

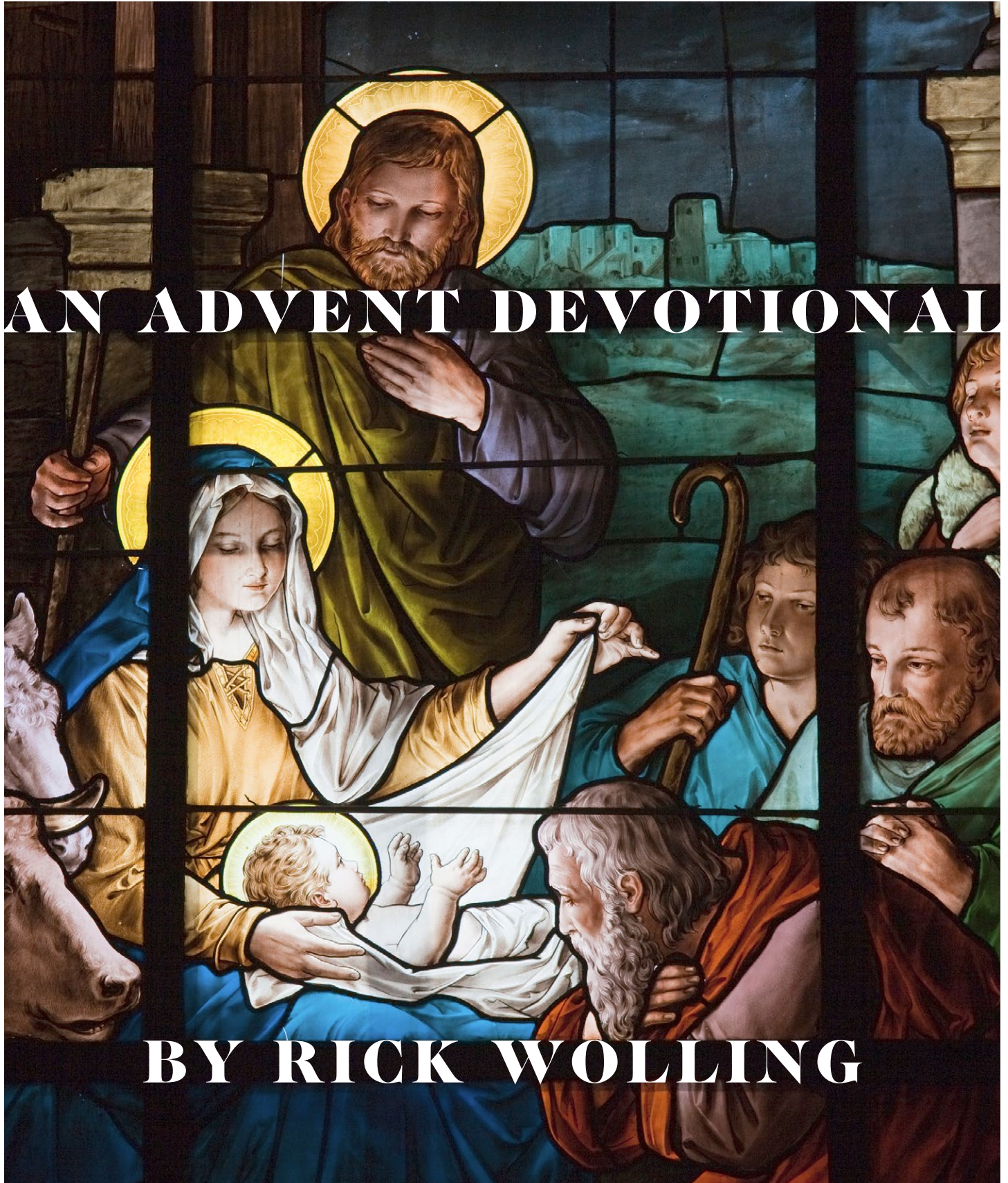


Beverly Heights  
Presbyterian  
Church

# scattered seeds.

THE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

DECEMBER 2021





## INTRODUCTION

It was a dangerous time to be in China's Szechwan province in 1934. Rebelling Chinese Communists roamed from village to village, committing all manner of unspeakable atrocities against those whom they believed had wronged them.

