

HOW TO HAVE A HAPPIER CHRISTMAS

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Pastor Terry is the Lead Pastor of CornerstoneSF, an independent, nondenominational church in the heart of San Francisco. CornerstoneSF began as a 1953 house plant started by Terry's grandfather Albert H. Brisbane and two other families. It has since grown into a thriving two campus church community, meeting both in-person and online. Terry took over from his grandfather as Lead Pastor of CornerstoneSF in 1988.

As we make our way into the Christmas season and the new year, let's acknowledge that we've been living in a time of great uncertainty. In fact, in my lifetime, it's a time of unprecedented uncertainty.

Even though things seem to have improved in the last year, we're still living in a troubling and unsettling time. For many of us, it's been hard. And part of the challenge has been, in addition to all the things that have been happening in our world, in our nation, the polarization and all the differences and fears connected to the pandemic, we have our own normal lives that we live. We all have our own personal struggles.

I'm not going to sugarcoat what has been a very challenging and difficult time.

A lot of us have operated under certain assumptions about what true safety and security looks like. We might now question where our security can be found. I actually think it's forced us to grapple with things that we would have otherwise maybe not thought as deeply about. And, I think that revelation is part of the reason why many of us are struggling with anxiety; things that we've been relying on as givens have been shaken.

And yet, I need to say this. I also think there's a positive side to it.



So, if circumstances draw us back to a real search for knowing and understanding God, they actually can become a blessing. This season can create an opportunity for personal and spiritual growth.

And, if this leads us to a greater degree of clarity and trust in God, exposing the false underbelly of society's attempts at telling us what security looks like, it can disabuse us of our sense of self sufficiency. It can actually become a gift to us.

So much of C.S. Lewis' writing has extraordinary relevance for us today. It's deep thinking. It seems to penetrate our humanity and also it reveals God in a way that makes sense to us. His writings are both profound and yet simple and I think that's part of the reason why they have such enduring relevance.

Everybody has something in them that — even in our broken condition — reflects the image of God and has the potential, if we are willing to open up our hearts to God, to spend an eternity with Him.

In his book *The Weight of Glory*, Lewis states, "There are no ordinary people. You've never talked to a mere mortal." Lewis goes on to say, "Nations, cultures, arts, civilization - these are mortal and their life to ours is the life of a gnat."

Like the life of a gnat.

He was reminding us to have a proper sense of proportion and gravity, and how sometimes we focus on something and we think, "Oh, this is going to last forever." But really it's not.

The United States will not last forever. No nation can or will. Kingdoms rise, kingdoms fall. Human beings, in contrast, were made for something more. We are not mere mortals. We were made to live with God forever. And that's why the Christ of Christmas came. He was, if we may say it this way, God's love on full display. He was the pathway for us to realize our ultimate purpose, our eternal potential, all through Him.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus said,

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him, would not perish, but have eternal life."



That we would realize our destiny because of God's overture of love. To me, it's the greatest verse in the Bible because it's a verse that speaks both of Christmas and Easter. It gives us all that we need. It encapsulates the gospel, the GOOD NEWS, and also reminds us of the cross at Easter time and the purpose of Jesus coming to earth as a man. It reminds us of Christmas and why God came. He gave. It's just an amazing verse that reminds us of God's love. A love that doesn't quit.

C.S. Lewis was also reminding us to be careful with our fixation on the now. He was warning all of us to watch out for getting absorbed by, defined by, mesmerized by, consumed by, dominant culture fads, passing fancies, the latest thing, the latest technology, latest social trends. His point was that we are to be a people who cultivate an eternal perspective — a future perspective — that's connected to Jesus Christ. The eternal perspective that enhances our love for others in the present.

When we realize the potential that is within people, it calls us towards not only sharing the goodness of Jesus, but also sharing His love sacrificially, in presence. We are to be that expression of Jesus to those around us, especially at Christmas.



I love the sentiment of Christmas. I know that many people struggle with Christmas and there are some real valid reasons for it. It can be a lonely time. The commercialization of it can be a little bit over the top. I get that but I do love the sentiment of Christmas. I love the romance of Christmas. I love the traditions and the smells and the Christmas trees and the lights and the ornaments and the gifts around the tree. I love the nativity scenes and how different cultures capture them. I love the joy. I love the songs, the carols, even the corny Christmas songs: Jingle Bells, Frosty the Snowman. The crisp air, the shortness of days, the winter's chill that invites us inward in so many ways.

I try to remember that even more than all those good things, all those nice things, all those warm things. Christmas is about heaven coming to Earth, isn't it? If you're a person of faith, it's about God's answer to the human dilemma.

This is not just important for our understanding and appreciation of Christmas, it gets to the very purpose of our lives. The Bible teaches us that God set eternity in our hearts. We have a deep-seated need to find Him and know Him. And Christmas is the entry point that God created as a pathway for us to find our way home. We are spiritual beings on a human journey. Sometimes we forget that.



God has made us as spiritual beings on a human journey and that this human journey is but a prelude to an eternity that awaits us. And how we view and respond to the Christ of Christmas will determine everything about that eternity.

Jesus came to us so that we could find our way home. We were created to know God. We were created to be with God forever. Far beyond this life. As the grown up Christ child would later declare, He is the way, the truth and the life. He is the door - the door to life. He is the light - the light of the world that shows us the way to the life that is truly life, the life that is now and forever. Real life.

