For many of us, the joy and anticipation of the season have become reduced to figuring out what we can afford to give our loved ones.

That’s why I’m pleased that we are able to give you this excerpt of Dan Schaeffer’s In Search Of The Real Spirit Of Christmas.

In the pages that follow, Dan draws us back to the mystery and inexpressible wonder that so many of us have lost along the way. When the darkness of our limited understanding meets the miraculous story of the Light of the World, it just might make the lights of this season seem to shine brighter than they have for a long time.

Mart De Haan
THE GOD WE THOUGHT WE KNEW

I must confess that I have a soft spot for many of our familiar holiday movies, but there is one of which I am especially fond. It is the old favorite TV special, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Charles Schulz’s classic story of a little boy trying to find out what Christmas is all about in the midst of all the cultural embellishments of the season always touches me.

In this ageless story, Charlie Brown is feeling the emotions that so many of us experience as we approach the Christmas season. He knows he should be happier, and yet what seems to be bringing everyone else holiday happiness eludes him. The cultural expressions of the season seem plastic to him and leave him feeling empty. Lucy’s unbridled greed in seeking real estate for a Christmas present and the blinking electric Christmas lights on Snoopy’s doghouse conspire to deplete his “holiday” feelings. Even his attempt to get into the Christmas spirit by directing the Christmas play fails.

At his lowest point, when Charlie despairs of ever finding out what Christmas is all about, his friend Linus quietly reminds him that Christmas is really all about the birth of the Savior, Jesus. This epiphany changes Charlie Brown’s entire attitude as he joyfully discovers that Christmas is far more than he ever thought it was. His views of Christmas, he learns, have been all wrong.

One of the most amazing truths of Christmas is that God’s entrance into our world reveals that much of what we think we know about God is wrong. (Mankind has misunderstood God from
the very beginning, so it is of little surprise that we still do.) In fact, this is one of the reasons that many modern-day Charlie Browns still fail to enter into the true Christmas spirit. Thinking they know the “real story” of Christmas, they tend to ignore it rather than examine it, leaving the Christmas story too soon. They fail to appreciate what God was showing us when He came into our world. But closer inspection reveals an event that makes no earthly or human sense.

**HOW WELL DO WE KNOW GOD?**

How would we have foreseen the incarnation? What would we have anticipated?

Because we see God as the Almighty Jehovah who is too glorious to look upon, wouldn’t we have expected Him to enter our world with ostentatious fanfare and world-stopping commotion?

“Well, didn’t He?” you might reply. “After all, angels announced the news to the shepherds. That’s certainly fanfare!” Yes, but they didn’t announce the news to everyone—not even to all shepherds.

“What about the Magi?” you might ask. True, a small group of Magi arrived from the east, following the star they had seen in the sky, but they were a mere token compared to the millions of people who inhabited the

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earth at the time.

“Well, then, what about the star?” Did everyone notice that one particular star? Did they understand the significance of that celestial sign? Of all the stars in the sky, did they focus on that one star above all others? It is doubtful. How many people even noticed the sky?

God did not choose to enter our world in the all-powerful city of Rome, but in the tiny town of Bethlehem. He was not born in a palace, but in a stable for animals. His royal entourage was not regally dressed nobles and princes, but common beasts of burden. His human parents were not royalty, but peasantry; His royal raiment nothing but common cloth.

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We would assume that a God who is all-powerful would exercise that power to protect His reputation and personal glory. And God would certainly not allow His puny creation to treat
Him with defiance. With His perfect righteousness and holiness, God would come in judgment to a creation that had mocked His law and ignored His commandments. But He didn’t.

We are tempted to say that God didn’t act “naturally.” It doesn’t seem natural to us that a perfect deity would treat His creation with so much love and grace after they had treated Him so badly. We can’t even imagine a God who would love enough to allow Himself to be treated with contempt and disdain. But that’s just the point. He did act naturally. Not once in the magnificent incarnation did God act outside of His divine character. We just didn’t know Him as well as we thought we did. In fact, when God put Himself at our disposal, we didn’t even recognize Him.

We knew many things about God, but our understanding was black and white. And when He came, He overwhelmed us with the brilliant colors of His divine character.

