might rescue those who all their lives were enslaved by the fear of death." For by the sacrifice of His own body He did **two things: He put an end to the law of death** which barred our way; and **He made a new beginning of life for us**, by giving us the hope of resurrection. By man death has gained its power over men; by the Word made Man death has been destroyed and life raised up anew.

This, then, is the first cause of the Savior's becoming Man. There are, however, other things which show how wholly fitting is His blessed Presence in our midst; and these we must now go on to consider.

Athanasius – The Council of Nicea

December 14 - Monday

“The Incarnation” Pt. 5

For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

Romans 1:21 (NASB)

When God the Almighty was making mankind through His own Word, He perceived that they, owing to the limitation of their nature, could not of themselves have any knowledge of their Artificer, the Incorporeal and Uncreated (Nature of God – PB). He took pity on them, therefore, and did not leave them destitute of the knowledge of Himself, lest their very existence should prove purposeless. For of what use is existence to the creature if it cannot know its Maker? How could men be reasonable beings if they had no knowledge of the Word and Reason of the Father, through Whom they had received their being? They would be no better than the beasts, had they no knowledge save of earthly things; and why should God have made them at all, if He had not intended them to know Him? But, in fact, the good God has given them a share in His own Image, that is, in our Lord Jesus Christ, and has made even themselves after the same Image and Likeness. Why? Simply in order that through this gift of Godlikeness in themselves they may be able to perceive the Image Absolute, that is the Word Himself, and through Him to apprehend the Father; which knowledge of their Maker is for men the only really happy and blessed life.

But, as we have already seen, men, foolish as they are, thought little of the grace they had received, and turned away from God. They defiled their own soul so completely that they not only lost their apprehension of God, but invented for themselves other gods of various kinds. They fashioned idols for themselves in place of the truth and revered things that are not, rather than God Who is, as St. Paul says, "worshipping the creature rather than the Creator."

Moreover, and much worse, they transferred the honor which is due to God to material objects such as wood and stone, and also to man; and further even than that they went, as we said in our former book. Indeed, so impious were they that they worshipped evil spirits as gods in satisfaction of their lusts. They sacrificed brute beasts and immolated men, as the just due of these deities, thereby bringing themselves more and more under their insane control. Magic arts also were taught among them, oracles in sundry places led men astray, and the cause of everything in human life was traced to the stars as though nothing existed but that which could be seen. In a word, impiety and lawlessness were everywhere, and neither God nor His Word was known. Yet He had not hidden Himself from the sight of men nor given the knowledge of Himself in one way only; but rather He had unfolded it in many forms and by many ways.

Athanasius – The Council of Nicea

December 15 - Tuesday

“How Do We Celebrate The Incarnation This Year?”

“Therefore let us celebrate the feast...”

1 Corinthians 5:8 (NASB)

As enter the Christmas week 2020, how do we celebrate the Incarnation? May we take note that Heaven that took the initiative in announcing Christmas with the appearance of the angelic host who said to the shepherds *"To you, today in Bethlehem, is born a Savior."* Then they said, *"Go."* Therefore there was a Divine directive to **move**.

Because we live in a heavily materialistic society with all sorts of pleasures and delights around us, as well as the busy-ness of our own personal schedules and jobs, there's something less than enthusiasm that can creep up on us with regard to Christmas. It's not that we don't like Christmas, but the season carries with it a certain number of demands, and sometimes we have a tendency to heave a sigh and think, *Celebrating this Christmas season is going to take work*. If we have a family and kids, there's the decoration of the house and the tree, shopping, and wrapping of presents. There's special cooking that goes on, invitations to the homes of friends, and special events at the church.

With all that, there's a need to develop a *mindset* and make a *decision*, i.e., to move. It's a decision to come to terms with to never come to Christmas *status quo*; Never come on the basis of, "Well, I'll just put on a happy face," but *wolet* something infuse our spirit—that **fresh joy of this season** would come upon us, and we would receive it, along with a child-like expectancy.

Entering this season, then, we need to set a *pace mentally, emotionally, and spiritually* that will maximize how we observe it. To do that calls for an **entering in**. We need to *activate Christmas* by entering into it with a welcome to its true Spirit. It's making the "connect." Let's consider that celebrating Christmas means to refuse the spirit of Scrooge and receiving the Lord's Spirit of Christmas.

Pastor Bill

December 16 - Wednesday

“Refusing The Scrooge Spirit”

Scripture: Matt. 2:1-12

As we step into the Christmas month, I want to talk with you about refusing the Scrooge spirit because inevitably there are all kinds of things that attempt to **diminish the summons of Christmas** that we welcome its celebration.

