

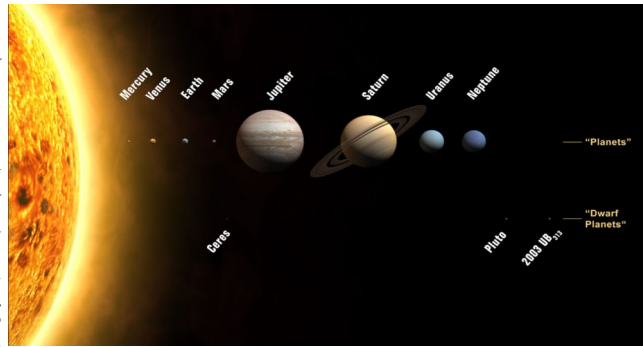
## LOVING CHRISTMAS

Who doesn't love Christmas? Circa 2.4 billion professing Christians will celebrate it this month. Western secularists and materialists, with no interest in Christ, will coopt it. Religionists, hearing of Jesus, respecting him, but not acknowledging him as their Savior, know of it, and some are happy to make money from it. Yet, how many grasp it? To be fair, the messaging of Christmas is mixed—a garbling of the sublime and the ridiculous, of what we want and what we need, and of our material and spiritual hopes. Yet, amid the festivities, let's delve into the real and radical joy of Christmas. It rests on three pillars of truth.

### THE GREATNESS OF GOD

The knowledge of God is etched ineradicably on our beings. This explains why Atheism is the most failed philosophy in world history. No matter how often it returns, it garners few devotees across the globe, even when state-sponsored. Seeming to abound in confidence, atheists now trim back their denial of God to a claim that no one can be certain. They also deny that Atheism is a belief system, all the while calling us to believe that something came from nothing, that life came from non-life, that order came from chaos, and that the immaterial comes from the material. And for what purpose? It's all so dour.

By contrast, Christmas joy is inspired by the realization that God, a spirit filling the estimated 10,000 galaxies of the universe (John 4:24), has a particular interest in ours: The Milky Way. Within the Milky Way, God focuses in on our solar system. Not on the giant planets (Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune), nor on other smaller planets (Mercury, Venus, and Mars), but on earth; surprise, surprise—the very place where life is found! Life or no life elsewhere, ours is the privileged planet. We're humbled, or



at least ought to be. (Photo: www.slideserve.com.)

### THE GREATNESS OF GUILT

Most astonishing about the interest of the Infinite in the infinitesimal, is the realization, corroborated the world over, that our race is in massive revolt against God. He speaks to us through the created order all the time (day and night), to all the race (every ethnicity), for all to understand, and in every place (Psalm 19:1-4), and yet we deny Him, doubt Him, attempt to refashion Him, swap him out for innumerable gods which neither see, hear, nor act; or we pay lip service to God, but go our own way.

No one, left to himself or herself seeks God, nor can we claim to be righteous. Consider our thoughts, our actions, our speech; the things we think, speak, and do, and those

we don't, which contradict God's law. In consequence, we are estranged from God, troubled in our consciences, and living life at a level far beneath what God intended for us. Having become worthless (Romans 3:10-12), Christmas calls to us that God has not given up on us! He seeks our

rescue.

### THE GREATNESS OF GRACE

If insanity is doing the same thing over and over again expecting a different result, maybe this is the Christmas to try something new. Why not look deeper into its meaning, refusing any longer to suppress your knowledge of God (Romans 1:18)? Why not pluck up the courage to weigh your life by God's law (Exodus 20:1-17)? That, counter-intuitively, is where the joy of Christmas begins. Owing our inability, in our smallness and sinfulness, to approach the God of the universe, we break out into wonder that God, the aggrieved, has already approached us!

Let earth and heaven combine,  
Angels and men agree,  
To praise in songs divine  
The incarnate Deity,  
Our God contracted to a span,  
Incomprehensibly made man.

