

“We all know about the Christmas tree, the turkey, the tinsel, the presents and even the carol services. But what’s it all really about? Let the book in your hand lead you past all the trappings to the astonishing truth of the authentic Christmas story, so helpfully explained here. You’ll never regret taking the time to investigate.”

TERRY VIRGO, Founder of NewFrontiers; Author of *Life Tastes Better*

“While engaging with some of our favorite holiday traditions, Andrew invites us to consider the plausibility of the story of the first Christmas. He explores the historical narratives of Jesus as Light, Savior and King while sharing family stories that make you feel like a guest in the Wilson home for the holidays. What a fun and helpful read!”

VANESSA K. HAWKINS, Director of Community Life, Redeemer Lincoln Square, Manhattan

“A wonderful book that connects so many of our contemporary Christmas experiences to the story of the very first Christmas. A must-read for anyone seeking to understand the deeper meaning of Christmas or for those of us who have become a little too familiar with the story and need to rediscover the wonder of it all.”

GAVIN CALVER, CEO of the Evangelical Alliance

“Christmas is a highlight of my year. It’s always sad when it’s over. But what if Christmas also has the power to transform our normal lives into something super-normal? This book unlocks this power. Check it out and see how the miracle of Christmas doesn’t end with the birth of Jesus but can continue to work its joy in our lives today.”

SAM CHAN, Head Trainer, EvQ and City Bible Forum,
Australia

“This has me feeling Christmassy—in every sense. A gem of a book. If you want to know some festive joy, read this!”

GLEN SCRIVENER, Author of *The Air We Breathe*; Host of
the SpeakLife podcast



It's



Beginning



to Look a Lot



Like Christmas

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Contents

Introduction: What Makes Christmas <i>Christmas</i> ?	7
1. Putting Up the Lights	13
2. Time with Family	21
3. Enjoying Christmas TV	33
4. Making Memories	45
What Next?	57



Introduction: What Makes Christmas *Christmas*?

Most of us experience a moment when it starts to feel like Christmas. It may be a fixed point that we anticipate eagerly, because without it the Christmas season cannot begin: like the end of Thanksgiving or the start of December or our first sight of the Coca-Cola “holidays are coming” advert. Or it could be a moment which catches us by surprise. Last week I went to Winter Wonderland in London’s Hyde Park for the first time, and as I stood in my hat and scarf surrounded by fairy lights and the aroma of mulled wine, it was as if autumn had become Christmas in an instant.

It’s hard to describe how those defining moments actually work. In terms of time, no particular day moves Christmas closer than any other. For commercial reasons, big companies spend lots of money trying to make us feel Christmassy as early as

possible: carols in the shopping malls in November, festive drinks for sale in October, gift suggestions and boxes of mince pies in September. But although these marketing departments do their best, their efforts don't resonate. Certain things have to happen before we feel that it's really beginning to look a lot like Christmas.

One of the first, where I come from, is the putting up of lights. I live on a small, windswept island in the North Atlantic, just south of the Arctic Circle, and it gets really dark at this time of year; at the start of December, sunrise is at 7:44am and sunset at 3:54pm. But the Christmas lights make it all worth it. The bulbs hanging in crescent-shaped arcs across the streets and the twinkling displays in coffee shops all create an ambience of anticipation. Personally, I don't think it can feel like Christmas until the lights go up all around the place.

Another moment for me is putting up the family Christmas tree. Some years, we have taken a trip to a pub in the middle of nowhere that sells trees as a side hustle and have chosen the largest one that will fit in our car. Other years, we have bought and built a fake tree—borderline illegal to some but undoubtedly quicker, cheaper and tidier. But whether the tree is real or fake, putting it up in the living room starts the season in ways that few other things do. It is soon followed by wreaths, sprigs of holly, and other

plants whose names I don't know and am afraid to ask about.

As the great day gets closer, the anticipation intensifies. Somewhere in the day or two beforehand, I find I stop thinking that Christmas is coming and start thinking that Christmas is here. I have my last day at work. Our extended family gathers together for a meal. The present wrapping is finished. Stockings are hung above the fireplace. Christmas movies and TV shows flood the airwaves. By Christmas Eve, four weeks after our children started planning it and four months after the local supermarket started planning it, it is finally and fully looking a lot like Christmas.

Of course, it may be different things for you that make Christmas feel like Christmas. But I bet it's something. I imagine you can list right now what are the joys that make the season feel special for you.

This book aims to persuade you of one thing: that all these Christmas joys only make sense—and in fact *life* only begins to make sense—if we understand the meaning of the first Christmas. It is only in the Bethlehem manger, surrounded by shepherds and wise men and farm animals, that we find the reason for the trees, traditions, tinsel and turkey. But more importantly, it is only in the Bethlehem manger that we find the reason for the deeper things that make life meaningful for the rest of the time. It is only there that we find real hope that the world will one day be filled

with peace and justice, love that does not depend on our ability or performance, and joy that can withstand the ups and downs of life.

That idea shapes what follows. In each chapter, I'll introduce you to one of the aspects of this season that makes me feel like it's really Christmas. And we'll use each of those things as a lens through which to look back to the first Christmas and consider the world-changing difference it has made.