We thought we knew God, but the incarnation proved us wrong.

**IF GOD VISITED THE PLANET**

One of the most popular and cherished human ideas is that we can seek and find God. But if you had known ahead of time that God was planning to visit our planet, where would you have expected to find Him? Where would you have started looking for Him? Would you have thought of looking for
a baby? Would your first stop have been an animal stall? Would you have gone to the home of a carpenter to find the designer of the universe? Wouldn’t you have been looking for an angelic type of being—powerful, awesome, terrifying, and unapproachable?

If you knew that God planned to announce His coming to His world, would you ever have put a rude and crude bunch of shepherds anywhere near the top of the “to be notified” list? If you knew that God was going to visit your planet, what do you think He would plan for His first year on earth, or His first 5 years? What kind of splash would He make to get the world’s attention? Who would He speak to? How would He go about instituting change in this world He had created so perfectly, and which we had so dreadfully messed up? How would He use His awesome infinite power? How would He display His omnipotence, His omniscience, and His holiness?

Knowing what we think we know about God, we probably could come up with thousands of ideas, many of them reasonable and logical and even creative. But would we think to have Him humble Himself before His creation by being born a tiny vulnerable baby and spending His first days on this earth in an animal stall, unable to speak or even communicate any but His most basic human needs?

Christmas celebrates the awesome and amazing fact that God is grander, wiser, and more mysterious than we could have ever imagined.
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WE CAN’T FIND GOD BY OURSELVES
If there is one thing we learn at Christmas, it is that our understanding of God was so woefully inadequate that we could never have hoped to find Him on our own. How can you find a God you can’t even truly understand? Which leads to the next logical question: How would a God of perfect glory and awesome splendor reveal Himself?

In his best-selling book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancey contrasts the humility of Jesus’ entrance onto our planet with the prestigious entrance of the British royal family. In London, looking toward the auditorium’s royal box where the queen and her family sat, I caught glimpses of the . . . ways rulers stride through the world: with bodyguards, and a trumpet fanfare and a flourish of bright clothes and flashing jewelry. Queen Elizabeth II had recently visited the United States, and reporters delighted in spelling out the logistics involved: her 4,000 pounds of luggage included two outfits for every occasion, a mourning outfit in case someone died, 40 pints of plasma, and white kid-leather toilet seat covers. She brought along her own hairdresser, two valets, and a host of other attendants. A brief visit of royalty to a foreign country can easily cost 20 million dollars.

In meek contrast, God’s visit to earth took place in an animal shelter with no attendants present.
and nowhere to lay the newborn king but a feed trough. Indeed, the event that divided history, and even our calendars, into two parts may have had more animal than human witnesses. A mule could have stepped on Him (Zondervan, 1995; pp.36-37).

The British royalty are merely human beings, and look at the pomp and circumstance with which they arrive on the scene. In light of that, when we think that God was planning a visit to His own creation, with all of eternity to plan the event, we can’t look at the Christmas story and make sense out of it. Everything about Christmas is totally unexpected. In retrospect, of course, we see His infinite wisdom; but even then, we see this only with His divine help and the eyes of faith. God is so much different than we imagined Him to be.

We are not surprised that He is greater in glory than we could ever imagine. But the discovery that He is greater in humility is too great a leap for us to take. God and humility seem such opposite terms. Only in His infinite wisdom and mercy—and in the incarnation—could they ever be reconciled.

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One of the common tools of criminal investigators is to create a profile. By studying
the habits and patterns and behaviors of a given criminal, they can get a good idea of what he is thinking, why he acts the way he does, and sometimes even where he lives. By this process, they narrow down their search for who this criminal might be. In doing this, they apply human wisdom and logic to the sticky problem of human nature. They understand people because they are people themselves—they share the same human nature. Because they do, they can deduce how someone will act, and at times predict their actions.

But all these human-nature tools are useless when we come to God. Christmas reveals to us that the idea of God we had developed was woefully inadequate.

**CONFUSED BY HUMILITY**

When we read of God’s divine power and authority so clearly demonstrated in the Old Testament, we quite logically expect God to react and behave in that manner. When we remember the displays of His presence and power in burning bushes, fire by night, cloud by day, thunder, lightning, and many other awesome manifestations, we are sure that when He comes to visit us He will use these same methods. Familiarity with what He has done in the past blinds us to what He intended on that first Christmas.

