

## “HAPPY CHRISTMAS!” AMID WORLD UNHAPPINESS

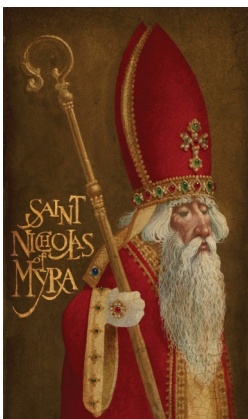
Across every nation touched by Christianity there will be heard in the run-up to December 25 greetings of “Happy Christmas!” or the more traditional “Merry Christmas!” It’s a beautiful sentiment, well beyond anything offered by the banal or vacuous “Happy Holidays!”

### ACKNOWLEDGING THE CONFUSION

That said, the greeting “Happy Christmas!” is likely perplexing to you if you come from a non-Western land. Christmas, you have variously heard, has something to do with the majestic figure of Jesus Christ, the mysterious figure of Saint Nicholas, and the mythical figure of Father Christmas (and his reindeers!). But why the confusion, and who should get top billing?

Additionally, there is the spectacle of folk from lands you believe to be Christian wanting to take Christ out of Christmas. “Help me understand this,” you say. “They want to swap gifts without celebrating the one Christianity claims is the ‘inexpressible gift?’” (2 Corinthians 9:15). “That’s very odd!” And you’re so very right! It’s also hypocritical—a charge atheistic and agnostic friends prefer to make than to receive.

As we’ll explain, Christmas is about Jesus Christ. By comparison, the narrative about the third-century saint, Nicholas, Bishop of Myra (died 343), is interesting, informative, and challenging. Not many give away their inheritance in order to serve the sick,



the needy, and the suffering (www.stnicholascenter.org/pages/who-is-st-nicholas/). Nicholas took his cue from Jesus Christ. By contrast, the tales about Father Christmas, extrapolating fancifully from the generosity of Saint Nicholas (hence the name Santa Claus) is for kids. It’s pretty harmless stuff, until it is pressed by secularists into filling, supposedly, the void created by the banishment of Christ. At that point, Father Christmas becomes the focal point of a me-centered materialism,

which explains, ironically, much of our need of a deeper happiness, not least at Christmas.



### ANALYZING THE NEED

The need we feel for happiness during Christmas underlines the need we feel for it all year long and all life through. Not only are we living, as we saw in the last issue, amid a global culture of death, we are at a distance from heaven, the home where God reigns and where perfect happiness abides.

So important is happiness to us that since 2012 the United Nations has monitored annually the happiest and unhappiest nations on earth, using the Gallup World Poll to do so.

Significantly, the criteria (or metric of life satisfaction) used are subjectively determined. The poll asks a representative number in different global countries, what makes them happy or satisfied. Six variables influence the answers: income, health or life expectancy, social support, freedom, trust, and generosity.

Note, these are all human factors. Change the circumstances and you increase or decrease the happiness. This year, the happiest live in Finland, and the least happiest in the Central African Republic. World happiness overall is at a ten-year low. Most of this year’s happiest live in sun-drenched South America, but the Finlander reminds us it takes more than sun to make us feel good. More than wealth, too. Americans are rich but oppressed by obesity, opioid addiction, and depression.

No Christian denies that circumstances don’t impact our demeanors. But when we wish you a “Happy Christmas!” we are praying for more than the betterment of your situation. Our greeting is like a cheerful but far more weighty emoji, in that it communicates “lots of information in a small amount of data” (www.emoji.com/). This content we unpack in the next pages. Enough to say here, that we pray you will enter this Christmas into a richer, longer-lasting joy than this world can offer—what John Newton (1725–1807), author of *Amazing Grace*, called in another hymn “solid joys and lasting treasures.”



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## WHY NOT SEEK SOLID JOY THIS CHRISTMAS?

Long before there was ever a United Nations or a Gallup Poll on world happiness, the biblical Book of Ecclesiastes taught us that while the blessings of life are real, everything **“under the sun”** is vain (i.e., fleeting and empty). That is, unless considered aright. The Preacher (or sage) was not being cynical or depressive, but teaching a critical truth, namely, that it is God who grants meaning to this earthly existence. Take him out of the picture, and everything turns flat and hopeless.

It is interesting the way Ecclesiastes teaches us this. So often does the Preacher repeat the refrain **“under the sun”** that eventually we get the point: There must be something or someone above the sun which or who makes sense of life on earth. To leave us in no doubt, the Preacher tells us that God **“has put eternity into our hearts”** (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Stated alternatively, we were divinely created with a God-shaped hole inside us which he alone can fill. This explains why a person may have everything and be miserable, or nothing and be content.

