

“Most of the Western world shuts down every year on December 25th. J.D. Greear shares what Christmas REALLY means. And his excellent explanation might just surprise you.”

STEVE GAINES, Pastor, Bellevue Baptist Church,
Memphis, Tennessee

“J.D. unpacks the longings each of us feel around Christmas-time, unearthing the questions we all ask deep down and pointing to answers. I highly recommend this!”

GREG LAURIE, Senior Pastor, Harvest Church, California,
and Evangelist for Harvest Crusades

“It’s easy to think that we understand the Christmas story. Bethlehem, star, baby in an animal pen, wise men. Check. Check. We’ve heard it all before... but so what? This little book, full of wisdom and understanding, will tell you why you should care. Take a moment and read it. You may be surprised. And your life may be changed.”

ELYSE M. FITZPATRICK, Author,
Worthy: Celebrating the Value of Women

“Quite simply the most moving Christmas book I have ever read. Profound questions get posed: Is there a God? Where do I find help? What has he done for me? What is he like? And with each answer I found my heart was deeply touched.”

RICO TICE, Author, *Capturing God*;
Founder, Christianity Explored Ministries

“J.D. Greear tells the Christmas story in an engaging, enlightening, exciting fashion that will put you in the Christmas spirit. A fantastic Christmas gift!”

JAMES MERRITT, Pastor, Crosspointe Church, Duluth,
Georgia; Past President of the Southern Baptist Convention

“In *Searching for Christmas*, J.D. takes us beyond cultural celebrations and traditions, and guides us back to the true heart of Christmas. He refocuses our hearts on the astounding love that God demonstrated by sending his Son to this earth. Put simply, if you are overwhelmed by the chaos of Christmas, this book will help you.”

ADAM W. GREENWAY, President,
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Whether you are someone who is searching for answers to the big questions of life, or a new follower of Christ, or a seasoned believer, this funny and accessible book will point you to rich truths that are older than time but as pertinent as ever.”

KERI LADOUCEUR, Multiplication Pastor,
The Vineyard Church, Florence, Kentucky

“The Christmas hymn ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem’ has us sing this prayer: ‘be born in us today.’ Truly nothing is greater at Christmastime than the reality that the same baby who was born in the manger is changing hearts and lives two thousand years later. This little book will introduce you to the real meaning of Christmas.”

TREVIN WAX, Author, *Rethink Your Self* and *This Is Our Time*

“This wonderful book shows us the One that Christmas is all about, and how he is all you will ever need, now and forever.”

DANIEL L. AKIN, President,
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary



J. D. GREAR

SEARCHING

FOR

CHRISTMAS


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Searching for Christmas
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Published by
The Good Book Company



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thegoodbook.com.au | thegoodbook.co.nz | thegoodbook.co.in

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ISBN: 9781784985318 | Printed in India

Design by André Parker

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1. Why I Own a Fluffy Neck-Warmer

The etiquette of Christmas gift buying can be quite stressful.

When I came home for Christmas the first year I was away at college, I met up with a girl I'd been dating the year before. It was December 23rd. To be honest, it wasn't very clear what our relationship status was. (This was before Facebook, so I couldn't just check on there.) I had just left my parents' house to drive over to hers when a panicky thought struck me: "Am I supposed to have a Christmas present for her?"

My mind raced. *If she hands me a present and I have nothing for her, then this relationship is definitely over. On the other hand, if it's already over and she doesn't give me a gift, I don't want to drop \$75 on a girl I have no future with.*

I found a sports store on the way, and I ran in and found a fluffy Adidas neck-warmer you wore when skiing. I thought it was perfect. It really screamed, "You're special." If she didn't want it, I could always use it. Plus, it was on sale for \$7. I took it next door to a

more upmarket store and persuaded them to gift-wrap it really nicely for me.

I was quite proud of myself.

I got to her house and left the present in the car. She opened the door, said “Hi,” and the next thing she said was “I bought you a gift.” I felt so relieved. “I got you something too,” I said.

She gave me her gift. It was in a beautiful gift bag, and it was a really, really high-quality jacket. It had clearly cost a lot more than \$7. My gift was not going to cut it.

I was no longer feeling so proud of myself.

So I did what any teenage guy would do. Well, what any teenage guy who happens to have a sister three years younger than him would do. I told this girl that I’d actually left my gift at home, and when we got there, I left her in the front part of the house while I found my mom in the back.

“Mom,” I said, in a voice of quiet desperation, “Do you have a gift that you were going to give to my sister that she doesn’t know about yet—a really nice one?”

“Why?”

“Mom, I don’t really have time to entertain questions at this point—do you or don’t you?”

“Yes.”

I went over to the Christmas tree, found the gift, took my sister’s name off it, and added this girl’s to it. Then I presented it to her.

“What is it?” she asked.

“It’s a surprise,” I answered, more truthfully than she knew.

She opened it up. It was a sweater. An expensive one. She loved it. Phew.

The relationship, as it turned out, didn’t work out (I know. You’re just as shocked as I am!) To this day, as far as I know, that girl doesn’t know what happened (unless she’s reading this book now—in which case, I’m sorry). And to this day, though I hardly ever use it, I still own a fluffy Adidas neck-warmer.

