

Lighting the Way

Every December season, Branson, Mo., hosts its Adoration Parade. Featuring faith-themed floats, the observance includes the lighting of a nativity scene on the mountain overlooking the southwestern Missouri town. This year, organizers will illuminate the crèche nightly for nearly three weeks.

Part of the Ozark Mountain Christmas celebration, the theme of this year's observance is "Keeping Christ in Christmas"—the same theme used since 1949, when two residents suggested erecting a nativity with 30-foot-high figures.

To say locals support the project is an understatement. Five years after it started, Everett and Rebecca Gloyd, who owned the property that hosted the crèche, deeded it to the Branson/Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce to ensure its place in perpetuity. When a tornado slammed the area last year, insurance quickly paid for replacements.

But sometimes it takes tougher resolve.

In 2009, Warren, Mich., resident John Satawa went to court after being ordered to remove a manger scene—which his family had erected every year since 1945—from a public roadway. In the fall of 2012, a federal appeals court ruled in Satawa's favor.

Last December, an atheist who had sued the city of Athens, Texas, over a nativity scene on the Henderson County Courthouse lawn dropped the case after the state attorney general intervened.

Branson resident Brad Thomas says grass-roots action is a way believers can influence the public and keep Christ at the center of the holidays. Too often, Christians offer excuses about what they can't do instead of doing what they can, he says.

“For these communities that complain about not being able to put nativities on public property, go find private property,” he says. “Go find the most visible land you can get, buy it, keep it privately held and put the nativity up.

“Privately held businesses can do things and talk about our faith. That’s why Hobby Lobby is successful. That’s why Chick-fil-A is so successful.”

*□A freelance □writer in Huntington, W. Va., **Ken Walker** has been writing regularly for Charisma for nearly 20 years.*

Perry Stone Sees Prophetic Impact in US-Iran Deal That May Lead to War

Prophetic minister Perry Stone, in **Israel** for a telecast when **Iran** struck a historic deal with six world powers on Sunday over Tehran’s **nuclear program**, sees prophetic significance in the deal with potential negative impact on the United States.

“My concern is that when **America** pressures Israel in a negative manner, within 24 hours our weather pattern becomes dangerous, which biblically can be a sign of God’s disfavor,” Stone says. “This has been traced back for years. That’s the thing that we have to be concerned about—our own future as a nation, or our **favor** with **God** as a nation, by not supporting people of the covenant.”

However, the evangelist says this situation “could be extremely serious for Israel within the next six months to a

year, especially by the fact that everyone [in the **Middle East**] in intelligence knows that Iran wants nuclear weapons, and once they get them, the whole game changes in the Middle East.”

When asked how the weekend’s agreement fits into end-times prophecy from a biblical point of view, Stone said, “In Ezekiel, the war of Gog and Magog, Persia is involved in that war. I’ve read it very carefully, and it looks as though there’s a pre-war that happens. God turns the Persians back and later puts a hook in their jaw and brings them down on the mountains of Israel.

“In my personal opinion, there are going to be two conflicts—one between the Persians and the **Israelis** at some point, militarily, whether there’s an air strike of some kind or something similar; and somewhere down the road, there will be retaliation among the Persians with the coalition of Islamic nations mentioned in Ezekiel that will try to come against Israel. But according to the prophet, Israel will win that battle. That’s how I’m looking at this.”

Stone had been in Israel a week when the agreement was announced last weekend. He says the Israelis he talked to are “extremely upset” with the Obama administration.

“They are very upset with President Obama,” he says, “and they are coming out and saying that if you let this go and let the Iranians be unrestrained in their nuclear program, the United States in the future will pay with a nuclear attack on American soil by Islamic radicals. They are publicly coming out and saying this: ‘Don’t blame us when this happens.’”

Stone, director of one of America’s fastest-growing ministries, Voice of Evangelism, says he is not predicting an attack on U.S. soil, only that it could happen with a future Iranian regime using nuclear weapons.

Stone says it is difficult to say what he thinks Obama should

have done but notes, "When it comes to the nuclear threat, there has to be a total removing of Iran's developing and enriching centrifuges, or there has to be an attack on those facilities to set them back for at least several years. The problem is that the regime that is in power will use their weapons against the Saudis, against the Gulf States or against Israel in the very near future."

But Stone adds that he is not afraid of Israel's ability to defend itself.

"Suddenly," he continues, "everyone around them will want a nuclear weapon to defend themselves from the nuclear weapon of their enemies. You'll have the whole Middle East being nuclear, and that's the most dangerous thing imaginable."

The six-month deal includes "substantial limitations that will help prevent Iran from creating a nuclear weapon," President Barack Obama said in a nationally televised address.

The agreement, which came after days of marathon talks, "addresses Iran's ability to enrich uranium, what to do about its existing enriched uranium stockpiles, the number and potential of its centrifuges and Tehran's 'ability to produce weapons-grade plutonium using the Arak reactor,' according to a statement released by the White House," CNN has reported.

In addition, Iran agreed to provide "increased transparency and intrusive monitoring of its nuclear program," the White House statement says.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has consistently asked the West to be wary of any deals with Iran, fiercely criticized the deal.

"What was concluded in Geneva last night is not a historic agreement; it's a historic mistake," he told reporters Monday. "It's not made the world a safer place. Like the agreement with North Korea in 2005, this agreement has made the world a

much more dangerous place.”

Charisma Assistant Editor Gina Meeks contributed to this report.

When Darkness Hides His Face, the Sun Is About to Rise

I sat in the **darkness** this morning. The post-sleep, pre-sun hours are my favorite, and I’m pretty serious about not missing them.

On this particular morning, the sky is not black, but blue. Majestic, glowing blue. The trees out my window, silhouetted against the indigo sky, make me think of Steve. Just a week ago, the trees were fat with leaves, and now they are skeletal, stripped bare but still standing. I think of our faded photos from a Mexico vacation, the pictures of sturdy, healthy Steve that help me remember how much has been taken from him by this disease. So much.

