



December 2017

Dear CWR/PTM Friend and Partner

**M**any customs and traditions that surround Christmas are flights of fancy promising unrealistic escape from the here-and-now into a never-Neverland of endless fun, frivolity and feasting. But the real story of Christmas is far from an idyllic fantasy filled with *stuff and fluff*. The real Christmas story is about the pits, foxholes and dark places of our lives—to which our Savior comes, to be with us and one of us. **The real story of Christmas is that Jesus comes to us—he joins us where we are—he does not rapture us away to “somewhere over the rainbow.”**

Matthew 2:13-23 tells us the story of a murderous despot named Herod. Threatened by rumors of a newly born King of the Jews whom he worried might take that title from him, Herod tried to kill the baby Jesus. An angel warned Joseph, so in order to escape the wrath of Herod, the “holy family” of Mary, Joseph and Jesus became homeless refugees and immigrants in Egypt. Egypt—of all places for a Jewish family to seek safety! What an irony! Jesus—the newborn King of the Jews found sanctuary in Egypt—that Old Testament symbol of brutal oppression and bondage.

Unaware that the newborn King of the Jews was long gone, Herod killed all the boys in and around Bethlehem under the age of two, in what history has come to call “the slaughter of the innocents.” This is “Joy to the World”? This is the quaint and peaceful scene of “Silent Night”? **The stage setting for the first Christmas includes the bloodletting of innocents, the cries of mothers for their dead babies and the cries of fathers who could not adequately provide for or protect their families.**

The world into which Jesus came was not and is not a *Hallmark-card-Christmas* where everyone is healthy, prosperous, well-nourished, living in beautiful homes, giving lavish gifts, gathered around long tables and enjoying sumptuous Christmas feasts. The world to which Jesus came and still comes is not about perfect families where everyone gets along, with no acrimony or arguments—it’s not a world where there is no oppression, no impoverishment, no disease and no heartache.

Jesus came to the weary, dirt-poor, ghetto-like world of Bethlehem where political and religious tyrants, then and now, kill and abuse out of lust for power. Bethlehem was a suburb of Jerusalem—but it wasn’t peaceful, landscaped and well-manicured, nor were two cars parked in every driveway. Jesus came to be one of us, to join us in a world overwhelmed by oppression and slavery, both physically and spiritually.

It was business and religion as usual that first Christmas—corrupt, money-hungry government and big-business religion finding new ways to gouge more money out of those they were ostensibly sworn to protect. Jesus came to a world in need of a Savior, not to a world of comfort and ease where there are no cares, no needs, no sickness, no disease, no hunger, no abuse and no tears. The real world of the first Christmas, and of every Christmas since, is not a light and fluffy pseudo Fantasyland—but rather a tough, difficult and even painful world.

This Christmas of 2017, citizens of planet earth, both Christ-followers and those who are not,

are enduring painful and tough times. Yes, in such a world we should all sing “Joy to the World” because the Savior has come—and we should sing “Silent Night” for it was a holy night when God became incarnate, coming to join us in the muck and mire of our lives. We’re filled with joy because our Savior has come, but **we also realize that our Savior’s arrival in the here-and-now does not mean that trouble and suffering will evaporate in a cloud of pixie dust.** The cradle at Bethlehem begins the journey to the Cross outside of Jerusalem.

Because, for many, the focus of Christmas is on *stuff and fluff*, on chasing the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, this Christmas will once again increase depression, anxiety and fear. People who are already depressed will get more depressed as they realize that there is no way their Christmas will ever measure up to a *Hallmark-card Christmas*. Grief will intensify for those who lost loved ones over the course of the last 12 months as parties and family reunions will remind them of who and what they have lost. Senior citizens living alone, some of them in senior homes, will come face to face with the brutal fact that family will not grace their little shrunken world of four walls this Christmas. When the focus of Christmas is about *stuff and fluff*, *the primary wish of many is to just make it through December.*

For almost 50 years the late Merle Haggard has been one of my favorite country-and-western recording artists. Often called “the poet of the common man,” Merle’s songs were meaningful ballads about the ups and downs of life as it is lived. Merle recorded “If We Make It Through December” back in 1973, when unemployment and inflation were at record highs, when North America was struggling through another recession. It’s about a father who is filled with guilt over his inability to buy his daughter “some Christmas cheer.”

“If We Make It Through December”—Merle Haggard

*If we make it through December, everything’s gonna be all right I know  
It’s the coldest time of winter, and I shiver when I see the falling snow  
If we make it through December, got plans to be in a warmer town come summertime  
Maybe even California—if we make it through December we’ll be fine.*

*Got laid off down at the factory, and their timing’s not the greatest in the world  
Heaven knows I’ve been workin’ hard—I wanted Christmas to be right for daddy’s girl  
Now I don’t mean to hate December—it’s meant to be the happy time of year  
And my little girl don’t understand why daddy can’t afford no Christmas gift.*

*If we make it through December, everything’s gonna be all right I know  
It’s the coldest time of winter, and I shiver when I see the falling snow.*

Christmas can include gifts and Christmas dinner with family and friends. But Christmas can and often does include unemployment, high taxes, the homeless, the poor, immigrants and refugees. The real Christmas, the first Christmas, is about mothers crying over their dead babies and fathers crying because they can’t provide for their children as they would like.

The real Christmas story includes tyrants whose bloodlust seems to never end. The real Christmas story is about Jesus, our Savior who doesn’t arrive in our lives with a magic wand to solve our earthly pain and problems—he doesn’t take us away from the storm but promises to be with us during the storm and to take us safely to the other side—his kingdom, peace and rest.

