

The image depicts a stage with red curtains on either side. A spotlight shines down from above, creating a bright circular area on the wooden floor. The title 'The Neglected Nativity' is written in a large, elegant, brown serif font, centered within the spotlight's beam. Below the title, the subtitle 'Finding good news in the overlooked parts of the story' is written in a smaller, green, sans-serif font, also centered within the spotlight's beam. At the bottom of the image, the author's name 'by Tom Ward' is written in a white, serif font, centered against the dark background of the stage floor.

The Neglected Nativity

Finding good news in the
overlooked parts of the story

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The Neglected Nativity
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“Thirst was made for water;
inquiry for truth”.

C.S. Lewis, The Great Divorce

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A brief word on the Bible

Throughout this booklet I will be quoting from the Holy Bible. This is where every school nativity originates. You don't have to believe in the authority of the Bible to continue reading, but it will help you to know that I do.

Since becoming infatuated with the green, red and blue pirate books at nine years of age, I have loved reading. I have read fast-paced novels that I haven't been able to put down. I have read poetry that has moved me deeply. I have read biographies that have made me laugh out loud and I have read textbooks that have filled my mind with knowledge. But nothing I have ever read has changed my life like the Bible has. And it's not just me; there are an estimated two billion people in the world who can attest to the same.

The Bible is no ordinary book. Written over hundreds of years by dozens of authors, it weaves together a mixture of history, biography, poetry, prophecy, parables and wisdom. The insights and truths we find in its pages have literally shaped the world as we know it. Many of our institutions, schools and universities, charities and even sports teams have been founded on principles taught in the Holy Bible. Historian Tom Holland recently tweeted:

‘If you live in the West, no book has had a greater effect on your life than the Bible. You don’t have to read it, or even know the first thing about it, for that to be true.’

This is not to say that it is easy reading. There are many mysterious and miraculous things contained within its pages. There are stories that will surprise and even shock you, but I encourage you to take the time to read some of it. No other book or religious text has power like the Bible has. Christians believe this is because, although human authors penned the pages, its true origin lies with God. He is the ultimate author of the Bible. What was written down was, and is, what God wants to say to the world. That’s why we need to take it so seriously.

The best place in the Bible to start reading is in the Gospels, from which the vast majority of the quotes in this booklet have been taken. ‘Gospel’ simply means good news or good tidings. These four books at the start of the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, are ancient biographies of Jesus Christ and are all about the good news that we find in Him.

My prayer is that you would read this booklet, and in particular the Bible quotes, with a desire to learn the truth and if you do so with an open heart, then the Bible will come alive to you. Many skeptics have read its pages and have been left unimpressed but for those who approach it with humility and a real desire to learn, it will be a real life-changing experience.

If you feel comfortable you could pray this very simple prayer before you start:

Dear God, I am interested to know more about You from the Bible. Please help me to understand what is written.

Chapter one: **Christmas isn't cancelled!**

On the evening of the 12th of October 2020 our hopes were shattered as Prime Minister Boris Johnson outlined his new three tier system of lockdown restrictions to battle the spread of Covid-19. Before he took questions from the press, he answered one from a member of the public:

'After months apart from extended families, many people are clinging to the hope of having some kind of family Christmas, although understandably not a "normal" one. What kind of restrictions do you expect for the festive season?'

It was a question about which many others had been thinking. Up until this point, Mr. Johnson had tried his best to reassure people that Christmas could go ahead largely unaffected, but with the rate of infection steadily increasing over the latter months, he had to deliver the bad news. He didn't come right out and say "Christmas is cancelled" - he is a politician after all - and unsurprisingly he gave a politician's answer. However it was abundantly clear that the Christmas we were all hoping for was not going to happen; which was a hard pill to swallow.

2020 has been the strangest and scariest year in recent times. The Coronavirus has wreaked havoc on many nations

and we are still in the thick of it. You may have contracted it yourself or have cared for someone who has; either way it's very likely that you at least know of someone who has had it. I am currently writing this under house arrest (sorry, self-isolation) as my eldest daughter had a temperature yesterday. She tested positive a few weeks ago and after finally being set free, it was only four days later that we were all isolating again.

These times are frustrating but we comply because lives are at stake. Covid-19 is a dreadful virus that has swept across this nation mostly affecting the older and more vulnerable in our society. Many thousands have died and hundreds of thousands have contracted the virus in the UK alone. Even for those who don't know anyone personally affected, the national and local lockdowns have still been hard, leading to frustration, anxiety, isolation and division.

Many of our plans have had to change: appointments; birthday parties; holidays; family gatherings and work arrangements. We have long passed the honeymoon phase with Zoom technology and we just want things to get back to normal. That's probably why Mr Johnson seemed so pained to say that some restrictions will still be in place at Christmas. In fact, the last I read it's likely that social distancing and masks will be with us until at least October 2021. These things keep changing and nobody really knows what is going to happen but the PM is well aware how much

people want something to celebrate after such a rubbish year. We need something to look forward to, despite all this doom and gloom.

Surely Christmas should be left unaffected? We deserve it!

But whatever this 25th of December looks like, Christmas will still go ahead. Christmas will be different, yes, but it isn't cancelled because Jesus Christ hasn't been cancelled. There will still be millions upon millions of people celebrating the birth of the most significant figure in human history. You are invited to do the same.

Christmas may be special to you, but is it special to you for the right reason?

Even if you don't get to stroll around your local Christmas markets spending a small fortune on mugs of burnt wine - Christmas can and will go ahead.

Even if you're not there to see a minor celebrity turn on the Christmas lights in your town centre - Christmas is still happening.

Even if your kids can only wave at a socially distanced Santa across a sanitised grotto - Christmas is still on.

It doesn't matter if the dining room table isn't extended and the spare chairs remain in the loft. If the infamous staff Christmas meal is axed and the carol service is postponed - you can still celebrate because Christmas isn't cancelled.

This would still be true even if things were much worse. Let's say that due to panic buying you weren't able to get a turkey in time or, due to a power cut, you were unable to watch the Queen's speech, or Christmas trees were outlawed because they were found to be particularly good at carrying Coronavirus; Christmas would still go ahead because these things are all trimmings. They are not the meat of Christmas.

The 25th of December is the birthday party of the greatest man who ever lived and, although it's almost certain that Jesus of Nazareth was not born in December, this is the date when we celebrate His birth. The problem is that most of us have forgotten the person Who started it all.

We turn up to the party every year with presents in hand but have forgotten Whose birthday it is. We raise our glasses but aren't really sure what or who we are toasting, so we toast ourselves. We give the presents to each other and another opportunity is lost to think about the real meaning behind this Advent season. Could this year be different? I hope so.