I feel myself start to sink. Into the past. Into the **sadness**. Into wishes and what ifs. These kinds of thoughts usually come at night. They don’t often encroach on my sacred mornings.

I close the Bible in front of me, suddenly frustrated with it. Frustrated with every little thing and dog-paddling against the darkness that wants to drown my heart and my morning and my whole day if I’ll let it.

Another glance out the window and something catches my eye. A spark. Just the smallest ray, but it’s burning through the black like a blow torch. A **holy** whisper: *You can’t stop the sunrise. It’s just on the other side of all this darkness.*

An ember of **hope** ignites to **life**. Now the choice is mine: stir it to flame or douse it with **discouragement**. I don't want to stir. I don't want to work for it today. A slow slide into **despair** is so effortless, but I know where it ends.

So I retrieve my **Bible** from the floor at my feet, and I give it one more chance to speak my language. One chance to tell me that the whisper I heard was more than my own voice, that it was something **supernatural** and real and right now.

And there it is—all over the pages. Peering through the darkness of the ages, through the dismal circumstances in history, sunrise is spilling over everywhere and onto everything:

“His **glory** covered the **heavens** and his praise filled the earth. His splendor was like the sunrise; rays flashed from his hand, where his power was hidden” (Hab. 3:3-4, NIV).

“He is like the light of morning at sunrise on a cloudless morning, like the brightness after rain that brings grass from the earth” (2 Sam. 23:4).

“Because of God's tender mercy, the morning light from **heaven** is about to break upon us, to give **light** to those who sit in **darkness** and in the **shadow of death**, and to guide us to the **path of peace**” (Luke 1:78-79, NLT).

“Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth” (Hos. 6:3, NIV).

And my very favorite:

“Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb” (Mark 16:2).

His **faithfulness** is certain as the sunrise. Sure as the morning. I don't fret that the sun will lose to the darkness,

so I won't worry that His light will be snuffed out by my sorrow.

Wherever you find yourself today, know that mercy comes. Weeping may last for the night, but **joy** comes on the other side.

Bo Stern is a blogger and author of the newly-released Beautiful Battlefields. She knows the most beautiful things can come out of the hardest times. Her Goliath came in the form of her husband's terminal illness, a battle they are still fighting with the help of their four children, a veritable army of friends and our extraordinary God. Bo is a teaching pastor at Westside Church in Bend, Ore.

'World's Ugliest Woman' Proves That Jesus Makes All Things Beautiful

That's exactly what happened to Lizzie Velasquez. One of only three people in the world born with a rare genetic disorder that prevents a person from gaining weight, Velasquez has never weighed more than 62 pounds in her life and was born blind in her right eye.

And right before her junior year of high school, she discovered a video of herself on YouTube labeled "The World's Ugliest Woman."

To make matters worse, it already had 4 million hits.

Velasquez's parents tried to get the video removed, but the anonymous figure who posted it declared he wouldn't take it down.

While many would take that as a signal to retreat into misery and self-pity, Velasquez took the opposite approach. Having already addressed some high school freshmen about her condition, she decided to confront the topic of bullying head-on and create a roster of speaking engagements. That launched her onto a global media stage and led to three books, including *Be Beautiful, Be You*.

Raised in the Catholic parish where both her parents work, Velasquez's decision to follow Christ came near the end of high school. She credits her faith with enabling her to endure everything from scorn to physical infirmities.

"It's been my rock through everything, just having the time to be alone and pray and talk to God and know that He's there for me," she says.

The recent Texas State University graduate will spend next year on the road sharing her message that no matter how things look at the moment, brighter days are ahead.

"Even when it seems like things will never get better in the darkest times," she says, "if you have faith and continue to push yourself, you can eventually get through anything." —*Ken Walker*

Christian Family Learns How to Reach Out to Muslims

Hilary Alan has a word for Americans who disdain all Muslims because they fear the stereotypical radical Islamist: *Don't*.

A Christian and director of a crisis pregnancy center in

Chapel Hill, N.C., Alan learned to love adherents of Islam during three years she spent in Southeast Asia. In 2006, she and her husband, Curt, responded to a call for relief workers after a tsunami struck a 14-nation region in late 2004.

Alan quit her teaching job while her husband left behind his business career so they could become community developers for a nongovernmental organization. The agency helped residents rebuild after the disaster that included the loss of more than 230,000 lives.

“My perspective about Muslims completely changed through relationship,” says Alan, whose new book, *Sent*, chronicles her experience.

Alan learned hospitality from Muslim residents who welcomed her and her husband and their two children into their homes, even on Islamic holy days, which Alan compares to the average American inviting a stranger to Christmas dinner. Most people in the U.S. are very private with their holidays, she says, particularly when it comes to those who don't share their beliefs.

“Yet here they were, inviting us into their homes to eat great food on the days that were just as important to them as Christmas or Easter would be to us,” she says. “I live in the South, where we're supposedly all about hospitality. No, compared to what we experienced, the South's got nothing on them.”

Although Alan never imagined that temporarily transplanting to Southeast Asia would be part of her story, she says dropping everything to head overseas taught her to avoid excessive advance planning.

“I learned not to hold things tightly,” she says. “I keep that ‘yes’ on the table and say, ‘Yes, Lord, I'll go today if You want me to.’ ” —*Ken Walker*

Companies Fight to Keep Christ in Christmas

Speeding 68 miles an hour and plunging 162 feet at an 81-degree angle on its opening drop, Outlaw Run has drawn tourists from across the world to the Silver Dollar City amusement park in Branson, Mo., since its mid-March opening—and those entering the theme park in December will be greeted by another breathtaking sight: a 5-story-tall **Christmas** tree adorned with 400,000 lights.