The majority of those who observe Christmas anticipate a fantasy dream of Santa Claus who is in the business of rewards and punishment. But a gift premised on earning or deserving that gift is

not really a gift at all—it's a paycheck, an act of reciprocity for services rendered. *A true gift is a one-sided, lopsided transaction, which is of course exactly the nature of the Greatest Gift of Jesus, God in the flesh.*

Baby Jesus is our pure Gift, the gift of God's undeserved and unearned grace, a light shining on all those who dwell in darkness, a Savior for the sick, impoverished, abused and heartbroken. Like any real gift, Jesus arrives as a grand and glorious surprise, a Savior to all of us, and God knows we don't deserve Him.

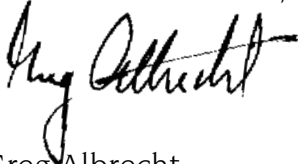
Jesus did not relate to the lepers and the prostitutes and the tax collectors on the basis of what they were able to bring to his table, but rather on the basis of who he was and is and the gifts he brought to their tables. Jesus did not come with gifts only to those who were nice while denying the naughty ("He's making a list/He's checking it twice/He's going to find out who's naughty and nice/Santa Claus is coming to town"). Jesus was embraced and welcomed by the "naughty" and he was rejected, despised and eventually crucified by the "nice." Herod, the governmental authority, was not able to kill the baby Jesus but eventually, after their devious plots and schemes, the "nice" religious authorities crucified him.

Humanity, then and now, opts for *stuff and fluff* over the grace of God. Humanity, then and now, would rather live in a fantasy land where people are deluded into thinking they can pay their spiritual bills by their own efforts and please and appease an otherwise angry and upset god than embrace the grace of God in the person of Jesus. Humanity would rather opt for the endless pursuit of *stuff and fluff* rather than fully embrace the grace, spiritual assurance and deliverance that our Savior is joining us, as one of us, to be with us now and forever.

Joy to the world, the Lord has come! Jesus, our Lord and Savior, will never leave or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). Jesus will supply all of our needs according to his glorious riches (Philippians 4:19) and add all things we need as we seek his kingdom (Matthew 6:33).

Merry Christmas to you and yours! God is with us, he is joining us, no matter what our circumstances, and he will never leave us!

In our Savior's name,



Greg Albrecht  
President, Plain Truth Ministries

P.S. We share this note of thanks from someone in Nigeria who is blessed by the ministry of CWR/PTM which you help to provide. **Thank you so much for your continued support!**

*Many thanks to everyone involved with CWR/PTM for your continued caring support, loving concern and much-needed emphasis on the heart of the gospel, minus the enslaving religiosity of much of Christendom. You have been a big blessing to me through your free resources, and I value and appreciate all your kindness, assistance and support. Your teaching and ministry is helping me and many other Christian students and staff at our campus fellowships at the University of Ibadan and Polytechnic Ibadan. God bless you all.—Nigeria*

## CWR/PTM Prayer List—December 2017

These requests for prayer represent just a few of the thousands we receive and pray for. We invite you to join us in praying for these and the others that space does not permit us to include here. Thanks for joining with us as a CWR/PTM Prayer Partner.

*PTM has deepened my faith. Please pray that all of my decisions will be faith-based from this point on and that all of this worldly turmoil will not influence me in any way.—Wisconsin*

*Please pray for me. I'm going to start chemotherapy because my tumor has grown significantly.—Ontario, Canada*

*I need my right hip replaced this month. Please pray all goes well with the operation.—Washington*

*Having a hard time accepting my sister's death even though I know that she isn't suffering any longer.—Arizona*

*I have elderly parents, ages 83 and 85. They are suffering from many health problems—stroke, heart trouble and hypertension. Please pray for God's continuing blessing and comfort.—Arkansas*

*God has been helping and intervening for my wife and I. The dementia is still there, but with Christ Jesus here with us night and day, we are learning we have nothing to fear.—Nevada*

*I am in need of heart surgery for the second time in a year and half. Also my husband is fighting serious infections.—Texas*

*Please pray for my husband and me as we are having marriage troubles.—Mississippi*

*Please pray for an end to my skin cancer problems, and for continuing recovery from a stroke.—Maryland*

*Please pray for me that the Holy Spirit will move me to another level to grow me in strength and knowledge.—Tennessee*

*Please pray for me as I am fighting depression in my old age.—Kentucky*

*Please pray for my ex-wife who has recently had a stroke. Thank you!—Indiana*

*I ask for prayers for physical healing in my right eye that requires corrective surgery.—Louisiana*

*Please pray for my two sons that God will open their eyes to see Him and then follow Him.—Ohio*

*Please pray for a friend of mine as she has to wear an ostomy pouch.—Ontario, Canada*

*I pray we all realize the unity we have in Jesus. He is our head and we are all parts of His body.—New Jersey*

*Please pray for me for healing of my back so I can sleep better. I'm 99 years old. God has been so good to me!—Nebraska*

*I need continued prayer for my arthritis and sciatic nerve pain even though I'm a lot better.—Mississippi*

*Please ask God to remove this terrible allergy that causes negative reaction to food and interferes with my sleep.—New York*

*Please pray for my grandson who was diagnosed with cancer one year ago. He now has a blood clot in his leg. Please pray that the cancer will never return and that his blood clot will go away.—Tennessee*

*My husband of over 58 years recently went home to be our Savior and it's very lonely without him.—Kentucky*

*Please pray for my mother's overall physical, mental and spiritual health.—Texas*

*Please pray for me as I cope with the death of my husband. Then two months later our only son died. It's almost too much to bear at times.—Georgia*

*I am suffering from a lot of pain in my joints, from high blood pressure, light-headedness and loss of breath.—Florida*

Dear God: We bring you many requests and needs. You know each of these individuals, and we thank you in advance for the answers you will provide for each request. With thanksgiving for your love and grace, we pray in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ—Amen.