## SEEING CHRIST

Today's secularists really ought to forgo Christmas. After all, states the late Christopher Hitchens, "We are not immune to the lure of wonder and mystery and awe" (*god is not Great* [2007]), but choose, he testified, to find it in music, art, and literature rather than in holy books. Others, sing blithely the carols, but wile away the festive season in terrestrial pleasures, from the cultured to the inebriated.

That's their choice, but why try debunking Christianity? To quote one atheist's response to Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*: "You want to get rid of religion? Good luck to you! You think you can get rid of religion? What planet are you living on? Religion is a fixture. Get over it!" (first Mariner Book edition, 2008). The problem for the unbeliever, however, is closer to home. It is not simply that he or she cannot overcome religion out there, but that among their ranks interest in the divine or the future beyond this life simply does not go away.

### MAN'S STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

One form of this interest is the stairway to heaven. The idea dates back to antiquity. Recall the tower of Babel (Genesis 11). The Egyptian papyrus of Ani depicts a winged spirit flying up a kind of staircase. African legends yearn after the moon, thought to be heaven's locale.



Yet, the idea is also more recent and western, sometimes implying that life is better here than in heaven. Note David Niven's 1946 romance, *Stairway to Heaven: A Matter of Life and Death*. It depicts airman Peter Carter's reprieve from heaven due to his newfound love on earth. In 1971, rock band Led Zeppelin launched what became their phenomenally popular song, *Stairway to Heaven*, stating, whatever the band meant, that a stairway to heaven can be purchased.

More recently, Bruce Hornsby composed "Jacob's Ladder" (1988), preferring to do "the best that I can" to evangelist calls to faith in Christ:

I met a fan dancer down in southside Birmingham  
She was running from a fat man selling salvation in his hand  
She said he's tryin' to save me  
But I'm doin' alright, the best that I can  
Just a pair of fallen angels tryin' to get through the night.

*Chorus:* Step by step, one by one, higher and higher  
Step by step, one by one, climbing Jacob's ladder.

Comin' over the airwaves the man says I'm overdue  
Sing a song, send money, join the chosen few  
But mister I'm not in a hurry, and I don't want to be like you  
All I want from tomorrow is to get it better than today.

All I want from tomorrow is to get it better than today  
Step by step, one by one, higher and higher  
Step by step, one by one, climbing Jacob's ladder

Not to decry finding love, looking beyond ourselves, or doing the best we can, but the true joy of Christmas is found in an alternative view of the stairway to heaven.

### GOD'S STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

For most, the question is not whether God and his gospel exist, but whether Christ is *the* Savior by whom God saves.



True to his character, Jacob deceived Isaac his father into granting him his end-of-life blessing. Guilty and fearing his brother Esau, Jacob fled. As the sun set along the road to Haran, he settled down to sleep for the night and had a dream. Dreams were used by God before the Messiah came to reveal his truth (cf., Hebrews 1:1-3). The dream pointed graphically to the Messiah as the one through whom Jacob could be forgiven and by whom alone he could come to God (Genesis 28:10-22). How do we know?

Note, *first*, that the ladder was "*set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven*" (Genesis 28:12). Jacob was taught that Messiah would come to bridge the gap between heaven and earth. As divine he retained on earth his contact with heaven. Yet, fully human, he was equipped to suffer on earth the penalty due us for our sins.

Note, *second*, there was but one ladder. Since it connected heaven and earth none other was needed. Interrogations of God as to why he provides but one way to him, miss this basic truth. Jesus was not boasting but stating a fact when claiming to be the way (John 14:6). When we understand God's greatness and character, we appreciate that Messiah is one more way to God than we deserve. At which point, we heartily embrace Christ, the sole mediator between God and man is a given (1 Timothy 2:5).

