

THEOLOGY | CRITIQUE | REVIEW | ESSAY | CULTURE

salt&light

4th Quarter 2011

THE STORY

N.D. WILSON

"From birth to the end,
He never left the trough"

PLUS:
LEARNING TO FLOAT
PEACE ON EARTH
PROFESSING THE GOSPEL IN MARRIAGE
UNCHANGING AND CHANGING

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a quarterly
publication



Riverwood
Presbyterian Church
Tuscaloosa, Alabama

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FROM THE EDITOR

The year is almost over, and what a year it has been for Riverwood Presbyterian Church. So much has happened. The Church has settled into our new building and utilized the old building as a wonderful facility ranging from a classroom to a meeting room to a dining hall to a warehouse. We have seen physical disaster up close – very close – with the April tornado. We mobilized and worked to help and rehabilitate. We had a wonderful summer conference with Doug and Nancy Wilson, with the twin theme of the Covenant family and Christian rehabilitation of the community and the culture. We have grown both in numbers and spiritually. And we have worshipped. Each Sunday we have been part of the “Sunday miracle” as we go before the face of God in worship.

This issue of the *Salt & Light* has a very special lead article. With permission, we are reprinting the Advent portion of N. D. Wilson's fascinating book, *Notes from the Tilt-A-Whirl*, a poetic meditation on living as a believer in God's amazing world. If you haven't read the book, don't miss it. If you have read the book, you'll enjoy reading it again in the context of Advent.

Peggy Drinkard, our very talented Director of Children's Ministries, has written her own beautiful meditation on marriage, titled “Learning to Float.” In it she depicts her troubles and desires in being the God-ordained submissive wife she is called to be. No one should miss any of her writing but be sure and catch this article.

Bob Thornton writes about the idea that the first Christmas was supposed to issue in a golden age of peace on earth based on Luke 2:14. His thoughts on the subject are profound and will add to the peace in your own heart as a child of God as Christmas approaches.

Eric Venable returns to our pages with his own extraordinary look at Christian marriage, something he describes as “a spiritual classroom like no other.” His thoughts are both personal and profound and are not to be missed.

My article, “Unchanging and Changing” speaks to the impact that years and events have on both Christmas and our perception of an unchanging God. I seem to get more retrospective every year and this is my latest thoughts on my attempts to live as a child of God.

Our *Finale* piece for this issue, called *Twelfth Night*, is by the American poet, John Peale Bishop. It is a look at the visit of the Magi in a way you probably have never considered. Don't miss it and have a wondrous and blessed Advent season.

James Hopper

THE STORY

An Advent Meditation Adapted from *Notes from the Tilt-A-Whirl*

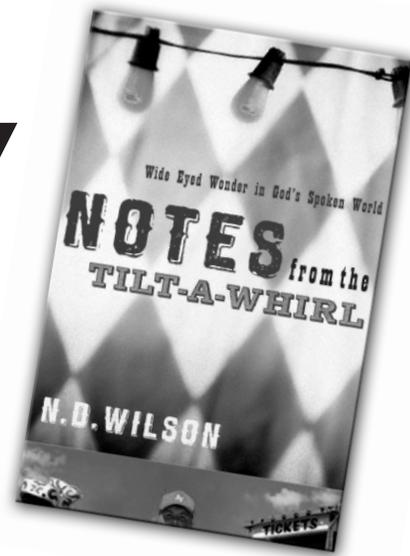
by N.D. Wilson

*The article that follows is a meditation about the coming of the Lord into this planet to redeem a fallen people. It is a portion of a longer meditation, **Notes from the Tilt-A-Whirl**, written by N. D. Wilson, that is aptly subtitled: **Wide Eyed Wonder in God's Spoken World**. In the book, Mr. Wilson writes of himself living as a Christian perpetually in a state of wonder at his status as one called by God, and in a constant state of amazement at what he finds as a man in God's world. In this portion of his book, he depicts raking the late autumn leaves and contemplating the Advent of the Lord and the feelings it invokes in him. The article is reproduced in *Salt & Light* with permission.*

The Infinite speaks us. We are in the frame, playing our role alongside the ants and the moss and Orion. We fell away, and our world fell with us. He stoops for us, and in the end our running and our suiciding will only picture the depth of His love, His humility. It magnifies His ultimate triumph.

Greek philosophers played their role. Plato made rules that enabled God to blaspheme, to defile Himself when He embraced the matter in His art.

To the Greeks, matter was a corruption of spirit. The immaterial was ideal, the spirit world was untainted. Flesh brought odors, needs, wrinkles, and vast storehouses of limitation. Flesh – that curse.



And so, like John the Baptist preparing the way, the Greeks set the stage for a reversal.

The Apostle Paul could talk to them about the Infinite Word, the Spirit Creator...this could get those beards nodding; it could be crammed into their Plato picture.

But Christmas – to the Greeks, Christmas was filth, a vulgarity in the extreme. They were right. And thus the beauty.

If the Maker of the world were to descend to earth, how would you expect Him? If you heard that the Infinite, the Spirit Creator was entering into His own Art, wouldn't you look to the clouds? Wouldn't you look to the cherubim in their storms; wouldn't you expect a tornado chariot? I would, and in my defense, I think my sensibilities are good and entirely in the right place. It is God who is gauche. And thus the surprise.

The Jews were waiting on a Messiah. They were waiting on a man to throw off the oppressor, someone like Judah Maccabee, someone like the King David. The Messiah came, and not just to the Jews. He did come like Judah, like David, but not how He was expected.