It's a *decision* we make, and it is a decision that will work even if you are busy or tired. It requires resisting and refusing another order of spirit—the “bah-humbug” attitude. Probably no one in this room is as negative as Ebenezer Scrooge, but you know what I mean by the **“Scrooge spirit”**—that which attempts to **dampen joy** and **reduce** our sense of animation, expectation, and pursuit of the season. I'm not talking about getting wild and happy; I'm talking about deciding to **open to the Lord** and **welcome His season**.

Recently, we needed a flashlight to find something in a cupboard, and one of the batteries was corroded over the connect. You'd push the switch and nothing happened. So I had to reach in and scrape out that corrosion so I could activate the switch. That's what I'm talking about. The “switch” doesn't automatically come on because we turn the page on the December calendar. There can be things that accumulate from the past, from personal history. Or there can be things of present circumstance, so you have to see that the celebration of Christmas is activated and then enter in.

Let me identify the **Scrooge spirit** for a moment, because it is exemplified in Herod. Herod, in fact, is the original Grinch. And that's really true. Just as the Grinch came and took away things that represented the season, Herod's effort was to kill the Christ-child who, as we say, is the reason for the season. He didn't succeed, as we know, but he characterized that. He is a model of duplicity and self-centeredness.

I don't know if “model” is a good word because we usually think of something modeled as splendid and desirable to emulate, but **Herod** is the very picture of **duplicity and hate**. In fact, a study of Herod could occupy twenty minutes of lecturing on details regarding a guy who murdered his own wives and strangled to death the one he loved most.

He was just a horribly distorted person, and it comes to play in this text as you see him **lying to the wise men**. He does not want to find out where the Christ-child is so he can come and worship Him; he wants to find out so he can **kill the Child**. Herod is asking when they saw the star because he wants to calculate the age of this potential heir to the throne that he currently occupies.

Pastor Jack Hayford

December 17 - Thursday

“Refusing The Scrooge Spirit” Pt. 2

Scripture: Matt. 2:1-12

Identifying the Scrooge spirit has to do with what happens **when the wise men encounter Herod**, and **their response** to the situation. In it, we see how the Scrooge spirit is **any stance toward receiving Christmas** that either **rejects its presence** or **attempts to kill it**. That's a *choice of refusal*. It's a choice of **rejecting anything other than a posture of receptivity**. It's that I choose to stance myself in **receptivity** to welcome the Christmas spirit.

I realize there are many things that happen to people that influence their thinking about Christmas. Over the years, I've encountered an amazing number of **people who have been taught not to celebrate Christmas**. They have been taught that it was designed after a pagan holiday. They have been told that Santa was a picture of Satan. They've been told nobody knows when Jesus was born anyway, so it's hypocritical to celebrate December 25th. It is true, of course, that nobody knows exactly what day Jesus was born. But the fact is, then, you don't know that it **wasn't** December 25th! The issue isn't *which* day, but that there ought to be *some* day. And Christmas on December 25th is the day that has been celebrated for a long time.

Then there are those who feel they are **disallowed from celebrating the season** because they have had it hammered into them, often from childhood, that the celebration is **irreverent**. I have actually heard it said from the pulpit that Santa is a representative of Satan because he has a red suit!! Or the clincher for not welcoming Christmas is because S-A-N-T-A has the same letters as S-A-T-A-N.

That kind of nonsense has tormented and trapped people who believed it. As sincere as they may have been, they were sincerely wrong and confused in the things that guided their decision to exclude themselves from celebration of the season.

I have dealt with hundreds of people who were raised in a "good Christian home," where they were told, *"We don't celebrate Christmas because it's commercial, and it compromises the truth of the gospel and who Jesus really is."* And built into them is a deep resentment toward anything that has to do with church and God and Christ and the Bible, and sadly, they pass that along to their kids.

Pastor Jack Hayford

December 18 - Friday

“Why Celebrate?”

Scripture: Matt. 2:1-12

Christmas is a marvelous chance to touch the world with the love of God. The world is particularly vulnerable to the tender touch of the love of God at this season. The good will that rises at Christmas did not generate from out of a vacuum. People who don't even understand the love of God in Jesus Christ often get a whole lot more generous and thoughtful at Christmas time; they become more vulnerable to the tenderness of the season. I don't think that comes upon the world by accident. I think that God honors the fact that there are hosts of His own people who come into the season, as we have, who open themselves and begin to reach out, and it spawns something that becomes self-perpetuating by the power of the Holy Spirit, who is the true Spirit of Christmas.