Note, *third*, the angels ascending and descending on the ladder. They are messengers of God, angel and messenger sharing the same word in both Hebrew (OT) and Greek (NT). They were on the ladder to teach Jacob, and ourselves, that only by Christ can we communicate with heaven, and that only by Christ does God disclose himself to man (cf., John 1:18). While angels do not save us, they nevertheless confirm that Messiah is the way of salvation, and minister to all placing their trust in him (cf., John 1:51; Hebrews 1:14).

Note, *fourth*, the LORD standing above the ladder. The ladder (the Messiah) takes us to Him in prayer and in death. Only to those coming by way of the ladder does God say, "I am the LORD . . ." Have you heard him yet?

## EMBRACING CHRIST

Hoe Pin Tan has encountered the LORD. He tells us how, thereby indicating the trace of truth in Led Zeppelin's *Stairway to Heaven*:

Yes, there are two paths you can go by, but in the long run  
There's still time to change the road you're on.

### MY EARLY YEARS

Born and brought up a Taoist in Malaysia, worshipping my ancestors and believing people can become deities, it was not until 1974 that I heard of Jesus Christ. I was studying in King's Lynn in Norfolk, England, to complete my "O" and "A" levels. Since my Christian cousins were staying with me, I followed them on Sundays to a small local church, hoping only for a good lunch in a member's home.

After gaining a degree from the University of Kent I returned, in 1980, to Malaysia to start a career in my family's automobile business. The auto group of companies was founded by my father and uncle in 1957, but it struggled until the mid '70s. With success came more success. Today the business is a conglomerate.

First, I worked in the Singapore operation. I was comfortable and became an entrepreneur. There I met my wife, Nancy. We married in 1984, moving to Malaysia in 1986 due to my appointment as Marketing Director. I was to revive our car business amid the success of the Malaysia national car.

Succeeding in turning the car company into a profitable, healthy conglomerate, I gained for the company a very good reputation. Everything was going my way and seemed to be perfect. I had achieved high business acumen and social recognition, was very proud of myself, traveling with bodyguards and an entourage. I mixed only in high society, with businessmen and with politicians.

Those who knew me at the time would say that I was unpleasant, arrogant, full of myself, selfish, greedy, unforgiving, but I swore a lot and was not an easy boss. I believed that happiness came with wealth and power, trusting only the things I could see and touch. That's why I worshiped idols. They are visible. Indeed, I became the spiritual leader of my family and company, and was considered a prayer warrior!

### THE TURNING POINT

Nancy and I were blessed with three beautiful children. When they were young, we sent them to Sunday school at St Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Kuala Lumpur. We believed that it was for their best to receive Christian teaching and values, little realizing our need of knowing

the one true God.

In 2000, a family feud broke out with our cousins who were also our business partners. My world became one of constant litigation. It was a hard and depressing time, and, like every family feud, emotionally stressful. Lacking peace and joy, I began to reflect on the meaning of life.

Then, a few significant events came together. First, my dear wife began attending Bible Study Fellowship, in search of the one true God. I would pick her up from the church and she would talk to me about the Bible. I always responded, "I know", but actually I didn't.

Then, in 2008, a close friend's wife got cancer, succumbing to it within 2 months. I assisted him in bringing her body back from Hong Kong, helping to arrange the funeral. This increased my inquiry into the meaning of life. About the same time my old friend Tony, who had suffered from cancer for 11 years, had a brain tumour removed. After the surgery, he went into a coma, his body systematically shutting down. Four days later he was pronounced clinically dead. Yet his wife, Ashley, kept praying and reading the Bible by his bedside, refusing to

"pull the plug," even after the doctor said there was no hope. I remember her telling me of the resurrection of Lazarus (John 11) and of the dry bones (Ezekiel 37). Then, on the seventh day, Tony miraculously regained consciousness. Although a part of his brain had been removed, today his life is normal.

### NEW LIFE IN CHRIST

When Tony told me of his time in the coma and how Jesus had pulled him back from the grave, everything came together for me. I realized that Nancy and I were like those witnessing Jesus bringing Lazarus out of the tomb. Christ, we now came to believe, *is* the only true God and Saviour. Tony and his son, my wife, my daughter and I were baptised on the 7th June, 2009, at St Andrew's.