**But Christmas -
to the Greeks,
Christmas
was filth,
a vulgarity in
the extreme.
They were right.
And thus
the beauty.**

He came to be humbled. He came to die.

Plan the event. Arrange the reception. The King of Kings is coming. He will shoulder governments. He will be called the Prince of Peace, Wonderful Counselor.

Plato, no covering your eyes, no throwing up in indignation, no offended boycotts of the crucifix set in urine. The Lord of all reality is coming to your hemisphere. And He, the pure Spirit, will take on flesh and need to eat and breathe and move His bowels, and have His diaper changed.

Don't look at me. I had plenty of glorious ideas. The blasphemy isn't mine.

He will be a carpenter, with splintered and blistered hands and cracking nails. One of His grandmothers was a whore of Jericho. He will enter the womb of a virgin and expand in the normal way. He will exit her womb in the normal way. And then, she will suckle Him as the cows do their calves. Because, well, He will be mammal.

These days, we dress the whole thing up and hum until it all seems holy. We set up little plastic scenes in our yards and then we backlight them. If God is pleased, it is because they are trite and silly entirely in keeping with the whole event.

The Lord came to clean the unclean. He brought the taint of Holiness, and it has been growing ever since. He was born in a barn and slept in a food trough. Maybe the livestock all took gentle knees, cognizant and pious, like in the back page of a children's Christmas book. Maybe they smacked on their cuds and continued to lift their tails and muck in the stalls.

The angels knew what was going on even if no one

else did. They grasped the bizarre reality of Shakespeare stepping onto the stage, of God making Himself vulnerable, dependent, and human — making Himself Adam. And so, in a more appropriate spirit, they arranged a concert and put on what was no doubt the greatest choral performance in planetary history.

Were the kings gathered? Where were the people with the important hats? Where were the ushers, the corporate sponsors?

The Heavenly Host, the souls and angels of stars, descended into our atmosphere and burst in harmonic joy above a field and some rather startled shepherds. But the crowd was bigger than that. The

shepherds were a distinct minority. Mostly, the angels were just singing to sheep. I'm sure those animals paid attention, and not just because there was a baby in their food bowl.

Sidenote: Does this sound like something a human would make up? Does it sound like something a bunch of cult builders would create to impress potential titheers?

And then the Holy One, the World-Maker, was born in a ... in ... uh ...

And the angels themselves descended, overflowing with jubilation and sang to a randomly selected flock of sheep and a couple of their unwashed, illiterate shepherds — the Lord Incarnate's first worshippers.

Extra Sidenote: Did those sheep reproduce? Do they have lineal descendants? Is someone shearing one now and taking a basket of wool to the little boy who lives down the lane?

I'm betting it's a black sheep.

**These days,
we dress
the whole
thing up and
hum until it
all seems
h o l y**

If I could get a sweater made from the wool of the descendant of one of the first Christmas sheep, would it itch like any other sweater? Would it give me visions?

Someone is wearing one now. If they only knew, it might just explain the dreams.

The reversals in the story didn't stop at Christ's birth. Rather than being celebrated, one of the first plot elements was Herod's declaration of genocide. The King of kings is here, you say? Bathe the land in infant blood.

Slaughter, Rachel weeping for her children lost...these things are part of the Christmas story. For some reason, we leave the soldiers, dead babies, and weeping mothers out of the plastic figurine collection.

Herod, the first king to fall, was eaten by worms. Where is he now? Where is the matter he used to use?

The infant Israel was taken by night into Egypt and escaped that early death.

Whom did Christ fight? The leaders of His own religion, His professed management. The righteous.

What did Christ do in the temple? He whipped people and flipped tables. Later He even ripped that big, expensive purple curtain.

With whom did He sit and eat? Whores. Thieves. The unclean.

From birth to the end, He never left the trough. Christ walked from insult to insult, from filth to filth. Lepers. Prostitutes. Tax men. The Dead.

He chose fishermen to stand closest to Him, and from among the educated He chose one great man – a murderer who didn't want to come and had to be knocked off his donkey.

How would He conquer? When would He leave this path of uncleanness?

He came to be stripped naked. He came to be lashed. He came to have His beard ripped out and thorns rammed onto His head. He came to be mocked, to have His body pierced with rough – forged nails and a Roman spear. To be severed from His father and experience Hell as Adam – for man.

He came to live in the trough and die on a pole.

Pilate, you conversed with your Maker. Truth stood in front of you, and you asked Him, "What is truth?"

Pilate, you have had another conversation. What words did you have?

The Word has shown how far He can stoop. From the pole, He went into the ground. From the ground, He went deeper, all the way to Tartarus, beating out a path for those coming behind, for the thief who walked beside Him.

The whale did not spit Him up. He ripped the whale open.

The stone was rolled away.

The Guards: Priests, the Christ was no liar. He has come again.

The Priests: Take this money. Tell no one.

Members of the Sanhedrin, there has been another

the angels...
overflowing with
jubilation...
sang to a
randomly
selected flock
of sheep
and unwashed,
illiterate
shepherds –
the Lord
Incarnate's
first
worshippers

trial. What was your defense? Even the sheep can testify against you.

In the cold, I stand, shivering in the dark storm.... It is collapsing in a rush. These leaves aren't fluttering; they aren't spinning on sun-gold air. They are dying swiftly in the night, their colors already hidden.

I see Rome falling, collapsed by rain.

I see Byzantium, with the pomp of great hats and the importance of emperors.

I see China in confusion.

I see Africa slipping to the earth.

I see Nietzsche and Plato, Hume and Leibniz and Kant. I see kings and prophets unable to stand.

