

Christmas 2021

“Christmas Anticipation”

A message by Pastor Phil Ballmaier

(12/12/21)

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Some of you know that my mom passed away in March of 2016 which means that this Christmas will mark the fifth year of her passing—my dad died in 1991.

Many of you already know this, that being without either of your parents is a milestone in life, especially at Christmas time—at least it has been for me. It has caused me to become a little nostalgic during the Christmas season as I reflect on some of my favorite childhood memories from this time of year.

Christmas means different things to different people—I am very fortunate in that I have many wonderful memories of Christmases growing up.

My mom always made the holidays very special—especially Christmas.

She would begin baking at the beginning of December—I can still remember the smell of freshly baked Christmas cookies when I came home from school!

In fact, my mom was really the driving force behind Christmas in our house going all out decorating every nook and cranny until our little house was turned into a cozy Christmas cottage. My dad would do his part by bundling up us kids and taking us out to find that perfect Christmas tree—which would sometimes require us to go to two or three Christmas tree lots until we found just the right one.

Then we’d hurry and bring it home and my dad would set it up, put the lights on it and the whole family would gather around decorating it.

I can still remember that smell—there is nothing like the smell of a real Christmas tree in your home at Christmastime. Then as we got closer and closer to Christmas the packages would begin to appear under the tree.

And I can still remember, as a small child, how I would sit by that tree for hours looking at those brightly colored packages with my name on them, simply tortured with anticipation for Christmas morning when I could finally tear into them and see what was inside.

When Christmas Eve finally arrived, I remember how I would always want to go to bed early so Christmas would come.

I remember one year, when I was about 7—I had my pajamas on at 3:30 in the afternoon ready to go to bed because then Christmas would come quicker (I was such a little Christmas nerd)!

I remember as a kid waking up around three o’clock in the morning and lying in bed so excited that I couldn’t sleep, watching the clock—the minutes seemed like hours!

My brother and I would sit in our beds and talk until about 5 or 5:30 when we just couldn't take it any longer and we'd go in and wake up mom and dad.

Finally, the day had come, and I was able to tear into those packages! I can recall getting a lot of great presents as a kid for Christmas—but I also remember that some of the gifts didn't live up to the anticipation that preceded Christmas morning.

You all remember as kids the excitement and anticipation, the wondering and fantasizing as to what could possibly be in those packages.

One Christmas in particular there was this one package under the tree that I just couldn't figure out. I could usually guess what was in most of them—but this one had me baffled. No matter how hard I tried I just couldn't figure out what was in the mystery package which caused my imagination to go crazy!

I began to imagine there were things in that package that couldn't possibly, by any of the known laws of physics, fit into the dimensions of that box!

I remember that Christmas morning tearing into that package first filled with an almost *unbearable* sense of anticipation—only to have my hopes and dreams dashed!

For behold the mystery package contained—a globe of the earth (fitting as I wanted to throw it into outer space)!

When you're a kid the last things you want for Christmas are clothes and educational toys!

But this taught me a valuable lesson, which I've never forgotten over the years—that some things in life don't always live up to our expectations—and that this isn't limited to Christmas. This lesson has been reinforced in my life many times over the years—through many different circumstances.

REFLECTION: Christmas is a time of reflection; think about some of your childhood Christmas memories:

As I have spent the last 41 years in ministry, I have also seen this lesson driven home in the lives of many of those I have had the privilege of ministering to.

That often, the hoped-for relationship or special day or long-awaited event doesn't always live up to the anticipation.

Sometimes the baby is born sick, sometimes the relationship fails, sometimes the promotion at work doesn't come or the success in life doesn't satisfy—or that a beautiful wedding day doesn't always lead to a 'happily ever after' marriage.

Sometimes life is hard, disappointments are many, and reality can be brutal.

But look, even though it's true that life is full of disappointments—it shouldn't rob us of the hope and anticipation for the future either.

When I was a kid, even though some of the gifts I received didn't live up to my expectations—I **still held onto my hope and anticipation** that each Christmas morning going forward would be a magical time—even if I didn't always get what I had hoped for in the present.

In other words, I still believed and never lost my childhood faith in Christmas!

It's only when we get older that we lose our child-like faith in life.

REFLECTION: What does "child like faith" mean to you?

It's only after many years of disappointments and unanswered prayers that we stop believing, that we stop having hope that with our God nothing shall be impossible. That's always tragic, because, if we continue to believe, tomorrow may contain the answer to our prayers—a special gift from God which will turn disappointment into joy and lead to a new beginning in our life.

I mean, after all, isn't that what Christmas is all about—a special gift?

I told you I've been remembering my childhood a lot this year, and one of my favorite childhood memories at Christmastime was to watch 'A Charlie Brown Christmas' with my family.

