

THE REASON FOR THE SEASON

By Desmond Ford

THE HEART OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE HAS TO
DO WITH CARING: GOD'S CARING FOR US, AND THEN
OUR CARING FOR ONE ANOTHER.

CHRISTMAS, TOO, IS ABOUT CARING. THAT'S
BECAUSE CHRIST CARES FOR US ALL, EVEN THE
FRAILEST OF HIS CHILDREN.

CHRIST
ROSS
HURCH
OMING
HRISTMAS.

Each of these words stirs our pulse and sets our imagination working at full speed. Each of these words comprehends so much.

But at the heart of them is another "C" ** Caring.

Christ Cross Church Coming

The reason we are drawn to Christ is because we know that he cares for the worst of us and the least of us, the youngest of us and the oldest of us.

The Cross has its fascination because of the outstretched arms, the crown of thorns, the bleeding hands and feet — all telling of an infinite love for the unlovely.

As for the Church, it's like our smaller family — a place where they have to take you in regardless of failures.

And then the Coming. The return of Christ means that God has not forgotten us; God is determined to make an end to sin once and for all as soon as the principles of his government have been fully displayed on a worldwide scale.

Christmas means caring

And then there's the festive season that even the worldling recognizes—Christmas.

Everyone associates Christmas with caring. The famous story by Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, (1843) has led to a cataract of tears over the years. Rightly so, for Dickens graphically sketched the outlines of a heart that didn't care until it was broken.

He also vividly portrayed the loving hearts of the members of a small family who cared wondrously for each other, and especially for the ailing boy, Tiny Tim. Yes, Christmas means caring.

God cared from eternity

When we cut a tree through, we really can see at that place



what the tree is like throughout its whole length. What opens to our view is the revelation of a specimen of the tree's entire length and its nature throughout.

Calvary was like that.

It wasn't as though God had suddenly awakened out of a stupor and said, "I had better do something for those perishing mortals." No, Christ was "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8 KJV).

From all eternity, God foresaw Judas, Pontius Pilate, Caiaphas, the Roman soldiers, the upreared gibbet, the howling, despicable crowds. It must have been ever before him through untold millennia. But God cared. God cared too much to pass us by.

God in the garden

This really is the message all the way through Holy Writ.

Have you ever thought of the depth of one of the earliest of Bible statements about God and his attitude toward sinners? We read in Genesis chapter three that the Lord God was heard walking in the garden during the cool of the day. Charles Spurgeon, with his usual depth of insight, has probed this picture to its depths. Note his words:

But now, the Lord himself comes forth to Adam, and note how he comes. He comes walking. He was in no haste to smite the offender, not flying upon wings of wind, not hurrying with his fiery sword unsheathed, but walking in the garden. 'In the cool of the day'—not in the dead of night, when the natural glooms of darkness might have increased the terrors of the criminal; not in the heat of the day, lest he should imagine that God came in the heat of passion; not in the early morning, as if in haste to slay; but at the close of the day, for God is long suffering, slow to anger, and of great mercy; but in the cool of the evening,



when the sun was setting upon Eden's last day of glory, when the dews began to weep for man's misery, when the gentle wind with breath of mercy breathed upon the hot cheek of fear, when earth was silent that man might meditate, and when heaven was lighting her evening lamps, that man might have hope in darkness: then, and not till then, forth came the offended Father.

God cared about humanity even when humanity had demonstrated that it didn't care about him.

God's steadfast love

Consider the wonderful words of Isaiah 63:9: "In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them."

If you look at this passage in its context, it's part of a recital of the history of Israel and God's innumerable mercies to that rebellious people. Verse 7 speaks of "the steadfast love of the Lord," and again in the same verse, "the abundance of his steadfast love."

Verse 9 continues with these words: "The angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old." (NIV)

God is our keeper

Notice the fact that "he carried them all the days."

It is an echo of an earlier statement about God's caring for those of little strength. In Isaiah 46, verses 3 and 4, God says,

Hearken unto me . . . which are borne by me from the belly, which are carried from the womb: And even to your old age I am he; and even to hoar hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you.