WHAT KIND OF GIFT?

All children know that presents are at the heart of Christmas. Most of us can remember, as kids, waking up at the crack of dawn on Christmas Day and asking, “Can we get up now?” Until I was 10 or 11, that day was the best day of my year. Why? Materialism. I knew I would get lots of great gifts from people who loved me. Later, I would learn that it was fun to give good gifts to people I loved, too.

Christians believe that at the heart of Christmas, and of life, is one particular present—God’s gift to us of a baby. But what kind of present is it?

Is it a gift like the one I got into the car with on that December 23rd all those years ago—non-existent? Is this baby just like the Santa Claus myth, which makes you feel comforted and sentimental in the Christmas season, but that’s it, because it’s just make-believe?

Or is this gift like the \$7 neck-warmer—one that is given without much effort, that costs little to the giver, and that changes nothing very much?

Or is it like that jacket—carefully planned, expensively bought, and given with love?

I want to show you why God's gift to you falls into the third category. To do so, I want to rewind back through history, but not to the first Christmas and the events we're so familiar with—the manger scene, shepherds watching sheep, angels singing their songs, and wise men arriving. I want to go back further than that because there's more to the Christmas story than those oh-so-familiar events. I want to land back around 800 BC.

It was at that point that a man named Isaiah, claiming to speak as a messenger from God, announced that “the LORD himself will give you a sign: See, the virgin will conceive [and] have a son” (from the Old Testament Bible book of Isaiah, chapter 7, verse 14).

A baby was coming who would be born in the most unlikely—humanly speaking, impossible—circumstances. Now, maybe the part of the Christmas story when a virgin gets pregnant is the part where you check out and file it as myth. But I think that's the part where you should sit up and listen: because that event was foretold over 700 years before. God had been preparing for the first Christmas centuries before Mary first laid her newborn baby in a feeding trough.

This isn't a Santa Claus myth but real history (more on this in chapter 3). The most unlikely birth in human history was a "sign" from God that he is real, and that he really gets involved, because he really cares.

The people to whom Isaiah made this prophecy—the people of Israel—were desperate to hear something, anything, from God. They were, said Isaiah, a "people walking in darkness." It was a time of national crisis. Economically, they had been devastated. They were facing invasion, and so their very existence as a nation was under threat. There was a darkness of uncertainty about their future, of fear about their safety, of the feeling that they were all alone, of the sense that they were helpless and they were hopeless. There was the darkness of knowing that things had gone wrong and knowing that there was no way to put things back together the way that they were supposed to be. They were searching for something to hold on to. And God said that what they needed was the birth of a baby. What they were searching for was what he would do at the first Christmas.

As we come to the end of this year, we too know how it feels for everything we thought was certain to become suddenly uncertain. We know the sensation of the ground shifting and even sinking beneath us. We've experienced the sense that there is no way to put things back together the way they used to be. We're aware more than ever, and perhaps for the first time,

that prosperity, state-of-the-art medical systems, our nation's economy, and even our own lives are more fragile than we'd like them to be.

Most of us know something of the darkness and the shadows this Christmas. Maybe this Christmas you're unsure about what the next year holds for you: your job security is shaky; your marriage is crumbling; your health is fading. Maybe this is the first Christmas that you've felt alone. Or maybe you've felt like that for longer than you can remember. Maybe you don't know where to go or where to turn. Or maybe things are ok, but still you wonder if there is more, and you sense that maybe that "more" might involve God.

We are searching for something to hold on to. And God says to us the same as he said to those people facing darkness all those centuries ago—that, perhaps without knowing it, we're searching for Christmas. Strange as it may sound, God says to us that, in times of plenty and in times of crisis, what we most need is the birth of a baby:

*"A child will be born for us,
a son will be given to us,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
He will be named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9 v 6)*

FOUR NAMES

There are a lot of rules about choosing names for your children that nobody ever tells you about. For example, if you or your spouse ever dated anyone with a certain name, that name is off-limits. If a name reminds your spouse of a girl she didn't like in school, that's also off-limits. And then you need to think through how the first and last names work together. I found a list by a pastor and author, Craig Groeschel, of unfortunate name combinations of actual people (say these out loud to get the full comedic effect):¹

Anita Mann.

Lois Price.

And my favorite: a lady named Helen who married a guy with the last name Back:

Helen Back.

Apparently after ten years of marriage, she said it was mostly true.

Names matter. That's why all of the virgin's baby's names were chosen by God. He wanted the baby's names to describe why this was the greatest gift he could give: the most valuable present ever given. In this short book, I want to take you through the four names, or titles, that Isaiah announced that this baby—the baby we usually call Jesus—would have: Wonderful Counselor. Mighty God. Eternal Father. Prince of Peace.

As we look at each, we'll see why the birth of this child is such radically good, life-changing news for us. We'll see Jesus doing things that can give us confidence that this isn't sentimental myth but historical reality, and that there's much more to the story of Christmas than we may ever have realized. We'll see that the person at the heart of Christmas gives a hope that we can hold on to when we feel helpless or hopeless.

We'll see that Jesus is a lot more valuable—and useful—than a \$7 neck-warmer, or an expensive jacket, or anything else.