Along with the distancing that comes with the debunking, there are those who have painful recollections that surround the season—perhaps a family member died on Christmas Day. That annual recollection of emotions impacts people who all the more feel the challenge of saying, “I’m going to make up my mind not to be trapped by the Scrooge spirit,” that is by anything that disables ready reception to Christmas.

Six ways to refuse the Scrooge spirit:

1. Refuse to let “the times” depress you

In verse one, it refers to “...in the **days of Herod** the king.” These are days of dismal influence and oppressive rule. The first thing to do in refusing the Scrooge spirit is to **refuse to let “the times” depress you**. Our world is abundant with “bad news,” and on a personal level, there are always things that will try to taunt, tempt, and trap you into not wanting to receive Christmas.

2. Refuse to let puzzling surprises stop you.

In verse two, the wise men ask: “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and **have come to worship Him.**”

When they arrive in Jerusalem, they have every reason to expect this is where the King of the Jews will be. And not only is there a non-Jewish king on the throne, nobody knows what they are talking about. Now, these guys have traveled a long way, and this is a bewildering surprise to them. The lesson? *Don't let puzzling surprises stop you.* There will be things that happen that you weren't counting on. But no matter what those things are, come to Christmas and open up broadly to its celebration.

Here is the good news: *“To you today is born a Savior who is Christ the Lord.”* It's trumpeted from the hillsides by angels, and it calls us to come to the spirit of celebration, even beyond things that are puzzling. You and I are going to bump into something surprising along the way to Christmas that holds the potential of blocking or reducing our readiness to pursue the season. We have to **make up our minds**, just as the wise men did when they were told that no one knew what they were talking about: **We have come to worship the King.**

December 19 - Saturday

“Refusing The Scrooge Spirit”

Scripture: Matt. 2:1-12

3. Refuse to just *know* where to find the King.

Go there. The most impressive thing in this text to me is found in verses four to eight. I’ve always been amazed at the capacity of the scribes to give a specific answer, on the basis of Scripture, about where the promised Messiah would be found. They knew where He would be born. They also knew that there was reason to **expect the sign of a star**, because that was also prophesied.

The scribes are the scholars of the community. They know the Scriptures inside out. So when the wise men come and say, “We’ve seen His star in the East,” any scribe would know there was a prophecy about that. The wise men said, “We’ve come to see where the King is born.” And the scribes respond, “*Well, this isn’t the place, but we can tell you where He’s born because the Scriptures say this.*” So the wise men head off, and the amazing thing is, **nobody goes with them**. Although they represented the community’s spiritual leadership, **the scribes didn’t go**.

The lesson? You can know everything about what the season is about; you can even know Who is the centerpiece of the season. You can have scriptures that tell you what is the appropriate approach to the season, which is to come and worship the King, and **still not go there**.

So, I have to refuse to simply know **where** to find the King—I **have to decide I am going to Him**.

4. Refuse doubt that God will to manifest Himself in unlikely places.

Verse 9 says, “When they heard the king, they departed.” **The wise men decided to go**. The scribes told them to go to Bethlehem. But Bethlehem of that day was nothing but a little burg. It would have been like Nazareth. Remember how it was said, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

It would have been dubious to expect that Bethlehem was a great place to go. It was obviously lacking in amenities, as Joseph and Mary found out. Definitely not the center of the universe. But the wise men were told Bethlehem was the place to go—not the capital city but a little burg a few miles south. So they head off. The lesson? As I come into this season, **I need to make up my mind that God is ready to manifest Himself in unlikely places**.

As much as anything I would like us to pick up in this message are two things: this and one item as I come to the last point. Watch for the Lord to make your Christmas in situations that would seem exactly opposite to your expectations. In those situations, you will say, “*This is a set-up by God.*” It will be a set-up that, in most cases, will not be either comfortable or desirable. But **give yourself to it**.

Pastor Jack Hayford

December 20 - Sunday

“Refusing The Scrooge Spirit” Pt. 2

The wise men will come to the unlikely place called Bethlehem and pour out the treasures they have—it is the relinquishing of not only gifts and what that represents materially, but also the **pouring out of themselves**. What the Lord calls us to as we come to Him at Christmas is to **expect an encounter beyond our calculation**.

They not only will come to a town that doesn't offer high promise, they will be directed to a barn, and coming into the barn they will find a Baby—a Child of poverty—wrapped in swaddling clothes that are virtually rags, in a manger where animals eat. The lesson? **Be willing to give yourself away in an unlikely place where nothing is what you would expect.** And I guarantee that you will find yourself saying, “Never has there been a Christmas like this one!” It's how we resist the Scrooge spirit and find the Holy Spirit of God working in our life at Christmas.