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As J. B. Phillips writes, “Whenever familiarity breeds
contempt there is potential danger. The particular danger which faces us as Christmas approaches is unlikely to be contempt for the sacred season, but nevertheless our familiarity with it may easily produce in us a kind of indifference. The true wonder and mystery may leave us unmoved; familiarity may easily blind us to the shining fact that lies at the heart of Christmastide” (“The Christian Year” in Good News: Thoughts On God And Man, Macmillan, 1963).

Had you lived in first-century Israel and known Mary and Joseph, or been one of the shepherds or Magi, you might have been able to cradle God in your arms. You could have easily overpowered His tiny arms and legs as He lay there vulnerable and helpless.

Helpless God.

Vulnerable God.

Hungry God.

Tired God.

None of these phrases would have any meaning to us had Christmas never occurred. Indeed, we would consider them blasphemous. We could simply not imagine these words used in connection with perfect deity. But because of the incarnation, they have meaning.

Even more difficult for us to comprehend would be the reason God made Himself helpless, vulnerable, hungry, and tired. We could in a finite sense understand God’s power and His glory and His majesty, but nothing could prepare us to understand the depth of His love as demonstrated in His unimaginable humility. His actions on that wonderful day we celebrate every year as Christmas displayed love better than any definition could ever hope to do.

“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. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him” (Jn. 3:16-17). These familiar verses are the Magna Carta of the incarnation, the one and only possible explanation for the unthinkable.

Christmas is God unrecognized, God unexpected, God misunderstood. It is also, to our utter amazement and joy, God delightfully revealed.

We could never have sought such a God, because we have never understood Him and would never have recognized Him. So He had to come looking for us. That is the inescapable conclusion of the Christmas story.

God tracked us down, each and every one of us. He came to find us and reveal Himself to us because He wanted us to know Him. He wanted us to know the depth of His love. His entire life, from His humble birth to His humiliating and agonizing death on the cross, is proof of the love He has for us.

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of His love for us. Words weren’t enough. Only actions could communicate the extent to which He would go to bring us back home.

Do you want to get into the Christmas spirit? Cuddle a baby close to you. Let those tiny fingers grab yours. Snuggle the child against you and feel its complete dependence upon you. Experience the fragile vulnerability of that precious little life and you will begin, in a small sense, to understand the incarnation. Your God poured Himself into just such a frail life and made it His own. He allowed Himself to be dependent upon His creation, to be at their mercy. Then ask yourself: What kind of love would compel a perfect, all-powerful being to do such a thing?

We can never hope to capture the Christmas spirit and make it our own unless we understand that God is so much greater than we ever thought He was. We thought we knew all about God. The incarnation proved us wrong.

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WE CALL IT CHRISTMAS

We call it Christmas. The incarnation. The day God became a man. But have you ever noticed that our view of that amazing event is always vertical? We are focused, as we should be, on God coming down to us—or, perhaps more accurately, God appearing among us.

This is the scene we are allowed to see. And it is amazing. So amazing that it will take forever to truly grasp it. Yet there is another scene, one we have not been able to see. One we can only imagine. And that is what I’d like for you to do with me for a few moments. Imagine the incredible moment when Jesus left His proper place in heaven. A place known only to Him, where His glory dwells in unapproachable light. Have you ever wondered about that moment?

Author Madeleine L’Engle brings us a sense of this moment when she writes:

Was there a moment, known only to God, when all the stars held their breath, when the galaxies paused in their dance for a fraction of a second, and the Word, who had called it all into being, went with all His love into the womb of a young girl, and the universe started to breathe again, and the ancient harmonies resumed their song, and the angels clapped their hands for joy? (Bright Evening Star, Crosswicks, Inc., 1997).

In the past, we were allowed to see visible manifestations of His Shekinah glory. We saw the cloud by day, the fire by night, the burning bush, the earthquake, the great wind. These were not God. They were not even His shadow. They were the leaves that the...
power of the passing wind blows off the trees, evidence of His presence displayed for those with weak eyes and weaker faith. We saw but an eclipse of His glory, and only indirectly, for our fragile senses were not equipped to look upon or fathom such glory.