In 2014 the Bible Society commissioned a Nativity quiz to gauge the public's general knowledge of the event. Only 1% of those who answered got all ten questions right.

It's hard for most people to tell what is fact and what is fiction in regard to the Nativity story.

It's not surprising when you consider that, although Christianity is growing and flourishing in other parts of the world, Bible literacy across the UK is in steady decline. I think it's wonderful that schools still put on a nativity and even though I am a bit of a grinch, I am sad to see so many nativities cancelled in 2020 because for many parents this is the one time in the year that they hear anything at all from the Bible. That's why it's so frustrating that nativities today seem to be little more than a photo opportunity. The story they portray is a sanitised, toothless tale of soon-to-be parents struggling to find appropriate lodging to give birth. It is indeed true, that Mary and Joseph were in need of a room to let, but it is nowhere near the whole truth, and at best should be a footnote in the real Nativity.

As most school nativities won't be on this year, I thought I would take the opportunity over these pages to introduce you to my alternative nativity. I will focus on the bits of the story which are normally left out of school nativity plays. To separate the fact from the fiction.

From Matthew's Nativity we will see that the Son of God became human to save us from the debt of our sin.

From Luke's Nativity we will see that the Son of God was born to bring lasting, deep inner peace to all those who would give their allegiance to Him.

From John's Gospel we will see that the Son of God was born

to experience life as we experience it, and to make a way to bring us into the light even though we naturally love the darkness.

May God's light shine on you as you read on.

Shhhhh.... It's about to start!

Chapter two: **Matthew's Nativity**

From a distance?

Paul Richards and Andy Thomas were sleeping peacefully on the Space Shuttle Discovery 350km above the earth when a song was played through the intercom to wake them up. It was to be a historic day for the astronauts. In a few hours they would embark on their very first space walk and of all the music that could have been played to them it was decided to serenade the sleepy Americans with the song 'From A Distance.'

It was a strange choice. Although the piano-laden track sounds warm and motivational, the theme of the song is surprisingly bleak - if you get far enough away from planet earth everything seems fine:

'From a distance the world looks blue and green...
From a distance there is harmony... From a distance
we all have enough...

And there are no guns, no bombs and no diseases...

No hungry mouths to feed!

It is undeniably true that the earth looks beautiful from space,

for we have all seen the satellite photographs, but obviously they do nothing to address the problems of the world. As Paul and Andy ventured out of the shuttle for their 6-hour spacewalk the scenery must have been utterly breathtaking and although, in those moments, they couldn't see the difficulties of life on the ground below them, those difficulties were still real all the same. But my unease with the song goes deeper than that. Later in the track this line is repeated:

'God is watching us
God is watching us
God is watching us from a distance.'

The thought that God is watching us from a distance seems to strike a chord with many people. The song was a big hit in the nineties being covered by the likes of Bette Milder, Nancy Griffith and Cliff Richard. It was quoted in greetings cards and children's books, won a Grammy and was even performed at the opening ceremony of the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. And the mantra of 'God watching from a distance' went unchallenged.

The vast majority of the world's population believes in a god of some kind and I am convinced many think that, if God exists, He?... She?... It?... is far away.

That makes sense when you think about how big earth is and how small we are individually. There are 7.8 billion people on earth right now, therefore it's easy to get lost in the numbers and to feel insignificant and small. Mountains tower

thousands of feet over us and oceans plummet below us to incredible depths. If we consider our sun then we get lost in its magnitude. But our sun is part of a galaxy that contains billions of other stars even larger and more powerful. The milky way seems huge but then we find that there are 125 billion of these galaxies all containing billions of stars. It's understandable we feel small.

We are like grains of sand on the shores of the universe. If there is a God who made it all, surely he is absolutely humongous? Surely He has to be bigger than His creation and is too busy to deal with grains of sand like us? Surely He is distant and far away? It's easy to see God as unapproachable and abstract. Maybe when He bothers to glance at our planet everything seems fine from His vantage point?

Well, I am glad to tell you that this could not be further from the truth.

The Bible is the account of God involving Himself in the world He created, and the pinnacle of that involvement is revealed in five monumental events.

The birth of Jesus

The death of Jesus

The resurrection of Jesus

The Ascension of Jesus

And the return of Jesus.

I want to look at the first two of these events in this chapter.

No ordinary conception

'She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.'

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' (which means 'God with us'). Matthew 1:21-23.

If you have just read those verses for the first time, yes, you read it right - a virgin will give birth. This is a little shocking so let's start here. You have likely heard of the virgin Mary before but the actual virgin part of Jesus' birth is rarely mentioned in nativities, partly because it's awkward to explain to children but mainly because it's such an incredible claim. It is presumed that not much is lost if this detail is left out. We see Mary and Joseph on stage - Mary with a pillow stuffed up her dress, Joseph by her side with a tea towel on his head - and, although none of the children bat an eyelid, the parents are thinking that it's pretty obvious how she got pregnant. But the Bible verses above tell us that this was no ordinary conception. Hundreds of years before Jesus' birth there was a prophecy that, although partially fulfilled at the time, was fully fulfilled in the life of this young woman, Mary. This was an incredible privilege for Mary but a daunting task.

Although today being unmarried and having kids is the

norm, it was not so at the time the Gospels were written. Mary's pregnancy was a scandal. She could have even faced death. But although her pregnancy was surprising, it was not unexpected or unplanned. Mary had been told exactly what would happen to her by an angel. The same angel later confirmed this to her fiancé Joseph. Maybe this talk of angels and a teenager getting pregnant without being touched by a man seems too far-fetched? It is extraordinary and it's meant to be! It is a miracle, but I believe miraculous things happen, don't you?

Let's return to our place on planet earth for a moment. We have already thought about how small we are compared to the rest of the universe but it is rather strange that we exist at all. If planet earth was a smidge closer to the sun it would be so hot that everything would burn up. A fraction further away and everything would freeze. Up to now no other planet in the universe has been discovered that has an environment compatible with human life.

In the light of this scientific fact we have only two options. Option one: beauty, order and the complexity of human life came from nothing, through the complete chaos and randomness of a 'big bang'. Or, option two: a higher power created the world and fine-tuned it perfectly for human life. When you look at the world around you what do you think? Both options take a lot of faith but I hope when you consider both options you would choose the latter and, if this is the

case, you have just agreed that you believe in miracles. In fact you are a living, breathing miracle yourself. And if it can be established that God created the world, then it can be understood that He has the right and the power to intervene in His creation as He chooses.