5. Refuse to disallow joy to come upon or sweep over your soul.

Don't let joy stop. When the wise men come toward the town, the Bible says, “They rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.” I don't know how you **rejoice with exceedingly great joy**. It could have just said they rejoiced. Or it could have said they rejoiced joyfully. But it says they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. We don't have any videos of it. We don't know how they did it. But we do know that these were stately men. They were scholars of their era. They weren't kings as we think of monarchs who rule areas.

The wise men had made a minimum of a 700–1,000-mile trip. That would have taken at least a month, and perhaps as many as sixty days. Even as much as the extensive trip cost, they then made lavish gifts as they arrived. They have come with an *earnestness of spiritual quest*, and when they see the star, they rejoice with *exceedingly great joy*.

As they approach the King, the essence of child-likeness crops up in some very stately gentlemen, and they get into rejoicing big time. Let's do it! Say with me, “Lord, make me a child again. Christmas is for children; that means it's for me!”

6. Refuse to be other than totally giving of yourself.

We touched on this in finding Christmas in unlikely places, about how the Lord calls us to give of ourselves in the spirit of the wise men. Notice in verse 12: “Being divinely warned in a dream...they departed for their own country another way.”

That's a remarkable verse. It's referring to the geographic route they took going home. They went home by a different route. Of course, the reason was because they had been warned by an angel not to go back and tell Herod. So the Holy Spirit of God is moving to give them direction, and as a result of His dealings, they go home a different way.

You recognize clearly where I'm going with this. *I want to leave Christmas differently from how I come into it.* And it's the result of refusing to be dominated by the times—by the unpredictable, by the things that don't hold likely promise. It's to not be caught up in the habits of human approach to things, but to be *captivated by the promise* of God's King, to *come to worship Him*, and, coming to worship Him, to move into the place where we say, “*Lord, I'm not only here to worship You, but I want to depart from this season different from the way I entered it.*” Amen?

December 21 - Monday

“Receiving the Christmas Spirit”

Scripture: Luke 1:34-35

The avenue by which the entry of the Redeemer came was through a mere girl from an undesirable community who had a miracle pregnancy. The question on Mary’s mind was, “How can this be, seeing I am just a young girl, not married and I’ve never been with a man? How can this be since I live in a town that nobody would think Messiah would come to? How in the world could this be?”

And here comes the answer from the angel: It is by the Holy Spirit. The power of the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christmas. When you talk about the true Spirit of Christmas, it is the Holy Spirit. “Receiving the Christmas Spirit” involves two things:

1. Becoming an instrument of Christmas to others, and
2. Acknowledging the Holy Spirit’s availability to enable that.

I want us to look at several evidences of the Holy Spirit at work at Christmas time in the original Christmas story. I begin by noting that Luke was a scientist—he was a doctor. Luke’s value system that is very apparent in his whole epistle. And it’s peculiarly apparent in the first two chapters that record what he contributes to the story of Christmas.

The Christmas story, in case you’re unfamiliar with this fact, is recorded essentially in two Gospels—the first two chapters of Matthew and the first two chapters of Luke—and they provide complementary material. For example, the shepherds are in Luke, and the wise men are in Matthew. But when we come to Luke’s rendition, there is profound emphasis on the Holy Spirit, and that’s very much like Luke throughout his whole Gospel. In the Synoptic Gospels, it’s an interesting fact that Matthew makes six references to the Holy Spirit. In Mark, there are eight times he specifically mentions the Holy Spirit. But Luke has 17 references. I don’t mean to suggest the others were trivializing or minimizing the ministry of the Spirit, but it’s a pronounced focus of Luke.

Doubtless, it is due to what Luke saw taking place during his travels with the Apostle Paul and the penetration of the Gospel throughout the pagan world. The power of the Holy Spirit was working in an environment among the Jewish people in Jerusalem and Judea where there was an openness by many to the truth of the Word of God and the Spirit of God. But to penetrate the pagan darkness, Luke recognized the awesome *need for the power of the Holy Spirit*. Forty-nine times in the Book of Acts the Holy Spirit is mentioned. It’s the heartbeat of Acts.

Unquestionably Luke references the Holy Spirit so much because it was his explanation of how that which changes the world happens through God’s people; it is by the power of the Spirit. So we come back to Mary where it starts. What happened through Mary changed the world more than any other single thing. And it happened through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Pastor Jack Hayford

December 22 - Tuesday

“Receiving the Christmas Spirit” Pt. 2

Luke watched the power of God by the Spirit and was aware of what was happening through the life of the Church and its outreach to the nations.