But there is another scene we have never really been told much about. It is, in fact, mentioned only in passing when we read that He “who, being in very nature God, . . . made Himself nothing” (Phil. 2:6-7).

Nothing? How could God make Himself nothing? Only by comparing His eternal glory, which our world cannot contain, with the feeble human nature that He would take upon Himself. There was simply “nothing” in that human nature or tiny body that our God took upon Himself that compared with His prior glory.

He made Himself nothing.

Suddenly His creative power was called upon again, creating a new form for His eternal existence. But instead of creating everything out of nothing, He who holds all things together would now pour everything into nothing.

With every inch He descended to earth, He allowed His glory to leak away, until His arrival on earth found Him empty. Only heaven would remember His former glory.

CHANGES IN HEAVEN
At a specific moment, if we can call it that, everything in heaven that had remained the same for eternity past changed. A decision made in eternity past, in the eternal perfect mind of God, suddenly reached that holy moment for which it had been born. The Son left the side of the Father and became a man.

We know what happened
on earth after that, but what about heaven? What was the reaction of the Father as His Son voluntarily undertook this suicide rescue mission? What emotions passed between the Father and the Son? What did the Son feel as the time drew near to leave His glory and His Father’s side and to take on a human nature?

__In some way deeper than the mysteries of the universe, the Father and Son’s relationship would be different. And in at least one way, the Son would never be the same.__

In some way deeper than the mysteries of the universe, their relationship would be different. And in at least one way, the Son would never be the same, for He had added human nature to His eternal being. Now eternal glory would emanate forever from One we could see, from One we could touch, from One who had touched us, and who could now touch us forever. This is the very least of what Paul meant when he told the Philippians that “He humbled Himself” (Phil. 2:8). Any human words fail to adequately describe that truth.

Was there silence in heaven when the Son left His glory? Did the solemnity of the moment and the eternal ramifications cause a hush? Did all heaven mourn His departure, even while angels sang His praises on earth? Or was there confident praise and adoration among the host of heaven and the Godhead? Knowing that the salvation of mankind was imminent, did His departure elicit the same praise and
exaltation that visited the shepherds only moments later?

Was there silence in heaven when the Son left His glory? . . . Did all heaven mourn His departure . . . ? Or was there confident praise and adoration among the host of heaven and the Godhead, . . . knowing that the salvation of mankind was imminent?

What was the mood in heaven? Would the knowledge that death could not hold Him, or the joy of the salvation that He would provide, overrule the pain of the separation? Human wisdom has no answer. All we can do is conjecture. That is what author J. B. Phillips did when he “imagined” what the entire incarnation must have been like from the perspective of the angels. Just for a few moments, imagine along with him, and see where it takes you.

THE ANGELS’ POINT OF VIEW

Once upon a time a very young angel was being shown round the splendors and glories of the universes by a senior and experienced angel. To tell the truth, the little angel was beginning to be tired and a little bored. He had been shown whirling galaxies and blazing suns, infinite distances in the deathly cold of interstellar space, and to his mind there seemed to be an awful lot of it all. Finally he was shown the galaxy of which
our planetary system is but a small part. As the two of them drew near to the star which we call our sun and to its circling planets, the senior angel pointed to a small and rather insignificant sphere turning very slowly on its axis. It looked as dull as a dirty tennis ball to the little angel whose mind was filled with the size and glory of what he had seen.

“I want you to watch that one particularly,” said the senior angel, pointing with his finger.

“Well, it looks very small and rather dirty to me,” said the little angel. “What’s special about that one?”

“That,” replied his senior solemnly, “is the Visited Planet.”

“Visited?” said the little one. “You don’t mean visited by—”

“Indeed I do. That ball, which I have no doubt looks to you small and insignificant and not perhaps overclean, has been visited by our young Prince of Glory.” And at these words he bowed his head reverently.

“But how?” queried the younger one. “Do you mean that our great and glorious Prince, with all these wonders and splendors of His Creation, and millions more that I’m sure I haven’t seen yet, went down in Person to this fifth-rate little ball? Why should He do a thing like that?”