And Is It True?

One question that sooner or later overshadows any discussion of the first Christmas, and its talk of God becoming human in the person of Jesus Christ, is whether or not it is true. Did it really happen? Some people look at the miraculous details of the Christmas story—signs in the stars, predictive dreams, supernatural beings, a miraculous conception—and conclude that it cannot possibly be true, however heartwarming or inspiring it is. That may be your perspective. And if it didn't happen, then no amount of wrapping can disguise the fact that the Christian message is empty. But if it did—if the Creator of the world has become human in order to rescue the world from sin and death—then nothing on earth can compare with it, and no amount of tinsel, trees or turkey could be celebration enough.

In the end, you have to decide for yourself. But believing in the truth of this story is not as big a leap

as you might think. It is not only ancient people who used the stars to guide them in their life choices, who were sure there was something beyond what we can see and measure, who changed their lives according to particularly striking dreams or who wondered about the meaning of events that could have been coincidences but didn't feel like that.

In fact, I am willing to bet that you yourself believe in all sorts of supernatural entities—things which are “above nature”. If you believe in human rights, dignity, equality or justice, then you are a believer in things that can't be seen or proved in a laboratory or test-tube.

And you probably believe in a kind of miraculous conception too, even if we don't call it that. Our generation's current understanding of the cosmos is that the universe suddenly and instantaneously burst into existence around 13.7 billion years ago—a theory that we know as the “Big Bang”. There was moment when something came from nothing. There was a moment when life appeared where previously there hadn't been life.

If you are tempted to dismiss the Christmas story for being fanciful, it is worth remembering how many extraordinary things you believe already.

And then consider one more thing: the only way we can be sure there are no miracles is if we can be sure there is no God. If there is an all-powerful Creator of the world, then it makes no sense to declare that he

couldn't speak to people in dreams, or light up the sky with angel choirs, or even become flesh and be born of a virgin. If we can be certain there is no God, then we can be certain these things never happened. If we can't, that does not mean these things are all true. But it means they might be. If God is possible, miracles are possible. So it is worth approaching the story with an open mind.

Anything but Ordinary

None of this is to say that the Christmas story is ordinary. It absolutely is not. There is no event more extraordinary than this: that the Creator of this world became part of it, born of a woman whom he designed and breathing air that he made. I would go further, actually: nothing more extraordinary has ever been claimed to have happened. There is some weird stuff on the internet but nothing that compares with the idea that the God who created the Eagle Nebula became a helpless infant.

So it's time to consider that idea by thinking about the ways we get ready for Christmas. And we're going to start with the thing that gets my Christmas started, and indeed gets the whole Bible started. Let there be lights.



Putting Up the Lights

Few things can generate excitement in the Wilson household like putting up the Christmas lights. And few things can generate the same levels of bafflement, frustration, technical confusion and abject fury.

In theory it should be an idyllic experience. Sometimes it is. Mince pies are baking; wine is mulling; Diana Krall's Christmas album is playing. The children are excited. The evening is clear. All it takes is a brief trip into the loft to retrieve the box of fairy lights and hang them on the tree, and our Instagrammable Christmas experience will be complete.

The problems start when the box is opened. Somehow the lights, which were carefully stowed last year so as to make removing them easier this year, have been shuffled, shaken, intertwined, and so thoroughly entangled by the loft pixies that they resemble nothing

less than a plate of fir-green spaghetti. Disentangling them takes an age, which is long enough for one child to begin pilfering the mince pies and another to remember how much they hate Diana Krall. Hanging them over the tree is always more complicated than I think it is going to be, mainly because the kids have started putting their favourite baubles on it already and because apparently it is vital that the baubles are backlit rather than obscured by the cables. Not only that but the lights come with four hundred and seven different settings—slow fade, rapid twinkle, annoying flicker, epileptic-seizure generator, and so forth—so it takes another age to work out how to turn them on, by which time the mulled wine resembles beetroot soup with a garnish of cinnamon sticks.

Still—at least the lights are on.

Then the Light Came

And we do like light. Most of us by instinct don't particularly like the dark. It makes children feel scared and adults feel sad, especially when it goes on for months. We long for spring in part because brightness makes us feel bright and gloom makes us gloomy. We turn on the lights when we go into a room because we want to know where everything is. We love to see houses festooned with Christmas lights; give me a garish and tastelessly lit-up house over a dark one any day. We are drawn to the light.

All cultures are. The major world religions all have a festival or story that centres on light in some way. Hanukkah is the Jewish festival of light. Hindus celebrate Diwali, which means “row of lights”. Buddhists see the aim of life as achieving “enlightenment”, by which they mean a moment of discovery in which you stop the endless cycle of reincarnation and reach Nirvana. Islam has the concept of spiritual and intellectual illumination, which is reflected in the way Muslims illuminate manuscripts of the Qur’an. Christians also focus on light, as we will see. Darkness and light are universal human experiences, so the idea that the light has come into the darkness—or that we have turned the lights on in order to banish the darkness—is a very common narrative around the world.