As part of the park's annual tradition, each evening's lighting of the tree is accompanied by entertainment director Brad Schroeder reading James Allen Francis' classic, Christ-centered poem "One Solitary Life." Attendants take in the twinkling of 5 million lights as they stroll the park, listening to tunes like "Joy to the World" or the "Hallelujah" chorus. They're invited to watch the story of **Christ's birth** unfold through *Living Nativity*, an original play with an 11-member cast. And they won't want to miss the Gifts of Christmas Holiday Light Parade, the final float of which features the Christ child under a banner that reads "The Greatest Gift of All."

It's all part of "An Old Time Christmas" at the park, where each stage production includes a **carol** paying tribute to Christ's birth.

"When it comes to Christmas, we aren't afraid to say we're a **Christmas** festival," says Brad Thomas, president and general manager of the park. "We know that everyone who works here and everyone who visits here is not necessarily a Christian. We don't want to be [too] forceful ... but we do believe that we

have values from which we shouldn't run."

It's no surprise that Silver Dollar City, owned and headed by Pentecostal businessmen Jack and Peter Herschend, is so bold in its presentation of the reason for the season. Yet amid the sweeping cultural onslaught to strip **Christmas** of any "religious messaging" that might offend, few venues are as forward with their public celebrations. Secularism continues to neuter public Christmas expression, leaving such companies standing in stark contrast to a growing opposition.

Despite this pop-culture tsunami, however, a quick look around shows the first six letters of this national holiday—*Christ*—still occupy a central place in millions of Americans' hearts. And this December, you'll find depictions of Jesus still appearing—intentionally and boldly—in numerous well-known venues throughout the country.

In Support of Christmas The annual candlelight processional at Walt Disney World's Epcot was conceived by Disney creative consultant Derric Johnson to tell the story of Christ with the accompaniment of a 50-piece orchestra and mass choir. Holiday evenings at the Orlando theme park include a reading of the biblical account of the virgin birth with a celebrity narrator, who in the past has included Jim Caviezel, Brian Dennehy, Susan Lucci and Marlee Matlin (in sign language).

Many Christmas attractions at the neighboring SeaWorld reflect holiday glitz, but Christian visitors have been pleasantly surprised by *O Wondrous Night*, a production based on the Christmas story that features more than 30 carols and includes live animals, life-size puppets and special effects.

The annual Christmas show at New York City's famed Radio City Music Hall includes a manger scene with live camels, sheep and donkeys, though the famous Rockettes and Santa Claus still headline the event. This year, audiences in Atlanta, West Palm Beach, Tampa and Nashville can enjoy the touring production.

At Tennessee's Dollywood amusement park, 300,000 are expected to experience the park's celebrated "Smoky Mountain Christmas." Its *O Holy Night* production, performances by southern gospel's Kingdom Heirs and the nightly "Carol of the Trees," which synchronizes thousands of lights to holiday music, are among the Christ-centered elements at the park, which recently announced a \$300 million expansion.

"We embrace the Christian message of Christmas," says entertainment director Paul Couch. "That's who we are and what our guests have come to expect. We are uncompromisingly clear that the holiday is about [Christ]."

And five years ago, the Creation Museum near Cincinnati inaugurated "Christmas Town," a walk-through re-creation of a first-century village where actors portray Joseph and Mary holding the newborn Babe and an archeologist explains the circumstances surrounding His birth. The weekend productions include several other dramas, including a depiction of John the Baptist's mother, Elizabeth, describing two of history's most famous births. Crowds have more than doubled since Christmas Town's inception, often matching summer tourist season numbers.

Campaigning for Christmas But it isn't just theme parks and dramas that keep the name of Christ alive this time of year. Numerous activists, citizen groups and websites have also risen up to counteract an offensive that has long sought to make Christmas politically incorrect.

Indeed, in many public schools, Christmas programs have morphed into "holiday shows" and Christmas vacations have been labeled "winter break." Last December, parents in Montana and Massachusetts declared carols a form of bullying. And in October a Bordentown, N.J., school district banned "religious" Christmas music at any school concerts.

Such opposition prompted Bodie Hodge to compile *The War on*

Christmas. The new book dispels popular misconceptions about the holiday, points out religious components of holiday displays are indeed constitutional, and encourages people not to surrender to anti-Christmas forces. A writer and researcher for Answers in Genesis, Hodge grew frustrated by outspoken opposition to the Bible, creationism and prayer that has snowballed into attempts to censor all things Christmas.

“The thing that really surprised me was when we started to see attacks on nativity scenes,” he says. “Even private businesses were attacked.

“One year I went to Australia, and they had nativity scenes all over the place. A lot of people down there are not Christians, but they didn’t have a problem with it. Yet in the States, it was a big deal. We noticed this trend and said, ‘This is an attack of the enemy.’”

The veteran author hopes to educate the public—especially children who have learned to equate Christmas with Santa Claus and presents.

“We want to teach people what Christmas is all about,” Hodge says. “We want to get back to a focus on Christ and worshipping Him.”

Still other incidences show encouraging signs of pushback—like what happened when a woman in Arizona asked for help in 2009 after the U.S. Forest Service rejected her child’s designs for ornaments that would say “Happy Birthday, Jesus” and “Merry Christmas” to be displayed on the Capitol Christmas tree. Thanks to intervention from Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), the federal agency dropped its rule against ornaments with a religious theme.

More recently, in 2012, a pair of pro-crèche forces turned back attempts to remove nativities from public places. Last June, the Texas legislature adopted a law protecting Christmas and other holiday celebrations in public schools from legal

challenges.

“I am optimistic about our ability to educate more companies and government officials about their ability to celebrate Christmas,” says Jon Scruggs, legal counsel for ADF. “But I also know that many companies and government officials will prefer to pander to ‘politically correct’ sentiments.”

After battling the PC police since forming its “Keep Christ In” campaign in 2005, Tim Wildmon of the American Family Association (AFA) thinks the anti-Christmas crowd is weakening.

“People want to express themselves about Christmas,” says the president of AFA, which each year ships up to 1 million “Merry Christmas” lapel buttons. “I think the general public sees the ridiculousness of not calling something by its real name.”