I see myself, my people, my country, my leaves, my blood. We are dying. We must die. The road is well traveled. We need not fear the dark, for the way is lit with Christmas lights.

We go into the ground, where the moss will feed on us and others will be stacked on top. We go into church floors and graveyards behind grocery stores. We go into the sea and the snow. We are devoured – by each other, by the earth, by time, by cancers and confusion, by the spinning of this sphere as it runs its balanced laps.

We are in Winter, where the light dies and blood runs cold. But we are not forgotten. Wet, ripped from the trees and trampled, we will not be lost, for we are His words, and when His voice calls, we will come.

Offstage, there is another greater stage.

Come, let us grow old like fishermen. Let us sweeten the air with songs while we fade. Let us die. Winter cannot hold us. Let us go into the ground, and our faces will find the sun. Let us ride the eruption of Easter.

**We are in
Winter,
where the light
dies and
blood runs cold.
But we are
not forgotten...
for we are
His words,
and when His
voice calls,
we will come.**

Our Maker waits. He would have a conversation. What words will we have?

We need only one, the One who spoke us.

We will hear the angels sing. We will be the sheep. We will be made new and find ourselves standing in a garden. We will be handed bodies and shovels and joy.

No tree will be prohibited.

Blister your hands. Tend to the ants. Push the shadow back. Sing. Make a garden of the

world.

We will laugh and carve FINIS on the earth. We will carve it on the moon. We will look to the Voice, to the Singer, the Painter, the Poet, the One born in a barn, the One with holes in His hands and oceans in His eyes, and on that day we will know – The story has begun.

And we will rake the leaves. 

N.D. Wilson is an author from Moscow, Idaho. He writes young adult fiction, children's literature, and apologetics. His other titles include 100 Cupboards, The Dragon's Tooth, and Leepike Ridge. He is currently writing a screenplay for the film adaptation of C.S. Lewis's The Great Divorce.

LEARNING TO FLOAT

Confessions of a Not-So-Submissive-Wife

by Peggy Drinkard

My dear, late stepfather used to, on occasion, invite me to tag along with him and my mother when they went out dancing. I was a late-twentyish-something schoolteacher and single woman who seldom dated and I think he felt the acquisition of a few social skills might improve my chances of changing that scenario. From time to time throughout these evenings he would dutifully ask me to dance. We would get up on the dance floor and stumble through some song or the other, with Jim constantly and kindly urging, "Let me lead." I tried. Really, I did. But to this day I have a VERY hard time "letting" the only person I dance with now, my husband, lead. Somehow, I can hardly "let go" and just follow. On the rare occasions when, almost magically, I do, it is a wonderful feeling to relax in his arms, and certainly a more pleasurable dance...not stumbling or straining or stepping on toes...just harmony and oneness. It's delightful. Lately I've been thinking of the analogy of following in dancing to floating in water.

I am a wonderful "floaters." I always have been since I learned to float sometime around the age of five.

And I *love* to float. My long hours of lying listlessly rocking on top of the waves in the Gulf of Mexico has become something of a joke on the annual "girls only" beach trip I take with friends most years. I remember on one such occasion being blissfully disengaged when I suddenly became aware of a commotion nearby. Upon

opening my eyes, I realized I was the object of loud shrieks of laughter and mirth pouring forth from a group of Japanese tourists who were unashamedly pointing and gesturing in my direction. Embarrassing, but I digress. Through the years, I have tried to teach others to float. The hard thing about floating, as with following someone else's lead in dancing, is that you are not so much *doing* something as *not doing* something. Just like my stepfather, I find myself saying to whomever I am coaching, "Just let go...trust the water to hold you." Most of my initiates into the joy of floating find this hard. Some find it impossible. One moment you've got your hand under them, they relax and you slowly pull your support away, and for a moment there, they are floating. But suddenly, they *realize* and startle and try to assume some control over the situation, at which point they inevitably sink.

Now down to the nitty-gritty...the painful object of my musings. True confessions. I am a bossy wife. I don't want to be. I know what the Bible tells me about husbands and wives and God's idea of good,

Christ-like and Christ-honoring marriages. He leads, I follow. All too often, I catch myself trying to do the leading. I make excuses for this. I say I can't help myself. I like to think it is because I grew up in a fatherless home where my mother was always in charge and making decisions, so "it's all I know." But at the end

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My problem is not so much about trusting my husband... as it is about trusting my God

of the day, the truth is, I am just disobedient. I want to grasp authority that has not been given me. Like dancing or floating, turning loose and following, I find *NOT* doing something very difficult.

I suppose, at the root of things, I have trust issues. “*Oh ye of little faith.*” And my problem is not so much about trusting my husband (who can perfectly trust a fellow sinner?) as it is about trusting my God. Like Eve, I listen to another voice suggesting, “did God *really* say....?”

In *What I Learned in Narnia* Doug Wilson has a chapter on confession of sin. Using illustrations from the various Narnian tales he points to the necessity of honest confession in the Christian life. Flowing from honest confession (made straightforwardly without subtle self-excusing or pointing to the sins of others) is forgiveness and restoration and healing of relationships. God desires this for his children. Restoration and reconciliation is His goal for us, the purpose of sacrificing His son. Our fundamental problem is our brokenness and the brokenness of our relationships, with others, certainly, but primarily with Him. True confession, followed by true forgiveness, opens the way for things to be made right.