I believe the conception of Jesus was one of those moments where God intervened. It is one of the proofs that the God Who created the world is the God of the Bible. A God Who can create billions of galaxies from nothing would not find it a challenge to create a life from nothing. Mysterious? Yes. Difficult? Not at all. God spoke the world into existence and He also spoke life into Mary's womb. I have met many people over the years who feel that the claimed resurrection of Jesus is a step too far - just too miraculous. They like Jesus the man, what He taught, how He lived. It's almost as if they think the miraculous bit is only at the end so you can still appreciate 98% of Jesus' life without the 'weird stuff' about rising from the dead. But they fail to realise that there is also a miracle at the start of His life, which is just as extraordinary. It was no ordinary conception because He was no ordinary baby. He was and is the Son of God. The book of Hebrews in the Bible puts it like this:

The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God, and he sustains everything by the mighty power of his command. Hebrews 1:3

This miracle baby showed the world what God is like, with all

of God's character and all of God's glory evident in this Child. Have you ever wondered what God is like? If so, then look to Jesus, for it is in Him that you will find the answer. Jesus was bestowed with a variety of names which reveal what He came to do.

What's in a name?

*'She will give birth to a son, and **you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.***

*All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, **and they will call him Immanuel**' (which means **'God with us'**).*

These verses tell us that God's Son will be called two things: Immanuel and Jesus. Both are profoundly significant, and to save speculation as to their meaning, Matthew provides immediate clarification, namely:

Immanuel - which means God with us and,

Jesus - which means to deliver, to rescue or to save, and He will save His people from their sins.

Put simply, Jesus is God with us to save us. To save us from our sins.

These two names are a perfect summation of His mission statement. Although the old song states that God is at a

distance, this is simply not true. God has never been distant. He has always been involved in His world. He is not an absent landlord or a divine watchmaker who wound up the world at the beginning and simply left it to unwind ever since - He has always been involved. But in the birth of Jesus something new happened - the Son of God took on human nature.

It's important to recognise that being God's Son makes Jesus equal to God. The Bible clearly states that there is only one God, but this God exists in three persons. In Christian theology we call this the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Mysterious and miraculous! But I hope you are coming to see that miracles do indeed happen. There is much more to say on this, but I mention it briefly here to show you how far the Son of God came to be with us, not in physical distance but in what He gave up.

The Son of God enjoyed the glory of Heaven and the royalty and riches of divinity. He received the praise and honour that he so rightly deserved. However, He laid it all down to lie as a helpless baby in a manger. He went from needing nothing to needing everything. He had been there at the creation of the world. In fact He was part of the construction team (see John 1:1-3). But now the One Who laid the foundations of the world lay in an animal feeding trough. I'm not sure if you have seen a baby being born but it's a wonderful thing to behold. And although I think that every pregnancy and birth is something miraculous and points again to a Creator God, there was nothing particularly special about the circumstances of

Jesus' actual birth. It was a rather undignified entrance into the world, with none of the comforts of modern hospitals and certainly none of the grandeur of a royal birth. Jesus was likely born in a dark and muddy room with no applause. It wasn't glorious or spectacular - something school nativities usually get right, particularly those with a small budget!

So, why would God send His Son into the mess and muck of this world?

To be with us to save us. To be true to His names.

This was God's answer to the issues on planet earth. It's a surprising antidote, to send a baby, and a baby born with all the limitations babies have. They can do very little for themselves besides breathing, crying, weeing and pooing. This completely dependent Child was the hope of the world. God Who was always close came even closer in this historic event.

It's almost a default reaction when life is really tough to think 'you don't know what I'm going through.' But you can't say that to Jesus. He lived as we live. He went through: pain and hunger; frustration and humiliation; tiredness and betrayal; depression and abuse; loneliness, anger and loss and being misunderstood. Jesus was born to experience life as we experience it. To feel the pain that we feel. The highs and lows, the frustrations and the joys. He became like us with all our limitations and was born into a world that is far from perfect. I have no idea what you are going through

right now, and have no idea what struggles and hardships you are facing. But Jesus knows. He can sympathise. Maybe Christmas is actually a hard time of year for you, when you reflect on what you've lost and what you've experienced. Maybe this Christmas is harder than usual because of the ongoing lockdown. Perhaps the isolation and loneliness are becoming unbearable, or you live in constant fear of catching Covid-19. Jesus knows and He cares. He is not watching from a distance. His name is Immanuel - God with us.

He is also called Jesus. Jesus - He will save His people from their sins. This is where things get really difficult. Jesus came to save us from ourselves. Jesus was ultimately born to die. This is never mentioned in school nativities. Once the baby-doll-Jesus is delivered into the makeshift manger, his role is basically finished for the night but in reality you can't separate His birth from His life, or from His death.

It's not a very Christmassy thought, but it is at the heart of the Christmas story. If truth be told, Christmas Eve should actually be the quietest day of the year for old St. Nick. No one deserves their presents. No one is on the good list. We have all failed miserably. The Bible calls this 'sin' and it's an unpopular concept today. In fact, it seems to have been hijacked by advertisers trying to sell you ice cream or some other product which is declared to be "so good it's sinful". They are working on the premise that sin is something pleasurable. But no amount of tinsel or fake snow can cover over the dark reality of sin and the ruin it has caused in our

lives and in the world. We know that 'From A Distance' has it wrong, however far away we travel:

There is harmony... wrong.

We all have enough... wrong.

There are no guns... wrong.

No bombs... wrong.

No diseases... wrong

No hungry mouths to feed... wrong, wrong, wrong.

There is great injustice in the world. Just listen to the news. Crime, war, poverty, discrimination, greed, corruption, selfishness, hypocrisy, anger and disasters are all things that we despise, and rightfully so. But we can't pretend that we are not a part of this. Without a doubt there are fingers to point at others but save at least one of your fingers for yourself. I know that you are not as good as you say you are. You are not as good as you want to be. How do I know? Because I am as guilty as you are.

We don't like to hear this. We can sometimes be the victim but we are most definitely the culprit at times as well. We want to be the hero in our own story, but so often we turn out to be the villain.

But instead of being distant, God had a rescue plan all along and there is hope. Over two thousand years ago a little baby was born in a manger, Who would grow up to live the life

that you wish you could live. The Bible attests to the fact that this baby Who grew from a toddler to a young boy, from a teenager to an adult, never did anything wrong. None of His fingers pointed back at Himself. He lived the life we should live and then He died the death that we deserve. He took upon Himself the sin of the world. Every wrong thought, word and deed was covered. Everything that you have done that you are ashamed of. Everything that you think you have got away with, that only God knows about... Jesus was punished on the cross in order that your sins could be dealt with. The seemingly unmentionable truth that can hardly be spoken in 2020 is that your sin is ultimately against God. God who created the world, also created the rules and laws for His creation to flourish. Those who fail to accept this, and refuse to call out for help, choose to live apart from God in this life and also the life thereafter.

