## CHURCH WEEKLY



# Church Weekly 

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## ดnกถ̆กa!

Christmas gift suggestions:
To your enemy, forgiveness.
To an opponent, tolerance.
To a friend, your heart. To a customer, service.
To all, charity. To every child, a good example.
To yourself, respect.
Oren Arnold


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Leela Kuruvilla
M.G. Kuruvilla


It's Christmas time again! The celebrations at the Alwaye Fellowship House started with a carol service on Sunday, Dec. 1. The choir was conducted by Sri Nice John. Rev. Sr. Amal of the Congregation of Sisters of Nazareth gave the Christmas message.


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He wakes desires you never may forget
He shows you stars you never saw before．






























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Wish you all a Merry Christmas! ©

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## The Joy and Assurance of Christmas


$\left.\right|_{t ' s}$ that time of the year again. December is, perhaps, the most joyous month of the year throughout the world. The reason? Christmas, the birth of Jesus Christ, is celebrated during this month. The world gears up to this great event by the middle of November, and churches, shopping malls, streets, and houses reverberate with Christmas music, and glow with colourful decorations. Candles, Christmas Trees, Christmas Stars, Manger scenes, Turkey dinners, Cakes and other goodies are everywhere, promising a joyous and wonderful time for most kids and grown-ups alike. Yet, for some people Christmas can also be a time of great sorrow. They might not have that extra money they need, to buy gifts for their children, family and friends. They might have lost a loved one during that same year, and many may be saddened at Christmas time when they think about a loved one who won't be able to come home this Christmas for one reason or the other. Yet, Christmas can become a season of great joy and assurance.

What is there to celebrate? The birth of a child? What is so special about the birth of this particular child?

For four hundred years, nothing new was added to the Bible, which began with the Pentateuch, and ended with

Malachi. The prophets fell silent. During this time, Middle Eastern empires rose and fell, and the tiny nation of Israel suffered under the domination of greater powers like Greece and Rome. And then something momentous happened. A baby was born - a baby unlike any who had ever come before.

The Bible tells us that God, in His infinite mercy and love, sent His only begotten Son, Jesus, to planet earth in the form of a tiny baby, to be born of a virgin, to grow up in a small village, just like any other kid of that region, but ultimately to redeem fallen Man from his sins, and to be reconciled with God. Jesus was God's greatest gift to mankind, totally undeserving and too wonderful to comprehend.

Pagan societies of history found inspiration by looking back to their ancient glories and their legends of a "golden age". Jewish prophets, however, through their inspired prophecies introduced a revolutionary idea that the "golden age" lies in the future and will begin when their Messiah-King comes to Earth.

The angel Gabriel instructed Joseph and Mary to name the Son of God 'Jesus', for he was to save people from their sins. Centuries before, the prophet Isaiah had
foretold that this child would be Immanuel, meaning "God with us". Out of many hundreds of prophecies concerning the promised Messiah, some four dozen are quite specific as to the place of birth of this holy Child, his predecessor who would make ready a way for Him, his entry into Jerusalem on a colt, his betrayal by a friend, the exact amount for which he would be betrayed, his torture, the piercing of his hands and feet, his burial, and resurrection.

Grant Jeffrey, a Bible scholar, took just eleven of the most specific prophecies about Jesus's earthly life, assigned probability values which were very conservative and calculated that the combined probability of all this happening in one life is equal to one chance in $10^{19}$. In other words, there is only one chance in 10 billion times a billion that the prophets could have accurately predicted these eleven specific prophecies by chance alone, which is virtually impossible. When we consider all forty-eight of the specific Messianic prophecies, the odds against any one life fulfilling these predictions by chance alone are simply astronomical.

To see just how "lucky" the biblical prophets had to be to predict those eleven significant events, imagine that someone dropped a diamond ring from a plane somewhere over one of the oceans. You enter a bet that you can locate it with just one try, using a long line and a fishhook. You can wander over earth's oceans (197,000,000 square
miles of surface) in your boat for as long as you like. When you feel lucky, stop, drop the line and try to hook the diamond ring which is lying thousands of feet below you on the ocean floor. You only get one try.

Your odds of finding the lost ring are roughly equal to the odds against the biblical prophets correctly predicting those eleven specific details in the life of Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah.

The great prophet Isaiah, transfixed by the Spirit of God, reveals much about the character of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. In Isaiah 9: 6-7, we read, "For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His government and its peace will never end. He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David for all eternity."