“It isn’t for us,” said his senior, a little stiffly, “to question His ‘why’s,’ except that I must point out to you that He is not impressed by size and numbers as you seem to be. But that He really went I know, and all of us in Heaven who know anything know that. As to why He became one of them . . . How else do you suppose could He visit them?”

The little angel’s face wrinkled in disgust.
“Do you mean to tell me,” he said, “that He stooped so low as to become one of those creeping, crawling creatures of that floating ball?”

“I do, and I don’t think He would like you to call them ‘creeping, crawling creatures’ in that tone of voice. For, strange as it may seem to us, He loves them. He went down to visit them to lift them up to become like Him.”

The little angel looked blank. Such a thought was almost beyond his comprehension.

“Close your eyes for a moment,” said the senior angel, “and we will go back in what they call Time.”

While the little angel’s eyes were closed and the two of them moved nearer to the spinning ball, it stopped its spinning, spun backward quite fast for a while, and then slowly resumed its usual rotation.

“Now look!” and as the little angel did as he was told, there appeared here and there on the dull surface of the globe little flashes of light, some merely momentary and some persisting for quite a time.

“Well, what am I seeing now?” queried the little angel.

“You are watching this little world as it was some thousands of years ago,” returned his companion.

“Every flash and glow of light that you see is something of the Father’s knowledge and wisdom breaking into the minds and hearts of people who live upon the earth. Not many people, you see, can hear His Voice or understand what He says, even though He is speaking gently and quietly to them all the time.”

“Why are they so blind and deaf and stupid?” asked the junior angel rather crossly.

“It is not for us to judge
them. We who live in the Splendor have no idea what it is like to live in the dark. We hear the music and the Voice like the sound of many waters every day of our lives, but to them—well, there is much darkness and much noise and much distraction upon the earth. Only a few who are quiet and humble and wise hear His voice. But watch, for in a moment you will see something truly wonderful.”

The Earth went on turning and circling round the sun, and then, quite suddenly, in the upper half of the globe there appeared a light—tiny, but so bright in its intensity that both the angels hid their eyes.

“I think I can guess,” said the little angel in a low voice. “That was the Visit, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, that was the Visit. The Light Himself went down there and lived among them; but in a moment, and you will be able to tell that even with your eyes closed, the light will go out.”

“But why? Could He not bear their darkness and stupidity? Did He have to return here?”

“No, it wasn’t that,” returned the senior angel. His voice was stern and sad. “They failed to recognize Him for Who He was—or at least only a handful knew Him. For the most part they preferred their darkness to His Light, and in the end they killed Him.”

“The fools, the crazy fools! They don’t deserve—”

“Neither you nor I nor any other angel knows why they were so foolish and so wicked. Nor can we say what they deserve or don’t deserve. But the fact remains, they killed our Prince of Glory while He was Man amongst them.”

“And that, I suppose, was the end? I see the whole
Earth has gone black and dark. All right, I won’t judge them, but surely that is all they could expect?”

“Wait. We are still far from the end of the story of the Visited Planet. Watch now, but be ready to cover your eyes again.”

In utter blackness the Earth turned round three times, and then there blazed with unbearable radiance a point of light.

“What now?” asked the little angel shielding his eyes.

“They killed Him, all right, but He conquered death. The thing most of them dread and fear all their lives He broke and conquered. He rose again, and a few of them saw Him, and from then on became His utterly devoted slaves.”

“Thank God for that!” said the little angel.

“Amen. Open your eyes now; the dazzling light has gone. The Prince has returned to His Home of Light. But watch the Earth now.”

As they looked, in place of the dazzling light there was a bright glow which throbbed and pulsed. And then as the Earth turned many times, little points of light spread out. A few flickered and died, but for the most part the lights burned steadily, and as they continued to watch, in many parts of the globe there was a glow over many areas.

“You see what is happening?” asked the senior angel. “The bright glow is the company of loyal men and women He left behind, and with His help they spread the glow, and now lights begin to shine all over the Earth.”

“Yes, yes,” said the little angel impatiently. “But how does it end? Will the little lights join up with one another? Will it all be light, as it is in Heaven?”