Just imagine Mrs Thompson from Year 3 standing up in the middle of the nativity, as the baby Jesus is placed in the manger and saying, in that slightly hushed and calm way that teachers talk, that 'the reason the cute little baby was called Jesus is because you are all sinners and He came to save you. When He grows up He will be brutally executed in order to provide the necessary sacrifice for the sins of the world to be dealt with. Ok, just wanted to clear that up.. on with the show!' I don't like to think about how the audience would respond. But a nativity that doesn't mention sin is like a doctor who doesn't tell her patients what's wrong with

them. It's missing the reason for the whole production. It's not popular but it is the truth. The most famous verse in the whole of the Bible puts it much better than I can:

For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16

God is not distant; He came down to be with us to save us from ourselves.

Jesus isn't cancelled

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. Matthew 2:1

I imagine Herod the Great wasn't very good at sharing his toys as a child because when he grew up and came to power he had a tendency to kill people who he felt were trying to steal his limelight. He murdered two of his wives and three of his own sons. He was given the title 'the Great' because he had the reputation of being a great builder but he wasn't very good at building bridges with people. So when the wise men came to inquire about the new King on the block who was about to be born he wasn't much pleased. Herod is understandably left out of school productions because if his part were portrayed faithfully the nativity would have to be rated an 18! After Herod heard about Jesus being born he planned to have Him killed. No surprises there. But, because he couldn't be sure which child it was, he arranged to have

every baby boy under two years old killed just to make sure.

Herod was not to know that after the wise men were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream.

"Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and his mother," the angel said. "Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." Matt 2:13

Herod tried to have Jesus cancelled. It didn't work.

2020 has not just been the year of Covid-19, we have also seen the rise of 'cancel culture'. People in the public eye have been - not killed, as Herod would have chosen - but 'exposed' for having views considered unacceptable in our modern and 'enlightened' times. Statues have been toppled and celebrities 'deleted' online when unpalatable actions or comments have been discovered in their past.

If you are honest with yourself, you know that if your whole life was aired for everyone to see in a Truman Show style broadcast... you would justly deserve to be cancelled. You have done things and said things and even thought things which are deeply wrong. And just as we face consequences for our actions if we break the law of the land, there are consequences for breaking the laws which God has revealed in the Bible.

Maybe you have had the thought, 'If there is a God who is powerful enough to create the world, why doesn't He just

stop all the bad things?’ I think part of the answer is that there would simply be no one left. We *are* the bad things! God would have to cancel every one of us. But instead, because He loves us, He made a plan to rescue us.

The Christmas story is that God became a baby, lived a perfect life and was ‘cancelled’ on the cross for sins that He didn’t commit. It was the right judgment but for the wrong person - He took the punishment we deserve so that we don’t have to.

But Christmas isn’t cancelled, because Jesus couldn’t really be cancelled! He rose from the dead to prove it!

It is a miracle and one that changed the world as we know it. However ‘enlightened’ or ‘progressive’ we become, Jesus will never be cancelled.

Chapter three: **Luke's Nativity**

Real peace

At that time the Roman Emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire.

Luke 2:1

Octavius. It may sound like the popular car produced by Skoda but is actually the name of the ruler of the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus' birth. His full name was Gaius Octavius but he came to be known as Caesar Augustus. You may never have heard of him. I certainly have never seen him depicted in any nativity I've watched. He claimed the name Caesar from his great-uncle, a man called Julius Caesar... you have probably heard of him! And the name Augustus was given to him by the Roman senate. Their first recommendation was the title 'The King of Rome' but Octavius didn't think this was good enough. Then they suggested 'The Dictate of Rome' but again this wasn't grand enough for him. Finally they suggested 'Augustus' which means 'from the gods' and he liked this name very much. He came to power as the Roman Empire was being formed. Up to that point it had been ruled by several generals but gradually the power began to be invested in one man, and that man was Octavius.

He was the most powerful man on the face of the earth. Rome led the world and Octavius led Rome. He was an effective but controversial leader. On the face of it, he brought peace to the entire empire. What started with him became known as 'Pax Romana' - a two hundred year reign of relative peace. But this was an enforced peace. Any dissent or unrest was stamped out swiftly with brutal force. So when Octavius called for everyone to be registered for a new tax, people didn't argue they simply obeyed. Years of warfare had taken its toll on the people. There had been so much division and despair amongst the people that Octavius planned not just to bring peace, but also bring unity as well; albeit an enforced unity.

People worshipped a plethora of different gods at this time, and if their city or nation lost a battle they would wonder if their local god had somehow abandoned them and it was this notion that Octavius planned to change. He put Himself forward as the one god everyone could worship. Peace and unity would come through everybody abandoning their current alliances and simply worshipping Octavius. I'm sure this didn't help his ego much, as he was already a highly ambitious and self-absorbed man. In recent years an inscription has been discovered of a Roman decree made under Octavius' rule, to re-start the official calendar from the year of his birth. It is called the Priene Calendar Inscription and was found at a site in Western Turkey. This is part of it: '...sending him as a saviour, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all

things... and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings for the world that came by reason of him.'

To sum it up, Octavius basically claimed to be the saviour of the world. He believed he was the only god anybody needed and he had his own gospel (good tidings) to spread far and wide. He even arranged to have a forty-member male voice choir literally sing his praises whenever he attended an important function or ceremony. It was into this context that the baby Jesus was born.

The angel said to them, "Don't be afraid! I have good news for you, a message that will fill everyone with joy. Today your Saviour, Christ the Lord, was born in David's city. This is how you will recognize him: You will find an infant wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger." Suddenly, a large army of angels appeared with the angel. They were praising God by saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those who have his good will!" Luke 2:10-14

Just consider the similarities between the Bible and the inscription:

Jesus's birth was claimed to be the beginning of the good news, just as Octavius' birth was.

Jesus had His own choir, as did Octavius.

Jesus was announced to be the saviour, as was Octavius.

And Jesus planned to bring peace, as did Octavius.

If you were to compare these two historical figures at the point of their deaths who do you think would be seen as the more successful? On the surface it was Octavius. At the time of his death in AD14 he had been something of a saviour to the empire. Saviour means a deliverer or a rescuer, someone who intervenes on your behalf to help you out of your trouble. He had brought an end to the military conflicts, which had blighted his people for so long and with this came a significant level of peace.

Jesus, on the other hand, had seemed to cause disruption and commotion wherever He went, and the scene around His death was anything but peaceful; however the story doesn't end there. Christians believe that following the death of Jesus, as was predicted, He rose again three days later. And after appearing to hundreds of people to verify this truth, He returned to Heaven. It was only after He ascended that people really started to understand the peace that Jesus was bringing.