John and Betty Stam were missionaries with the China Inland Mission. In the tiny rented shop in which they lived, the Word of God was faithfully taught, accompanied by praises of the locals who gathered for worship with the Stams and their 3-month-old daughter, Helen Priscilla.

The marauding bandits ultimately arrived at Anhwei province. They began rounding up the town's wealthy landowners and prominent leaders who were ushered into the streets and executed.

With just moments to spare before the fateful knock came at the Stams' door, Betty wrapped her newborn in a hooded blanket, tucked a box of powdered milk and a \$10 bill into the wrap and, as Moses' mother had done before her, hid the child of her love in a dark corner of the house.



It was just in time. Moments later, John and Betty were dragged into the street and stripped of their clothing in humiliation. John was stabbed to death in front of his wife. Betty was immediately beheaded.

A brave, Chinese evangelist, Mr. Lo, heard of the raid on their town and went looking for them. When he found their bodies, he secured coffins for them and then began a search for Helen Priscilla. He found the child in her hiding place, warmly wrapped with the Lactogen and \$10 bill in her hood. For 27 hours she had slept and lay still, never making a peep, never giving away her hiding place.

Ironically, providentially, no one in the entire province knew anything about powdered milk, how to mix it, how to use it, save one person ... Mrs. Lo.

When news of this great tragedy and great deliverance reached the mission's headquarters in Shanghai, it was decided that the editorial secretary, Frank Houghton, would tour the province to encourage the remaining missionaries.

As he traveled, his heart was captured by 2 Corinthians 8.9:

***For you know the grace***

***of our Lord Jesus, that***

***though He was rich,***

***yet for your sake He***

***became poor, so that by***

***His poverty you might***

***become rich.***

It was that trip and scripture which inspired Houghton to write the beautiful Christmas carol, *Thou Who Wast Rich Beyond All Measure*.

What follows are Advent devotional thoughts inspired by the three original verses of the hymn. The initial verse underscores the humiliation of Christ, the second focuses on His incarnation and the third on His exaltation.

As there are four weeks in the Advent season, it seemed reasonable for me to compose a fourth and final verse which ends a month of the church's preparation with a cry of "Maranatha – Come Lord Jesus." This fourth verse underscores the believer's future glorification secured by the coming of our Lord.

What follows may be read at one sitting. Alternatively, one section per week may best serve as a meditative focus for your Advent preparation.

However it is used, what follows is offered with the sincere prayer and fervent hope that the Spirit of our Lord Jesus will capture you with the wonder of His coming, and fill you with a longing for His return.

Blessings,



## VERSE 1

***Thou Who wast rich beyond all splendor,  
all for love's sake becamest poor;  
Thrones for a manger didst surrender  
sapphire-paved courts for stable floor.  
Thou Who wast rich beyond all splendor,  
all for love's sake becamest poor.***

I once sat across the table from a friend with whom I regularly had breakfast. On the back of a napkin, I sketched out some biblical concept we were discussing as he prepared to teach an upcoming junior high Sunday school class.

Having spent most of my adult life reading and writing about our Lord, I habitually used the notation X for Christ. X is the Greek letter representing the “ch” sound and is the first letter in the Greek word for Christ. Hence, the abbreviated Xmas for Christmas.

My friend launched into a tirade

over my theological shorthand. He was a strong proponent of keeping Christ in Christmas and, for him at least, that meant always taking the time to fully write out Christ. Christ had given His all for us and the least we could do is fully write out His name. He worried that the profound meaning of the incarnation was being eliminated from our holiday celebration.

No such worry with Frank Houghton's carol. As my friend, who now hosts a radio show in California, is fond of saying in his daily broadcast, “It's all about Jesus.” And we know this because each of the carol's three



verses begin with “Thou.” The Thou is Jesus: *Who is rich, Who is God and Who is love.* I followed that pattern in writing the final verse which begins, *Thou Who art King.*

The initial verse of the carol is focused upon all that Christ gave up for our sake. The splendor of His heavenly riches is beyond measuring. All the treasures of heavenly glory belong to Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Thrones, dominion and power are His.

Mere human language fails to express the wonder of Christ's pre-incarnate presence with His heavenly Father. The apocalyptic language of *The Revelation to John* stretches our imaginations in an attempt to capture the magnificence, but our vision is dim indeed.