His senior shook his head. “We simply do not know,” he replied. “It is in the Father’s
hands. Sometimes it is agony to watch, and sometimes it is joy unspeakable. The end is not yet. But now I am sure you can see why this little ball is so important. He has visited it; He is working out His plan upon it."

“Yes, I see, though I don’t understand. I shall never forget that this is the Visited Planet” (Taken from J. B. Phillips’ “The Angels’ Point Of View,” New Testament Christianity, Macmillan, 1956, pp.15-19).

THE HEAVENLY AUDIENCE

Though Phillips’ story is fanciful, it reminds us that heaven too was an audience to Christmas. Our Lord did indeed leave His glory and the company of the angels. He did it to show us what could not be shown from heaven—the great extent of His love. We would have to see it up close.

When adults want to speak to a small child gently and effectively, they bend down and accommodate themselves to the child’s size and understanding. In the same way, the Lord of heaven voluntarily accommodated Himself to us in the incarnation. He made Himself like us in form so that we might become like Him in holiness.

When our Lord left His glory and the company of the angels, He did it to show us what could not be shown from heaven—the great extent of His love.

The incarnation, as we call it, mixes pain and sorrow so perfectly with hope and joy that we cannot know what...
transpired in heaven before our Lord left His heavenly tarmac. Our perspective will, I fear, always be skewed. The moment was too glorious to truly understand. We will always see Christmas from this side, at least as long as we are on this side.

Today we call it Christmas. Only eternity knows what we shall call it forever.

I love Christmas and all it represents. I have since I was a little boy. And the week following Christmas I invariably experience a sad nostalgia for the passing of the season. Partly because I am hopelessly sentimental, and partly because, frankly, I miss the anticipation, the joy, the warmth, and the hope of the season. For one brief shining moment in my year, the world seems to change a little for the better. I seem to change a little for the better.

Each year after Thanksgiving, our kids begin begging us to get out our Christmas decorations and put up the lights. So one day, as is our tradition, we put on our Christmas CDs, open up the boxes of ornaments and decorations, and with each piece we unpack we are reminded of Christmases
past. Each ornament has a story and a history to it, and our kids enjoy hanging them on the tree and placing the decorations around our house.

But when it is time to put everything away in the boxes and bins after Christmas, they are not nearly so eager. Preparing for the season is exciting, but parting from it is like saying goodbye to beloved family and friends when they leave after the holidays. We have just had a wonderful experience, and we don’t want it to end. The days and weeks following Christmas slowly steal the wonder of those holy days, and as we look around at a house that now looks strangely bare, we can’t help thinking: Wouldn’t it be great if Christmas could last forever?

But this is not just about decorations and warm family gatherings. You see, at Christmas we get a taste of the eternal, and it whets our appetite for more. At Christmas, strained relationships often seem better as we are more willing to put aside our differences. Our three children suddenly forget to bicker and complain about each other and begin asking what the others want for Christmas. Giving takes precedence over getting.

At Christmas, we get a taste of the eternal, and it whets our appetite for more; strained relationships often seem better as we are more willing to put aside our differences; and giving takes precedence over getting.
The Schaeffer household experiences holiness, peace, joy, generosity, and love in ways we don’t at other times, and our souls long for more.

Then the season ends, and the grudge we overlooked during Christmas flares up again after the new year. The weaknesses in others we were more willing to overlook during the holiday season become unacceptable once more. Our patience, strengthened and encouraged by the season, grows short again. Peace with God is a reality to those who have placed their faith in Him, but perfect peace with each other is still unattainable.

Though many promises of the Bible have been fulfilled—the Messiah has come, and our salvation has been secured—the needles of the tree of life still fall from the branches, just like the dead needles fall from our lifeless Christmas tree at a touch. Pain, disappointment, sorrow, and trials, which can be anesthetized by the Christmas season, soon reappear. Life on planet Earth is still the same.

Pain, disappointment, sorrow, and trials can be anesthetized by the Christmas season. But they will soon reappear. Life on planet Earth is still the same.