Doug Wilson points out (as our pastor is doing in his series on Matthew) that confession is not the end but the means. In reference to Jill, a character in *The Silver Chair*, Wilson says, “Being in Aslan's presence naturally creates a posture of confession in Jill. She does not feel sorry for her faults because she has a list of sins and is methodically checking them off – she feels sorry because she *knows* Aslan, and

seeing him makes her realize how being a quarreling sort of person is deeply inconsistent with Aslan's character. He is not an impersonal force behind a list of dead laws. He is a person, and sin can be easily identified by asking yourself, ‘Is he that way, or is he not?’.... As soon as she realizes this she wants to confess all the things she has done wrong, but it is wonderful that Aslan interrupts her. He knows her heart, and he gives comfort and praise instead of scolding. That is the pattern of how Aslan receives all those who offer him honest confession. Aslan cares about confession of sin, but there is always something beyond it. In other words, being honest about our faults and failings is like washing up for dinner, so you can enjoy that dinner with clean hands. But imagine if someone just washed up for dinner, all the time, over and over, and never came to the table? Washing is important, but the point of being clean is so that we can enjoy the meal.”

Enjoying the meal! How instructive, and liberating! Like the pleasure of dancing when someone leads and someone follows, like the joy I experience atop the ocean waves, this is what God has for me in other arenas, marriage among them. Submission, or following the lead of the one in authority, is a means to freedom and blessing. It evokes truth and humility and all that is becoming in a child of God, positioning us where we can relax and enjoy the feast. “A table thou has prepared for me.”

“I believe, Lord, help my unbelief.” ¶

Peggy Drinkard is the Children's Director at Riverwood Presbyterian Church. You may contact her at pdrinkard@riverwoodchurch.org

PEACE ON EARTH

The Promise and Reality

by Robert Thornton

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor does He sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail
With peace on earth, good will to men."*

~William Wadsworth Longfellow

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

~Matthew 10:34

"Peace on earth, good will toward men." During the Christmas season you hear this phrase constantly repeated. You see it on billboards, in Christmas cards, and on TV public service announcements. Seasonal songs such as "Let There be Peace on Earth" echo the refrain.

The expression is of course from Luke 2:14 in the King James Bible. The scene is the proclamation of the birth of Jesus. Shepherds are tending their flocks, when suddenly an angel appears to them and tells them that the long awaited Savior is born. Following this a host of angels sing the familiar refrain: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

The implication usually taken from this is that somehow the birth of Christ heralds for our secular society an era of world peace. During Christmastime we wistfully talk of no more wars, a cessation of ethnic conflict, even a reconciliation of political discord.

But is this what "peace on

earth" really means? Are we to have some worldwide Utopian society spring up as a result of everyone attempting to follow the Golden Rule? Let's look at an example of man's attempt at peace.

In World War I there was an interesting incident at Christmastime in 1914. It was known as the Christmas Truce. If you were present for a recent Movie Night you witnessed it played out in the motion picture *Joyeux Noel*.

Beginning on Christmas Eve and into Christmas day, German and British soldiers (and to a lesser extent German and French soldiers) facing each other in trenches along the Western Front, began singing carols and exchanging Christmas greetings. This grew into a spontaneous cease-fire and eventually troops leaving the protection of their trenches to meet in the barbed wire and body strewn No-Man's Land. There they exchanged food and souvenirs, sang carols together, buried their dead, and in some cases played soccer. There was even one account by a British soldier of one of his mates, a barber in civilian life, cutting a German soldier's hair.

It would be wonderful if, as a result, the troops laid down their arms and went home, never to fight again. However, we know what happened. The day after Christmas it was business as usual and World War I became the second greatest abattoir of the Twentieth Century, exceeded only by World War II. Eight million soldiers were killed in

The implication usually taken... is that somehow the birth of Christ heralds for our secular world peace

Europe alone. Germany lost 15% of its male population and France lost 10%.

It appears that man's effort is pretty dismal. So what about the Christmas "promise?" What does the Prince of Peace say about peace?

In Matthew Chapter 10, Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." Wait a minute. Christ denies bringing peace to the world?

Let's look at the passage again, this time in the context of the complete idea: *Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

The sword is the Gospel and the peace disrupted is quiet before the storm when the radical nature of the Gospel is proclaimed.

If you don't believe this, try talking to a secular friend or relative about the Reformed Faith, specifically telling him or her about Limited Atonement. As you get into the idea that God intended Christ's sacrificial death on the cross for only those whom he elected from the beginning of time, watch them bristle in anger and disbelief at

such a perceived unjust doctrine. You've just drawn a metaphorical sword and struck a wounding blow.

So, what is the real meaning of the passage, "Peace on earth, good will toward men"? A good start would be to go back to the passage and review a more complete translation. In the ESV, Luke 2:14 is translated as: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

**The only true
"peace on
earth"
is the peace
we have from
knowing that
our sins are
forgiven and
that we stand
blameless
before the
Creator of
the universe**

This peace is conditional. The condition? It is God being pleased with us. We know that God can only be pleased with a sinless man or woman. But we are separated from God by our sin nature. We humans, left to our own devices, are a sinful people. It's in our DNA. We're born that way and cultivate a sophisticated life of sin that weaves a complex tapestry of denial and excuses that leave us sound and pristine on the outside but within a rotting, foul smelling

corpse.

Another thing about this sin nature – it fosters guilt. We know we somehow are flawed, and apart from God's saving grace, we wander through life in a free range funk of angst.

Perhaps Patrick Henry had it right when in his famous "Give me Liberty, or Give me Death!" speech he said, "Gentlemen may cry, Peace, Peace--but there is no peace." Although he was writing about the Colonies' political condition the words certainly describe man's spiritual condition without Christ.

The peace on earth that the Bible is talking about is peace with God. This is a peace that doesn't depend on an absence of wars, or your favorite political party being in power, or lower crime statistics.