You remember in that story how that Charlie Brown was depressed at Christmastime—and he really didn't understand why. Here everybody else was happy and getting into the Christmas spirit—while he was feeling down and empty inside.

So, you remember how that Lucy encouraged Charlie to get involved in the annual Christmas play that the neighborhood was putting on—she said it was guaranteed to put him in the Christmas spirit. He thought that was a great idea, so he shows up ready to throw himself into this play and find the true meaning of Christmas—only to discover that no one was taking it seriously!

After expressing his frustration, a number of times at the lack of commitment on the part of everyone—the group sends him out to get a Christmas tree thinking that will help his Christmas spirit.

Of course, you remember how he brought back that famous 'Charlie Brown Christmas tree'—a scrawny little twig of a tree and how everyone yelled at him for being such a blockhead.

Finally, in frustration and in desperation he cries out—***"Can anyone tell me what Christmas is all about?"***

With that, Linus walks over and says, ***"I can tell you what Christmas is all about Charlie Brown."***

So, Linus walks up onto the stage with blanket in hand, the house lights grow dim, the spotlight comes on and Linus quotes a passage out of Luke chapter two (he was a King James man)—

Luke 2:8-14 (KJV)

⁸ And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. ¹⁰ And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this *shall be* a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, ¹⁴ Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Charlie Brown didn't say a word, but a smile came over his face and he walked out the door having found, in his heart, the true meaning of Christmas.

Christmas is all about Jesus coming to the earth as God's greatest gift to mankind:

John 3:16 (NKJV)

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Isaiah 9:6 (NKJV)

⁶ For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

This is what we as Christians truly celebrate on Christmas Day—the First Coming of Jesus to the earth to save us from our sins—

Matthew 1:20-21 (NKJV)

²⁰ But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. ²¹ And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins."

So, at Christmastime we celebrate the joy of Jesus First Coming—but where is the excitement and anticipation of Jesus' Second Coming to the earth?

Christians used to have such joy, excitement, and anticipation at the thought of Jesus' return to the earth to establish His Kingdom, when wars would cease, righteousness would reign and the love of man for his fellowman would prevail—what happened to that?!

As Christians what has happened to our anticipation of Jesus' coming to the earth again?!

- ❖ *The anticipation of His coming for His Church at the Rapture.*
- ❖ *The anticipation of seeing Him face to face.*
- ❖ *The anticipation of living with Him in a Kingdom where love and righteousness will abound and never end?!*

Where is the joyful anticipation we once had as Christians when we were young in our faith?

I'll tell you where—we lost it when we outgrew our childlike faith!

REFLECTION: How would you rate your childlike faith (1-10)?

Look, as an adult I no longer have the anticipation and wonder of Christmas that I had as a child—I outgrew it as everyone of us did when we grew from childhood to adulthood.

But that doesn't mean it's gone for good, never to return. You see, when I became a father, I realized that I was able to recapture the joy and anticipation of Christmas through my children—and now through my grandchildren.

Which means that the joy and anticipation of Christmas still lives in my heart through them! The same is true with the return of Jesus Christ to the earth to establish His Kingdom—a truth we have grown up with as Christians and in many ways have grown used to in our faith.

When I say 'grown used to' I mean that the hope of Jesus' return no longer excites us, in fact for many Christians it is no longer of any interest to them—they've grown bored with it.

But if that is how you're feeling today, take heart because **you can recapture the joy and anticipation of Jesus' return through each new generation of Christians.**

REFLECTION: Has your Christmas Hope been compromised?

And that is why the devil has targeted young Christians in an effort to destroy their faith—he knows that so much of our excitement, joy and anticipation of things to come, come from those who are new in the faith—those who are spiritual children!

And so, the devil has targeted the teaching of prophecy as pastors have bought into the idea that young people don't want to hear about things to come—they're only concerned about right now.

That they aren't interested in prophecy, it's irrelevant to them or frightens them—so let's stay away from it.

It's amazing to see how effective the enemy has been as so many churches are no longer emphasizing or even teaching the Rapture of the Church and the Second Coming of Christ.

The result has been that Christians young and old have lost the joy, hope and anticipation of Jesus' return.

So, what can we do to rekindle the excitement and anticipation of Jesus' return?

First, stop focusing on this life and start focusing on the coming Kingdom of God—

Colossians 3:2 (NKJV)

² Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.

Second, start paying attention to the signs the Lord has given us in His Word that point to Jesus' return—

Luke 21:28 (NLT)

²⁸ So when all these things begin to happen, stand and look up, for your salvation is near!"