The Greek word for peace has two primary uses. One is 'freedom from military conflict', the other is 'peace between people and God'. Whereas Octavius brought a peace that was enforced by the military and an iron fist, the type of peace that Jesus ushered in and delivered to mankind can never be enforced, nor could it ever be engineered by man. Jesus came to reconcile humans with their Creator, restoring

their relationship with Him, which has ultimately been corrupted by sin, and it is this reconciliation that will actually bring true and lasting peace.

It's been a long time since World War II and, although there have been other conflicts that the British army have been involved in, we have had relative peace for many years. However, despite this reality and the fact that we are living in a time where there is little to no threat of military conflict, are we all truly living at peace? Do you have a deep sense of peace in your heart and mind? Would you say that our nation is at peace? Why is it, that with more freedom than ever before, with more technology and health care, with more expendable income and longer life expectancy, people are still restless, dissatisfied and depressed? I believe it is because people don't have peace with God, through Jesus. This peace, though received into the hearts of individuals, has the power to effect change within whole communities and cultures. This will ultimately usher in radical change with the peace of God being personally experienced far and wide.

So as we look back on Octavius, he is all but forgotten today. His grand claims ultimately came to nothing. The hopes that he carried so confidently are now only preserved in stone, as a perpetual reminder that he failed spectacularly. It's not wrong to make big claims if they are true and you can prove it, as we'll see in the next chapter, but Octavius couldn't back up his false claims. He couldn't carry the weight of his promises and consequently was crushed by them.

He was not a god. He was not a saviour. He didn't bring true peace.

There is a reason that not one single person in the world has prayed to Octavius today.

There is a reason that not one single person in the world has sung a song to Octavius today.

There is a reason that not one single person in the world has promised to follow the instructions of Octavius today.

And there is a reason we don't start our calendar from Octavius' birth.

Because he is dead. No one thinks that Octavius *is* a god, but two billion people believe that Jesus is God. No one thinks Octavius is the saviour of the world today, but more and more people every day around the globe believe Jesus Christ is. It's a worldwide movement of people that has shaped so much of what we hold dear in our daily lives. Living in the UK you may feel that Christianity has had its day. The stereotype of a musty church with four old ladies falling asleep over weak tea and stale hobnobs, may come to mind. You may feel that the church building would serve the community better if it were converted into affordable flats but the Church still has a message today and it's as relevant as ever before. Jesus is the Saviour. He has come to rescue you from a life of meaninglessness and give you joy and peace. In my experience the more a local church shares this

life-giving peace the more it flourishes. However, there is still undoubtably a lot of work to be done because, although Octavius is long-gone, he keeps getting replaced!

Yes, it's political

Political leaders have always had so much to live up to. To get elected they often have to make huge promises that they are highly unlikely to be able to honour, but that is the nature of the process. Go big or go home. No one goes as big as Octavius these days of course but, when all is stripped back, they make similar guarantees. Yes, there is talk of health care and education and a better society but basically every politician wants you to believe the same thing, 'If you vote for me your life will be better'. I am grateful for our democratic system and I'm sure the vast majority of our MPs and leaders are doing the work they do with honourable motives but we need to stop putting our hope in political leaders. This year's U.S. elections came perilously close to advent and last year's British general election happened just before Christmas. This unique season of the year, where we should be reflecting on the birth of Christ and the certain hope of His return, keeps getting sidetracked by those who can't ultimately deliver the peace you need.

It might be obvious but it probably needs to be said:

Joe Biden is not the saviour.

Boris Johnson is not the saviour.

Or any other politician.

Maybe you're not a fan of any of them. For you, maybe it's celebrities or social media influencers or academics or even family members you look to. We all have a tendency to put our faith in mere mortals and, of course, don't forget the most popular choice of all... the person who really can change your life... you! Unfortunately your track record shows that you can't even trust yourself to bring you the peace you need. You weren't designed to.

You are not the saviour.

Jesus is the Saviour.

In our society Christians are often portrayed as thinking of themselves as superior citizens. In reality we are ordinary people who have found peace in Christ and strive to become more like Him every day. Experiencing this peace won't mean that life is easy; however it will yield an inner contentment that isn't at the mercy of our external circumstances. As the minister of my church said in a message the other day, 'as long as things are good at home, I can face difficult things outside of the home.' He was using the illustration of himself and his wife and linking it back to us and God, and it's true that if I have peace in my heart from God then, however rough things get externally I can face them rather than be overwhelmed by them.

There is a wonderful moment in Luke's Nativity where an old

man called Simeon finally gets the peace that he has been longing for. He had been waiting all his life for God to send the true King that would bring hope to all people. When Mary and Joseph take the baby Jesus to the temple, Simeon is there and he knows instantly that his waiting is over. For so many years he could have put his hope in others - political leaders, kings, dignitaries, priests and prophets - but to each and every one of them he said 'next!' The waiting was worth it:

*He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying,
"Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace,
as you have promised.*

*I have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared for all people.*

*He is a light to reveal God to the nations,
and he is the glory of your people Israel!" Luke 2:28-32*

The right response was to simply worship God. He sang his lungs out for he now had peace. The good news is that you don't need to wait. Peace is available right now.

So, if *you* want inner peace today, it can only come through an acknowledgement of Who Jesus is and what He calls you to do. He calls you to believe in Him and to put your trust in Him. The Bible calls this 'faith'.

*Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight
by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus
Christ our Lord has done for us. Romans 5:1*

Let's imagine Mrs Thompson from year 3 again, standing up while the angels are wandering onto the school stage and stating, 'Isn't it amazing that what the angels sang over the baby Jesus all those years ago turned out to be absolutely true? Jesus is the peacemaker. Would anyone like to kneel with me and ask for His peace today... anyone?... no one?'

I imagine it would be a tumbleweed moment but the Nativity is good news to weary souls and is not meant to be watched from afar. It is aimed at your heart, so how will you respond today?

