



UNWRAPPING HOPE THROUGH
THE SONGS OF CHRISTMAS

PART 2:

“O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM”

DECEMBER 05, 2021



Heaven and Nature Sing: *Unwrapping Hope through the Songs of Christmas* "O Little Town of Bethlehem"

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Part Two : "O Little Town of Bethlehem"

O **little** town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by
Yet in the dark street shineth
The everlasting Light
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight

I. On Littleness

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small [note that word – this is 'littleness' language. Though you are small] among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from ancient times." - Micah 5:2

Micah highlights the "littleness" of this town.

"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. And *everyone* went to their own town to register." (Luke 2:1;3).

- Caesar Augustus was the epitome of "big". He was 'in charge' of *all* at the human level.

"Went up" and "city of David" lead us to anticipate "Jerusalem" as the destination.

"Now Joseph also **went up** from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the **city of David**, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David..."

- Luke 2:4 (NASB)

Luke sets up our expectations only to subvert them. To flip our expectations on their heads – to help us see the irony of how God often works.

The Point: God works through people of lowly status and in seemingly insignificant places to accomplish his divine plan. This critiques the way that we as humans so often hunger after the 'bigger', that which means 'more power', for more limelight, for more significance.

"**26** Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. **27** But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.



28 God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, **29** so that no one may boast before him.” – 1 Corinthians 1:26-29

Where this touches down for us:

1. The fact of God becoming “small” in Jesus, this shows God’s delight to dwell with us. Jesus is, and will always, be fully human as well as fully God. And that ennobles the apparent ‘littleness-es’ of our humanity. And we can rest and work in that reality.

2. Is there a sense in which by pursuing what seems to count as ‘making it’, ‘succeeding’, ‘gunning for the larger’, you may unwittingly be ‘despising’ the lowly things, or people, or believing God can’t possibly be at work in this – this job at Tim Hortons, or of changing diapers and vacuuming, or selling t-shirts?

Practices for Living Little:

1. Embrace the small acts of love:
 - a. Through simple gestures that says, “You matter – I see you.”
 - b. Through a simple, kind word, “I really appreciate your heart.”
 - c. Through a promise followed through on – a commitment kept.

2. Acknowledge and embrace your own ‘smallness’ – the places of weakness or vulnerability, not as elements of yourself to be hidden or embarrassed by, but as places that God may particularly want to work in and through.

II. Christology 101

“Light” is with a capital-L.

I am the Light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life”
- John 8:12

“God is light.” - 1 John 1:5

In saying “I am the Light of the world,” Jesus associates himself in that same category; as one and the same with God.



“We believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, **Light from Light**, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father. Through him all things were made.”

- Nicene Creed (325 AD)

When we say “Jesus”, we mean, God – one and the same as the Creator of all. And it means that we can speak of God “subsisting” as God the Father, as distinct from God the Son, as distinct from God the Holy Spirit, they share “the same essence.”

The Point: The fact that God fully embraced humanity – that Jesus was 100% human while remaining 100% God – is of utmost importance. It means that God relates to all human struggle, and every part of humanity, every race, every culture, every hurt, every heartbreak, every joy.

“For that which He has not assumed He has not healed.”

– Gregory of Nazianzus, 4th C. (*Letter 101, Epistola CI, To Presbyter Cledonius*)

III. In All Our Dark Streets

When Herod realized he had been outwitted by the Magi he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under...”

– Matthew 2:16a.

Jesus will end all violence – for all time, *in time* – and, ironically, he does it by letting evil do its worst to him.

Though Jesus escapes Herod’s attempt at his life as a toddler, he will lay down his life voluntarily – will freely associate with those little ones who did not escape Herod’s infant-genocide. And he still associates with those whose bodies are broken in violence.

The Point: Because of his death – that he ‘assumes’ the very human reality of death, even violent death – that he can bring healing and life on the other side of death.

