

Isaiah 9:2 (NIV)

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.

On a night when believers sing “**O Come, all Ye Faithful**”, I want to speak to those who have not been faithful. This is a message for a prodigal, for one who has wandered away from the faith.

You’re here tonight either out of obligation or by reason of concession to a family member. But this is a message for a prodigal, and that’s why you’re hearing it.

For you see, there is someone who cares for you very much, and the very fact that you’re hearing these words is evidence that there is a God who answers prayers.

Your name has been heard before the throne of grace time and time again, and God has taken notice of those prayers.

You may have thought that prayer was a waste of time, nothing more than wishful thinking, a kind of solace or comfort for those who couldn’t help themselves.

And that may be true some. There are those who pray but they have no faith, and without faith it is impossible to please God.

But somebody, somewhere, had the faith and persistence to get through. Somebody has mentioned your name to God.

Over and over again they pleaded your case before the Almighty. And tonight, **on the eve of Christmas**, God is in the beginning stages of answering those prayers.

And that's the first point that I need to make clear to you tonight. God is not speaking to you this evening because you deserve His grace.

You're not a Jimmy Steward type character in the Hollywood movie "It's a Wonderful Life."

You have no merit in yourself that prompts God to act on your behalf. Your luck is not changing. God is still sovereign. You have reaped what you have sown in the past and you shall do so again in the future.

But something has changed. Whether you know it or not you are not alone. The prayers of one, or of many, are following you every step of the way.

Every event in your life, every action that you take, every circumstance that you find yourself in, has not come about by chance.

Almighty God, the maker of heaven and earth, the ruler and Supreme Being of all the universe, has, in his sovereignty and providence, declared that his grace should be bestowed upon you.

Again, let me stress that's it's not because you deserve it. God is sovereign and He is responding to the prayers of others on your behalf.

Like someone who has inherited millions from a long lost relative, you are benefiting from the labor and pain of others.

You have done nothing to earn the grace that you're about to receive. If anything, you have spurned this grace of God in the past.

You've made light of the supernatural, never really taking seriously the things of God. You turned your back on your Creator because you thought that there was nothing to it.

However, the things that you have scorned in the past, are now coming back, not to **haunt** you, but **to bless you**.

For reasons known only to God Himself, He has willed to deal with you not just in accordance with His justice alone, but in accordance with His justice and mercy.

Your life is about to change because of that mercy. This is going to be a most unexpected Christmas gift, a gift that you certainly didn't ask for.

There was a family that had their Christmas gift exchange on Christmas afternoon. After all of the presents had been given, the adult son brought in a crate and presented it to his elderly father.

Inside the crate was a puppy. Not the kind of present the father was expecting or asking for. The father was befuddled. What was he going to do with a dog?

He scolded his son for giving him something that he didn't want or thought he needed. But the son knew his father well. This wasn't a thoughtless or impulsive gift. The son knew of his father's loneliness, and of his need for companionship.

To make a long story short, that puppy and that man grew on each other, and they became inseparable until the end of the man's life.

Some gifts might not be immediately appreciated, but after time, you'll see how that gift has changed your life.

Someone has spent a lot of time thinking about you, and what you need. They're not going to get you a pet for Christmas, but they have prayed for something **far more profound for you to receive.**

They have prayed for a great light to penetrate the area of your life that has been shrouded with darkness.

- It may be a deep sadness
- a profound disappointment
- or just a lack of direction.

Someone who knows you has been praying for a light to shine to illumine the darkness that you may or may not even be aware of. And they've been persistent about it.

In the Bible JESUS told a parable about a woman who went to a judge to plead her case. We're not told what her issue was, but it must have been a matter of great urgency, because day and night she hounded that judge until he couldn't stand it anymore.

She even went to the man's home in the middle of the night and cried out for mercy outside his window. The judge wasn't even allowed to sleep until he would act on that woman's behalf.

JESUS said that the woman finally wore that judge down and he granted her request.

In much the same way, somebody has been pleading their case to God in prayer. Day and night they have petitioned God to act on your behalf.

And when the normal channels of prayer didn't seem to do anything, they began to fast and pray, and ask others who were willing to do the same.

Finally, their persistence has paid off. After hours and hours of prayer and buckets of tears, the heart of God has been moved to grant their request.

Again, this brings up mystery of God's sovereignty and the prayers of God's people. He knows the end from the beginning, His decrees are the final word, but He also listens to our prayers.

The LORD has heard the prayers of those who pleaded your case before the ultimate judge of the universe.

But you say, "There was no case, there was no trial. Nothing of this nature was going on in my life. Even if somebody was praying for me, that doesn't have any effect at all on my life."

This is not the time to argue the case on whether or not there is a God who hears and answers prayers. The God of the Bible is presented to us as the One being in the universe that has no limits.

One of the reasons that you may have left the faith is that you put limits on God. In your finite mind, you determined what God could or couldn't do. Such an inadequate Deity isn't worth your devotion or worship.