Be more like the shepherds

I think I would have liked the shepherds from Luke's Nativity. They were down to earth, working class guys who did their job and went home. They were not dramatic or overly emotional. They also were not very highly regarded by others. Their job involved long hours for little pay. The verses we read earlier from Luke 2 about the angels declaring the birth of Jesus were directed to a group of shepherds. They were just minding their own business on the hillside late at night when an angel, who had such good news he couldn't wait for the town of Bethlehem to wake up, went and spoke to those on a night shift. They were terrified, as you would expect, but after receiving this world-changing message about the Saviour being born, and watching an angelic concert in the night sky they did something rather interesting:

When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished. Luke 2: 15-18

The shepherds visiting the baby Jesus is part of any nativity worth its salt. However I've never seen a nativity where it is highlighted that the shepherds were there to check the details of what the angel said. Even though they had had an angelic visitation they still wanted evidence and wanted to see it for themselves. Maybe you should be more like the shepherds? The fact that you are reading this booklet makes it clear that you are interested in finding out who Jesus is. You don't have to take a leap in the dark. You can explore the facts like the shepherds did. Obviously you won't find an actual baby Jesus anywhere, or a grown-up Jesus for that matter, but you will find good evidence. Evidence from historical sources, from the Bible and from the changed lives of Christians. Those who have faith in Jesus are supposed to be like the shepherds as well, in the sense that they can't help but go and tell everyone about what has happened in their lives.

Coming to believe in Jesus is not a blind leap of faith and neither is it a cold acceptance of irrefutable evidence. Very

few people come to believe in Jesus by merely exploring the facts alone. The shepherds had an experience and then they wanted to verify it. We have to acknowledge the fact that God can seem hidden at times, and has chosen not to appear in the sky every afternoon at three thirty just so everyone knows without a doubt that He is real. However, that's what makes Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection even more profound, for this is how God chose to reveal Himself to the world - through Christ and through the Bible. I would encourage you to keep exploring and if you prayed the prayer on page 11 then keep praying it, and ask God to make clear what the truth is and that He would give you the peace that only Jesus can bring.

Pondering these things

The shepherds were not the only ones considering what they had seen, for Mary was doing likewise and in amongst all this talk of angels and shepherds we read this:

Mary treasured all these things in her heart and always thought about them. Luke 2:19 (GW Translation)

Mary took time in the busiest season of her young life to ponder what God had done. She was a teenage mum who gave birth without pain relief and without the guidance of a midwife. It took place in a stable or a cave with no electric light or gas central heating, she was not in her own house or within the warmth of a guest house room. Giving birth is hard (I hear) and raising a young child is very demanding but

despite all this she continued to ponder. Even the woman who gave birth to Jesus would have to work out what to do with the life and message of her own Son.

I know what Christmas is like. We all look forward to having time off and being with family but all too commonly things get hectic and stressful with presents needing to be wrapped and food needing to be planned. Somehow, every year Christmas turns out to be far busier and frantic than most of us expect but, as we saw in the first chapter of this book, Christmas will look different this time. I wonder if 2020 could be the year when you take time to ponder the real reason for this season. I would encourage you to take time in this socially distanced December to think about the Man Who created Christmas. He is the greatest gift you could ever receive.

Chapter four: **John's Nativity**

Bah Humbug!

Am I the only one who thinks that pre-enlightened Scrooge was on to something? Maybe making my staff work on Christmas Day would be a step too far but I am definitely one of those people who thinks Christmas starts way too early in our country. I had a vain hope that this year's smaller, socially distanced Christmas would mean less of all the fluff that clogs up the Advent season. How wrong I was. We weren't even close to December before the fake snow started to fall and the shops didn't even politely wait until Hallowe'en was out of the way to pollute their spaces with tinsel, plastic trees and mince pies. Am I alone in thinking it should be illegal to watch Christmas films before the 23rd of December? And am I abnormal to think strict guidelines should be imposed for festive pop music? In my opinion Wham, Cliff, Bing and Mariah should be restricted to being played only twice a year across all radio stations and only during Christmas week! Slade can be played on Christmas Day only if it is deemed absolutely necessary!!

I know... bah humbug!

It's ok to disagree with me. If you are one of those people

who begins thinking about Christmas on your summer holiday and puts up your tree up in November; you're very welcome to.

However, many Christians, even those fully sold out on the festivities, feel a little protective of Christmas. This is the time of year when we want to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ but we often feel that He gets crowded out of the proceedings, much like your average primary school nativity. The top role is not the baby Jesus, it's clearly Mary. Next is Joseph, then the Wise Men, then the shepherds, then the innkeeper and the star. After this, you start to get into the c-list roles. Although no specific animals are mentioned in the biblical narrative (not even a donkey), school-teachers over the years have somewhat embellished the scene, with something resembling a fully functioning zoo finally being revealed before the curtain falls! Then come the entirely fabricated roles to get those few remaining children on stage. I can remember a particularly depressing year when my eldest daughter played the role of a wall! That's right, she stood motionless for the entire proceedings with her arms out wide. She gave a spirited performance but it did leave me wondering what she had done to deserve that. However, it is true to say that amidst all the dressing up and singing, and teachers whispering forgotten lines to the children the baby Jesus can be a fairly neglected figure. He is usually represented by a baby doll which appears as if by magic in the feeding trough a third of the way through the play. He

is then left unattended for the remainder of the production by a disinterested Mary and Joseph, but is it all that different in the real world? Jesus is so easily discarded in favour of family, presents, food, alcohol and an hour-long 'Dr Who' special ... (don't get me started). The real Jesus ends up as an understudy for His own starring role and that is precisely why John's Nativity is my favourite.

Jesus is centre stage.

There are no animals.

There are no shepherds.

There are no wise men.

There are no angels.

Mary and Joseph aren't even mentioned! The only role is that of Jesus Christ. It's all about Him. John's Nativity is also incredibly brief. In fact it consists of just 11 words.

The Word became a human and made his home among us. John 1:14

That's it. That's the whole thing. This is why no school nativity has ever been based on John chapter 1. Just imagine Mrs Thompson standing up in front of a bustling school hall of expectant parents and, after welcoming everyone, simply quoting John 1:14 and then saying, 'Good night, drive home safely everyone. See you next year!'

There would be outrage. 'That was not a nativity,' the crowd

would cry, but they would be wrong. For John, there is only one truly essential role and it is that of Jesus Christ. Part of the reason why we have different takes on the life of Jesus in the Gospels. No one is questioning how important Mary, the angels and the shepherds are but John leaves all of them and their significance to Matthew and Luke. (Mark doesn't even record the nativity but that's a discussion for another day!) John wants to keep the focus solely on Christ.

The Word

The Word became a human and made his home among us. John 1:14

As you read that verse from John chapter 1 you might be thinking that even Jesus didn't turn up to this nativity as His name doesn't appear, but in fact He is *The Word*. You could write the verse like this: 'God's Son became human and made His home among us', but John didn't write it that way. Rather, he purposely used the Greek word *logos*, meaning *The Word*, to get the attention of his original audience. Jewish readers well versed in the Old Testament would know that God spoke *The Word* and the universe was formed from nothing, and that through prophets *The Word* went out. *The Word* was also used when talking about God's law and His perfection. For the Jewish audience *The Word* was basically an extension of God. For the Greek audience *The Word* would also be familiar because it was used in philosophy at the time, referring to the principle of reason

that governed the entire world. John took this word, *logos*, and applied it to Jesus. This would have been shocking for both the Jews and the Greeks. It was a direct challenge to them to explore the claim that Jesus was *The Word*.