The Apostle Paul simply says that though Christ *was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that by His poverty, you might become rich* (2 Corinthians 8.9).

And again, to the Philippians he wrote: *though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men* (Philippians 2.6,7).

Theologians refer to this emptying of heavenly glory as Christ's humiliation. In our common usage today, humiliation suggests an emotional experience. One is humiliated when disgraced, shamed or put down. Humiliation is something one feels.

In the case of our Savior, His humiliation is the very real loss of glory, honor and praise. It is the loss of His eternality, His omnipotence. In His humiliation, Christ willingly

gave up all the rights and privileges of being fully God.

The Westminster Larger Catechism underscores the complete humiliation of Christ, not only in His humble birth, but in the totality of His earthly life: His growing up, His ministry, His death and burial.

And why did He suffer such humiliation? The answer is in the carol: *All for love's sake becamest poor.* Christ traded a throne for a manger; sapphire-paved courts for a stable floor; the worship of angels for the shouts of an angry mob; and a crown of gold for a crown of thorns, *because He loves us.*

Driving through the hills of China and contemplating what John and Betty Stam gave up out of their love for Christ, as great a sacrifice as their lives were, Frank Houghton knew that greater still was what Christ gave up out of love for them. And, for us too.

## PRAYER

**Lord of heaven and  
its highest treasures,  
grant me the proper  
perspective on the riches  
of this world that I might  
see, in Your Son, the  
greatest treasure of all.**

**AMEN**



## VERSE 2

*Thou Who art God beyond all praising  
all for love's sake becamest man;  
Stooping so low, but sinners raising;  
Heav'n-wards by Thine eternal plan.  
Thou Who art God beyond all praising  
all for love's sake becamest man.*

Before Mr. Lo searched for baby Helen Priscilla, he scoured the hills to look for the bodies of her parents, John and Betty Stam.

He found them, broken and desecrated, in shallow mountainside graves. Having procured proper coffins in which to lie them, it was over a month before they could be safely removed and interred at a Christian burial site.

It was an outrageous knife stab and a decapitation that ended the lives of these dedicated ambassadors for Christ who believed, with the Apostle Paul,

that to live was Christ and to die was gain. Houghton could only imagine the horror that Mr. Lo knew upon finding their defiled bodies.

The possibility of such corporal violation is conceivable only with regard to mere mortals. From dust we have come and from dust we will return.

One of the glories of deity, however, is that such debasement is not possible. God is spirit. He is not subject to death and corruption.

But isn't that part of the wonder



of what God has done for us through the incarnation of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ? In Christ, God took on human flesh. As God, He was not subject to mortal pain, humiliation and bodily destruction, but willingly clothed Himself in a body like ours.

That is what this second verse is all about and what the incarnation means. God, who is Lord of all creation, majestic in being and eternal in unending years, the Ancient of Days, gave it all up, emptied Himself and, in Jesus, "becamest man." And He died.

A friend from my days in Oklahoma, when frustrated by lack of understanding, would often exasperatedly ask, "What was the thinking?"

We might ask the same. What was God thinking? How could He exchange eternity for finiteness? Why would He subject Himself to the possibility, no, the certainty of bodily limitation, harm and death? After all ... He is God!

The answer, of course, is that was part of the divine plan. "Stooping so low" and taking on human form in the incarnation was in the mind of God from the very beginning.

There are those who suggest that the birth of Jesus, His life, death and resurrection, were a divine Plan B of sorts, that the sin of Adam and Eve somehow caught God off guard, requiring a Trinity-huddle to devise a way to respond to man's disobedience. Such would suggest there was no "thinking" at all on the part of our sovereign God.

But there was, as Houghton declares, an "eternal plan." It was a divine plan from before the foundation of the world, one that required God the Son to stoop low in order to raise us sinners heavenwards.

Paul tells the Ephesians that we are blessed because God chose us IN CHRIST, before the foundation of the world. God destined us in love with redemption through Christ's blood and the forgiveness of our sins (Ephesians 1.3,7,8).

In our place, Jesus Christ took upon His broken body, the punishment for sin which is death.