So while some are pessimistic about the fate of holiday tussles, Wildmon takes the opposite view. He says that over the past eight years, the percentage of retailers limiting the use of Christmas greetings has declined from about 75 percent to less than 25 percent.

Mat Staver of Liberty Counsel is encouraged too. He organized Liberty Counsel’s “Friend or Foe” Christmas campaign a decade ago to educate the public—and, if necessary, go to court. Among the group’s victories are overturning bans on nativity scenes, helping seniors prohibited from singing carols at nursing homes, and coming to the aid of students whose schools dictated not wearing red or green during December.

Liberty Counsel issues a “Help Save Christmas” action pack annually, including legal memorandums about the holiday, buttons, bumper stickers and sample newspaper advertisements. The group also maintains a “Naughty or Nice” list spotlighting retailers that permit “Merry Christmas” and other observances while frowning on those who expunge all references.

Liberty Counsel assembled its first list after Boston renamed its 40-foot-tall Christmas spruce a “holiday tree,” ignoring the tree’s historic significance: Nova Scotia’s shipped a Christmas tree to Boston annually since 1917 to honor the city for coming to its aid after the Halifax Explosion in Halifax Harbour.

Staver observes numerous parallels in the retail world. “We realized you couldn’t find Christmas trees on the street; they were called ‘holiday trees’ and ‘holiday decorations,’” he says. “There were clerks who couldn’t return a ‘Merry Christmas’ greeting even if the customer initiated it.”

And Wildmon points to another development: “Stores like Wal-Mart and Sears now have a Christmas shop within their stores—something that didn’t exist a few years ago. How are you offending people when you acknowledge Christmas? That’s bizarre.”

Changing Lives Through Christmas Standing up for Christmas makes a difference—even in a deeply religious area like Lancaster County, Pa., home of the renowned Sight & Sound Theatre. Founded in 1976, it expanded to Branson in 2008. After a break in 2012, the theatre’s long-running *Miracle of Christmas* recently returned to the Pennsylvania stage and runs through Dec. 30. (Branson’s production ends Dec. 28.)

Though based on the Gospels, the play takes some creative license to dramatize the relationships between Mary, Joseph, their parents and Elizabeth. It depicts the turmoil Mary felt when she approached Joseph with the news of her pregnancy and the harsh reactions that greeted her in her hometown.

Many don’t ponder such realities in the Christmas story, says co-president and former creative director Josh Enck. He thinks the production illustrates the faithfulness of God and the unlikely people He chooses for extraordinary experiences. Even though Sight & Sound is clear about its Christian roots, key

leaders recently reflected on whether to soften its language so more non-Christians would come and find a place of healing.

“We spent some time talking about how to do that and be more seeker-friendly as a ministry, but we came down to the fact that we’re not going to hide who we are,” Enck says. “We bring the Bible to life in this way—on stage—and we’re Christ-followers. People don’t have to believe it, but we’re going to present it in a way that entertains them and inspires them.”

Such conviction is also important to Steve Green, president of the Hobby Lobby chain of retail craft stores. Although the nationwide chain stocks a wide assortment of general merchandise throughout the year, store clerks are encouraged to offer “Merry Christmas” greetings during the Christmas season. Christmas carols and a wide selection of Christian music play overhead year-round in the chain’s 569 stores in 45 states. Stores remain closed on Sundays so employees can attend church.

After failing to persuade a supplier to remove objectionable material from its greeting card selection, five years ago Hobby Lobby began phasing out its line of general-market cards to rely solely on a Christian distributor.

However, Hobby Lobby’s highest-profile step on behalf of Christmas is the newspaper advertisements it runs in all of its markets on Christmas Day (or close to the date for papers that don’t publish Dec. 25) expressing the meaning of the season. The placements originated in 1995 with a quarter-page ad, then expanded to a full page a year later.

Green says his father, David, got the idea after reviewing multiple newspaper ads and getting frustrated that nobody recognized the holiday’s true meaning in their advertisements.

“Then he felt like God convicted him, saying, ‘Neither are you,’” Green says. “Since we do sell a lot of Santa Clauses and are criticized for commercializing the season, he felt

that he wanted to let people know what the season was all about.”

The chain’s stand has made a difference. Green says he’s received letters from other merchants who decided to stay closed on Sundays or have placed their own Christmas ads because of Hobby Lobby’s example.

And a veteran cast member of *A Christmas Carol* at Silver Dollar City has seen the impact the park’s twist on the long-running play makes on sell-out crowds that attend the show, which is produced up to four times daily.

The Branson production draws a clear connection between the change in Scrooge and his spiritual redemption. Using a split stage, after Ebenezer Scrooge catches a glimpse of his tombstone, he sings to an altar boy (late for the church service occurring downstage) about his need for prayer, followed by the classic hymn “Ave Maria.”

“That’s when you see the change in Scrooge,” says Rachel Wallace, who portrays the Ghost of Christmas Present. “He realizes you’ve got to have Jesus.

“[At that moment] you can sense a reaction from the audience. You can feel it more than you can hear it. I definitely feel that people have left the Christmas festival with a change in their heart.”

So go ahead and say “Merry Christmas” during this season. You never know who might be listening—and be changed by that choice that you make.

*A freelance □writer in Huntington, W. Va., **Ken Walker** has been writing regularly for Charisma for nearly 20 years.*

Joy to Your World

My name is Carol, and I'm a Christmas-aholic!

Yes, I am one of those eccentrics who embraces the tradition of singing **Christmas carols** starting Oct. 1, of giving gifts to every person living on my street and of smiling at strangers in the outrageously long holiday post office lines.

But it was not always this way. Many years of my adult life, I was locked in the cold dark of a **depression** that shunned celebration and gave little reason for mirth. There was a time when I acutely dreaded turning the calendar page to December and when I realized I could be the present-day embodiment of **Charles Dickens' Scrooge**.