Yet Luke had never met Jesus. There's no evidence of it in Scripture, and Luke never suggests it. It's obvious he was a believer but his salvation experience is not recorded in the Bible. He was a companion in much of the Apostle Paul's travels, taking the gospel to the nations, and he was Paul's personal physician as well. But his exposure to Jesus' ministry was second-hand. We know that from the text in verses 1 to 4 where he says, *When I wrote this gospel, I spoke with people who were eyewitnesses, and people who ministered with Him from the very beginning.*

Luke is regarded as the foremost historian of antiquity because of the accuracy of his record. While there are people who don't necessarily care whether he was accurate about Jesus, the historical references he mentions, which can be cross-referenced with other writings of ancient times, match precisely and evidence that the man was a scholar, a brilliant scientist, and that he was careful and exact in his report.

The reason I mention those things is because of **Luke's emphasis on the Holy Spirit**. This is a guy who has as much brain power as anybody. He's meticulous with regard to detail. He's a man who, about to write a history, carefully goes about making sure that he gets solid evidence. And while it will be the Holy Spirit who will animate his writing of this book we call the Gospel of Luke, he is not a man who says, *"Well, I'm just going to trust God and go for it."* He's a person who is **trusting God** but also **working at it**, and then **depending on the Lord beyond what he can do**.

There are a lot of practical things to learn here, but the main thing that stands out in Luke's writing, aside from the technical accuracy and thorough detail that he provides, aside from his own testimony of how he came about that detail, is his **emphasis on the Holy Spirit**. He tells us, *This is the way the world becomes different*. And his Gospel is the one that gives us the picture of Christmas proper. Interestingly, of the 17 references to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the 24 chapters of Luke, seven of those references are in the two chapters here at the beginning where he talks about **Christmas**.

Those things I've emphasized here are teaching information, because I want you to see that this is not stretching an idea but it's in the heartbeat of this man as he gave this word. It's the **heartbeat of the Holy Spirit. Christmas happens by the power of the Spirit**.

Pastor Jack Hayford

December 23 - Wednesday

“Receiving the Christmas Spirit” Pt. 3

Now, in Luke’s Christmas report, I want you to go with me to **five places** in these two chapters and to see where he **references the ministry of the Holy Spirit**. There are seven times it is used, but five places where it’s mentioned.

(1) First, there is a **promise** to Zacharias that a son would be born.

“For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.” (1:15)

In the first reference, Zacharias is being addressed by the angel, and the promise is that a son that would be born—**John the Baptist**, we call him. Zacharias’ wife, Elizabeth, is an old woman and has not had a child. The angel is saying that her womb will be quickened. This is not a supernatural birth as was the virgin birth, but a supernatural birth very much as with Sarah, Abraham’s wife, where a woman, past her time of life, is miraculously capacitated to give birth to the one who will be the herald of Messiah. The promise is that he will receive **an unusual anointing of the Holy Spirit’s power**.

(2) Come down with me to verse 35.

And the angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.

It is the paradigm that precedes and overshadows all. It is the picture of **the Holy Spirit bringing redemptive entry into human circumstances**, dramatically beyond human resource. So the supernatural incarnation of Jesus through Mary is referenced.

(3) Let’s look at verse 41.

And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Mary goes to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, having not said a word about the fact that she is pregnant or that she is carrying the Messiah-child. Mary doesn’t even look pregnant, yet Elizabeth receives a prophetic word that is affirming and confirming to Mary.

It’s important to look at **the power of confirming to people things God has begun to do in them**. Have you ever had the experience of something happening, and you feel God is really giving you faith for something to occur, having seen the beginning signs of it? And then it seems like nothing is happening right now, and you wonder, “Is this just me or my own enthusiasm?” Mary is affirmed by Elizabeth. Even with the supernatural visitation of the angel, Mary was as subject to human question marks, as any one of us would be.

Pastor Jack Hayford

December 24 - Thursday

“Receiving the Christmas Spirit” Pt. 4

(4) Next...

Now his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying...

Verses 68-79 comprise a 12-verse **prophecy that Zacharias brings**. This took place on the occasion in which they were going to name the child after his father. He had been told by the angel to name the child John. But he had been struck dumb in the interim period. And now there comes a miraculous recovery of his power of speech, and he bursts out with this word of prophecy. The people were saying the baby should be named after his father, so Zacharias, unable to speak, writes down, “John,” and shows it to them. They protested that it was not a family name. Then he bursts out with a prophecy that goes on for twelve verses.

(5) Then in chapter 2:

And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was **Simeon**, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. 27So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law...

This references three things: Simeon’s **abiding in the life of the Spirit**, his **receiving revelation by the Holy Spirit**, and his **leading by the Spirit**.