He removes the stain of sin's guilt from us, as we transfer it to Him by faith and as He died as our substitute. He received the wrath of God against sin, rightly directed toward us, but redirected toward

Him in what the theologians call propitiation, thereby reconciling us to God from Whom we were estranged.

But the only way this could happen was if God would become fully man and fully stand in our place.

Such was the plan and God could only fulfill it Himself. Truly this God, our God, our Lord Jesus Christ, is "beyond all praising."

## PRAYER

God of love, you gave Your  
all that we might have life  
eternal in heaven with You.  
Give us a burden for the  
lost that we might sacrifice  
all we have for the sake  
of others, that they might  
possess real life and hope.  
AMEN



## VERSE 3

***Thou Who art love beyond all telling,  
Savior and King, we worship Thee.  
Emmanuel, within us dwelling,  
make us what Thou would have us be.  
Thou Who art love beyond all telling,  
Savior and King, we worship Thee.***

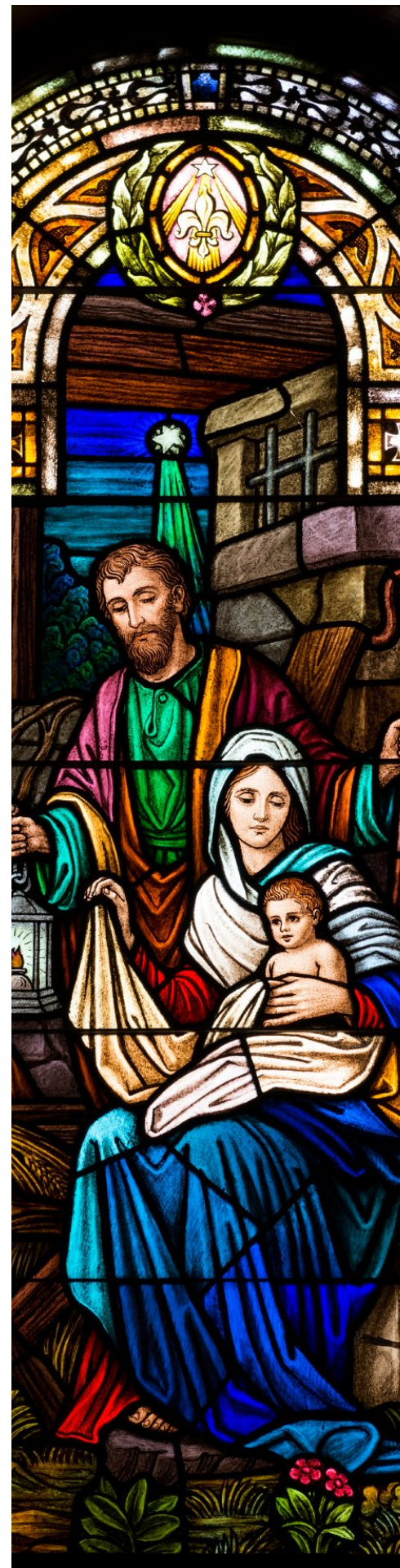
In the presence of the Christ-child so new, so vulnerable, so tiny, we seem smaller still.

The One who was rich beyond all splendor, who is God beyond all praising, is also the One whose love for us is beyond description. We are finite – too small and too limited in our abilities to see and describe the infinite love of God.

The Apostle John tells us “God is love” (1 John 4.8). In his gospel, he says that this divine little One has made God’s love

known to us (John 1.18). And the Apostle Paul prays that the Ephesians (and we) might “be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ” (Ephesians 3.18).

This glorious carol underscores some of the ways He shows us His love. For love, Jesus sacrificed heavenly glory. Though the riches of heaven’s treasures were His, He gave them up. Though highly exalted as the eternal God, He stooped



low in order to raise us into eternal fellowship with Him.

He did this at the cost of mocking, scorn, denial, abandonment, rejection and ultimately, death on a cross.

And all, not because He needed to and surely not because we deserved it, but because He loves us. Truly such love is beyond our ability to adequately extol. What we can do, what we must do, is fall before Him and worship.

Christ’s humiliation and His incarnation led to His exaltation, before which we bend our knee, bow our head, raise our arms, and lift up our voices in adoration and praise. In the light of all who Christ is and all that He has done, another hymn writer calls us to “Come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ the newborn king!”