Although my husband and I had been given the gift of two precious boys who were quickly growing up, we also sent five consecutive babies to heaven, each of them between 12 and 20 weeks in utero. Our holiday mantle remained void of miniature **Christmas stockings**, and my arms and my heart went empty year after endless year.

After sending those five tiny lives back to the arms of the Father, the doctors then told me I would be unable to conceive again. But I believed with my entire being I was made to be the mother of a large family, and I begged God for the gift of another baby ... or two ... or three. During that season, my circumstances continuously assaulted me with disappointment, while the black hole of depression relentlessly called my name.

Eventually, I did bear another child—three more children, in fact. But before I ever felt the flutter of new life or held the miracle of new life in my arms, something changed for me

regarding Christmas.

You see, I developed an addiction during the darkest days of my life. My addiction of choice was not an over-the-counter medication or shopping or even chocolate. Mine was an addiction that injected hope into the cold and emptiness of my circumstances.

During my days of paralyzing and debilitating depression, I became addicted to the miraculous cure of the Word of God. Somehow, as I read the Bible, I found the strength to nestle into the truth of Christmas rather than the fantasy of the culture. Celebrating Christmas with faith and joy rather than the fairy tale of seasonal merriment turned me into a believer—and I know it can make you one too.

Carrying Christ The true Christmas story—the one I have chosen to weave into the fabric of my life—is the story of a girl who was ordinary, young and unqualified. God chose to place Himself inside her womb so you and I could one day carry His presence inside our lives as well.

God the Father, the Creator of the universe, the instigator of everything glorious and miraculous, chose you and me as the vehicle through which our generation would receive its greatest gift. It is our miracle that we have been called to demonstrate Jesus to the world in which we live.

But the world will only experience the joy of His birth to the extent we exhibit joy. The world will only taste the peace of His coming to the extent we reveal His peace. The world will only know the hope of Christmas when we respond to pain and disappointment as hopeful believers.

The glory of Christmas is found in the simple yet eternal fact that your depression or disappointment in life does not alienate you from celebrating an event so rich and rare that all of humanity stops to stare in wonder.

Jesus was born for your depression. The skies exploded over Bethlehem to melt away your darkness. The angels sang to heal your weary soul. Joy was eternally announced into your hopeless life.

A Cleaned-Up Life The shepherds were dirty, uneducated men with grime under their fingernails and sludge in their brains. A group of them huddled one night around a fire in the inky black of night. These muddy specimens of humanity were cold and shivering while they tried to stay awake. Their only responsibility in life was to keep track of a herd of dumb sheep who were restless, disobedient and lice-infested.

These men were diseased by the sickening disappointment that nothing about their lives would ever change. Life can become quickly pointless if you are a man with sheep drool on your clothes and sheep dung between your toes.

Perhaps you are in a place where you feel like one of these hopeless, cold shepherds surrounded by darkness and dung. Perhaps you, like me for so many years, dare the holly-jolliness of the season to get close to your muddy, murky existence.

If so, get ready for a God-induced, Christmas-sized, eternity-driven explosion! God loves to invade the world of lonely shepherds and despondent humanity with the combustion that belongs singularly to Christmas.

That night more than 2,000 years ago, heaven exploded into the cold and dark world of the shepherds. The song of the angels burst forth into the war zone of earth and proclaimed the joy of heaven into their hopeless and meaningless existence. Stars were falling and bursting in rare and glorious colors while the heavens opened and a majestic angel choir began to sing a mighty symphony that can still be heard today.

Christmas has come to you in your depression and darkness. As

the God of creation proclaimed, "Let there be light," the God of Christmas proclaims to you in the middle of your mess, "Let there be Christmas!"

No Longer Afraid Every time an angel appears in the Christmas story, the message is always the same: "Do not be afraid!" The angel said it to Zachariah, then to Mary, then to Joseph and finally to the shepherds on the hillside: "Do not be afraid!"

I believe this just may be the message heaven is sending you this Christmas season. Christmas definitively proves Jesus and fear are mutually exclusive. When Jesus arrives on the scene, there is no reason to be afraid. His presence powerfully removes any reason for fear.

The message of Christmas has not changed in 2,000 years, and the words of the angels still ring clearly into our 21st-century world: "Do not be afraid!"

When your circumstances are falling apart, remind yourself: "Do not be afraid!" When there is not enough money to pay the bills, remind yourself: "Do not be afraid!" When you are dealing with disappointment, pain or loneliness, remind yourself: "Do not be afraid!"

It is time for you to step away from your fear and step boldly into His presence. I pray that this Christmas—and every day this coming year—you realize that when Jesus is birthed in your heart, there is absolutely no reason for fear or worry.

Filled With Joy The first word the angel that appeared to the shepherds used to describe the birth of Jesus Christ was the word *joy*: "But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord' (Luke 2:10-11, NASB).

I believe *joy* should also be the first word used to describe

every believer at every moment in history. Joy is the birthmark of a Christian, because when you accept Jesus—the Baby found in the manger—into your heart, you are branded for life with His joy. Your life becomes purposeful as you carry the Christ child to this dark and restless world. The hopelessness of your life dissipates as you understand the honor of transmitting the joy of His presence to the muddy specimens of humanity.

Similarly, when the star stopped the magi in their wealthy tracks, the Bible says these learned men “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy” (Matt. 2:10). Just five words, yet what richness their scarcity holds. These five simple words are some of the most expressive words in all of Scripture.

Rejoiced means “let the hope of future blessedness give you joy.” What rich intent and calling!

This communicates to all of us, from every generation and every historical juncture, that because of the Baby born in the manger, we can look ahead with hope and expectation. When you encounter Jesus, there is reason to rejoice because of the many blessings now headed in your direction.

Exceedingly is defined as “greatly” or even “violently.” These first-century professorial types did not just bow low with scholarly hands clasped in front of their wise faces. The joy they experienced in the presence of Jesus was an explosion that knocked their mortarboards off their wizened heads. These men of highly respected academia were jumping up and down!

