



Possible?

by Al Wezeman

Jesus said in the Holy Bible's New Testament in Matthew 19:26, "...but with God all things are possible." With that statement Jesus was saying that God is all powerful, everywhere present, all knowing, and anything else that would describe a perfect being. The list goes on way beyond our limited knowledge or imagination.

The Holy Bible tells us in the first book of the Old Testament that God spoke everything into existence in six days. One of God's created beings, man, would like to be able to do that, but only God in His Sovereignty can call things into existence and make miraculous changes. God shows His Sovereign power and perfection throughout the pages of the Holy Bible. If there is any doubt about God's almighty power we need only read Psalm 19:1, 35:6, and 89:11 where it tells us that the "heavens declare God's glory." His word brought it into being and it all belongs to Him, both Heaven and earth.

The old and new testaments of the Holy Bible describe God's perfection in many ways. Deuteronomy 32:4 tells us that His "...works are perfect." II Samuel 22:31 says, "...God's way is perfect." Job 36:4 states God's perfection in knowledge. Psalm 19:7 makes it clear that the "...Law of the Lord is perfect." Psalm 50:2 speaks of God's perfect beauty as He "shines forth." We see in Isaiah 25:1 that God is "perfect (in) faithfulness." The New Testament brings out God's perfect will in Romans 12:2.

In the beginning we started out as perfect beings, but due to our disobedience (read Genesis 3), we became imperfect (sinful). God in His perfect love did not abandon (destroy) us but provided a way to our being perfect again. In His perfect wisdom, God sent Jesus to this earth (we soon celebrate Christmas) to give Himself for us (see John 3:13-21 and John 3:36).

These passages tell about the Son of God coming from Heaven for the purpose of being a sacrifice for our sins so we can have eternal life through Him. If a person trusts in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, he will have eternal life. Verse 36 of John 3 sums up what Jesus was saying about Himself: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."

Hebrews 10:4 and 12:2 states the fact: "...one sacrifice — made perfect forever those being made holy." "Jesus (the) author and perfecter of our faith."

"God keeps in perfect peace those who are steadfast." (Isaiah 26:3).•



The innkeeper on trial

by Rev. William Randall

This Christmas season I decided to write about Bethlehem's inn keeper because he has received bad press coverage in the past.

The words "no room" are terrible, especially when it pertains to Jesus. Thoughts of weary travelers being turned away has created bad feelings toward the inn keeper, especially when we know it was Joseph and Mary, who was just about ready to give birth.

Have you ever been stuck while traveling without a place to stay? Several years ago, my wife and I visited Stone Mountain Park just outside of Atlanta, Georgia. After making our way to the top of the stone formation, we found a place to sit for the laser light show. I got tired of sitting, so found my way to the information center. I asked the attendant if she would please give me a list of motels. We wanted to attend Reverend Charles Stanley's church the next day. She phoned one after another and heard the words, "no vacancy." There were two or three ultra-expensive hotels that we could not consider if we wanted to have any spending money on our trip to Savanna and then back up along the coast. We decided to head south on Route 75. Macon's motels had glowing "no vacancy" signs. We decided to sleep in our car. We parked in a motel parking lot but felt uncomfortable there, so back on the highway we found a rest stop. I understand that sleeping in cars there is not recommended, but we got a few winks. I think I would have been happy if someone had invited us to sleep in his stable. It would have made me think of childhood days. Once or twice my siblings and I decided to sleep in the newly-gathered hay.

We need to realize Bethlehem had a crowd as never before. Caesar gave a decree that all in the empire had to return to the town of their family ancestry to register and pay taxes. Mary and Joseph had to make the trip because they were both of the lineage of David.

It had been a grueling trip from Galilee far in the north. Joseph no doubt walked along the Jordan River while Mary would have jostled along on a donkey's back. For them, any place would be welcome, even a stable.

The innkeeper didn't know that it was the Holy Family and thought of the stable as the next best thing to the inn. The inn was not to be compared to the Holiday Inn. They somehow included people and their means of transportation.