There is a debate currently raging amongst basketball fans as to who is the best player ever. This debate comes and goes as with most sports but the discussion was reignited when Lebron James of the LA Lakers won his 4th NBA championship earlier this year. The phrase often used is 'greatest of all time' or G.O.A.T for short. Some people think Lebron James is the G.O.A.T and others think it's Michael Jordan. There are still others who think it's neither, but even to have your name associated with that label is a huge honour bestowed on a very select few. In his mini Nativity, John is claiming that Jesus Christ is the G.O.A.T. Not in the realm of sports but as the greatest person to ever live. Everybody has to make a decision about this claim of John's and people have been debating it for over two thousand years. Many have decided he was right, some have decided he was wrong, and a good many people have not given it much thought.

Personally, I do believe that Jesus is the G.O.A.T. He was and is the greatest person to ever walk the face of the earth but He is so much more than that. As we saw in Matthew's Nativity, Jesus was a man but He was and is also God. At the very start of John's biography, a few verses before his Nativity he says this of Jesus, *'In the Beginning the Word already existed.*

He was with God and he was God' (John 1:1). So Jesus is *The Word* who reigned with God before the earth was even made. He took on human nature and became flesh and blood like us. John isn't preoccupied with Jesus the helpless baby but rather is primarily concerned with Who Jesus is and consequently what his readers will do with the claims made about Him in the Bible. Everybody must decide what to do with Jesus. Today most people believe He was a real historical person but instead of studying the Bible, they use their imaginations to make estimations as to what He might have been like. They have a 'Ricky Bobby' type of Jesus. If you have ever watched *Talladega Nights* you will know what I mean. In a scene from the film *Ricky Bobby*, a nascar driver played by Will Ferrell, is sitting at the dinner table with his family about to tuck into a banquet of KFC, Dominos and Taco Bell. However before he does everyone bows their heads for him to say grace. Here is a little excerpt:

Ricky: Dear tiny, infant Jesus...

Ricky's wife: You know sweetie Jesus did grow up. You don't always have to call him 'baby'. It's a bit odd and off-putting to pray to a baby.

Ricky: I like the Christmas Jesus best and I'm saying grace. When you're saying grace you can say it to grown up Jesus or teenage Jesus or bearded Jesus or whoever you want.

Ricky then continues to pray to a very specific '8 pound 6

ounce tiny infant Jesus' with 'golden diapers' and asks him to use his 'baby Jesus powers' to heal his father-in-law. After the much-interrupted grace is finally finished Ricky's best friend Chip and Ricky's two young sons each describe how they like to imagine Jesus. As with 'From A Distance' back in chapter two, this is a deeply profound moment in a fairly goofy film. As much as we like the idea of thinking of a deity in ways that appeal to us, we simply don't have the right to do this.

The Bible states that humans were made in the image of God, not the other way around. We can't fit Jesus into the box of our own ideas of what He should be like. We don't get to design Jesus. Sometimes Christians don't help with this when they talk in very cavalier ways about the Lord Jesus Christ. I've seen a number of preachers online boldly state that Jesus is going to make the team they support win a certain game or championship because obviously He supports their team. Jesus isn't interested in these trivialities.

Jesus is a polarising figure Who made some fairly blunt proclamations about life and death and, because of such statements, many people often prefer a 'pick and mix' Jesus. They choose the bits they like and discard the rest. Maybe, like Ricky Bobby, you like the 'Christmas Jesus' best because he doesn't say anything. He doesn't challenge what you do or believe. He has nothing to say about your lifestyle choices. Maybe this is why the 'Christmas Jesus' is eminently more popular in our society than the 'Easter Jesus'? The bottom line is... you can't have one without the other!

Returning to Lebron James for a moment. Part of the reason that the G.O.A.T discussions get so heated is that King James (as he has been nicknamed) has actually referred to himself as the greatest basketball player of all time. It's one thing for others to say it but it's another thing entirely to say it about yourself. It's the kind of statement that makes most of us British folk blush but, if it's true... then, it's true... whoever says it. With Jesus it wasn't just others that made incredible claims about Him, He also made these claims about Himself.

What was written about Him in John 1:1, Jesus said and demonstrated throughout His life as recorded in John's biography. Seven times Jesus used the words 'I am':

I am the bread of life

I am the light of the world

I am the door

I am the good shepherd

I am the resurrection and the life

I am the way, the truth and the life

I am the true vine.

You don't have to understand the full significance of each of these statements to see that they are huge claims, but they become even larger when you realise that 'I am' is the name that God the Father gave to Himself in the Old Testament. Don't let anybody tell you that Jesus never claimed to be

God for He frequently made this claim! Clearly Jesus talked a big game. It seems He's got more swag than Chesney Hawks and Mohammed Ali combined, but did Jesus back up these claims? I believe He did, through His life, death and resurrection. Jesus truly is the G.O.A.T and I encourage you to read the whole of John's Gospel to explore this for yourself. Before Jesus made any of these statements though, He was simply born. John's Nativity focuses on Jesus being like us.

Camping with Beyonce

*The Word became a human and **made his home among us.***

All the way back in 2011 singing sensation Beyonce performed a headline set on the last night of the Glastonbury Festival. As one of the world's premier celebrities I presume she was pretty comfortable throughout. Madonna usually brings a 200-person entourage with her for all her gigs, so I imagine Queen Bey had something similar. I'm certain she wanted for nothing with no request being too lavish. Just imagine for a moment though that Beyonce had decided that she wanted to have the 'real glasto experience'. Instead of arriving by helicopter directly onto the site a few hours before her performance, she insists on driving a beat-up 2001 Vauxhall Corsa all the way to the famous farm. After queueing for hours to get on to the site she spends two hours fighting with a disposable tent from Aldi in the pouring rain. After completing this task she queues up for an hour to buy

a questionable burger and a warm Carling before queueing for another three hours to use the even more questionable toilets. She spends the next two days repeating this routine before the time comes for her to go on stage. She wades through the sea of similarly smelly people and wipes as much mud from her face as she can with spit and a tissue. She then grabs the microphone and, instead of standing on stage, she begins her performance of 'Crazy In Love' right in the middle of the crowd wearing just her wellies, jeans and a waterproof. This would be front-page news. Ok, maybe just the tabloids but it would genuinely be a big deal.

The Son of God coming to earth in human flesh is an event in a totally different stratosphere than that imaginary situation.