Great in this sentence means “with great effort of the affections and emotions of the mind.” It is significant that this particular definition of the word includes the word *mind*. The magi were men of scrolls and cerebral intensity, but at the moment this star stopped in the presence of Jesus, all they had ever learned or studied paled in comparison to this one momentous event.

And finally, the word *joy* is rich in meaning and texture because it is defined as “the blessedness that the Lord enjoys.” Every blessing that the Lord has, you now have—because of Christmas!

Compelled to Worship The magi fell on their faces and worshipped Jesus in full-blown, dynamic heart worship: “After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him” (Matt. 2:11).

These learned and respected men fell on their faces in His sweet presence. While Jesus was babbling in a language only his mother could understand, these men who were known for solving the mysteries of the ages lay prostrate before Him.

True worship always entails a change of position and a change in prominence. In the presence of the holy Child, these men cared not for tradition or liturgy. They only knew He was worthy to be worshipped, so they fell at His baby feet in heartfelt praise.

Will you fall on your face this Christmas in the presence of Jesus?

True worship always involves joy! These wise men had their scholarly world rocked with the joy that was found in the presence of Jesus Christ. They changed their academic regalia for a garment of praise.

Will you let go of your emotional human make-up and allow the joy of His presence to infiltrate your world?

Christmas Today In this Christmas season, I am the mother of five extraordinary young adults, the mother-in-law of three young women who have captured my heart in their own endearing ways, and the grandmother of five precocious and beautiful preschoolers who flood my heart with their own brand of sweetness.

Yet however priceless the gift of my beloved family is, it is not these family members that have taught me how to celebrate Christmas. My five children on earth have made me happier than any one woman deserves to be, but it's my five babies in heaven—the ones I lost before they were born—who have taught me the miracle of the joy of Christmas.

I learned how to celebrate Christmas while my world was falling apart because Christ invaded my world with His joy. I learned how to embrace the beauty of heartfelt giving when all I felt was alone and forsaken. I began to sing the glorious anthem of the angels when my world was dark and broken.

The true miracle of Christmas is that He came while I was yet depressed. The Baby in the manger came for lost, lonely and heartbroken people like you and me. Christmas should never induce additional pain, but it has the miraculous power to alleviate all emotional diseases forever.

The mistake many of us make is being distracted by the magic of the season when what is actually occurring is miraculous. The miracle of Christmas is just one choice away. Will you yearn for snow, gifts and family—or will you lift your eyes to the miracle of Christmas?

I celebrate Christmas today not because my life is perfect but because He loved me enough to declare over my emotional darkness, "Let there be Christmas!"

Carol McLeod *encourages and empowers women with practical biblical messages mixed with her special brand of hope and humor. She is the founder of Just Joy Ministries, author of three books and a popular speaker at women's conferences and retreats.*

Watch Carol McLeod share more of her testimony about becoming a “defiantly joyful Christian” at

Surrendered

(Pure Flix Entertainment)

A husband and father discovers that in order to keep his family together, he must first surrender himself to God’s plan in the motion picture *Surrendered*, releasing Nov. 5 from Pure Flix Entertainment.

Surrendered is the story of Jay Harding (David McIntyre), a man on the verge of losing everything he loves in an attempt to be the man he thinks his family needs. Even though Jay views himself as a generous, loving and selfless man, he soon learns that everyone around him sees him as greedy, manipulative and selfish. His marriage is failing; his children need discipline; and although his friends try to help him through his struggles, it’s to no avail.

With Christmas quickly approaching and in a sweeping attempt to redeem himself, Jay launches out on a quest to purchase a dream home as a present for his family. With this ultimate gift as his sole focus, he pushes himself to make it happen, no matter the cost to himself and to those around him. And while focusing all of his energy and efforts on that dream, Jay begins to lose sight of the things that really matter in life.

With his finances failing, his marriage on the rocks and a sudden tragedy threatening to send him into a downward spiral,

Jay soon realizes that the only way to keep his family together is to trust that God will guide them through the darkness and instill them with the strength to endure—even when it seems as if all hope is lost.

Through tragedy, pain and loss, Jay is forced to make the biggest decision of his life: the choice to surrender.

Surrendered was produced by the Church at Chapel Hill in Douglasville, Ga., with a budget of around \$15,000. The movie was filmed in the Atlanta area and features volunteers from the church. —Dewayne Hamby

When a Righteous Woman Falls

“Through skillful and **godly Wisdom** is a house (a life, a home, a family) built, and by understanding it is established [on a sound and good foundation], and by knowledge shall its chambers [of every area] be filled with all precious and pleasant riches” (Prov. 24:3-4, AMP).

This morning I read this verse and, can I be totally honest? I felt sad at myself. I thought of all the areas where I have not built my house wisely enough. Things I haven't taught my **children**. Things I still haven't seemed to learn myself.

My laundry room is a mess. My desk is piled with papers that need someone to care about them. My schedule generally borders on out of control.

In so many areas, I wish I was better. And I know there are good things, too, but the **successes** aren't as noisy as the **failures**. I'm certain we've worked hard to build a solid **foundation** beneath our children's lives, but I also am painfully aware of the places where we've been not smart enough or not strong enough or just plain Not Enough.

My kids are 26, 23, 18 and 13. Those numbers are looking very scary. Only one of those numbers is still technically a child. The rest are full-on people. Grownups. And what if those grownups are standing on a wobbly foundation? And what if the fractures in that foundation are entirely my fault?

I've read this verse before, and I loved all those other times when I felt like I still had time to get it right. To fix my screw-ups—or at least to fake it better in front of them as they learned how to be brave in this great big world of ours.

But then, this. These wonderfully beautiful words from the Father of all: "It's never too late to build. Never."

And then, this—just few verses down from the building verse:

"A righteous [woman] falls seven times and rises again, but the wicked are overthrown by calamity" (v. 16).