Jesus' birthplace put emphasis upon His sacrifice of leaving the glory of Heaven to be born into this sinful world. This humble stable became a sanctuary for worship when shepherds came and bowed before the newly-born Son of God.

Have you thought of the fact that Jesus was born in a pol-

of a nude pagan huntress goddess, Artemis. Mary was, in fact, as exposed to sin as any woman in today's culture.

The traditions of Medieval monks, proud of their piety, have added many misconceptions to the Bible's version of the Christmas story. Too, many other customs of Christmas are from non-Christian origins. Gift giving, for instance, once practiced in early January, began as a pagan custom among Romans long before the Christian era. Christian clergy arbitrarily set Christ's birth at December 25 to incorporate this practice into Christmas (the Magi brought gifts to Jesus: gold, frankincense, myrrh — remember?) The actual date of our Savior's birth, unlike that of his death, which occurred during Passover, is simply not known, and even the exact year is in doubt.

Charles Dickens' famed "A Christmas Carol" portrays the parsimonious Ebenezer Scrooge as the antithesis of the Christmas spirit. God gave his Son to redeem mankind — the greatest gift of all, the Bible tells us. So Dickens rightly argues that those who are born again of the Holy Spirit should give in Jesus' name to those in need — not only at Christmas, but all year long.

In "The Gift of the Magi" O. Henry wrote 100 years ago about a pair of newlyweds who gave out of love to one another until it hurt, each giving up his most prized possession.

One considers with alarm how readily the spirit of giving has segued into a spirit of grasping and getting — covetous materialism — in the span of one lifetime. When Gene Autry popularized "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" in 1947, Autry built on a tradition of Christian origin, the story of Saint Nicholas. But in the decades since "Rudolph" caught the popular imagination, Santa has become the pagan god of covetousness to many, perhaps most, American children.

Grisham discovered that "Skipping Christmas" is not necessarily the answer, yet his short novel underscores the excesses to which this celebration has gone. So, take your kids to see *Nutcracker* or a staging of "A Christmas Carol." Join in the church and family festivities, while teaching your children that the Christ Child, not the jolly fat man with his sack of presents, is what it's all about.

When you think of God's gift to us, let your imagination transcend the popular image of sanitized crèches and haloed Madonnas and robed Magi. Recall that Jesus was born in a filthy stable — a realistic picture of the human heart. Jesus came to a world where jealous King Herod, fearful that Jesus might take his throne, would slaughter babies in the same way that millions have died since. The innocent and guilty alike will continue to die until Jesus' ultimate sacrifice on a crude Roman cross is recognized as the only, final payment for all sins of those who receive God's gift. •

luted place, but also comes to impure sinners and is willing to enter into their lives when they repent and invite Him in? He said, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come into him." (Revelation 20:5)

Maybe you are wondering about our trip to Savanna. After some sleep at the rest stop, Avis and I went inside and washed up. We changed clothes because when we travel, we go to church. We continued down the highway and saw signs to Vidalia. To our surprise, it is an onion town. There were warehouses for the shipping of the wonderful, sweet Vidalia onions. It is a small place, but we found a welcoming church in the heart of town.

Now back to the innkeeper before we criticize him for saying "no room." One cannot help but wonder how many churches have turned the Christ of the Bible and the clear offer of the gospel from their doors. We all need to say, "Jesus, you are welcome. Come in to stay."•



Too much praying?

by Rev. R.A. Shackles

Do we Christians place too much reliance on prayer? There are some who think so, those "let's do something" pragmatists who complain that, while the churches closet themselves in prayer, society is going bust all around us. Others, in a variation of this cynicism, complain of the "lost in space" unreality of focusing everything in some miracle of prayer. The worst cynics are those who look at the mess our social order is in and blithely accuse "so much for all your prayer can do for you!"

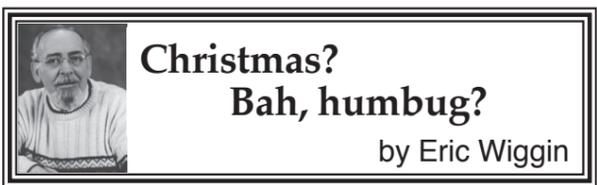
We have to admit that the seeming situation is certainly persuasive, especially if you are one who has just "prayed your heart out" and still the defeat or pain or negativeness of your situation just seems to have been ineffective — it all continues despite your and others' prayers. So we can understand how some can bitterly respond "all that prayer and nothing happens." So we repeat our opening query: Do we Christians put too much reliance on prayer?