Simeon abode and walked in the life of the Spirit, and he received revelation by the Holy Spirit, that is, insight or pragmatic things that work in life—hope, expectation, faith. Sometimes people use the word “revelation” recklessly and fail to recognize that the Divine revelation of Scripture goes by that name, too.

It doesn’t mean that God is giving someone more of the Bible. Yet there’s reason why people think that. I have met people in the Charismatic tradition (and we do live out that testimony ourselves as Spirit-filled people, so I’m not faulting the tradition) who get **so taken up with prophetic words they stop heeding the eternal Word**. And the Bible is the only ultimate Word; it is the gauge by which all prophecy is measured. This Word, the Bible, will abide forever, but it says that all prophecies will cease. They are temporary; they are only in part. That means you never get the whole picture to begin with and you never know the time by which it will work out.

Pastor Jack Hayford

December 25 - Friday

“Receiving the Christmas Spirit” Pt. 5

Noting those occasions from Luke’s report of the Holy Spirit at work, look with me at Luke’s Gospel applied to this Christmas. This is really where I want to go. The Holy Spirit who worked in Christmas past works in Christmas present. I want us to look at each of those five instances to see their application to us now. Biblical history records God’s ways and works so that presently we might receive and live in them. In other words, Christmas past reveals the working of the Spirit this Christmas.

Let’s look at two things that are rooted in the manifestations of the Holy Spirit in the first Christmas time story, and bring them up to a place where you would receive at least one of these workings at this Christmas time.

(1) That there be an outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon your children.

In the promise given to Zacharias, it says his son John will be filled with the Spirit from his mother’s womb. I want to ask you to join me this Christmas in openness to the Holy Spirit—that our children may be filled with the Spirit. *This Christmas time, receive the anticipation.* That didn’t happen that day for Elizabeth. But the promise came that day. And the promise is in scripture for you and me. “I’ll pour out My Spirit upon all flesh and your sons and your daughters will prophesy.”

(2) That Jesus be manifest through you to affect your world.

That’s what happened to Mary. I love these words, and I use them frequently:

redemptive entry. Redemptive entry is what the Lord does to bring the entrance of His redemptive operations into any human circumstance. It applies to those situations in which, left to themselves or human enterprise, nothing is going to change. But if God moves in, something will change. That’s redemptive entry.

Redemptive entry happens through human agency. God did not send His Son out of the sky. The Baby wasn’t carried in an angel’s arms to land in a manger. The living God did not walk into Jerusalem and, by raw power, say, “I’m here to take the throne.” He came by human agency. He came as a human being, and He came in the midst of so many circumstances that were not advantageous. It wasn’t an advantageous time for Mary’s pregnancy or the trip to Bethlehem. It wasn’t advantageous when Joseph and Mary couldn’t find a room. And the travail and delivery of the infant in the middle of a cattle barn were not advantageous. This Christmas time, ask the Lord what He would like to do through you *in a new way*.

Hear what I’m saying, dear ones: So often, we would rather just say, “Lord, do it!” and not be personally involved, because when we are, it costs more than we’d like to pay. Any time the Lord wants to do something that’s going to make a difference in your world or mine, He’s going to work through a human agent.

This Christmas, let’s say, “Lord, I would like to receive a ministry of the Holy Spirit this Christmas that would make my heart freshly available for You to do something of redemptive entry through me. Lord, make us that kind of a people. **Receiving the Christmas Spirit** is to receive these kinds of things.

Pastor Jack Hayford

December 26 - Saturday

“Coming To The Lord’s Table At The Start Of 2021”

It’s been our custom at AGM when we come to the beginning of a New Year, to partake of the Lord’s Table to remember Him and the grounds for the resources given to us through Jesus’ victory at the Cross. When you partake, let there be a *severing in your heart of anything* that would make you other than fruitful or victorious in this New Year.

If you are living with a sense of guilt from sins committed and would like to enter the New Year with a sense of being cleansed and free from that haunting sense of failure, the Lord wants you to know that as you come to His Table, He will sever that bond to the past.

For those who have come to the Lord and know you have been forgiven, perhaps there is a lurking *sense of condemnation*. The Lord doesn’t want you to enter the New Year with fog in the sky of your soul. He wants you to step in with the confidence of a clean posture before Him.

While you partake of the bread and the cup, confession of sin brings cleansing for those who stand in guilt, and for those who have confessed their sin but are carrying condemnation, release comes by lifting your head and letting the joy of the Lord begin to overflow you.

As the New Year begins, God invites us to come discard excess baggage and sever anything that lurks from the past. Let the Holy Spirit fill you afresh and drive out that oppressive work of hell that brings the spirit of guilt, condemnation and mourning.

