



NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2005

*Don't be afraid! For behold, I bring you great news! For there is born in your heart a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!
And through the Holy Spirit, you will find the resurrected Christ wrapped in the cloths of your personality.
(My paraphrase of Luke 2:10-12 and the message of my heart)*

These verses were first spoken to the shepherds at the time of Jesus' birth. From my view from the resurrection side of the manger, these verses are the essence of THE message I have grown to love sharing...and I have witnessed many lives transformed by receiving this message. We no longer have to be afraid of where our hope comes from. Fear has many people striving to achieve identity, value, and security based on the world's standards...I know this fear too well. The glorious truth that sets us free from this fear is that when we receive the gift of Jesus, each of us become a new born creation (2 Corinthians 5:17) wrapped in the identity, value, and security of Christ Himself (Ephesians 1:13)! On the back are more glorious truths...truths of how God related to the shepherds long ago, and how God relates to us in the same way today. Below are three holiday insights that I hope encourage you.

The 4-foot diameter wreath on our barn (above) is a picture of grace...the wreath was made by my wife Joy. For the first time in years (due to a back ailment) Joy has felt like doing little things she loves to do. It's a miracle. What a delight to share her joy with her. But you know what? It was also a miracle for us to experience God's grace even when Joy was confined to the bed and house for so long. We wish you and your family a gracious new year!



HOLY CHILD

Here is newborn Wyatt, precious son of our niece and her husband, in modern swaddling cloths! What an amazing truth that Christ our Creator was born a little boy like this! Following is an excerpt from the song "Welcome to Our World" by Chris Rice that has touched my heart this holiday season.

Fragile fingers sent to heal us, tender brow prepared for thorns. Tiny heart whose blood will save us, unto us is born, unto us is born. So wrap our injured flesh around You, breathe our air and walk our sod. Rob our sin and make us holy, perfect Son of God, perfect Son of God. Welcome to our world.

It was amazing to hear 30+ boys from the Boys Home recently sing the entire song at chapel! I'd love for you to visit chapel any Tuesday evening to meet the boys.

HOLIDAY GREETINGS

Many of us are standing up for truth in response to some stores choosing to omit the name of Christ in their greetings and marketing. However, I am aware of the subtle temptation to more boldly try to *win their words*, while our deepest desire is for Christ through us to boldly *win their hearts*. Following are helpful insights from Preston Gillham of Lifetime Guarantee Ministries (www.lifetime.org).

It is disconcerting to see our American heritage and the faith of our founding fathers lost in the intoxicating fog of secularism and tolerance. The framers of our society were men and women of deep conviction who—by God's blessing—put together the framework of a society that would fuel capitalism. We have lost our way over time and become simply a capitalistic society. The secularists of today only prove with their tolerance that they believe in nothing of value. (However) it has never been a dream of God to have a superstore announce His deity and affirm the Christ of Christmas. His dream is that we will do this when we visit the superstore. We are the ones commissioned to be salt and light, not the corporate board and stockholders of XYZ retail center. If Christ is included next year, it will be for economic reasons, not personal conviction, and economics are down God's list of priorities from relationship.

HOLIDAY MOVIE AND HOLY WORDS

The *Chronicles of Narnia* is a holiday movie based on the book by late British author C.S. Lewis. Following are excerpts from his book *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1960, 62-65) that helps articulate the message of my heart.

In Christ a new kind of man appeared, and the new kind of life which began in Him is to be put into us. The Christian thinks any good he does comes from the Christ-life inside him. He does not think God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because He loves us. When Christians speak of being "in Christ" or of Christ being "in them," this is not simply a way of saying that they are thinking about Christ or copying Him. They mean that Christ is actually operating in them.

Shepherds Long Ago and Today

(Luke 2:8-20)

God meets us where we are. *The shepherds were living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night (2:8).* The shepherds were simply doing the best they knew to do. Whether you're rich or poor, healthy or sick, made bad mistakes, etc...God meets you just where you are. You don't have to, nor can you, "get right" for God to relate to you. God dealt with that on the cross.

God initiates relationship with us. *And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them (2:9).* The shepherds were not seeking God. They perhaps stood in fields looking at the stars above and sensed God the Creator...but even creation is God's initiative to reveal Himself to us (Romans 1:20). Only God can initiate...that's grace. We have no life of our own to initiate anything of eternal value. Adam and Eve were deceived into trying to initiate something fruitful, which led immediately to death. We are tempted with the same deception. I'm so glad God chose to relate to me, for I would have never decided (i.e., initiated a choice) to follow Christ!