It is the birth of this Holy Child of God that we celebrate during Christmas. And this Jesus symbolizes 'God with us'.

In 1994, two Americans answered an invitation from the Russian Department of Education to teach morals and ethics (based on Biblical principles) in the public schools, prisons, businesses, the fire and police departments and a large orphanage. About 100 boys and girls who had been abandoned, abused, and left in the care of a government-run program were in the orphanage. The

Americans related the following story in their own words:
'It was nearing the holiday season, 1994, the time for our orphans to hear, for the first time, the traditional story of Christmas. We told them about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem. Finding no room in the inn, they went to a stable, where baby Jesus was born and placed in a manger. Throughout the story, the children and the orphanage staff sat in amazement as they listened. Some sat on the edges of their stools, trying to grasp every word.'
'Completing the story, we gave the children many things to build their own manger. The orphans were busy assembling their manger as I walked among them to see if they needed any help. All went well until I got to one table where little Misha sat. He looked to be about 6 years old and had finished his project. As I looked at the little boy's manger, I was startled to see not one, but two babies in the manger. Quickly I called for the translator to ask the lad why there were two babies in the manger.'
'Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at this completed manger scene, the child began to repeat the story very seriously. For such a young boy, who had only heard the Christmas story once, he related the happenings accurately until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger. Then Misha started to ad-lib. He made up his own ending to the story as he said, "And
when Maria laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mamma and I have no papa, so I don't have a place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with him. But I told him I couldn't because I didn't have a gift to give him like everybody else did. But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift. I thought maybe if I kept him warm, that would be a good gift. So lasked Jesus, "If I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift?" And Jesus told me, "If you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave $\mathrm{me}^{\prime \prime}$. So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and he told me I could stay with him - for always.
'As little Misha finished his story, his eyes brimmed full of tears that splashed down his little cheek. Putting his hand over his face, his head dropped to the table and his shoulders shook as he sobbed and sobbed.'

The little orphan had found someone who would never abandon nor abuse him, someone who would stay with him -FOR ALWAYS. I believe that this is what makes Christmas a joy and an assurance.

So, look at Christmas in a new light this year. Christmas is a time of remembering God's great love for us. It can be a time of healing and renewed strength. The joy, assurance and peace we receive will last all year long as we look to God to meet all our needs.

As long as Jesus is the reason for the season, Joy and Assurance are ours forever!

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## The Gift of Christmas



God's gift to us at Christmas was in God's mind well before the world and the universe came into being. God being all knowing, knew ahead of time that His most important creation, namely man, would turn against Him and commit sin. He knew that man would be lost for ever, if He did not provide for the redemption of mankind. Hence God provided for that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Therefore: The Bible calls Jesus the Lamb of God slain before the foundations of the world were laid.

God does not force any one to accept Him or His provision of salvation. Having provided a way for us He proclaims why He has done that. In John 3:16 He says "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

God has very categorically said why He has paid such a heavy price to give us forgiveness and eternal salvation. The Bible says that he loves us so deeply that He gave His beloved son, in exchange for our lives. We are unable to comprehend the seriousness of the sins that we commit. Our God who is absolutely holy can never accept us with our sins. They have to be paid for, that we may be forgiven and released.

Sometimes people give multiple gifts inside a single package. As you open the first covering you see the first gift. But then you realize that there is more. As you unwrap the package further you see another gift. Then you unpack it further, you come to another one. Christmas is a gift that God has given us. As you receive and unwrap it, you see several gifts in that single big gift.

## 1. The first gift is the gift of forgiveness.

The first gift that is given to us is forgiveness. All of us know how often we have said, done or thought of evil things against our neighbours or our loved ones or against God himself. Sometimes we have totally ignored God and done things that we know we should not be doing. When we come to God in repentance He forgives us and erases all record of that sin from our account for ever. God will never again bring it up. In Romans 3:23-24 we read "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." But the catch here is that for this to happen we should have accepted what Jesus has done for us and should have accepted Jesus as our Lord and saviour. The forgiveness that we are offered is undeserved, instantaneous and permanent. God leaves that decision to
us-do we want it, are we ready to trust God and His offer - the choice is ours.

## 2. The second gift is the gift of strengthening.

Philippians 4:13 "I can do all this through him who gives me strength." When we accept God's offer of salvation and the new life He offers, God knows that by ourselves we will never be able to live it. How well Paul knew that. But he found that along with salvation God also gives us the strength, the wisdom and the ability to do what God expects of us. When we live a Christ like life we see the truth of what Jesus said in John 15:4 'Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me." God places us in Jesus's life, and we need to consciously remain there so that we can successfully live the Christian life. That is what Jesus meant in John 17:20-24. "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one - I in them and you in me-so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you
have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world." Surely one day, we will see His glory.
3. The third gift is the gift of heaven.