It's an honest question. It requires some serious and honest reflection. A first response usually is to insist that the disappointment and disillusionment result because we simply only inadequately *understand* Christian prayer. We agree, there is a great deal to be said there. We don't reject that; indeed we believe there is much that is true there — we *do* often pray, in effect, unthinkingly.

But that is not the point we want to make in response to our question. Here, we insist that the real issue is that Christians — and especially the Church — simply do not rely on prayer nearly enough. How many congregations do you know of in which at every gathering for worship there is significantly pointed *and* intensive prayer over the things distressing our lives? Sermons on public vice? Sure! Plenty of them! But how many give a one minute "sermon" stating, "here is a moral issue before us," then say, "now for the rest of this sermon time, let us all pray for God's Spirit to fill us so we can affect this social sin?" And let it be said that it be not the pastor offering one of those interminable "Pastoral prayers," but the members frankly opening their heart-raised voices to seek God's guidance on how we as Christians can affect the problem.

This, we suggest, is the problem about prayer and whether or not it does in fact have any telling effect in the life of our society. It is to suggest a version of G.K. Chesterton's famous quip that it is said Christianity was tried and found wanting, but that rather Christianity is wanting but has not really been tried. With prayer, it is the same. It is not that prayer has been tried and doesn't work; it is that we have not really — as a united Christendom — tried prayer as it is meant to be tried! Consider the impact on today's cultural malaise — the immorality, crime, violence, etc. — if our little suggestion were exercised among all Christians and communions at every public gathering, every small prayer group and — most important of all — by each, every individual Christian in his or her personal life.

Too much prayer? No! Not hardly enough — by a mile or two!•



Christmas? Bah, humbug?

by Eric Wiggin

In *Skipping Christmas*, John Grisham wrote of a family so fed up with the glitz and glamour of the world's most popular holiday that they decided to ditch the parties, decorations and presents. Go to the beach, instead.

Not such a bad idea, some will agree.

Some 800 years before the first Christmas, Isaiah, speaking to Ahaz, his king, made an outrageous prediction. Old Ike was about to take a new wife, a virgin with a local reputation for making prophetic utterances. Isaiah asserted he would soon get his young prophetess pregnant, that the baby would be a boy, and before the kit uttered his first word, Ahaz's enemies would be dead.

So the virgin prophetess got pregnant right away and Ahaz's enemies died, as foretold. But Isaiah's brash promise to the King of Israel (Isaiah 7:14) became the basis for the Christian belief that three-quarters of a millennium later an impoverished, hastily married teen virgin would give birth to a divine manchild without having slept with a man.

Isaiah's earthy pronouncement re his own virgin bride is a prophesy with both a primary and a secondary fulfillment. The primary, greater meaning of "The virgin shall conceive and bear a son" has to do with Jesus' birth. The earthiness of Ike's words to Ahaz gave Christ's miracle birth a setting quite unlike the Christmas story of popular imagination.

We sing about the "holy child" as we imagine a pure, pristine (albeit humble) scene of the pretty young mother and sleeping child of the conceptions of Renaissance artists. Yet Jesus was born in a fly-infested stable polluted with cow manure and donkey dung. His teen mom wrapped him in strips of cloth torn likely from a none-too-sanitary, worn-out garment. She fed him from a breast bathed in water from a cattle trough, or perhaps washed with wine from the family jug' then she laid him down to nap on a pile of hay.

Not the "immaculate" Madonna of popular myth, Mary, though a good and godly girl, was a sinner like the rest of us. As such, she, too, needed a Savior. Nor was she perpetually a virgin, for she bore Joseph at least five children after Jesus. Years later, she evidently spent her widowhood in Ephesus, a pagan Roman city, rife with idolatry, dedicated to the worship

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