Christmas, if you think about it, it's also about the humility of God, a humility that waits to be received. And that, to me, is amazing. That God won't force himself upon us, just like he wouldn't force himself upon Mary. Mary had to open up her heart to him. Mary had to say, I am the servant of the Lord, the handmaid of God. Do as you will with me. It was her choice to cooperate with the Lord, to receive Him.

And it's a choice for you and me to say, "Jesus, I want to know you. I want to receive you as my Savior."

And maybe on this Christmas you want to receive Jesus - the Christ of Christmas.



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Jesus came to us so we could find our way home. We were created to know God. We were created to be with God forever. Maybe you are rededicating your life to Jesus - you've drifted away and we want to start afresh.

Maybe you are opening your heart and your life to a fresh new view of God and an understanding of who Jesus is.

Why not start that now, here at Christmastime?

Christmas is also about the one who is willing to come and meet us in our frailty. It's about God becoming vulnerable to meet us in our vulnerabilities. It's about God exposing himself in a very real way. He was at the mercy of human care and that has always struck me. We always say, "Who can be afraid of the God who comes like a baby to us?"

That's something about Christmas. It reminds us of the tenderness of God, the love of God on full display.

It's also a reminder to me about the uncertainty of our times that we're living in right now. Into the uncertainty of life, the certainty of God comes.



God had a plan and he's been unfolding it ever since the first humans God made broke trust with him in sin. That sin has affected every human being to walk the earth since then, separated from God.

Yet God has been reclaiming humanity. And the first Christmas was D-Day. It's when God landed. That was the beginning of a new movement of God. A new song that was about to be sung - a song that was anticipated. But when Jesus came, the heavens opened up in song. Why? Because God's Son was being brought to us in a way that had only been hoped for and now was happening.

My prayer for all of us, loved ones, is that we would allow Him to sing His song over our lives as well.



Every now and then our world is shaken. Sometimes it happens in a broader sense, like what we've been experiencing these last couple of years. But it also can happen in our personal lives or the lives of people we love and care for. And that's what is going to push us to ask deeper questions about where our security and certainty and identity come from.

Are we disturbed by future uncertainties? Is fear trying to grip our soul? Are there anxious thoughts that are trying to bind us even as we think about heading into the new year? Is it hard for us to rejoice at Christmas? Because of Jesus, even if things are really bad we have a reason to rejoice. Let's open up our hearts intentionally to His love. Let his goodness fill us with happiness, like a curtain pulled open in the morning. Let's allow the Son to shine in.

A famous person once said,

"Christmas is not as much about opening our presents as it is about opening our hearts."



So, as we make our way into the Christmas season, let's finish with three simple ways to have a happier Christmas.

Six with the Chairman Street

Sit with the Christmas Story

We read it and ponder as Mary pondered the words that she was given and kept them in her heart. Let's really create some space to ponder the significance of what God has done in Jesus. Let's make room for it. Let's consider, reflect, meditate on it. Let's not be a cynic. Let's not throw it aside as simply the domain of the naive and childlike and immature. No, let's not be so wise in our own eyes that we can't appreciate and be blessed by the simplicity and beauty of the Christmas story.

Pray, "Lord, give me the gift of a childlike heart and fill me with wonder."

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Sing the Christmas songs and carols.

Sing them with joy and gratitude in your heart. You don't even have to be a great singer! It's one of the most unusual times ever because you can go into stores or just tune in to the radio or tv and you're hearing Christmas carols sung. But when you actually listen to the words, some of them are amazing testimonies of what God has done in Jesus, and they're filled with depth. If you really sit with the words of some of the Christmas carols, they capture everything about who God is, about who we are, about the human condition, about what God has done in Jesus, how the gift that we've been given has changed everything. These are deep waters to swim in and also they just make us joyful.

Sing, sing and sing some more.

To quote a wise man, Will Ferrell in *Elf*, "The best way to spread the Christmas cheer is singing loud for all to hear."

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Share the Christmas Spirit.

Seek to give and to bless. Helen Steiner Rice wrote in one of her beautiful little poems,

"Bless us, Lord, this Christmas, with quietness of mind; teach us to be patient and always to be kind."

So simple. That could be inside of a card. But it does really connect two things that the Lord wants us both to receive and give away, two gifts that will make us happier at Christmas in giving and in receiving: patience and kindness. Sometimes the person we need to be a little kinder with is ourselves. And we definitely need to be more patient with other people because it's so easy to get irritated and that will mess things up and destroy moments.

Pray, "Lord, just give me the gift of patience, and also give me the gift of kindness."

To be just a little bit more caring than we would have been, to be a little bit more of a blesser than we would have been. To just be a little bit nicer than we would have been. And maybe just a little kinder to ourselves.

I'm hoping and praying that you will have a happier Christmas.





CornerstoneSF is a Bible-based community with 60 years of consistency, creativity, and credibility, our purpose is to share the power of faith in Jesus Christ and to experience life change together.

We invite you to become part of our community and strengthen your relationship with God.

Find out more at cornerstonesf.org.

To dive into another online offering, check out our Rise & Shine Morning Devotionals on <u>YouTube</u> or the CornerstoneSF App.