IV. Where “Meek Souls” Will Receive Him Still

Verse 3:

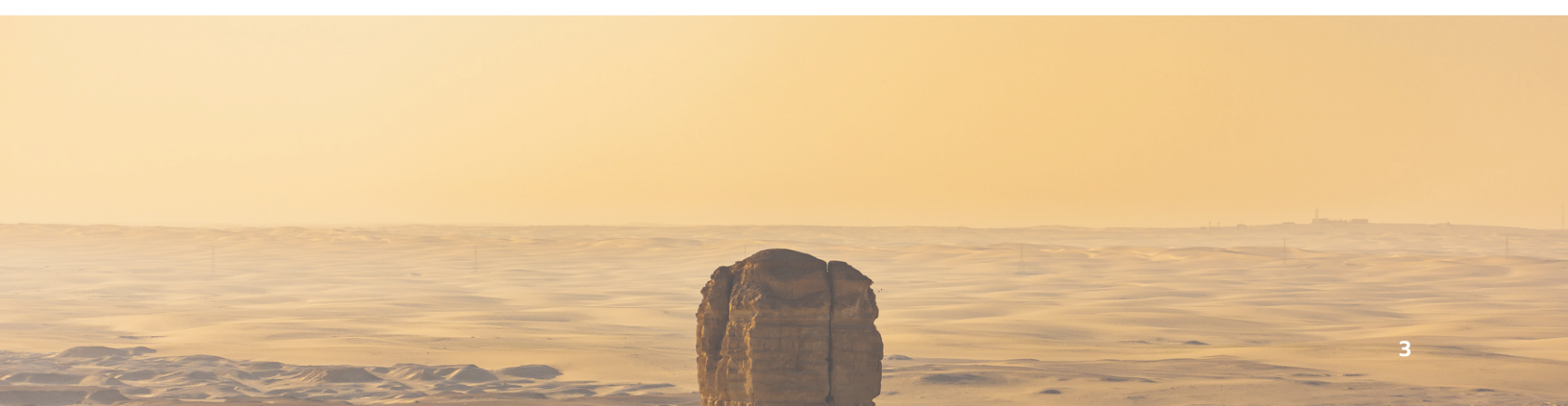
How silently, how silently
The wondrous Gift is given!
So, God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven
No ear may hear His coming
But in this world of sin
Where meek souls will receive Him still
The dear Christ enters in

Verse 4b:

O holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born in us today

“At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.”

– Luke 10:23



1. If you want to know God, you don't have to be smart. There is no intellectual prerequisite to know God – you can be a little child. In fact, Jesus says kids have an advantage. The prerequisite is not cleverness but openness. “Meekness” means “not arrogant.” It implies openness to learn and grow.
2. Jesus also says that he's “hidden himself” from the ‘wise and learned’. That sounds really *exclusive*. It sounds like he's “for” the unintelligent and *against* those who have smarts. But that's not what Jesus is saying here. Remember, the apostle Paul, he's intellectual to the max. The issue is not that the intelligent can't know God – but that intelligence alone *can't* get you there.

Intellectual *pride* is a form of arrogance that blocks the some from coming to know God.