The problem that really plagues people is not so much the day-to-day strife and conflicts we read about in the papers or see on the TV news programs. We tend to focus on these external problems, as serious as they are (and I do think they are serious and even life threatening at times) but without seeing the most severe problem facing all of humankind. It underlies everything we attempt to achieve or neglect. And that problem is our separation from God due to our sin nature, a separation that can only be bridged by Christ's sacrificial work on the cross. In Christ we have peace with God, the only peace that is lasting, the only peace that is complete. In John 14, Christ says:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. Again we see the promise of peace with God in Philippians: Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The only true "peace on earth" is the peace we have from knowing that our sins are forgiven and that we stand blameless before the Creator of the Universe.

As we approach this Christmastime and are bombarded with wishes of "Peace on earth...", know that we have peace. Our peace, the only real peace, comes from being in Christ.

Merry Christmas. ☮

Dr. Robert Thornton is an elder of Riverwood Presbyterian Church. You may contact him at rthorn3423@comcast.net.

INTERACT WITH CULTURE



RIVERWOOD BOOK GROUP

This group meets each Monday evening at 7:00 pm in the Church library to discuss books we have chosen to read. We cover a wide range of theology, fiction, history and commentary, looking at all subjects through the lens of the Gospel and "sharpening each other" in our interaction. If you enjoy books, Christian fellowship and good coffee, please join us. All are invited. Upcoming selections include *Don Quixote* by Miguel De Cervantes, *How I Killed Pluto* by Mike Brown, and *Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare.

PROFESSING THE GOSPEL IN THE MIDST OF MARRIAGE

Marriage as a Spiritual Workshop

by Eric Venable

I haven't been married long (Jen and I are coming up on six years early next year), but I've been married long enough to know that marriage is no cake-walk, no romantic fairy tale straight out of the gushy bliss of a Hollywood romance film. I love my wife Jen like no other woman on earth and only by the grace of God do we find ourselves in a season of marriage where we both love each other in ways that we never have before. But we have also endured difficult seasons. Marriage is simultaneously glorious and messy. And as long as marriage is comprised of two fallen people and not two robots or two angelic beings, this is how we all will experience marriage to our earthly spouses this side of heaven. I once heard someone say something to the effect that marriage always involves two sinners and so marriage will always have to deal with double the issues and struggles of the human sinful heart.

Marriage is also a spiritual classroom like no other that the Lord has used to bring about enormous redemptive change in my own soul. Marriage is always getting me to question some of my most deeply held convictions and assumptions about some of life's most important questions. *What is life all about? How do people change? What is the true nature of love?* These are all things every married person struggles to answer and I'm convinced that your answers to questions like these will largely determine the direction of your marriage, whether it's one that honors God and grows with time or one that runs from God and his good design for marriage.

What Christians profess about God, themselves, and

the world they live in has everything to do with things as practical and everyday as marriage. If what we confess about the gospel has no practical effect upon the relationship we have with our spouse, then we need to ask ourselves if we truly believe the things we say we believe. We should ask if our confession of Christianity is something we have relegated to some abstract intellectual thought that flits about our brains but not entered our hearts and begun its necessary work of transformation. The Puritans once said that Christian doctrine is something that is meant to be screwed deep down into the human heart. One of the best ways for us to know as Christians if this is happening with our Christian doctrine is to take a long, hard look at our marriages. We can look at a hundred different things that we believe as Christians that can and should have a practical effect on our marriages, but here are just two simple things about the gospel of Jesus that should deeply form Christian marriage.

The gospel gives me constant power to forgive in my marriage. It's usually fairly difficult to be deeply hurt by someone else that you don't know very well. They simply just don't have enough ammo to do the greatest damage. Someone has to begin to see all your dirt, when you are at your worst moments, before they have some real leverage to wage an effective war. One of the more comical scenes from the cult-classic movie *Fight Club* is when the social misfit Tyler Durden and his merry band of anti-establishment rebels are given assignments to cause as much mischief and mayhem in their city as possible. One of the assignments involves getting

into a fight with a complete stranger; something they admit is much harder than first appears. They discover that it takes doing things as obnoxious as repeatedly spraying someone in the face with a water hose before a stranger will be pushed to the level of anger that will drive them to physical blows.

It's kind of just the opposite in marriage, isn't it? Verbal assaults can begin with giving the wrong look. Leaving socks (repeatedly) on the floor easily becomes a declaration of war. Simple, monosyllabic answers become the spark that can ignite the powder keg of a long, protracted, nasty fight. Ever wonder why this is? Well, it's because our spouse knows us better than any other person on earth. They often can see straight through a look, a word or gesture right into an evil heart. There just isn't any place to hide in marriage from your own sin or the sin of your spouse. It will be found out or rooted out inevitably and when this happens, fights ensue. The thing about sinners is that they don't typically respond to sin in gracious, redemptive ways. Rather they compound the problem by responding rather sinfully (what a shock!). The better someone knows you, the deeper they are able to hurt you. As intimacy increases in marriage, so do the stakes in your conflicts. The deeper you go with someone, the greater the ability you are giving them to hurt you. And this is why love will always be risky. It's something that those primarily concerned with their own comfort and protection should stay away from or else they will constantly be disappointed. This is why the power to forgive is essential in marriage. It is something so essential that your marriage simply will not survive in the long haul without it.