In Hebrews 2:10 we read "and it was right and proper that God, who made everything for His own glory, should allow Jesus to suffer, for in doing this, he was bringing vast multitudes of God's people to heaven, for His suffering made Jesus a perfect leader, one fit to bring them into their salvation."

This was his greatest gift, that for all eternity we will be with God and we wiil be like Him. What an assurance, what a great thing to hope for!

Young Billy was acting as the inn keeper in his school's nativity play. On the final day he was on the stage. Mary and Joseph come on to the stage and Joseph pleads with Billy the inn keeper saying "my wife is pregnant and will deliver a baby soon. Please give us a room to stay." Billy said there is no room at all in the inn and Joseph and Mary sadly turn to walk away. But young Bill's heart was so touched by the sorrow of the moment, he cried out "Joseph come back, Joseph come back, you can have my room!!"

In a real sense that is what God is offering us as we turn our backs on God and start to walk towards hell and damnation -COME BACK, COME BACK, THERE IS ROOM IN HEAVEN FOR YOU IF ONLY YOU WILL ACCEPT MY OFFER. Are you listening, will you come back to this loving father who waits eagerly for your return during this Christmas season? ©


## The Role of Women in Biblical Israel <br> (continued)



Women played a prominent role in the context of family life, first as mother and second as wife. The mother's authority was exercised in the household. Sara cast out Hagar and her son Ishmael even though it was not to Abraham's liking (Gen. 21:10). The Shunammite woman did not consult or seek permission from her husband before deciding to extend kindness and hospitality to Elisha (2 Kings 4: 8-10). Women decided on the child's name. Accordingly, we find Leah and Rachel deciding on the names of their children. When Hannah was blessed with a male child, it was she, not her husband Elkanah, who named the child Samuel and offered him as Nazirite to the service of Yahweh ( 1 Samuel 1: 11-28).

There was no formal schooling system in ancient Israel. Therefore the Israelite family played a vital role in the education and socialisation of its members. The care, discipline and training of young children were the responsibility of the mother.

The sons, as they grew up, came under the tutelage of their father who apprenticed them in farming, shepherding, and non-specified crafts. Accompanying the father in such activities as warfare and hunting, they
learned how to handle weaponry - the bow, sling and sword. The mother was the daughter's primary teacher. Besides the religious duties, daughters would learn domestic chores required to run the household. Daughters also shared the duties at harvest time. Besides raising children, women were responsible for providing food and clothing. They engaged in crafts that could be managed while caring for the children, such as basketry, spinning and weaving tapestries and mats. Women drew water for the needs of both the household and the livestock. Outside the household chores, they worked in the fields and tended the flock. The famous description of the ideal wife in Proverbs 31:10-29 concerns the variety of women's roles in the household, especially their economic role.

Women participated in the daily activities of the community including worship. Biblical writers describe women as dancing, singing and playing musical instruments. Women participated in the harvest festivals and shared in the sacrificial meals.

Frequently parents and children of both genders took part together in the domestic chores. David was a shepherd
(1 Sam. 16:11). Rachel tended her father Laban's sheep (Genesis 29:9).

There are notable examples of women who served in less traditional roles. Deborah was a judge. Huldah was a prophet. Then there is the medium at Endor.

Even prostitution seems to have been tolerated in the society. Biblical writers are ambivalent about it and the laws are inconsistent. Rehab was a prostitute before her marriage to Salmon. So was Goner, the wife of Prophet Hosea. The story of Tamar who impersonated as a prostitute to seduce her father-in-law Judah in order to claim her levirate rights is well known.

A woman's life as widow was not easy in ancient Israel even though the Lord commanded the Israelites to take special care of the widows among them. A widow remained outside the normal social structure of the community and therefore could be easily victimised and quickly reduced to destitution. There may have been many widows because of age differences at the first marriage, since men usually married later in life and were therefore considerably older than the wives. Without male protection the widow found it hard to survive; her position in the community was considered inferior. A widow was set apart by her distinctive dress. However a widow was free to remarry and derive security from the levirate legislation. A widow without an adult son could also inherit the property of her deceased husband.