In an earlier chapter still, we again find words expressing the unceasing care of God for his people:

A pleasant vineyard, sing about it! I, the Lord, am its keeper; every moment I water it. I guard it night and day so that no one can harm it. (Isaiah 27:2–3 NRSV)

Love in the Gospels

What are the four Gospels but illustrations of these earlier Old Testament passages!

Never do we find a single harsh word from Christ to any who felt their need. His only harsh words were for hypocrites and those who treated children with cruelty.

Think how patient Christ was with his disciples of old. After

his resurrection, resplendent in glory, Christ yet sends a message earmarked for penitent Peter. (See Mark 16:7.) Alexander Maclaren has written with eloquence about this evidence of our Lord's caring for the careless:

Sin is mighty, but one thing sin cannot do, and that is to make Christ cease to love us. Sin is mighty, but one other thing sin cannot do, and that is to prevent Christ from manifesting his love to us sinners, that we may learn to love and so may cease to sin. Christ's love is not at the beck and call of our fluctuating affections. It has its source deeper than in the springs in our hearts, mainly in the depths of his own nature. It is not the echo of the answer to ours, but ours is the echo to his; and that being so, our changes do not reach to it, any more than earth's seasons affect the sun. Forever and ever he loves. While we forget him, he remembers us; while we repay him with neglect or with hate, he still loves. If we believe not, he still abides faithful to his merciful purpose, and in spite of all that we can do, will not deny himself, by ceasing to be the incarnate Patience, the perfect Love. He is himself the great example of that charity which his apostle painted; he is not easily provoked; he is not soon angry; he beareth all things; he hopeth all things. We cannot get away from the sweep of his love, wander we ever so far. The child may struggle in the mother's arms and beat the breast that shelters it with its little hand, but it neither hurts nor angers that gentle bosom, nor loosens the firm but loving grasp that holds it fast. He carries, as a nurse does, his wayward children, and, blessed be his name! His arm is too strong for us to shake it off, his love too divine for us to dam it back.

What encouragement for each of us when life's vitalities seem to be running out, when guilt depresses us, and our weakness seems more than ordinarily obvious.

Christ and the reed and flax

This magazine could not hold all the texts of Scripture that teach the caring of our Christ for the unworthy. They are everywhere to be found in both Testaments.

Consider yet another from Isaiah: "A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench" (Isaiah 42:3 KJV).

These words remind us that wherever there is so much as a spark of life in the conscience, where there is room to hope for anything, Christ sees hope for all things, and he nurtures that tiny spark. Where there is but the faintest stirring of repentance, the love of Christ will fall with gentle power.

Those who receive sinners coldly or with an averted eye and a hasty tongue, do but drive them into defiance or despair. If a person is bereft of hope, they are bereft of everything. If hope be crushed, then the flax is extinguished and the light goes out.

Even truth, if it's expressed without love, can do damage to the weak, or even to those who think they are strong. These words from Isaiah declare that God is gentle to all who truly need him, while he promises nothing whatever to the self-sufficient.

The principle that guides God is seen to be whether we have the principle of conscious need and the willingness to be guided.

The Man who receives sinners

Dwell upon Isaiah's metaphor and its significance. Here is the presentation of a slender bulrush, perhaps growing by the edge of some pond, that has been crushed and dented by some exterior power, some gust of wind, a sudden blow, perhaps the foot of a passing animal. And the head of the bulrush is hanging by a thread, but it is not yet broken off.

Isaiah the prophet is saying that there are many people just like that, who are as reeds bruised and shaken by the wind of life's trials, and they're yet not fully broken. And to such the tender Christ comes in gentleness and wisdom and mercy, to bind up these souls and make them strong again.

Christ cares. How much he cares! "This man receiveth sinners" (Luke 15:2 KJV), "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner" (Luke 19:7 NRSV).

That's always the story, and this is the meaning of Christmas.



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Joyce Irene Gee

1941-1997

She died at home, in her husband's arms,

November 3, 1997.

"Joyce went from one secure bosom to Another"

"The dead in Christ will rise first"

(1 Thessalonians 4:16)