

The Elisabeth Elliot Newsletter

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Christmas Is a Thing Too Wonderful

Some things are simply too wonderful for explanation—the navigational system of the Arctic tern, for example. How does it find its way over 12,000 miles of ocean from its nesting grounds in the Arctic to its wintering grounds in the Antarctic? Ornithologists have conducted all sorts of tests without finding the answer. *Instinct* is the best they can offer—no explanation at all, merely a way of saying that they really have no idea. A Laysan albatross was once released 3,200 miles from its nest in the Midway Islands. It was back home in ten days.

The migration of birds is a thing too wonderful.

When the angel Gabriel told Mary, "You will be with child and give birth to a son," she had a simple question about the natural: How can this be, since I am a virgin?

The answer had to do not with the natural but with something far more mysterious than the tern's navigation—something, in fact, entirely supernatural: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the Most High will overshadow you" (Lk 1:35; NIV). That was too wonderful, and Mary was silent. She had no question about the supernatural. She was satisfied with God's answer.

The truth about Christmas is a thing too wonderful for us. Who can fathom what really took place first in a virgin's womb in Nazareth and then in a stable in Bethlehem?

At the end of the book of Job, instead of answering his questions, God revealed to Job the mystery of Who He was. Then Job despised himself. "I have uttered what I did not understand, / things *too wonderful* for me, which I did not know" (Jb 42:3; RSV).

In one of David's "songs of ascents" he wrote, "My heart is not proud, O Lord; / my eyes are not haughty; / I do not concern myself with great matters / or things *too wonderful* for me. / But I have stilled and quieted my soul; / like a weaned child with its mother, / like a weaned child is my soul within me" (Ps 131:1,2; NIV).

A close and fretful inquiry into how spiritual things "work" is an exercise in futility. Even wondering how "natural" things are going to work if you bring God into them—how God will answer a prayer for money, for example, or how your son-in-law is going to find a house for eight in southern California (on a pastor's salary)—is sometimes an awful waste of energy. God *knows how*. Why should I bother my head about it if I've turned it over to Him? If the Word of the Lord to us is that we are "predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with his purpose" (Eph 1:11; NIV), we may apprehend this fact by faith alone. By believing that God means just what he says, and by acting upon the word (faith always requires action), we apprehend it—we take hold of it, we make it our own. We cannot make it our own by mere reason—"I don't see how such-and-such an incident can possibly have anything to do with any divine 'plan.'"

Why should we *see* how? Is it not sufficient that we are told that it is so? We need not see. We need only believe and proceed on the basis of that assured fact.

Mary's acceptance of the angel's answer to her innocent question was immediate, though she could not imagine the intricacies and mysteries of its working in her young virgin body. She surrendered herself utterly to God in trust and obedience.

Do you *understand* what is going on in the invisible realm of your life with God? Do you *see* how the visible things relate to the hidden Plan and Purpose? Probably not. As my husband

Addison Leitch used to say, "You can't unscrew the Inscrutable." But you do see at least one thing, maybe a very little thing, that He wants you to do. "Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult [other translations say too hard, too wonderful] for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven. . . . nor is it beyond the sea. . . . no, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it" (Dt 30:11-14; NIV).

Let it suffice you, as it sufficed Mary, to know that God knows. If it's time to work, get on with your job. If it's time to go to bed, go to sleep in peace. Let the Lord of the Universe do the worrying.

A Christmas Tradition

In our home on Christmas morning we were allowed to go into our parents' bedroom very early with the filled stockings we had found hanging on the footboard of our beds (we had no fireplace in those days). We all (three of us in the early days before three more—known as "the babies"—came along) sat on the bed and pulled out the tiny gifts. These were things like toothpaste, pencils, April Showers talcum powder, nail brushes—for we had a practical mother—and always little gold mesh bags with gold-wrapped chocolate coins.

Next we dressed, made our beds, and ate breakfast. Things were always done decently and in order, even on Christmas. After breakfast we washed the dishes and had family prayers. Our thoughts were not focused, I'm sure, on the Bible reading or the prayers, but we learned something very important about delayed gratification: waiting enhances the joy.

Then—the presents which were piled under the tree. My father gave them out one at a time and everyone watched as the wrappings were torn off and the present displayed. In this procedure we learned not only to share in another's joy, but our own joy in the giving of gifts was greatly enhanced because everybody was watching. We found, too, that the longer it took the longer the pleasure lasted.

We all helped pick up the rubbish. Then each chose a "public" place to display the gifts received.

A Thanksgiving Tradition

During the Pilgrims' first harrowing winter in Massachusetts food dwindled one day to a single pint of corn—enough to provide each man, woman, and child with five grains. From that time on, it is said that they placed five grains of corn on each plate at Thanksgiving to remind them of God's faithfulness even in times of extreme want.

In William Bradford's history *Of Plimoth Plantation* he wrote of how, though the people had worked hard to produce crops, "the Lord seemed to blast, & take the same, and to threaten further & more sore famine unto them, by a great drought which continued from ye 3 weeke in May, till about ye middle of July, without raine, and with great heat (for ye most parte), insomuch as ye corne begane to wither away, though it was set with fishe, the moysture whereof helped it much. Yet at length it began to lanquish sore, and some of ye drier grounds were partched like withered hay, part whereof was never recovered."