The legal system of the patriarchal society placed women at a distinct disadvantage. Before marriage the woman was subject to her father; in his absence, to an older brother; and after marriage, to her husband. Laws of inheritance worked to her detriment too. According to Israel's patrilineal system, only males could inherit property, because it was passed from father to son. If the father left no sons, the real estate was inherited in the first instance by his daughters who were then obliged to marry within the circle that perpetuated the father's name.

In the region of the Middle East known as the Levant which consists of the present day Israel, Palestine and Syria, a combination of farming and pastoralism was typical of village economies from the Neolithic period to the present. Families lived together in villages where they farmed while some members tended the flock. The laws, customs and traditions governing the family might have evolved to meet the demands of such an agropastoral society. Such a family system could have led to the subjugation of women as happened in many Semitic societies. At home, in ancient India, the society came to be governed by Manusmrithy which held that a woman does not deserve to be free and that she should be under the protection of either the father, the husband or the son at different stages of her life. Such a degeneration did not happen in the Jewish society.
(continued on page 33)

## Life Stule

# "TO THE LOST SHEEP OF THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL" 



When the Canaanite woman followed Jesus pestering him to heal her daughter, Jesus said that he was sent only "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24). The primary purpose of the Incarnation was the salvation of Israel; Jesus was greatly concerned about 'the lost sheep' among God's chosen people. The Church is a community of God's chosen people; each parish is a unit of this larger community. Every parish has its 'lost sheep' - members who come to church for the Sunday morning worship just because traditionally their families have done this for generations; the Sunday morning worship does not have any other significance for them. Of course there are other 'lost sheep' both inside and outside the Church. But I have often felt that our primary concern should be for those who do come to church but do not find any special significance for the service they attend at the church.

Why did Jesus institute the Holy Communion before he went forth to his death on the Cross? He took the bread, blessed it and gave it to his disciples saying that it was his body. Likewise he took the wine, blessed it and gave it to his disciples saying that it was his blood. The disciples partook of the body and blood of Christ. The life of Christ thus flowed into his disciples, and they became sharers with him in his life. This is what unified them into
one living body. When we celebrate the Holy Eucharist in the church, we should relive the experience of the institution of the Holy Communion by Jesus during his last supper with his disciples. There are people who ask why we should go to church - whether it isn't enough to sit at home and pray. We do not celebrate the Holy Communion at home, do we? Jesus gave us the instruction that we should do it in his memory every time we came together to worship as a community. The celebration of the Holy Communion in the church should mean to us the sharing of Jesus's life with him, our oneness with him, and our oneness as the Church, the body of Christ. Unless we have this experience within us every time we attend the Communion service in the church, our church going has no significance. We do not become part of the unified body of Christ. Unless the church -going community has this experience, they are not going to attract the non-churchgoing people inside and outside the Church towards Christ. God became incarnate in Jesus in order to find and save us, 'the lost sheep' inside the Church so that we are enabled to fulfil the mission of the Church. During this Christmas, may the Blessed Babe of Bethlehem be born in our hearts! A Blessed Christmas to everyone, and a Happy New Year too!

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## Reflectians

# CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS BY GIVING ROOM FOR GOD 



Christmas is a time we are all looking forward to. By December 1st itself, the celebrations start and we put up Christmas trees and lights.

I had the blessed opportunity to witness the White Christmas in Canada. It was indeed a white snowy Christmas, with snow and ice all around.

The trees were all covered with white snow, the roads were a white bed of snow, the Christmas decorations and Christmas trees placed outside the houses were all covered with white flakes of snow. It was indeed a great experience.

Wherever we are, Christmas is a time of celebration, and no doubt, it's a time of enjoyment, decorating our houses, cooking the best of dishes and sharing them with others, singing carols, visiting relatives, and above all, being together with our kith and kin. Let me share one thought... There were so many imperfections during that first Christmas... Why?

To name a few: Mary's tedious long journey in her pregnancy period, Jesus Christ's birth in a stable, the makeshift bed in the manger, on which Mary had to lay him after his birth, and even the timing of his birth during the census.

I have often wondered why the inn keeper never gave Joseph and Mary a place, why there were so many obstacles and testing for our Lord!