This divine newborn is wonderfully exalted in our carol through the enumeration of the names and functions of the Lord Jesus. He is Savior and King. He is Emmanuel, God with us. He dwells in us and abides with us. He is the One in Whose image we are being sanctified day by day; a divine work that will be completed only in our glorification when He comes again. Which takes us back to John and Betty Stam.

The Chinese nationals who gathered in their shop to worship the Lord Jesus had learned a great deal about His love during the regular teaching sessions John led.

But I wonder how much more they

learned about the love of Christ through observing the Stams’ own sacrifice for the sake of the townspeople they loved.

And to bring it home: to what extent do our families, friends, neighbors and co-workers learn about the indescribable love of Jesus Christ for them, by observing His love at work in and through us?

Such love cannot be manufactured through sheer willpower. Rather, this rich, indescribable love of Christ, beyond all telling, becomes a characteristic of our lives only through a spiritual transformation of divine proportion.

Wherefore, our prayer in all seasons not just Advent must be *Emmanuel, within us dwelling, make us what Thou wouldst have us be.*

## PRAYER

**Eternal God, accomplish**

**Your transforming**

**work in my life that the**

**indescribable love of**

**Your Son will be a beacon**

**that draws others to You**

**in faith and in worship.**

**AMEN**



## VERSE 4

***Thou Who art King of all creation  
our church cries out, “Lord, come again!”  
O, that you’ll reign o’er us forever,  
we’ll in eternal joy remain;  
Thou Who art King of all creation  
Your church cries out, “Lord, come again!”***

It seems that every day the news is worse than the day before. Inflation, the schools, the border, racial unrest, woke intimidation, international intrigue, politics – in every sphere of public life, every day and in every way, things are going from bad to worse.

A popular cable news commentator is fond of asking the same question two or three times during his one-hour program each night.

“What’s going on here?” is a question that’s on the minds of his viewers, too – that’s why he asks it, I suspect.

Can the discord and strife get any

worse? Yes, it can. Can our country become any more divided than it is? Yes, it can.

Will truth-telling by our public officials become out of fashion? Yes, it will. In fact, it has. Will the course language, now a staple of all media, matched by our president’s regular taking of the name of the Lord in vain, get even more vial? Yes, surely it will.

What’s going on here and, more importantly, what is the remedy?

Answers are sought from “experts” representing sociology, psychology, political science, the military, especially celebrities, authors,

sports figures and even rap “artists.” Everyone offers opinions, research and philosophies as normative. As often as we hear the question, “What’s going on here?” we hear the retort, “What we need to do is ...”

The believer knows the answer to the question, “What’s going on here?” And that knowledge is based not upon personal opinion or bias but upon revelation. The believer knows that the answer to the question is “sin.”

Sin is the explanation for the discord, disunity, dysfunction of our current age and, in fact, any age.

And the believer knows this because God has said so in His Word. But never is a biblical or spiritual point of view given in discussions of our current malaise. Never do we hear anyone cite the Bible for explanations of our state of affairs.

The public wouldn’t put up with it.

Religion is a private affair and only for those who believe it. No one wants somebody else’s beliefs shoved down their throats. And, after all, isn’t spiritual belief and practice irrelevant to “real life?” The spiritual world and life are not real, anyway, are they?

The believer not only knows what’s going on here but also knows where this is going. Every day, in every way, things will NOT get better but worse. The evil one seeks our destruction and, in league with the world and the flesh (Ephesians 2.1-3), will do all that he can to make our lives miserable – in any way, every day.

So, what is the answer? What’s the remedy for all that grieves us in the world today?

The Bible points the way. First, we must cast our hope and dependence upon the salvation that comes from God alone through His Son, Jesus Christ. The first thing is for

individuals to be reconciled to God through forgiveness of sins and to enjoy the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that transforms our lives in the likeness of Christ, from one degree of glory to the next.