They then designated "a solemne day of humiliation, to seek ye Lord by humble & fervent prayer, in this great distrese."

The Lord answered with "such sweete and gentle showers as gave them cause of rejoicing & blessing God . . . For which mercie (in time conveniente) they also sett aparte a day of thanksgiving." (From *Pentecostal Evangel*, Springfield MO, Nov. 23, 1975, used by permission.)

It might be a nice idea to put five kernels of corn at each place on your Thanksgiving table.

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A Prayer for the Middle-Aged

Lord, Thou knowest better than I know myself that I am growing old. . . . Keep me from the fatal habit of thinking I must say something on every subject and on every occasion. Release me from craving to straighten out everybody's affairs. Make me thoughtful but not moody; helpful but not bossy. With my vast store of wisdom (?) it seems a pity not to use it all, but Thou knowest, Lord, that I want a few friends at the end.

Keep my mind free from the recital of endless details; give me wings to get to the point. Seal my lips on my aches and pains. They are increasing and love of rehearsing them is becoming sweeter as the years go by. I dare not ask for grace enough to enjoy the tales of others' pains but help me to endure them with patience.

I dare not ask for improved memory, but for a growing humility and a lessening cocksureness when my memory seems to clash with the memories of others. Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally I may be mistaken.

Keep me reasonably sweet. I do not want to be a saint—some of them are so hard to live with—but a sour old person is one of the crowning works of the devil. Give me the ability to see good things in unexpected places and talents in unexpected people. Give me the grace to tell them so. Amen. (From my mother's little red notebook, source unknown. If any reader can enlighten me, please do.)

The Sweet Running of Household Wheels

"If I am inconsiderate about the comfort of others, or their feelings, or even of their little weaknesses; if I am careless about little hurts and miss opportunities to smooth their way; if I make the sweet running of household wheels more difficult to accomplish, then I know nothing of Calvary love." (Amy Carmichael: *If*, London, SPCK, 1949, p. 45)

Recommended Reading

Ken Wilson: *The Obedient Child* (Servant Publications, P.O. Box 8617, Ann Arbor, MI 48107. \$6.95)

Such a relief to find such love, such wisdom, such straight-shooting Biblical teaching on a subject about which so much ignorance and foolishness is pooled. It is not only possible for, it is incumbent upon, all Christian parents to teach their children to obey. This book will help you do just that.

If You Can't Do What You Like, Like What You Do

A young man working at a resort hotel for the summer: "For about four weeks I was in a total daze as I tried to relate the complex details of the hotel to each other. One day, at the end of my patience, I said, 'This is a waste of time!' I sat down and read Ecclesiastes—'Vanity, vanity. . . .' I realized, like Solomon, that if we fail to recognize God's complete sovereignty over all things, life is just endless, meaningless cycles. After that, I realized that no matter how hard, dirty, or apparently useless my immediate job is, God has a purpose in it and I am to do my work 'heartily as unto the Lord.' So I do, and what *peace* it has brought me! I now *love* my job!"

Another man who through reading *Through Gates of Splendor* heard God's call to mission work, and through *Passion and Purity* decided to trust God completely for his lovelife, writes, "Mrs. Gren, please don't write any more books—I don't think I can handle another major change in my life! Ha!"

New Video Series

I now have a six-part video series entitled "Suffering Is Not for Nothing," available by sending \$75 per set to Ligonier Ministries, P.O. Box 7500, Orlando, FL 32854. *Please do NOT order from the Newsletter.*

An Atheist's Prayer Answered

In his work with the World Evangelical Fellowship my brother David Howard has contact with many who live in countries where there is no freedom. In one of them he heard this true story:

A pastor's son in the second grade faced continuous Marxist and atheistic indoctrination in class every day. One day it went like this:

Teacher: "Some people say there is a God up in heaven who will give you what you ask for. Let's test that out and see if he does. We need more books, workbooks, paper, and pencils in this school. Let's ask God to give them to us."

She then prayed, asking God to send these things. Nothing happened.

"See, children? There is no God up in heaven. He didn't hear us and He didn't send anything."

That afternoon as school was letting out a big truck loaded with educational materials (books, workbooks, paper, and pencils) drove up and began to unload. The children called the teacher: "Teacher! Teacher! Come quickly! Here are the things we asked God to send! See? He sent them!"

Travel Schedule, November-December 1988, January-February 1989

November 3 Edina, MN; Grace Church, (612)926-1884.

November 5 Philadelphia, PA; singles conference, Mike Cavanaugh, (716)582-2790.

November 11, 12 Willowdale, Ontario; Ontario Bible College, (416)226-6380.

December 8-18 England; Saltmine Trust, 384-238224.

January 27-29 Pasadena, CA; Lake Avenue Congregational Church.

February 9 Ft. Monroe, VA; National Prayer Breakfast and Women of the Chapel, Thomas L. Deal, Chaplain (Colonel).

February 10, 11 Newport News, VA; Peninsula Community Chapel Marriage Retreat, (804)595-9019.

Keep in Touch

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