What will you do when you have to face head-on your own sin and the sin of someone you also dearly

love? *In those moments when we come face to face with the ugliness of sin in all its Technicolor detail – whether in ourselves or our spouse or both – we need to rely upon the wellspring of forgiveness found in the gospel.* 1 John 1:8-9 gives the beauty of the gospel promise, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” For Christians, the free grace of God extended to us through Jesus is our assurance that no matter how dark the crime, God's forgiveness is big enough to cleanse and restore. And again, there is no place like marriage to expose whether or not you truly believe this and cling to it as your only hope. Are you able to forgive your spouse in the face of their repeated sin? If the answer to this is no, then you are not drinking from the gospel yourself. You just don't see yourself as someone who needs the forgiveness of God just as desperately as your spouse. You cannot give what you have not received. People who regularly know, experience, and love the forgiveness of God extended in the gospel will be people who want to grant this same kind of forgiveness (continually!) to undeserving sinners, even the one you happen to be married to. If you cannot do this, you need to begin asking yourself some difficult questions about whether or not you believe you have received the forgiveness of God in the gospel. And if you do profess this truth, you must wrestle with the question of why you cannot extend to someone else the very thing that you believe God has graciously given you.

The gospel gives me a meaning and a purpose bigger than my marriage. We live in a world that distorts all the good and grand designs of God into selfish desires that orbit around ourselves. The



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When husbands and wives really see and believe that their marriage exists for Jesus' glory, they begin to truly love their spouses

tragedy of sin is that it makes human beings “curved in on themselves,” as Augustine once mentioned. And sinners will do this with marriage as with any other good part of God's design and creation. Our fallen world has turned marriage into a quest for ultimate human fulfillment and satisfaction. People get married honestly believing that this other creature will make them feel happy, fulfilled, and satisfied and as long as the initial buzz of romantic love sticks around, living this way is possible for husbands and wives in the short-term. But sooner or later, this deceptive understanding of marriage wears thin, and enormous disappointment and disillusionment are the result. I suspect many husbands and wives simply bail on their marriage once they discover the painful truth that this other person whom they thought they loved so much isn't capable of bringing about the ultimate satisfaction and fulfillment that they thought they were capable of.

But as Christians, we should know better than to think and live like this. Our reformed catechisms that we teach our children tell us from the very get-go how we are to think about all of life, including our marriages. “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” This means that the chief end of your marriages isn't your own personal happiness and satisfaction. Instead, its purpose is something far greater and far more exhilarating – God created marriage so that husbands and wives together could bring glory to a glorious God and know the joy of knowing this glorious God. Paul tells us in Colossians 1:16 one of the most profound truths that exists on planet earth, that all things were made

by Jesus and for Jesus. “All things” here really does mean “all things” whether we are talking about your job, hobbies, or relationships with your spouse and children. And so this God-centered understanding of all of life, particularly marriage, is essential for Christian husbands and wives who profess the gospel. If husbands and wives do not believe and live like this is true, that their marriage exists primarily for the sake of bringing Jesus more glory, then they will likely look for ultimate purpose and meaning in all sorts of places that cannot ever live up to such high demands. And the results of this are disastrous of course. Every Christian husband and wife must come to grips sooner rather than later with the reality that the person they wake up with every morning cannot and will never be the person that provides for them ultimate meaning and fulfillment.

Strangely enough, contrary to the wisdom of this world, when husbands and wives begin to really see and believe that their marriage exists for Jesus' sake and for his glory, not their own, then they really do begin to truly love their spouses. We begin to stop demanding that our spouses provide something for us that they nor any other creature or thing was made to provide. We begin to see our spouses as they truly are, fallen individuals made in God's image who need his redemption and rescue, just like we are. We don't become angry with them when they fail to live up to our demands and we stop hoping that they will satisfy the deepest longings our hearts and provide for us our purpose in life. When we begin to put Jesus and his glory at the center of hearts, then our hearts suddenly begin to be freed up to love the people God has put in our lives and we stop being

the beauty of the gospel is that we receive and experience a love that puts anything either of us can muster up to shame

constantly angry and disappointed that they are people with flaws, issues and sins just like we are. When we see that Jesus is the Lord over everything and our hearts submit to his reign and rule, we can begin to be patient and loving in the face of the sins of our spouse and begin to believe that Jesus is in the process of restoring who they are just as he is at work doing this in us.

Do you honestly believe these things about your spouse and your marriage? If you and/or your spouse are struggling to believe these things in the context of your marriage, would you humble yourself and ask another Christian couple in your life for some help? The more I read what the Bible says about marriage, the more I'm struck with the fact that the Bible tells us that marriage isn't ultimate, but something good and God-given to help us understand a bigger, greater reality, the reality of Jesus' incredible relationship with his people. And it's essential that our marriages practically function like this, that they do not exist for their own sake nor will they be sustained by the sheer force of one's determination to love. I've never loved anyone like I love my wife Jen. But I discovered early on in my marriage that my love for Jen simply is not enough to sustain our relationship. My love, in and of itself, is weak, pitiful and simply inadequate to fuel the life of our marriage for the long haul. But the beauty of the gospel is that Jen and I both receive and experience a love that puts anything either of us can muster up to shame. It is a love that is found only in the person and work of Jesus, a love that has been and will continue to be graciously shown to us into eternity. So your marriage and my marriage exist to show us the gospel and they will only grow and be sustained by the power of this same gospel. ¶

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INTERACT WITH CULTURE

RIVERWOOD BOOK TABLE

The Riverwood Book Table is located in the church narthex. Here the church provides books of interest to our members. These volumes include a wide range of subjects such as theology, biography, history, fiction and commentary. While many of these books are not classic "Presbyterian" texts, they have been found to be informative, helpful and are often classics. We believe that you and other Riverwood members will benefit from this cultural interaction.