Upon fixing my eyes on Jesus Christ my whole life started to turn upside down. I saw many other miracles. In August 2009, just two months after my baptism, our 9-year family feud suddenly came to an amicable settlement. Without prompting, my mum informed me that, since I was now Christian, I need not participate in the family's prayers to the ancestors. Shortly after, I got rid of the idols and removed the altar from my house. I replaced it with two paintings, the crossings of the Red Sea and of the Jordan River. Jesus Christ is now head of my home. Yet, there is more. In 2013 my mum received Christ as her Saviour, as did my father in 2015, at 92! A year later he went to be with the Lord. To God be the glory, forever!



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## COMMENDING CHRIST

Hoe Pin Tan leaves us with a challenge. It's from the answer of Paul and Silas to the Philippian jailor's question, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?": "Believe in the Lord Jesus," they said, "and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:31). It doesn't matter who you are, what your history is in sin, or where you live, God offers you this Christmas lavish grace in Christ.

Don't resist him! Jesus taught that while we may be forgiven sins against him, to resist the Holy Spirit's promptings to come to Christ is an unforgivable blasphemy (Matthew 12:31; Mark 3:28; Luke 12:10).

If, then, in reading thus far you have "been enlightened" as to the good news of Jesus Christ, "have tasted of the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come" (Hebrews 6:4-5), don't hesitate to come to Christ. Only through him can you know God, his forgiveness, and his ultimate purpose for your life. Resting on Christ's divinity you are assured of his power to save you, resting on his humanity of his right to do so. In our flesh he lived the perfect life needed to stand before God, and died to pay the ultimate cost of sin.

Spurn, then, what comes natural to us—"an evil, unbelieving heart" (Hebrews 3:12). Recalling page one, why not this Christmas carve out time get alone with God. Humbly ask him to show you himself, to show you yourself, and to show you his grace in Christ, not ceasing to call on God until you know you are heard in heaven.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to enter the new year, blessed with a new life? Receive, then, this season God's unsurpassed gift of Christ. None who have truly done so ever regretted it. (Photo: <https://mairie-sainthippol->



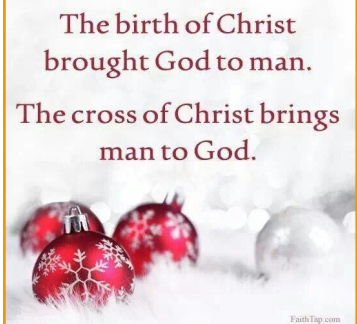
[yte.fr/joyeux-noel/](http://yte.fr/joyeux-noel/); sketch, Carl August Schwerdgeburth [1845].)

One who truly grasped the joy of Christmas was the Protestant reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546). To him is attributed the tradition of decorating pine trees.

Growing up in Christendom, believing in God was never in doubt. So conscious was he of God that he lived in dread of him. His *Anfechtung* as he called his terror of God led him on a quest to understand how mortal men, riddled with sin, could draw near to God. Believing that man must work up a righteousness from below—that is to say, from our hearts and deeds—he despaired of ever finding acceptance and peace with God.

Yet, after a long dark night of the soul, he came by the leading of God's Spirit to the wonderful discovery that the righteousness God accepts is not ours, but that which God has revealed through Jesus Christ. It is gained not by our "good" works but by resting entirely on Christ's person and work (Romans 1:17). Thus, Luther found the peace with God he had long sought.

By preaching God's grace in Christ, Luther brought huge change to Europe. Christmas he also came to view in terms of Jacob's ladder. Summarizing his thought, Heiko Oberman, writes: "The ladder connecting heaven and earth is the incarnation of God. It is what the Devil hates most and is fighting against. The Devil wants to tear the faithful away from Christ, their ladder to heaven."



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