I've also read this verse before, but my attention has been mainly on that poor wicked man who is overthrown by calamity. Today, however, I reoriented my vision on these words and saw this instead:

A righteous woman falls.

She does. We do. We fall. We fail. All of us. What makes us righteous is not that our attempts at building sometimes produce only brokenness. What makes us righteous is not that we never land face-first in a ditch of our own making.

What makes us righteous is that we get up. We rise. We start again. Try again. Love again.

We pick up that hammer and we turn our attention once again to this beautiful house. And when the house is finished, I imagine we will realize: It wasn't our skill at all that built it. It was just our willingness to work with Him in joy and sorrow, wins and wounds.

That's good hope.

Bo Stern is a blogger and author of the newly released Beautiful Battliefields (NavPress). She knows the most beautiful things can come out of the hardest times. Her Goliath came in the form of her husband's terminal illness, a battle they are still fighting with the help of their four children, a veritable army of friends and our extraordinary God. Bo is a teaching pastor at Westside Church in Bend, Ore.

Hungry to Help

Growing up in destitute Haiti, all 10-year-old Marie Louise ever knew was **poverty** and **hunger** pangs. The things most Americans take for granted—sitting at a table to eat a full meal, not to mention the use of utensils—were completely foreign to her and the other children in her village. Instead, she was all too used to scooping a handful of dirt or even cement into her mouth simply to have something in her stomach to keep her from starving to death.

But then God's love, in the form of a Florida-based nonprofit ministry called **Feeding Children Everywhere**, found its way to Marie Louise's village. Through founder Don Campbell's connections with **Open Door Haiti** and its founder, local pastor Wiljean Compere, the young girl now eats three healthy meals each day and has been spared the life of **disease** and hunger for which she was formerly destined.

That's not all. Her story is being replicated by millions around the world as Feeding Children Everywhere (FCE) rapidly expands to make its mark nearly, well, everywhere.

FCE's journey has taken Campbell and his wife, Kristen, from feeding their neighborhood to embarking on seasons in which

the couple mobilized **churches** throughout Central Florida, ran a local branch of a Minnesota-based nonprofit and, in 2010, launched into Haiti. Today the organization provides 15 million meals annually to hungry children in the U.S. and around the world, all in the name of Jesus—and with the financial support and volunteer manpower of mega-corporations such as Bank of America, JPMorgan Chase, K Force, Johnson & Johnson and many others (including entire sports associations).

Major secular organizations helping to support a ministry? How did that happen?

Small Beginnings From his youth, Campbell always believed his working career would somehow involve food. Forced to become the man of the house at age 10 after his father took his own life, Don became the family chef and learned to cook for his mother and sisters. As he grew up, food and soccer became his passion.

“When I was a kid, I always wanted to be a pro soccer player, and I still play with a group of men,” he says. “But I’ve always had this food thing at the core of me too. I love good food, and I love to entertain. That’s where my heart is. To tell you the truth, I always thought that I would open up a restaurant. But obviously God took me in a different direction—a wonderfully different direction.”

The first steps of that “wonderfully different direction” began when Don served at the Central Florida Dream Center in 2002 and then became a staff pastor at Family Worship Center in Sanford, Fla. But he and his wife, Kristen, weren’t satisfied with simply working with youth on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights. They longed to make a bigger impact.

“Jesus was extremely relational in everything He did,” Campbell says, “and we are super relational people as well. We started learning to connect with people and honoring

relationships over promotion, if you will. By doing that, we have been promoted.”

The FCE dream started small—just by meeting a community need of feeding neighborhood children from their dining room table. As word began to spread, the Campbells’ work expanded in their community and eventually with a Minnesota-based nonprofit. After years of volunteering and feeding children from their home, the couple took their entire life savings of \$9,000 and rallied friends, family and volunteers—and FCE was officially born.

But it wasn’t until an event no one could have foreseen that the ministry really took hold. In January 2010, following the devastating 7.0 earthquake in Haiti and the numerous aftershocks that left more than 200,000 dead and hundreds of thousands in need of aid and food, the ministry pushed into deploy mode.

Campbell approached Doug Holliday—a friend who also happens to be the U.S. president of the humanitarian aid organization Open Door Haiti—to explore a partnership for helping destitute children affected by the earthquake. Open Door Haiti became FCE’s first international feeding partner, and FCE organized packing events with local churches to raise money to fund the project and ship 250,000 meals to hungry children in the nation.

Explosive Impact According to Campbell’s estimates, FCE has grown 200 percent every six months since its inception and is one of the fastest-moving nonprofit organizations in the world. He describes FCE’s vertical growth during the past three years as “nothing short of miraculous,” and the evidence certainly supports this.

In the last two years, FCE has expanded beyond its corporate headquarters in Longwood, Fla., to include facilities in Hartford, Conn., and Los Angeles—with plans to launch offices

in other regions as well. Despite the increasing space and staggering amounts of food passing through these facilities, the ministry staff is kept intentionally lean—FCE currently has 15 full-time employees and 60 interns working at its Florida location—as it continues to prioritize volunteer training.

And yet the rapid growth of the ministry doesn't surprise Campbell. The Holy Spirit's leading through divine business appointments—which is how virtually every corporate connection has come—and the ministry's heart to do things God's way have made FCE an easy sell to corporate partners, he says.

Instead of approaching businesses and asking them simply to write a check, FCE has devised a way for corporate employees to get involved with a hands-on approach to alleviating local and global hunger. In an era in which most companies see the value in blending social justice advocacy with their own corporate values and culture, FCE has found a sweet spot. The nonprofit organizes events and allows corporations to bring teams of individuals to get physically involved in the food-packing process. In turn, employees leave the events with a sense of personal satisfaction, having helped to make a difference in the lives of hungry children across the U.S. and around the world.

“You have companies like JPMorgan Chase and Bank of America—two of the larger companies in this country—that have executives and people that want to do something good and noble from a social responsibility standpoint,” Campbell says. “We've found a niche where they can take the dollars they normally contribute and instead use those dollars to mobilize their staff and deploy their donation into their community and ultimately impact the lives of children locally and globally.