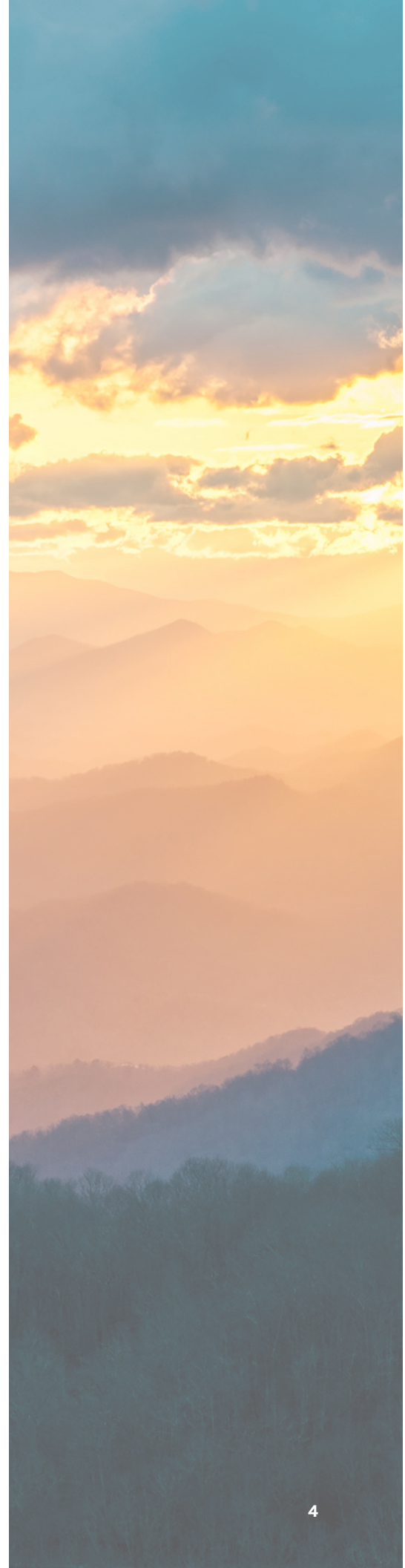
It's why Jesus will tell us that we need to become like little children to enter the kingdom (Luke 18:17). He doesn't mean become “childish”, but to take on the posture that kids have. Like, kids are intensely curious. To know God, you have to **want** to know God.

The Table

“As we take communion during this Advent time, then, may we give thanks for Jesus' body and blood in all that it means: **sacrifice** [he willingly, even joyfully, gives his life for us], **sustenance** [he fill us, helps us, empowers us], **salvation** [rescues from sin, evil and death to a fullness of life forever], and **subsistence** [that God the Son, Jesus, really does become fully human to be with us, to remain fully God - forever]. “Emmanuel,” indeed. Alleluia!” - John Stackhouse Jr.

Life Group Discussion and Reflection:

1. In what way have you typically engaged with the songs of Christmas? Is it mostly positive, mostly negative, or something else altogether? What about “O Little Town of Bethlehem”?
2. Read Luke 2:1-7. Caesar Augustus is described as ruling the entire Roman world, and that everyone had to respond to his word to register in their hometown. Luke is juxtaposing the “largeness” of Augustus with the “littleness” of the town of Bethlehem, and the fact that the true King of the *whole universe* is coming as a baby. How do you see the fact that God chooses to work in and through the ‘small’ and seemingly insignificant things to achieve his purposes in this text? What about in your own experience?





3. Pastor Dave mentioned two practices on “Living Little” (as opposed to “Living Large”) in his message (see above). These included:
- a. Embracing small gestures and acts in your regular life, since they make a larger impact than we may realize. In what ways do you need to engage, or re-engage that kind of practice in your life? What would happen if you did?
 - b. Acknowledge and embrace your own ‘smallness’ – the places of weakness or vulnerability, not as elements of yourself to be hidden or embarrassed by, but as places that God may particularly want to work in and through. How has God worked in and through your weaknesses? What might happen if you were more open to sharing your weakness as well as your areas of strength in service others?
4. Look again at what Jesus says in Luke 10:23: “At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.”

Jesus is telling us that it is a posture of ‘meekness’, or a ‘lack of arrogance’ – a childlikeness – that open the door for faith in Jesus (See also **Luke 18:15-17**).

How has that been true in your life? How might that shape how you pray for neighbors and friends who need to come to a knowledge of God? How does that shape how you minister to them?

Prayer: Take some time to thank God for how he chooses to work through the “small”, and even becomes “small” in a sense, by taking on our humanity. Pray in response to your discussion: for the enablement of the Holy Spirit to help you “live little” and to engage with your neighbors in a way that honors the ways God chooses to work.