RIVERWOOD MOVIE NIGHTS

Movies are important purveyors of ideas and culture and are a part of the 21st Century canon. At irregular intervals, Riverwood will have a Movie Night on Sunday evenings. We will screen a movie that is of interest to the Christian community and provide an opportunity to discuss it. Join us for profitable Christian interaction with the questions and ideas provided by movies.

Sweet Land

The Tree of Life

UNCHANGING AND CHANGING

A Christmas Odyssey

by Jimmy Hopper

As Thanksgiving came to an end and another Advent season was upon me, I caught myself thinking, "Again? So soon?" This led to thoughts about time and its inexorable movement, carrying my life along with it at what seems to be an ever-increasing speed. All of which, of course, led to thoughts of Christmases past. Thankfully these thoughts were not Scrooge-like, nor even sentimental reflections in the way that usually happens around early December but were reflections of a changing life, a changing focus, and a changing concept of Christmas. My concept of Christmas has changed in a far more profound way than a movement from Christmas as a child and a belief in Santa; it has changed to a more (I hate to use the word) "religious" view.

Since this is my 74th Christmas, there should be variety in my experience, in fact, there should be a lot of variety. One would think that I had some Christmases that I knew little or nothing about when I was very young; however, my Mother was one of six sisters and as the first son of the family, I got enough attention that everything I did that was "significant" became part of the family lore. This includes anything in my childhood that was remotely "cute", "sweet" or especially, embarrassing. Thus I think that I have heard (many times) all the stories of all the Christmases I have lived through. I don't remember, but I have heard it retold, the Christmas in which I, as a four-year-old, insisted that the

Christmas tree remain up and decorated, and I actually prevailed, I'm told, until March of the New Year. I'm sure the tree was a sad affair by today's standards since this was post-depression Hale County, Alabama, but it must have been magical to me. The incident has given me an idea either of how spoiled I was or of the clout the "first son" has until the second, third, and fourth children have been born. So I do have a record, a decent sample of Christmas Past and while memory is fallible, it is still reliable enough to remember at least the different epochs.

The first of these is, of course, childhood. This is magic, lights, gifts that you get to choose, sweets (fruit, nuts and candy was the operative phrase then and they all appeared in my stocking), and attention, lots of attention. Children were at the center of Christmas in my childhood. It was as if Christmas was for children, and I think that this was literally true as I look back. There was the Christmas story, the Sunday School lesson(s) for December, and in the background, a different note that came from many of the haunting carols that to this day still touch and vibrate the same string in my heart. Afterward, the extended family would gather in the home place, and there was food and laughter and more presents.

The next distinctive epoch was young adulthood, college, marriage, and children of my own. I remember them as responsibility, responsibility

The ever increasing materialism always led to the exhortation to "put Christ back in Christmas"

that including buying and paying for it all, decorating, making things magic for our own children, and the importance of presents for my wife. The “home place” visit moved from the Hale County farm to my parents' house. None of my children ever seemed to mind when the Christmas tree came down, though. The ever-increasing materialism that is centered in the holidays in America always led to the exhortation to “put Christ back in Christmas” and a ubiquitous newspaper essay each year about the “true” meaning of the season. I could piously *tsk tsk* about this but I was frankly as hedonistic as anyone, a true son of America. I was not a Christian or more accurately, I did not yet know I was a Christian, so again I did not consider theology a significant part of Christmas.

When I did learn that I was a Christian in my mid-thirties, everything changed, including Christmas. The word Advent became significant to me, and in it Christmas became charged with meaning. God on earth! Not being a Deist, I knew that God operated within His creation, overseeing it and bringing His will to pass. I knew that God had acted within me, that I had been brought to faith and to realize that I belonged to God in an unfathomable sense, the sense that it had happened outside me (blessedly!) and there was nothing I could do to change it. But God on earth? What did this mean in depth?

As a new Christian, Jesus was central, of course, and His work as the author of my salvation was also central, but the word “Advent” as a description led me, over time, to reconsider His entry. He not only came to earth, He came to earth as a man, one of us. The Creator became part of the creation. Everything

hangs on this most amazing of facts. He could pay our penalty only as a man. He could pay our penalty only if He had gone through what we go through. His life couldn't be robotic, a mechanical journey in which He wasn't able to sin. He had to suffer the temptation, the evil, the dirt, the betrayal, the disillusionment (witness Pilate's rather plaintive question, “What is truth?”) He had to suffer the pain of humanity that is physical, psychological, emotional and intellectual. He had to suffer all of

these things. He had to be able to pray for His torturers on the cross with the cry, “Father, forgive them.” He had to suffer all these things and still triumph over them to pay our penalty. He had to be a man.

The Advent epitomizes all of this. Jesus didn't drop down from the supernatural world in a pod like a visitor from outer space. He wasn't an alien who looked like a man and caused havoc on earth as part of his agenda. He was born. He was a fertilized egg in the womb of a teenaged peasant

woman in a backwater of the Roman Empire. He grew into a fetus and in the course of time, was born. The Lamb of God born in a stable where it is probable that the usual lamb variety had been born. That He was also God is the really stunning part of it. God was born as a man within the eternal plan to redeem a people from the disaster that had fallen on earth. We can only look at the grace of God in wonder.