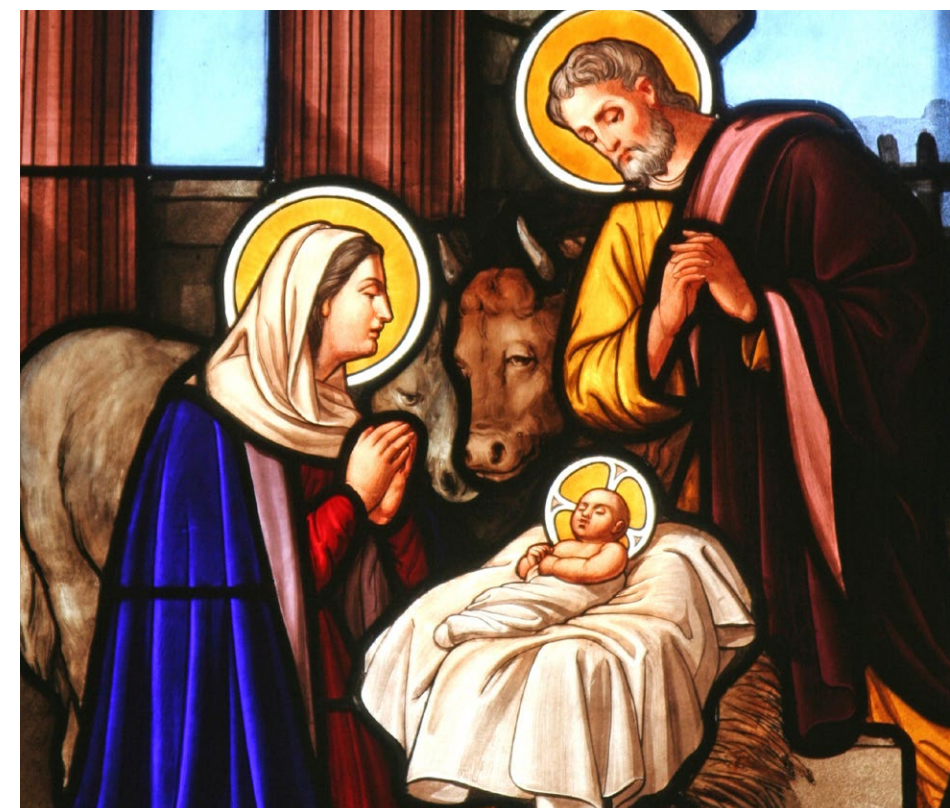
Second, the church must be committed to giving witness to our only hope in Jesus Christ and to being what truly is the only living demonstration of peace, justice and love. We must show the world the wonder of living under the lordship of our “Maker, Defender, Redeemer and Friend.”

Finally, we must wait for, long for and pray for the second coming of the Lord Jesus, our Creator and King. Who, in His return, will make all things new. Only when He establishes His eternal kingdom and reigns over us forever, will we know the fullness of peace and joy.

What’s going on here? We are crying, “Lord Jesus, come again soon!”

## PRAYER

Sovereign Lord, there is  
but one answer to the  
questions of life, one  
solution to the world’s  
problems. That answer  
is found in You and Your  
reign over us in the new  
heavens and new earth.  
Come, Lord Jesus, and  
come soon. AMEN





## POSTSCRIPT

As a rookie hymn-writer some 10 years ago, I was greatly concerned with many things. I wanted to be sure that the hymn extolled the attributes of God, that the text was theologically correct, and that a passion for God and His truth was expressed in its message.

As I shared these concerns with my collaborator and veteran hymn writer, Paul Jones, I received the simplest and best advice possible.

He said, “Rick, as important as those concerns are, they are for naught if the hymn is not sung. We need to write hymns that people want to sing.”

I love this carol, *Thou Who Wast Rich Beyond All Measure*, because I love to sing it and I love to hear it sung.

In fact, it was not the text that first captured my attention but the tune.

The carol is set to the hymn tune *Quelle est cette odeur agréable?* – What is that beautiful fragrance? – a traditional French carol melody. Not much is known about the melody except that it appears to have originated from the 18th century ballad opera, *The Beggar’s Opera*, by John Gay.

The quiet sweetness of the carol evokes the humble nativity of the Christ child and contrasts with the profound meaning of the incarnation of the Son of God.

It is a perfect pairing of medium and message. I luxuriate in it. It is the perfect carol.

Our choir will sing this carol in anthem form during the Advent/Christmas season this year. I hope that these few, short meditations will enhance your appreciation for the carol and that you will come to love it as much as I do.