Welcome the oil of rejoicing poured over your head, and enter this New Year as a runner, fit to run the race, with all eyes on our loving Savior who has already set the course.

Pastor Bill

December 27 - Sunday

“Excess Baggage For 2021” Pt. 1

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:1-2

Approaching the threshold of a New Year, we are not to be a superstitious people living in the empty supposition that everything can change because the page of a calendar is flipped over, but we do know that the Lord is faithful to move in on whatever is given to Him.

Just as surely as when a heart is given to Him and in one moment a life is transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the Kingdom of God’s dear Son—as surely as that transaction is accomplished by the Holy Spirit where one minute later is different from the minute before—we come together in a New Year in a commitment to Him to say, “Lord, we’re giving ourselves to You, as we step into a New Year,” confident that God will honor that.

The Hebrew reference is connected to the runner setting forth on a course and laying aside the things that would hold him back and slow him down, things which would hinder his keeping pace and keep him from accomplishing the goal.

This passage of Scripture in Hebrews notes three things:

- **Seeing** (those that have gone before us)
- **Setting aside** (anything that would hinder us)
- Recognizing that pursuit of the course has been **set before us**

The opening phrase is a direct reference to the chapter before, the great “gallery of faith” of Hebrews 11. It’s a great statement of people who have run and succeeded in pursuing the way the Lord had for their life. Everyone can go through the story of each one of the people mentioned in Hebrews 11 and see a portion of your own life because all of us face many of those same things.

The Bible begins this 12th chapter by saying: When you look around and see those who have run this course before, and how God rewarded their faith with triumph, then, *seeing that*, don’t let anything drag you down or hold you back. Lay aside anything that would turn you aside. Lay aside the excess baggage that would keep you from running your best, and look unto Jesus, “the author and finisher of our faith.”

Pastor Bill

December 28 - Monday

“Excess Baggage For 2021” Pt. 2

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:1-2

As we approach a new year, the Lord is calling us to a place of

- **Beginning fresh** with Him;
- **Moving on in faith** and certainty; and that
- There's a way **set before you**.

There are clear boundaries within which the Lord wants you to run. “Don’t violate the lane or you’ll disqualify yourself.”

The Lord is the One who sets the course. While He calls us to a narrow way and says it’s a fruitful way if you’ll run it, it’s also a way that He’s gone before (v. 2). “Author and finisher” literally is the One who founded our faith, and who accomplishes its full provision. He’s saying we can follow Him; it’s safe with Him. We can step into the future confidently with Jesus because He has been here before (Revelation 1:8). That’s why He can say the things He does prophetically, and here He says, *“If you’ll just run the race I’ve set before you, you can’t lose.”*

Therefore, we are to lay aside the weights—the training process (things that would drag you back); and the sin—part of the failure process (lack of discipline, lack of obedience). Ephesians 4:17-32 lists four categories of things we need to discard: those things which are **darkened, alienated, ignorant** and **hardened**. If we, as a person of life and light in Jesus, choose to give place to these things in your life, we’re living in darkness; living like a stranger when we are people who have been brought into the Family; and we are giving way to a heart to be hardened, when it’s a heart that’s been made new through Jesus.

So it says get out of your training clothes (the “old man”) and put on your running togs (the “new man”) (v. 22), discarding:

- Displeasing speech (v. 25, 29)
- Dishonest practices (v. 28)
- Devilish anger (v. 26, 27)
- Destructive attitudes (v.30)

Verse 32 is the answer to v. 31: To get rid of all these things—bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor and evil speaking—**let these things be characteristic of you:**

- Tenderhearted
- Forgiveness
- Kindness

Pastor Bill

December 29 - Tuesday

“Despair Is A Kind Of Possession Of Hell Itself”

Satan begins with his more pleasant sins so that he may later entangle the victim more hopelessly. But the devil is too clever to lay his net of despair in the bird's sight. Other sins are only the top cover, and once he flatters his prey into it, he has trapped him for eternity.

Despair, more than other sins, puts a man into a kind of possession of hell itself. As faith gives substance to the word of promise, so the cruelty of despair gives existence to the torments of hell in the conscience. This drains the spirit and makes the creature become his own executioner.

Despair puts a soul beyond all relief; the offer of pardon comes too late. Faith and hope can open a window to let out the smoke that offends the Christian in any circumstances. But the soul will be choked when it is fastened up within despairing thoughts of its own sins, and no crevice of hope is left for an outlet to the dread which smothers him.