Our human experience all hangs, then, on our relationship to God. We know he exists, for he has inscribed this knowledge on our consciences. We cannot eradicate it. If you start, however, bringing God self-consciously into your life, you give these solid joys a chance. For God, known as **“the blessed [or seriously happy] God”** (e.g., I Timothy 1:11), offers you joy. (Image: darrellcreswell.wordpress.com)

### JOY FROM THE OUTSIDE

God could have justly left us in the misery of our sin and emptiness. Yet, he has so loved the forlorn, rebellious world he created that he sent his Son to our rescue (John 3:16). In that action, celebrated each Christmas, we learn that the blessed God desires our blessing. Not ultimately with things, but with him! Although, with him, earthly things find their highest enjoyment.

Listen to the excitement of the Gospels. Utilizing eyewitness accounts of the night of Jesus’ birth, Luke tells us of the angel or messenger sent from God to the shepherds, proclaiming amid a display of divine glory, **“I bring you good news of great joy”** (cf., Luke 1:1–4; 2:10). What was so great about it?

- A Savior is born. None other than Christ the Lord would atone by his death for our sins, thereby opening a way for us to come back into fellowship with God.
- Christ the Savior is for all people: for rich, for poor; for male, for female; for Jew, for Gentile; for religious and irreligious; and so forth. Yes, for those thinking they are happy in their sin and in need of no Savior (the Bible describes such as **“alive without the law”** [Romans 7:9, KJV]),

as well as for those despairing because of it.

Then, there is the recollection of John: **“No one has ever seen God, the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known”** (1:18). John indicates that Jesus appeared both to declare the possibility of joy in the personal knowledge of God, and to open up access to this personal relationship.

### JOY ON THE INSIDE

Only those who turn unto God in repentance for their sins, and who receive in faith Christ as their Savior and Lord can experience true joy (joy as God defines it). Whereas Christ procures this joy for us, the Holy Spirit nurtures it within us.

First, the Spirit helps us feel the pain and the emptiness of our alienation from God. Next, he grants us a new nature in which we gain both the desire to be reconciled to God and the ability to both repent and believe the good news of Jesus. In doing so, we come out from under God’s condemnation and have impressed on us, third, the reality of peace with God and joy in Christ (Romans 5:1; 8:1). Fourth, the Spirit grows our joy throughout the remainder of our lives (Galatians 5:22–23).

While we still experience the afflictions of life, are additionally harassed by Satan, and chastened for our good by our heavenly Father, we can nevertheless say with the sixteenth-century German noble, Caspar Schwenckfeld (1483–1561), **“Having Christ I am not sad!”**

### JOY TOWARD THE OTHER SIDE

Obviously, our joy in Christ, while real, is not yet fulfilled. Nevertheless, it envelops our trials and afflictions and grants us hope for what lies beyond them. Meanwhile, we glean from Christ a new philosophy of life, recalling that it was for the joy that was ahead of him eternally, he endured the cross and despised the shame (Hebrews 12:2). Likewise, we reflect on what God has promised us: unending and uninterrupted fellowship with him, in the presence of Christ, and in a context from which Satan is barred, where the Fall of man is undone, and where chastenings are past. Quite simply, in heaven there are no pain, no tears, no dying, and no death (Revelation 21:4).

This sole utopia is not fake news! The massively attested resurrection of Jesus proves that the happy life of heaven exists, and that all belonging to Christ will experience it hereafter. This leaves us with the question Jesus once posed in the context of discussing the life to come: **“Do you believe this?”** (John 11:26).



*No more let sins and sorrows grow . . .*

## LEGACIES OF JOY IN CHRIST

My mother, Bess, was one of four children, one of whom had learning difficulties. They lived in a little terrace house in South Wales (U.K.). Her father worked for the railroad. Her mother's brother Oliver was converted at the Welsh Revival of 1904.

*Revival: God's extraordinary refreshment and empowerment of his church, leading to significant social improvements, as when, in 1904, 100,000 people turned to God through Christ in ten months.*

### OLIVER

For the rest of his life Oliver was an evangelist. Typically, he carried a text around the town and preached in the open air on a Saturday night. He could never resist the opportunity presented to him when he was with a crowd of people to talk to them all about the Lord Jesus Christ.

If it were a day trip to the seaside he would get up and leave his children making sand castles and talk to the people sitting on the beach. "Isn't this a lovely day, ladies and gentlemen? And do you know that it was God who made this world and he sent his own dear son Jesus Christ to be the Saviour of all who put their trust in him . . ." If his brother-in-law, a farmer, was hosting a family gathering then the men would go for a walk on the mountain in the afternoon and the women would make the farmhouse supper. It would not be long before Oliver spoke to the men, "Let us have a word of prayer to thank God for his glory and goodness to us." And he would take the same initiative if he were speaking to one person, for example, to my cousin: "Look Bobi at this patch of ground at the flowers and clover and grasses here and here and here. Let us thank God for his presence with us." My cousin told me how powerful it was.