Despite the wonderment of it, the Advent has been romanticized to a remarkable degree. The great art of the Western canon had something to do with it, and certainly Hallmark cards and the sentimental aspect that has developed around Christmas has

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something to do with it. Carolyn and I attended the *Nativity* movie of a few years back. It began with a gritty look at the lives of the people of Galilee during the Roman occupation and a realistic view of the troubles attended Mary's pregnancy with Joseph and public perception. But as the trip to Jerusalem came, it degenerated into a mishmash of romanticism and sentimentality. After the birth, we found that the stable was not in Bethlehem, but in the open fields with enough of the roof missing so that the Nativity star shone down into the manger and on the face of the child like a spotlight. In addition, the soundtrack was abandoned and modern Christmas carols were played in its place. One view, a tableau that showed nothing was happening but a soulful staring down at the baby, seemed copied from a Christmas card (and this was probably the case). The birth was romanticized and sentimentalized beyond reason, so much so that it resembled nothing but said Christmas card.

This is pretty much how I and much of the world thought of the Advent. At least part of the reason is the fact that Jesus is God and it just seems appropriate to think of His birth in this exalted fashion. I've come to think of Advent in very different terms and in my heart I feel that this is not only truer, but that it has strongly impacted my thoughts and worship at Christmas. In his fine book, *A Grief Observed*, C. S. Lewis wrote the following: *My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast. Could we not say that the shattering is one of the marks of His presence? The Incarnation is the supreme example; it leaves all previous ideas of the Messiah in ruins. And most are "offended" by the iconoclasm; and blessed are those who are not.* Lewis is saying that he is not capable of knowing who God is, except to the extent that He reveals Himself to us. His revelation continually breaks and remakes our perceptions. God is unchanging. We are not, and as children of

God we are being changed; we are being sanctified. Part of this, Lewis says, is that our idea of who God is and what He does is constantly being changed and strengthened. God is unchanging. We are being changed.

I have felt this regarding Christmas/Advent. I see the Advent now as the beginning of the aforementioned "pain of humanity." He was deliberately brought to earth in the most dismal of conditions; conditions that would appall modern men and especially women. As N. D. Wilson put it in the lead article as he described the Greek idea of Christmas, *Christmas was filth, a vulgarity in the extreme. They were right. And thus the beauty. It is more beautiful.* It speaks more fully of the love of God. It is more of a testament to what was given up, and what was gained. It also speaks to the blessing of those who are not offended. The brilliant poem, *Twelfth Night* by John Peale Bishop, in the Finale section that ends this issue describes the offended.

My idea of Christmas has changed, even changed drastically. Now I celebrate Advent in one hour on Christmas Eve night in worship. This year I will also celebrate in worship Christmas Day because it falls that way. The rest of it, the Christmas "holiday," is something else, sometimes bad but often something good; family, food, fellowship, love, all those things, but it is not Advent.

Christ came. He came as a man. He came in and to the pain, dirt and squalor that is a fallen world, fallen even in the palaces. By coming, and necessarily coming in this way, we are redeemed. Christmas is Advent. ¶

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FINALE

Twelfth Night

Twelfth Night is a festival in some Christian circles that comes at the end of the traditional twelve days of Christmas and marks the beginning of the Epiphany. We know it mainly from Shakespeare and from the “Partridge in a Pear Tree” song. In the Middle Ages, it was a time when everything was turned upside down; a time when peasants became kings and kings became peasants. The leader of the festival was the “Lord of Misrule.” In the towns, the young men, usually wearing masks, would run through the streets with whips and ringing bells to drive the demons and evil spirits away.

In this fine poem, the American poet, John Peale Bishop, makes use of many of these devices. His theme is the journey of the Magi, and he sees them as in a vision or a dream. The poem centers on two scenes. The first is at the moment of their leaving and the second, the time of their finding the Christ child. The Magi are formal, stilted, guarded, elaborate, traditional, the “Establishment” yet with a “mad, hid look.” The star they follow is none of these things. It is unnamed, never seen before, and is a living demon, strange and supernatural, that they seek to name, make known, and thus possess. Their leaving requires being unlocked from their citadel by the guards, the “night swords,” itself a loaded image of what is to come.

When they arrive, they come to a stinking stable with mist rising from the manure and nothing to indicate the self-righteous, “pedantic” God they were expecting, a God who would appreciate men who were all that they were. Instead, they found petulant rather than pedantic, a crying child on “a toss of straw.” They are courteous, they left their gifts, but the poet sees their “grey evasions,” the shame at the conditions and the skepticism they can't hide from their faces.

Their leaving is hurried. As they leave, they hold up their “gorgeous skirts” to keep them out of the manure. “Christmas” is over and the Lord of Misrule still reigns. Their world sees nothing in this primitive Advent to change that.

Twelfth Night

*All night I thought on those wise men who took
A midnight leave of towers and came peering
Pyramidally down to the dark guards
And stared apart, each with a mad, hid look
Twitching his mummied beard*

*while the night swords
Conferred and chains fell and the unwieldy bar
Slid and swung back
then wandered out to name
The living demon of an unnamed star.*

*All night I followed them and came at last
On a low hutch propped in an alleyway
And stretched aside
while one by one they passed
Those stilted mages mitred in stiff blue
Under the sagging beams and through the stalls.*

*Following through stench and misty fug I saw
And nothing were clearer in the scrupulous day
The rigid drooping of their ancient palls
Burnish with light, where on a toss of straw
Swaddled with rags, to their abashment, lay
Not the pedantic God whose name they knew
But a small child petulant with cries.
With courtesies unperturbed and slow
They laid their gifts down, unburnt scents and gold:
But gray evasions shamed their skeptic eyes
And the starved hands were suddenly boned with cold
As plucking their gorgeous skirts they shook to go.*

~John Peale Bishop
(1892-1944)



uel of fire.
s a child is born,

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name 'JESUS':
people from their si