LIFE AFTER CHRISTMAS

When I observe our own post-Christmas letdown, I can't help but wonder what life was like for Mary and Joseph and the other characters in the Christmas story a year later. The shepherds were back in the fields with the sheep.
Had they been changed? Inevitably. But had life itself changed that much for them? Probably not. Did they ever wish they could recapture the surprise, joy, and holiness of that angelic visitation and that holy moment at the manger? Did they wish those blessed moments could have lasted longer?

I wonder whether those shepherds watched the sky expectantly for the rest of their lives. Would the angels reappear? Would they bring another glorious message? Were the shepherds’ dreams filled with memories of that angelic visitation?

The Magi returned to their own homeland and their old lives. Life must go on, even after you’ve witnessed a miracle. The star that had guided them had disappeared from the sky, and their lives had been forever changed, but life on earth had not. Would they, like the shepherds, be looking for a repeat of the miracle? Would there be another celestial sign? Did they spend the rest of their lives trying to fully understand the miracle they had witnessed? Or did the daily grind of life slowly shift their focus away from that miraculous time?

Herod, the ruthless genocidal monarch, continued to abuse his power to secure his kingdom against all challengers. But did he ever find peace of mind regarding “the child born king of the Jews,” or did he remain troubled? Did he worry that somehow this renegade child-king had escaped his deadly purge and might threaten his rule one day? Did the Scriptures that the chief priests and scribes had shared with him haunt his dreams?

For a time, Mary and Joseph had to live in Egypt as refugees, hiding their son from the murderous plot of Herod. Eventually, though,
they returned to their home in Nazareth—Joseph to his carpentry shop and Mary to her life of homemaking and mothering. They would never be the same as a result of their experiences, but life, with its hardship and pain, daily routine, and, yes, joy and success would go on.

Yet despite this return to the ordinary sameness of life, in reality, nothing would ever be the same again.

THE INVISIBLE CHANGE

Everything changed when Jesus entered our world. The power of sin would soon be broken, and Satan’s plans would be crushed. God’s grace had been born into our world—a power so great nothing could prevail against it. The spiritual axis of the world had shifted violently, and the effect could not have been more profound if the earth’s physical axis had shifted.

Today, the sinful momentum of our world continues, making everything seem as it was before Jesus came. But a new kingdom has been established. And by faith we live in the long shadow of that promise. At Christmas, the shadow seems to lift for a moment and we seem so much closer to that day. With its celebration,

With its celebration, joy, excitement, warmth, and holiness, Christmas reminds us that although many wonderful promises have been fulfilled in our midst, we are still waiting for the last, eternal, Christmas morning—the one that will last forever.

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As J. B. Phillips wrote, “Nothing can alter the fact that we live on a visited planet.” And he urges us as we daily tread the surface of this planet to “reflect with confidence that ‘my God has been here, here on this planet!’” Have you ever taken that into account during your celebration of this holy event? *Your God walked this earth.* He fingered the leaves on the trees and quenched His parched throat with cool water. He watched the sun rise and set and followed the moon across the night sky.

Phillips goes on to write: When God decides that the human experiment has gone on long enough, yes, even in the midst of what appears to be confusion and incompleteness, Christ will come again! This is what the New Testament teaches. This is the message of Advent. It is for us to be alert, vigilant, and industrious, so that His coming will not be a terror but an overwhelming act of joy (“The Christian Year,” Good News: Thoughts On God And Man, Macmillan, 1963).

Perhaps that is one of the elements that make our celebrations bittersweet. A part of us wants to hold on to the hope of a better world, a world where Christ has come to stay, where sin will be banished from our hearts as well as our world. We desperately want to embrace all that Christmas promises, especially Immanuel—God with us. He came to live
with us, and now within us, but His inner presence only makes us desire more.

We desperately want to embrace all that Christmas promises, especially Immanuel—God with us. He came to live with us, and now within us, but His inner presence only makes us desire more.