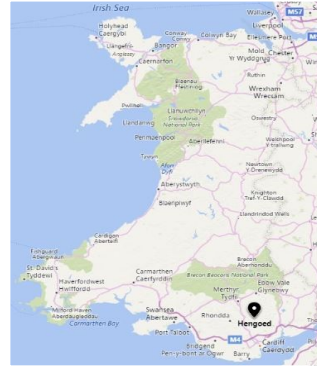
### BESS

On Fridays Oliver led some youth meetings, writing songs and teaching them to the twenty children who attended. My mother was a young teenager during the First World War and attended every Friday, 6.30 through 7.30. Some time during those years she "gave her heart" to Jesus Christ, quite artlessly to Him, and then simply followed him all her life.

She was betrayed by theological liberals who, denying the fundamentals of the gospel, nevertheless occupied the pulpit in the Baptist church she attended, Unable to counter them, she simply went to gospel meetings, anniversary services, and conventions and listened intently to the messages. In 1929 the rising preacher Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones came to speak in her town and she heard him. When I went to hear him thirty years later she recalled to me some of the things he had said that she had never forgotten. "See the opposition to the gospel here in the New Testament and the muddles people made of their lives

then. It is just the same today. Man does not change, and neither does the gospel."

She sang the old hymns under her breath, quite unconscious that she was doing so, throughout her life. *How sweet the name of Jesus sounds, Jesus the very thought of Thee, Crown him with many crowns*, and so on. One day a close friend Brian said to me, "Your mother is remarkable isn't she?" "Yeah," I said cautiously . . . looking for some explanation to his remark. He said, "the way she sings hymns all the time." I thought, "His mother doesn't sing hymns!" I thought every mother sang hymns.



I went with her in my teens to the Baptist Chapel. She gave me an Imperial mint to suck after the third hymn. We moved to **Hengoed**, a church which had its origins at Mount Pleasant, Maesycwmmmer, in the 1904 revival. The older members had a stirring testimony and there my mother and I worshiped. ([www.bing.com/maps](http://www.bing.com/maps)).

One Sunday night in March 1954 I was given assurance as I heard the Word of God preached that the atonement of Christ covered my guilt and through him God accepted me. I was then baptized, and was led wonderfully to read my first three books: James I. Packer's *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, J. C. Ryle's *Holiness*, and Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones' *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*. They kept me through the years of Modernism at university, with its rejection of the morality, optimism, and conventions of the Victorians. I loved the life those books displayed and wanted to preach like Ryle and Lloyd-Jones, and I do so still.

I went on to become my mother's pastor for the last twenty years of her life. My debt to her is enormous. I long to see her again in heaven. I sometimes think I want to see her more than the Lord Christ, but no, the Lord first and then his bride. I just want to thank her for what she did for me. I never showed her the gratitude that I should. But she will not know what I am talking about. "When did I help you like that?" We will have time to explain.

*Rev. Geoff Thomas, D.D. is former minister of Alfred Place Baptist Church, Aberystwyth, Wales, and now serves as assistant preacher in Amyand Park Chapel, London. Pictured with him is his wife, Barbara, and his daughters from his marriage to Iola (deceased 2016).*



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## A PRAYER FOR TRUE JOY

Our Creator and Our God,

We come to you, the seriously happy God, the one who knows no personal sin, no misery, no emptiness. You live in your own light and are the God who is ever blessed.

We praise you for ever thinking of us, and for sending your Son, Jesus, into the world that we may fellowship with you in your joy.

We confess that we are blinded by our sin, and in our folly and willfulness think that life's ultimate pleasures are found in sin. Open our eyes, we pray, to see how our sins have dishonored you, our Maker, and how they destroy ourselves. Grant us the humility to confess to you our sins, then grant us, we plead, understanding of the work of Christ for our salvation.

We thank you for Jesus, for his willingness to enter our gloom, to become for us a man of sorrows, and to carry our griefs even unto the death of the cross. But we glory in the cross, for by it we may draw near to you and enter into your joy.

Grant us, where needed, we humbly pray, repentance toward you and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, for you have revealed yourself to be the God of hope who fills your people with joy and peace in believing so that by the power of the Holy Spirit we may abound in hope (Romans 15:13). For this we yearn.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen (Hebrew for "Let it be").

(Photo above: Courtesy of [www.allentempleamechurch.org/2016/02/05/the-battle-plan-for-prayer-bible-study/](http://www.allentempleamechurch.org/2016/02/05/the-battle-plan-for-prayer-bible-study/), accessed October 16, 2018.)

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Next Issue Due Out: March 1