“We approached them and told them that we have volunteer opportunities—philanthropic opportunities—that they can attach

to their check and give them a feeling of pride that they're doing something to impact the world. You might be surprised at just how eager people are to help when you're asking them for more than simply money."

Eager indeed. Jodie Hardman, senior vice president and market manager for Bank of America, says that when bank employees are asked to gather for a packing event, there is usually a waiting list of at least 150 to 200 people.

"It fills up pretty quickly," says Hardman, who herself has participated in past packing events. "People don't have to have a special skill or a special gift to give back to the community. Knowing that you're helping others, you feel good, and it gives you a lot of pride that you're making a difference. It's a great lesson you can teach to your kids."

Hardman says that although there are many worthy charities to choose from, FCE is exactly the type of organization Bank of America looks for in its community investment program.

"It all goes back to the simplicity of their process," she says. "Their events are so spirited. A lot of times when you're asked to do something for the community, it can be a somber event when you're serving. But with FCE, there's a lot of spirit around it. It's fun, and it's fulfilling."

Gospel Bonus But personal fulfillment isn't the only benefit participants receive. When God opens the door—and He frequently does—FCE's staff seizes the opportunity to share His love to whoever will listen.

Ron Johnson, senior pastor at One Church in Longwood, and one of the Campbells' biggest spiritual supporters, says people are more apt to receive the gospel message when they aren't simply listening to a sermon but instead are seeing Jesus' love in action.

"That's the genius of the model, the fact that Don and his

people are taking kingdom principles and bridging them while addressing a major need in the world—hunger,” he says. “They are reaching people that may never darken the door of a church. The reason it’s working is that they don’t have to convince people by their words. What they are doing—feeding hungry children—touches the core of our humanity.”

For Campbell, the work comes as a direct response to Jesus’ frequently quoted but rarely followed words in Matthew 25: “For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink” (v. 35).

Campbell says it’s clear that feeding people and meals around the table were at the heart of Jesus’ ministry. And he believes that God wants to do great things through His kids using that same model. “If we’re willing to move in faith, the Bible says that pleases God,” he says. “If you move in big faith, God can do big things.”

It’s because of the “big things” God is doing through FCE, along with Campbell’s personal integrity, that he has earned the respect of many pastors in the Central Florida area. Among those is Jeff Krall, under whom Campbell served as youth and family life pastor at Family Worship Center.

“Don has told me that he has had conversations with people in the secular world, and they look at him and say, ‘You’re a different kind of Christian,’” Krall says. “They tell him, ‘I think you’ve got the words and actions of life.’ The universal appeal of what he is doing with FCE is amazing.”

“You see corporations like Apple and IBM that are business icons in this country. ... I believe that there is going to be a time when Feeding Children Everywhere will become an iconic mission organization that will have a major national and international footprint,” Krall adds. “God is blessing Don and FCE because what he’s doing is embodying the life of Christ; he’s incarnational. Jesus just loved people, found needs and

met them. That's exactly what Don is doing, and he's such an inspiration."

Johnson agrees. "Don is someone who has a heart after God," he says. "That's why he is someone that can put a plan into action that God can bless. He's a man with vision, and that's an explosive combination."

Shared Vision When devising FCE's innovative business strategy, Campbell says he heavily researched and reviewed the models of similar ministries and even volunteerism. He then combined those concepts with the above-mentioned kingdom principles, and the ministry quickly took off. Now FCE sets the standard for ministries that feed hungry children, although Campbell says the goal for each ministry is the same.

"Other organizations have come to us and asked us what we are doing, and we're happy to share what we've done because it's all for the glory of God," he says. "We've been given to freely, and now freely we give back. It's the greatest level of flattery. ... You don't want to be in competition with others when it comes to feeding the hungry.

"For us, we've adopted the mindset of the Bible that God is never going to run out of blessings. We're ever mindful that if every other hunger organization in the United States worked together for a month and gave all of its resources collectively, we still couldn't feed the hungry in the world for that same month. That's simply unacceptable to us, so we keep working harder for the ultimate goal—to eradicate hunger altogether."

Jeff Nene, Convoy of Hope's national spokesperson, echoes Campbell's sentiments. In addition to disaster relief response and community outreach, Convoy of Hope has made an impact feeding hungry children in the U.S. and around the world for more than 19 years.

"Like Convoy of Hope, [FCE's] goal is that no child around the

world goes hungry,” Nene says. “And that is a very lofty goal. We don’t stand around and simply talk about it. We get our hands and feet dirty feeding one hungry child at a time. Don and his organization are doing the same, and it’s a wonderful thing. It’s wonderful to see them doing so well and reaching so many kids.”

Future Hope With the initiation of its U.S. Hunger project in October 2012—an effort to combat hunger right here in the United States—FCE continues to expand its operations and seek new corporate sponsors in its quest to eradicate world hunger. Campbell says he believes FCE has barely scratched the surface of its potential and that he expects the ministry to provide as many as 25 million meals in 2014.

But what about Marie Louise?

Since 2010, FCE has continued to work with Open Door Haiti to provide meals for the hungry in Haiti, including more than 1.5 million in 2011. In the last three years, with FCE’s help, Open Door Haiti’s feeding program has expanded from 250 kids to more than 1,200.

“We are able to feed those kids every day—kids that were accustomed to sitting in the dirt and eating handfuls of dirt because they had nothing else—because of the efforts of Don and Kristen and Feeding Children Everywhere,” says Holliday, who is now an FCE board member.

“Literally, those children were living like animals,” he adds. “But now, to see the transformation in these kids in just this short amount of time is nothing short of miraculous. They are happy and healthy. To see them sit down for at a table with a plate and a spoon and a cup for their first time in their lives, it melts your heart.”

Shawn A. Akers *is an associate editor for Charisma Media.*

Watch a video explaining FCE's new initiative to eradicate hunger in America at