You can see it in ideological and political projects too, from East to West. You may have heard of the Ming dynasty of China, for example, famous for their vases and a pretty impressive wall. “Ming” simply means “brightness”; it was a name that suggested the darkness had been banished and a new regime of light established.

The 21st-century West’s version is very similar. Here is how we think about ourselves: the whole world was mired in gloom, ignorance and superstition for centuries (the “Dark Ages”). But then modern Europe experienced a rebirth (the “Renaissance”), and soon people started to think for themselves, ask critical

questions, use science, build complex machines, and make everyone richer and healthier (the “Enlightenment”). Things were dark. Then the light came. And everything got better.

Where’s Your Light?

We think this way more personally too—about the things that happen in our own lives. You have almost certainly said or heard someone else say at some point, “It’s been a dark time”. You have almost certainly said or heard someone else say at some point, “Don’t worry; there’s a light at the end of the tunnel”. We talk like this all the time. Darkness is sad, but one day it will be light. In the meantime we need to hold on, hunker down, and hope.

The question, whatever culture and/or religion you feel connected to, is: What’s your light? When the world around you, on the global level or the more personal one, is difficult and frustrating and challenging and depressing, what do you look to in order to be able to say, “It’s going to be okay”? Where does your mind go to in order to be able to think to yourself, “Yes, this is hard, but I can look to this light to know that this situation will get better. This is where I’ll look to find hope.” Everyone who is not utterly hopeless has a light. What’s yours?

The answer to that question almost certainly depends on what you think the “darkness” is. Unless you have

a perfect life (in which case, I'm not sure you're living in the same world as the rest of us), where you look for light will be directed by what you think the root of the problems in your own life or in this world are.

For the Ming in China, the darkness was the instability caused by constant invasion by foreigners. So (and I'm simplifying here!) they built a huge wall and said, "We've solved the problem. The darkness has gone. The brightness has come. Our rule over you will provide all the light you need."

In Buddhism, the darkness is illusion about what is real and what is not, so the light is a moment of realisation about reality.

In the Western story—what you could call secular liberalism—the darkness is ignorance, and so the light is knowledge. That's why, if you grew up in a Western context, you probably think that education will solve most of the problems we face.

Here's why I don't sign up to those views of darkness and light: they all lowball the problem. Ultimately, the darkness in the world is not just about ignorance, or political instability, or a lack of education. It's about death. (Happy Christmas!) The world is dark because people die, spiritually and physically, not just because they don't know enough or because they have been invaded too often. Even in the most educated and least invaded societies in world history, like the 21st-century US or Australia or UK, the darkness of death is still here.

The Bible says that death operates on two levels. The first is the one we tend to think about: namely physical death. But there is also a deeper, spiritual level of death, in which we are separated from God. Put the two together and you have the reason for why we struggle—even in an age when there is more peace and prosperity than ever before—to find fulfilment and security. We know that life is not quite as it should be.

That's pretty dark. But it explains why building a wall or having a spiritual experience or gaining more education and knowledge doesn't provide sufficient light to pierce the darkness. We build our walls; we talk about our religions; we find out more and more; we put our Christmas lights up, enjoy them, take them down again and put them away ready for the next year. Yet true light, inner peace, deep joy, steadfast love... these things remain elusive to us, personally and globally. The darkness of death is still here.

So what do we need? We need a light that can banish death and restore us to life, spiritually and physically.

The Light from Beyond

People often think that the Christmas story is schmaltzy and sentimental. Many of us see it as a story for children. In the West, we put Jesus in the crib alongside Santa in his sleigh: a nice childish tale which gives us a good reason to take a holiday, eat, drink, and have a rest. Angels, mangers, carols and trees are nice

and sparkly and comforting—twinkly reassurances at the most wonderful time of the year.

In fact, though, the Christmas story is a brutally honest account of how dark the world really is. It takes place in a land occupied by a foreign army, among a people burdened by taxes and dreaming of freedom. Its central characters are mostly on the margins of society, far from the palaces and universities where life is warm and exciting and light. It ends—although we usually leave this part out of our modern versions—with a power struggle that leaves dozens of young children murdered and Jesus' family fleeing as refugees. The Christmas story in the Bible is very real about the darkness in this world.

Yet the Bible is also very confident in its claim that at Christmas, Light came into the world. It didn't come from within this world, as though we can fix our own problems. It didn't come by looking within us or around us but by looking beyond us, to a source of light from outside this world. At the first Christmas, Light stepped into the darkness in person: a Light that “shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it”. At the first Christmas, “the true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world” (from the Bible—the Gospel of John, chapter 1, verses 5 and 9).

The Light which shone at that first Christmas has been shining defiantly in the face of darkness for two thousand years and is still shining today. This

Light does not look like a giant wall along the border of China or a Western university full of clever people doing experiments or a man sitting cross-legged with a lotus flower in front of him. It looks like a dark-haired, dark-eyed Jewish baby in the arms of his unmarried teenage mother. This is Jesus Christ—the one Christians call the Light of the world.

So why is this baby, among the millions of others born that year and the billions of others born through history, the Light? What does this Light do? And can it—can he—really make a difference in your life today? That's what this book is about.