Faith quenches the fiery dart of despair. The chief of Satan's strengths is the greatness and multitude of a person's sins, which he can use to bring a soul into such despair that he sees no way of escape from God's verdict against them. When the conscience is breached and waves of guilt pour in upon the soul they soon drown all the creature's efforts, as the great flood covered the tallest trees and highest mountains. And as nothing was visible then but sea and heaven, the despairing soul sees nothing except sin and hell. His sins stare him in the face as with the eyes of many devils, ready to drag him into the bottomless pit.

A mere fly dares to crawl over the sleeping lion, an animal whose awesome voice makes all beasts tremble when he is awake. Fools freely mock sin as soon as the eye of conscience is shut. But when God arms sin with guilt and lets this serpent sting the conscience, then the proudest sinner flees before it. Only faith handles sin in its fullest strength by giving the soul a glimpse of the great God.

William Gurnall

December 30 - Wednesday

“Opening To The Prophetic In 2021”

But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification, exhortation & consolation.

1 Corinthians 14:3

One of the dynamics the Spirit wants to release in our church in 2021, is the Lord using all of us prophetically to confirm and affirm His word to others.

Consider Mary’s trip to visit cousin Elisabeth, virtually the same distance as the trip that she and Joseph would later make from Nazareth to Bethlehem. The visit to Elizabeth takes place three months before that. So Mary actually goes south, down to Judea, two times from Galilee. Mary, like so many of us, was facing many things.

It was an extended trip. How did she go? Was she with a caravan of some kind? We’re not told, and it’s immaterial to the point except that the trip took time. It would have been many days of travel. I suppose people would think, there’s a girl walking along saying, “I’m pregnant with the Messiah.” But I think it would have been more like a young woman walking the path saying, “I know this incredible thing happened, but it’s more than I can imagine. I know what I think happened to me.” And that shifts very easily to, “I *think* I know what I think happened to me.”

I am not inventing something to make a point. We all live there. God makes something so vivid and alive to you—a word of promise comes from Scripture and leaps out to you—and as time goes by, we all get to the place where we wonder....

But when somebody comes and says to you, “You know, the Lord showed me that this is true,” and they don’t know what’s happened to you, it is a confirming word. That confirming, affirming word is an extremely important manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the Body of Christ. It’s actually far more important than when people go around and say, “*God told me to tell you to do this.*”

Listen folks, I don’t think going around giving people direction is any of our business. We are not about developing a dependency cult with people spinning around so-called “prophets” like satellites. The Bible says very clearly what prophecy is for:

- ...he who prophesies speaks **edification** and **exhortation** and **comfort** to men (1 Cor. 14:3)

But there is nothing more comforting than when somebody says, “The Lord put this on my heart to say to you.....” and **it confirms** what the Lord has already said directly to you. If God wants to give you *direction*, He can get through to you without the middle-man of some guru. Are you with me? What we don’t need is gurus like that. What we need are people who have a sensitivity to the Holy Spirit and who offer us edification, exhortation and comfort.

The Lord wants us to use the word of prophecy to encourage one another, to exhort, and to build up one another; to confirm one another. This New Year, let us each be an available instrument of the Spirit’s encouragement and hope.

Pastor Bill

December 31 - Thursday

“Fresh Faith For 2021”

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.

2 Corinthians 13:14

Love, in the heart of God, is the source of all spiritual blessing; grace expressed in Jesus Christ has made that blessing available to us and communion, the coming alongside of the Holy Spirit, is the means whereby it becomes ours. What the Father's heart has devised concerning us the Son has accomplished for us, and now the Holy Spirit communicates it to us.

Can we walk as a church in that type of faith for 2021? “And without faith it is impossible to please *Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and *that* He is a rewarder of those who seek Him” Hebrews 11:6 (NASB). Note the three facts about God that underlie true faith: **He is able** (Matt. 9:28); **He is willing** (Matt. 8:2); **He is** (Heb. 11:6).

By this question of faith I do not mean some vague belief that there is a God. I mean the conviction that God is: *living, present and active*.

Now faith is *the* substantiating of things hoped for, *the* conviction of things not seen – **Hebrews 11:1 (Darby)**. What do we hope for in 2021? The color yellow is quite real; but if I shut my eyes, then to me it has lost its reality; it is simply nothing – *to me*. With my faculty of sight to substantiate it, yellow becomes yellow to me. Not only is the color there; I have given it reality in my consciousness.

But even more than music or color, the “hoped for” things of Christ are eternal and real and we are given one faculty that can substantiate them. Faith, the faith of the Son of God, is this faculty. It makes divine things to become real in my experience. By resting on God's faithfulness, faith substantiates *to me* the unseen things I as yet can barely hope for. May we rest on His faithfulness so the unseen things of the Kingdom may become real and alive to my soul in 2009!

Watchman Nee (Editing by Pastor Bill)