This reminds me of a play which was enacted by some small children during a Christmas celebration. In the play, Joseph and Mary come to an inn and ask if there is room for them. Two small boys dressed up as security guards standing in front of the inn tell them in a stern voice, "There is no place here". Mary, dressed up with cushions tied around her tummy to show that she was pregnant, and Joseph accompanying her with a sad face, go to the next inn. There also, two small boys stand on guard and they also have to say NO. They had nothing else to say. This was their daily practice and all of them acted well. On the final day, when the play was staged, Mary and Joseph came to the first inn asking for a room, the security said, "No, there is no place for you" and they went to the second lodge. There, when they asked, "Can we get a room... she is full term, it is urgent", the boy who was standing as the security said, "YES". There was perfect silence... the teachers in the back stage showed all possible signs and asked the boy to say, "NO," but he said
(continued on page 33)

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loudly, "YES, THERE IS PLACE IN MY HOUSE".

It was the innocence of that boy, that prompted him to say "yes". Today, how many of us can say "YES LORD, THERE IS ROOM FOR YOU IN MY HOUSE... AND IN MY HEART TOO". Our houses may be imperfect, our nature may be imperfect, but remember, even if we are imperfect, God's love for us is perfect - the gift of Jesus Christ to the imperfect.

People like us were part of His plan. Looking back, I realize that the imperfect circumstances Mary went through resulted in the gift of perfect love.

So, friends, this Christmas, let us forget the imperfections in our house, the imperfections in our society, or even in our country, and have an open heart to
love each other. Through these 25 special days, let us try to correct ourselves, make a nice room within ourselves, and decorate it with prayers and gratitude. Just as we do our best to clean our houses and decorate all around with bulbs and stars, let us cleanse ourselves and decorate our minds with love and compassion.

The Lord is asking, "Can you be the manger?"

Once our manger is ready and we offer room for Him, He will surely come and abide in us. He is just outside, waiting for us to receive Him. After receiving HIM on this Christmas day, let us ensure to keep Him with us all through the New Year.

Wish you all a blessed Christmas and a prosperous New year.
©

## The Role of Women in Biblical Israel

(continued from page 28)
Women had their freedom, but within limits set by economic considerations and the requirements of motherhood. They received respect and recognition for their contributions to family and society. But these do not find a place in the Bible because the Bible was written and compiled by males who had no special interest in women's roles. They focussed principally on the male aspects of life, such as warfare, governing, economy and worship, in which women were not directly involved or to which they contributed only minimally.

The roles played by men and women in biblical Israel were reflective of the division of labour demanded by an agropastoral society and not of any positive discrimination against women. But, this does not mean that women enjoyed the same status as men in the society. By the time we reach biblical times, gender equality - whatever little of it - envisaged in the creation stories is seen to have been undermined to a great extent.

Ref: 1. Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager : Life in Biblical Israel
2. William Barclay : The New Daily

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## The Clouds.... My Teacher



When I said the storage space in my cell phone is full, someone advised me to store everything in the 'cloud'. I looked for clouds in the sky, and realised that 'this cloud is not that cloud'. The cloudless sky made me gloomy. There was only a dim light although it was not dark. A big patch of grey colour spread all over without a break. It appeared as if the sky was very sad.

Gradually some dark clouds invaded the grey. It looked as if it was going to rain. Initially what appeared like a sad face... without any glow... or the blessing of smile... looked like someone about to cry.

Next day, as I got out, it was very much the same sky...But beautiful silver clouds appeared against a bright blue background. I felt some relief...a smile came on my face...the sky was welcoming me...I was filled with a positive energy.

As time passed, I saw the sun retreating to the west. But the colourful decoration in the evening sky...the increasing red colour as the sun said bye...then darkness that pervades all on a sudden...the vacuum I felt till the artificial lights in the night erased the darkness...it was all amazing !!!

As I sat watching the sky, the sky
started speaking to me about my life...the childhood days like the rising sun...the burst of energy and brightness as I grew...occasional diseases or accidents like a sudden onslaught of rain that dampers everything..some days without the shine on my face like the dull, grey sky...dark clouds invading my thoughts making me cry...it could be a drizzle or a torrent of tears depending on the cause of my grief...passing phases!

The next day... I will be ok... my face will once again shine with hope and happiness... my presence will give a positive energy to my friends... my smile will entertain and encourage them like the sun that hides and shines from behind the clouds...It's a time of satisfaction.

A day comes when the sun is about to set in my life as well... that evening sky will be colorful... with all that I gained... my health... my wealth... my achievements... my contributions and of course a few dark clouds...! Yes, the sun has to move on... It is time to set... the red colour increases ... all other colours fade... darkness prevails... there is a vacuum for a short time... till more lights fill the darkness or a new day breaks !

On the evening of this Christmas, let us move on with optimism. Let us welcome this New Year with all the blessings of a Happy Christmas.

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