The fact that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob might be at all interested in your fate, seems ludicrous. Yet here you are, in a church, on Christmas Eve, and you're actually listening.

You're here because God has willed it, and He has heard and is answering the prayers of people who care for you very much. And now, your life is not going to be the same.

The direction of your life may have already begun to change. Some of you will head down a completely different path altogether. Others of you will simply stop, and turn around, and head back home.

But again you say, "I'm not going back. I am the way I am. I've made my choices. Plus, I never left anything that was worth going back to."

I'm sure that is the way you see it. When it comes to the things of faith, you didn't leave anything that was that vital in your life.

When you were a child, it was different. Children need a way to understand the vast world around them. They need a story, like the Christmas narrative.

Mary, Joseph, baby JESUS in a manger, along with shepherds, angels and wisemen. That was all fine and good back then.

But you're older now. You live in the real world, and you look on those ancient stories as myths that don't carry much weight for you now.

It's a tough world out there. If you don't take care of yourself, then nobody else will. That's why you left your childhood faith behind.

In doing so, you opened up all kinds of options for your life that you didn't have before. You didn't have to worry about having God's approval or facing Divine judgment for your choices.

You were free to pursue what you wanted for your own life. What's right or what's wrong is now up to you.

Truth, morals, values, ethics, these are relative concepts that have no need of Divine revelation or authority. You consider yourself to be a good person that has no need for redemption.

But there's something about the Christmas narrative that still resonates with you.

Isaiah 9:6 (KJV)

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

Maybe it's the nostalgia of the Christmas season. Maybe it's the echo of a child like faith that you long ago outgrew.

**Or maybe you're seeing a light at the outer edges
of your soul.**

Do you have a soul? That's another thing that you haven't thought that much about. The human soul.

It's what makes a person unique. The soul is that part of us that will outlive the body. It gives us all intrinsic value and worth.

You still believe that, even though some in science assert that we are mere biological creatures. Even the feelings of love and well-being are nothing more than chemical reactions in your brain.

You may have more faith in science than in religion, but intuitively you know that love is more than that. You know that if life has any ultimate meaning at all, it always comes back to love.

There's something about Christmas that brings you back to those basic things. Faith, hope, and love. **The incarnation of those things, in a child.**

A newborn child will always cause one to pause and consider the wonder and the miracle of life.

But how do you know that there's more to this child that came into the world in Bethlehem? Why couldn't we have some sort of sign that this child was something special?

Isaiah 7:14 (KJV)

Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

There's something about that passage that still strikes a cord within your spirit. A virgin, a son, Immanuel. How could such things be?

If love became incarnate, what difference could that make in your life today?

Perhaps love would be more than a passing feeling or a philosophical concept.

Love could show Himself to you through humility, sacrifice, grace and forgiveness. **Even you could be forgiven.**

When you leave God to go off on your own, you forge ahead **but with blinders on.** You set out to do that which is right in your own eyes, but you don't often see how that affects others.

In your wake you can leave behind some debris, often other people who have been deeply hurt by what's gone on in your life.

You try not to think about that. You've got your own issues to deal with.

But if this child called Immanuel really did come into this world, that means that God is with us, not just back then, but now. That gives eternal significance to all of life.

Our thoughts, words and actions aren't meaningless after all. God has come to us, and we will all answer to Him. That could fill you with dread, or it can fill you with hope.

- The innocence of that child **illuminates** the duplicity in our lives.
- That which that child came to do **brings to light** the grace and mercy of God.

Those walking in darkness have seen a great light.

This world can seem as dark and gloomy as it is outside right now. There's a lot of tension in our country right now, both domestic and international.

The light of reason would be welcomed, but more than that, **the light of the Gospel is needed.**

That's true with you and everyone else here. None of us are as self-sufficient as we'd like to think.

It's humbling to think that your eternal fate is depended on one who came into this world so meek and mild. God in human flesh, and a child at that.

But there was and is something unique about this child. You've always thought that. It's not JESUS that you walked away from, it's all the baggage that comes with that. Expectations, rules, guilt and the loss of autonomy.

But tonight, the light shines on **JESUS**, and all those other issues seem to fade away into the background.

The prayers of those who love you, have been that you see the light of God in the face of JESUS. Nothing more, nothing less.

A prodigal's Christmas is a homecoming of sorts. You're coming back to familiar ground. You're a different person than you

were before, but the One you're coming home to hasn't changed a bit.

The everlasting Father is there ready to welcome you back. Now isn't the time to give an explanation or an excuse, you just need to follow that light until you are back with Christ.

God wants you back. There are people around who love you more than you know...they want you back too.

But you say, "How is it possible that I come back now?" JESUS made it possible a long time ago. When he came to this world, and when he died on the cross, he had you in mind.

The invisible but persistent pull you feel in your heart this evening is the powerful but gentle love of JESUS Christ bringing you home.

You can still resist that pull, but the grace of God is stronger than you are. It's going to win you back. And when you're back, angels in heaven will rejoice, just like they did outside Bethlehem.

Luke 2:8-14 (KJV)

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 Saviour, 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.