Third, start living like Last Days believers—

Romans 13:11-14 (NLT)

¹¹ This is all the more urgent, for you know how late it is; time is running out. Wake up, for our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. ¹² The night is almost gone; the day of salvation will soon be here. So remove your dark deeds like dirty clothes, and put on the shining armor of right living. ¹³ Because we belong to the day, we must live decent lives for all to see. Don't participate in the darkness of wild parties and drunkenness, or in sexual promiscuity and immoral living, or in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ Instead, clothe yourself with the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. And don't let yourself think about ways to indulge your evil desires.

Finally, teach your children (and grandchildren) diligently about the Lord and His return to the earth.

They are the next generation of Christians that will take the gospel into the world and help to energize our walk as we benefit from their young faith and enthusiasm.

REFLECTION: How do you incorporate the anticipation of Jesus in your Christmas celebrations with family, friends, and colleagues?

Of course, the devil doesn't want that, and has been working very hard over the last century or so to turn our country into a secular society. He is accomplishing this in part by replacing Jesus at Christmastime, with Santa Claus and other non-religious symbols in an effort to divorce Christmas from Christ.

A few years ago, my family and I went to Macy's on State Street in downtown Chicago to look at the windows—the theme that year was, "Yes, Virginia there is a Santa Claus."

That theme, of course, was borrowed from the title of one of the most famous editorials in American history which first appeared in the *New York Sun* newspaper in 1897.

The editorial was written by Frances Church, the son of a Baptist minister, in response to a letter he received from a little girl named Virginia O'Hanlon.

You see, some of Virginia's young friends were telling her that Santa Claus didn't exist—she wrote:

"Dear Editor, I am 8 years old. Some of my friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says, 'If you see it in The Sun, it's so.' Please tell me the truth, is there a Santa Claus?"

The Editor, Francis Church, wrote Virginia back (I'll only read part of his response):

"Virginia, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds... Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus!...Not believe in Santa Claus! You might as well not believe in fairies...Did you ever see fairies dancing on the lawn? Of course not, but that's no proof that they are not there...[even so just because you've never seen Santa Claus doesn't mean he's not real either]... No Santa Claus! Thank God he lives and lives forever! A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay 10 times 10,000 years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood."

Now look, I'm sure many people back then applauded Mr. Church's attempt to bolster a little girl's belief in Santa Claus—I mean every kid needs to believe in Santa Claus—right?!

➤ **But what's more important?! Reinforcing a child's faith in Santa Claus or in Jesus Christ?**

You say, "Why can't we teach our children both—a belief in Santa and Jesus?"

The Western World is becoming increasingly more and more secular to the point that it now is endeavoring to teach children that Christmas (which celebrates the incarnation of God to Man), is a myth while fairy tales like Santa Claus, elves and reindeer are being promoted to children as fact.

Look, this question should never have been passed off to a secular newspaper to answer in the first place—Mr. O'Hanlon, Virginia's father, should have sat his little girl down and told her the truth—but he didn't, like many Christian parents today.

And so, with that being said, what Mr. Church, a pastor's son, should have said was:

"No, Virginia there is no Santa Claus. However, I've got good news there lives Someone much better! His birth was first announced by an angel God sent to a group of shepherds two thousand years ago who were watching over their flocks one night in the fields right outside a little town called Bethlehem. When suddenly the angel appeared in the sky like a bright shining star and said, 'I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people! For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior Who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign to you, you will find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men.'

And so, Virginia there is no Santa Claus to bring you little gifts, but there is a Savior, Jesus the Christ, Who gave to you and me and to all mankind the greatest gift of all—the gift of eternal life.

He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to

your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! How dreary (and hopeless I might add) would be the world be if there was no Jesus Christ!

Thank God He lives and lives forever! A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay 10 times 10,000 years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of His people.”

I have entitled this message, “Christmas Anticipation”—but really I have in mind, “Christ Anticipation”.

You see we outgrow Christmas anticipation because we come to realize that Santa Claus isn’t real and doesn’t come each year to give us presents.

But as Christians we should never outgrow the truth that Jesus Christ is real, that He has come once to save us from our sins and is coming again to bring a Kingdom of righteousness and peace to the earth—a glorious Kingdom that will never end!

REFLECTION: What are other “western” influences that have taken Christ out of our Christ anticipation celebrations?

Folks, that is a truth we should never get too old to embrace and rejoice in!

And so, may the memories of Christmas past, the joy of Christmas present, and the hope Christ’s return be to you and your family a constant source of joy and anticipation this Christmas—and throughout the year!

“Merry Christmas!”

If you would like to know more about what it means to be a Jesus-follower— you can experience the richest Christmas of your life!

Please, reach out to us. It would be our greatest privilege to lead you into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

Reach out to us [here](#).

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