The Savior has come and opened our eyes to perfect eternity, and we can’t help experiencing a sort of heavenly homesickness. We who wait for the promise must wait a bit longer, and waiting is difficult. Henri Nouwen wrote:

For many people, waiting is an awful desert between where they are and where they want to go. And people do not like such a place. They want to get out of it by doing something. . . . It impresses me, therefore, that all the figures who appear on the first pages of Luke’s gospel are waiting. Zechariah and Elizabeth are waiting. Mary is waiting. Simeon and Anna, who were at the temple when Jesus was brought in, were waiting. The whole opening scene of the good news is filled with waiting people. . . . People who wait have received a promise that allows them to wait. They have received something that is at work in them, like a seed that has started to grow. This is very
important. We can only really wait if what we are waiting for has already begun for us. So waiting is never a movement from nothing to something. It is always a movement from something to something more (“A Spirituality Of Waiting” in The Upper Weavings Reader, The Upper Room, 1993). Christmas provides a looking glass for all believers. God came to live among us, and now we wait for the day when we will live with Him forever. Life as we know it is not life as it will always be. As surely as God kept His promise to enter our world and bring us back to Him, so He will take us to be with Him one day. We long to live in His perfect presence as naturally as we live in this fallen, sad, and dying world.

The blessed hope and the painful reality are rarely in greater contrast than at Christmas. Our greatest dreams and our deepest despair often intersect in the holy season. Both are real—hence our conflict. The celebration of Christmas is a delicious spiritual hors d’oeuvre to eternity, tantalizing us with reminders that the banquet is yet to come, and it will be eternally satisfying.

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Part of the real Christmas spirit is the hope it inspires in us of the day when Jesus will come again, no longer the baby in the manger, but the Lord of all the earth. That is the ultimate fulfillment of all that Christmas promises. The Babe from Bethlehem will revisit the planet He once called home. But this time He will not come in humility; He will come in power. Death will be overcome forever, replaced by eternal life. Old things will pass away; behold, new things will come. Lies will be replaced with truth, and injustice will become extinct. Sadness, pain, regret, loss, failure, and tears will pass away like the ice age, never to return. And those of us who spent so many years celebrating Christmas in the firm belief that one day faith would become sight will wake to that eternal morning. Until then, in each celebration of Christmas we are turning the light on in anticipation of that final morning.

Pastor and author Robert Russell tells the story of a family in their subdivision...
that kept their Christmas lights on long after the season was past. In fact, they were still on through January and the first of February. As the middle of February drew near, Russell couldn’t help being a little critical. If I were too lazy to take my Christmas lights down, I think I’d at least turn them off at night, he thought. But about the middle of March a sign appeared outside the house that explained why they’d left the lights on. It said simply, “Welcome home, Jimmy.” Russell then learned that the family had a son in Vietnam, and they had unashamedly left their Christmas lights on in anticipation of his return.

Lights are a symbol of hope. And Christmas is how we “keep the lights on,” anticipating His return.

All the joys of all our Christmas experiences will pale before the advent of the last, eternal, Christmas morning. The divine Christmas Light will never be extinguished, the joy will never fade, the hope will finally be fulfilled. The King—our King—will have come at last. The long promised kingdom of God will be ushered in, and our fervent dreams will be reality.

Peace on earth, good will to men will no longer be a hope or a motto on a Christmas card. It will be the actual inheritance of all who have longed for His appearing. Each Christmas we keep the lights on, knowing that promise is a little closer.

When we speak of the hope of Christmas, we are imagining something other than what we are currently experiencing—something better, something eternal.

Imagine the last Christmas morning. Imagine what life will be like when our world is ruled by our Lord who loved us so much that He died for us. What will life be
like when the only emotions that fill our hearts are joy and love and peace? What will it be like to have no fear, no anxiety, no anger, no envy, no jealousy, no tears or sadness, because the world in which we live is so perfect that no such emotions can be produced? What will it be like to be so changed internally that we actually fit in a perfect world, so changed that we have become something fundamentally different than we can ever hope to attain here on earth? What will it be like to live a perfect life—forever? What eternal wonders await those who will walk and live forever with our God in His perfect world?

Through His first coming—what we call Christmas—God revealed to us how much we have to look forward to in His second coming. And with every Christmas morning I experience, I know I am much closer to the last Christmas morning.

So this Christmas, and for all the days thereafter, my goal is to keep the lights on in my heart in anticipation of His return. When He does, the last Christmas morning will dawn—and never end.

This booklet is excerpted from In Search Of The Real Spirit Of Christmas by Dan Schaeffer, which is published by Discovery House Publishers, a member of the RBC Ministries family.

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