God's truths are received through humility. *The shepherds were afraid (2:9).* The shepherds were humble servants primed to hear God. I believe God lovingly humbled me several years ago by taking away the illusion that my accomplishments were a means of "nourishment," and I came to realize I was actually starving for true life. During that humble time, God revealed Christ in my heart as the true Bread of life. Another example of God giving grace to the humble is a precious woman who has struggled with daily panic attacks for 15 years. In-Touch Ministries referred her to Christ Life Ministries, and Joy and I are ministering to her. She is so beautifully receiving the good news that she is complete in Christ (Colossians 2:10), and she has gone an entire month without a panic attack. She still has many struggles, but she is growing in hope and is sharing that hope with others.

God sends messengers with His presence. *And the glory of the Lord shone around the shepherds. The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people" (2:9-10).* "Angel" means "messenger." However, this angel was not simply given a message to pass on to the shepherds, because "the glory of the Lord shone" as the angel spoke. The significance of this one phrase is realized in Hebrews 1:3 that says "The Son (Christ) IS the brightness of God's glory!" Wow! Jesus IS the glory, the very outshining of God! Although I cannot explain it, I do understand from this phrase that the triune God was present with the angel and the shepherds. Today every Christ-one is a messenger through whom God uses to express the glory of His dear Son to the world! Every Christ-one has the presence of God with them. The deceiver doesn't want us to know this.

God's promises are specific. *For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And you will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger (2:11-12).* Through the angel, God revealed to the shepherds a specific town and a manger. Today, following Christ's resurrection, God speaks to us through the Holy Spirit. Are you aware of the 100s of specific things God promises to fulfill in you each day through the Holy Spirit? Everything we decide to do should not be because they are right things to do, or even good things to do...I believe every moment is God's promise for each of us to specifically relate to Christ!

Faith is receiving God's words. *The shepherds said, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us" (2:15).* It is vital to note that the shepherds received the angel's message and personally related the words as being from God. The shepherd's genuine free-will response was a fruit of this receiving and relating. I can be tempted to respond by RECEIVING TRUTHS ABOUT CHRIST, rather than genuinely responding by RECEIVING TRUTHS FROM CHRIST. The temptation is to respond by doing things out of obligation (*this is the right thing to do*) or out of guilt (*I really should to do this*). Christ came to free us to respond out of His life in us (*this is the most loving thing to do and I really want to do this*)! Faith is a receiver of God's grace. Faith receives the indwelling life of Christ moment by moment. Faith simply says "thank you" for God's continual grace.

I don't believe God initiates and then anxiously waits for our responses before He initiates something else. I believe God, and the Christ-life, are so much more miraculous than that! God is sovereign and loving. I really don't understand all of this, nor am I trying to get anyone to believe as I do. All I know is that I was blind and now I see...I did nothing to receive sight in the first place, and I can do nothing to be able to continue seeing...I just see! I thank God for continuously relating to me the sight of His dear Son in my heart and the free will to relate with Him. I have seen many people helped temporarily by merely responding to biblical principles, but I am more and more seeing people changed forever by receiving and embracing Christ as their very life.

When we hear from God, we will be excited to see how He fulfills His promises. *And the shepherds came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger (2:16).* I was always hesitant to step out in faith (i.e., respond to grace) to do anything when I was getting information about Christ second-hand. I was so self-conscious. When I began to realize God revealing Christ living in me, I became more Christ-conscious and joyfully started doing things the world considers foolish but that are the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18).

When we see God fulfill His promises, we will testify to others. *And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds (2:18).* The shepherds did not have to be coerced to witness to others...their testimonies were simply an overflow of the living words they had received. And people actually listened at awe to these humble servants! This encourages me!

Christ is always the focus of our relationships with God and other people. *Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen (2:20).* The shepherds first received God's glory in the LONELY FIELDS...then they saw God's glory in the LOWLY MANGER...then they related God's glory LITERALLY EVERYWHERE they went! Christ-ones, who are vessels of God's glory, express the fragrance of Christ to everyone with whom we relate (2 Corinthians 2:14)!