

As we enter the last month of the year and see all of the colorful preparations for the holiday season, I wonder if we ever consider the question, "What is the real meaning of Christmas?" If you were to ask this on the street you might receive a variety of answers, but they would always include the birth of Jesus, family togetherness, and the idea of giving. We may realize that in the coming of God's own Son to our world to live and teach and die for us, God gave us the greatest gift that could ever be given. But so many times this knowledge is lost in the excitement of the festival atmosphere.

We even emphasize many times the glory of the gift, but do not explore the real depth of it. All of the stories and programs deal with the birth of Christ; how many have you ever seen that also mention his crucifixion, death, and resurrection? It is as though we don't want to get too intense about it, especially in the presence of the children. It seems much better to candy-coat the outside and leave the inside alone. In a sense we have arrived at the party but refuse to go in and participate.

Have you ever given an child a gift that you put a lot of time and thought into, only to have them be more excited about and play more with the box that it was wrapped in? It's a little frustrating. Or perhaps given someone something that they kept in the package and never used? This sort of thing reminds me, too, about the nice VCR that someone gave their parents; they were appreciative, but they never learned to program it or even set the clock. It just keeps flashing "12:00" all of the time.

We have a similar problem in our enthusiasm for Christmas. We celebrate the coming of the Lord, but we never get to the real core of its meaning. We spend millions or perhaps billions as a nation to make this the most wonderful time of the year, and we overlook the part that makes it so wonderful. Philip Yancey in his book The Jesus I Never Knew wrote,

*We observe a mellow, domesticated holiday purged of any hint of scandal. Above all, we purge from it any reminder of how the story that began at Bethlehem turned out at Calvary.*

For every beginning there is an ending, and we should make sure that we don't miss the point of the season.

We love sending and receiving Christmas cards, don't we? Most have a peaceful nativity scene, or Santa with presents, or cute little animals. I wonder what would happen if we put the true meaning of Christmas in our cards. My vision of this type of Christmas card would have on the front a gentle pastoral scene of the nativity, but when you opened it up to the inside it would have a picture of the crucified Christ. And then on the back there would be an image of His resurrection; in this way the tension of the previous page would be resolved in the joy of our own opportunity for everlasting life. The message would be pure and simple:

*We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.*

*Romans 6:4*