John 1:1 says that Jesus *'made his home among us.'* The Gospels in the Bible were written in Greek and the word for 'home' in the original language literally means 'tabernacle' or 'to pitch your tent'. The Son of God chose so much more than the 'true glasto experience'. This divine King pitched His tent among ordinary people. He wasn't helicoptered into His birth scene, flown back to a luxurious trailer and then dropped off again for His death scene. He moved into the neighbourhood in order to live with the ordinary, the poor, the sick.

The Old Testament tells us that the tabernacle was a large movable tent where God's presence dwelt while the Israelites travelled through the wilderness for forty years. It

was basically a portable temple. Even though God did use the tabernacle to presence Himself with His people, it was temporary and ultimately incomplete. The large tent was situated at the back end of a makeshift courtyard and within it there were two separate rooms - the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. Only priests were allowed in the Holy Place and only one priest on one day of the year was allowed into the Holy of Holies where God's presence was. This meant that the vast majority of God's people had very little experience of God's actual presence apart from what was relayed through the priests (there are some wonderful exceptions to this of course). This was partly for their own protection, for God is so awesome and powerful that His presence can be too much for people to handle, particularly those who have not lived the way He has instructed. People don't want to get too close to God and this makes Jesus being among people even more fascinating and significant.

Bonfire of the vanities

There is something very appealing about fire; it's almost mesmerising. I regularly sit with my family out in our backyard using an old washing machine drum as a makeshift fire-pit but nothing compares to bonfire night. A few years ago I went to an event with the biggest bonfire I had ever seen. The pallets were stacked high into the night sky. I got as close as I could but the barrier was some distance from the pallets. It seemed very cautious - health and safety gone

mad maybe... until they lit the fire. At first I didn't feel much but after about 20 minutes the wood suddenly seemed to take and a fierce blast of heat hit my face. I stepped back. The heat only intensified from that point on and as I looked along the barrier I saw that, one by one, people were turning their backs to the fire as the heat was simply too intense. I suddenly felt that the barrier may not be far enough back. God's presence can be a bit like that. Like fire, there is something appealing about it but it is also a power that is wild and untameable. Let me remind you of the verse in Hebrews that I quoted previously:

The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God, and he sustains everything by the mighty power of his command. Hebrews 1:3

It may be hard to imagine that the 'tiny, infant, 8 pound 6 ounce baby Jesus' is the same wild and untameable God but He is. *He really is.*

Jesus went camping. In His human life He was God's presence among the people. Today He is present in those who love and follow Him.

Not once a year.

Not once a month.

Not once a week.

Not once a day.

But 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Jesus has made a way through His life, death and resurrection for us to be reconciled to God. Jesus was, and is, the wonderful burning beauty of God welcoming us into a relationship with our Creator. So what's the problem?

Hello darkness my old friend

A few chapters after John's Nativity we read these sentences:

God's light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil. All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed. John 3:19

That's the problem. Now, I recognise that these are not the most Christmassy verses but I figure you have come this far so I'm encouraging you to delve a little deeper. These verses point out that people naturally like the dark which in context is referring to spiritual darkness. Turning to God is a costly business because in doing so your motives, desires and priorities will be challenged. The things that you say are important and the things that actually are important to you will be exposed; in a good way. Many have a tendency to assign too much value to things other than God, for example personal relationships or material possessions, which simply cannot bear the weight of our dependence and can easily become distractions. Coming into the light will cause you to put aside the things that naturally keep you away from God; most importantly sin.

This is my story. I grew up going to church but when I was a teenager I pulled away from everything to do with faith. I joined a band and started drinking, smoking weed and submerging myself in heavy music. I was trying to live the rock and roll lifestyle and what I had presumed would give me purpose and satisfaction proved to do the exact opposite. I felt empty and numb. I felt depressed and hopeless. I was looking for meaning in all the wrong places. Finally, when I was eighteen, I was thrown a lifeline from my parents. They didn't know most of what I had been doing but they could see I wasn't happy. They invited me back to church. Surely this wasn't the place to find fulfilment of all places? Surely I couldn't come back with all this baggage? However, something happened upon my return when I walked into the church. I had spent my teenage years trying to stay out of the way of God. I had chased darkness with vigour.

My hidden life was a secret to all but a few people. When I experienced the joy, hope and love of Jesus in that church meeting I knew my life would never be the same and by God's grace it hasn't been, but it wasn't easy in those early days. Jesus wanted to peel back the darkness that I had clothed myself in, for things had to be brought into the light and exposed for what they were. Mirages. Fake hopes. Candy floss promises that tasted sweet at first but could not provide the nourishment I needed.

What about you? What are the things that keep you in

the darkness? I hope that you will think deeply about this question. Believing in Jesus is so much more than mental assent. You can say that you believe in Jesus and you can even believe that He was raised from the dead but if you fail to see the implications for your own life then you're not getting it at all. Jesus doesn't want you in the dark. He wants you to live in His light and to live in the freedom that He offers. The world will tell you that religion makes you a slave but the exact opposite is true. Jesus can free you from the guilt of sin and help you to live a life that is full of purpose and meaning. The truth is, that it is costly but I can assure you it is the greatest thing in the world, for through a relationship with Jesus you will find peace, hope, joy, fulfilment and ultimately everlasting life.

This Christmas time turn away from the darkness and run into the light.

What next?

If you would like to continue exploring the Christian faith here are a few things that you could do:

- Go to **www.gnba.net/what-is-the-good-news** to listen to three short podcasts on what the gospel is, why you should trust the Bible and why you should go to church.
- Visit a local church this Christmas. If you are not sure which one to go to send an email to **info@gnba.net** and we will see if we can help.
- Read the Nativity in the Gospel of John this Christmas and then... keep reading. If you don't have a Bible you can read it all online at **www.biblegateway.com**

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Also, thanks to Mel for designing it.

I dedicate this book to the Mrs Thompsons of the world.

This book is also available in ebook and audio book format and can be found on our website along with many of our Bible-teaching radio programmes.

www.gnba.net

To request more printed copies of *The Neglected Nativity* please send an email to info@gnba.net.

How well do you know the Nativity story?

Perhaps, like most, your main exposure to it has been through primary school productions. Do you remember the tea towels for the shepherds' headdresses? The fumbled, mumbled lines muttered? And proud parents with Panasonic camcorders capturing it all?

As great as these memories are, the sad reality is that the essential ingredients of the true Nativity are usually neglected. The account of the birth of Jesus is not a traditional fable to be performed by children for their doting parents. Rather, it is a true record of a real event and it demands a response from everyone, even today. This little book will delve into the big story of the birth of Jesus Christ and the good news that is found there.



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