

PRAISE FOR WINTER FIRE

Drawing from the bottomless well of Chesterton's poetry and prose, Ryan Whitaker Smith renews and refreshes us with these tidings of comfort and joy.

DALE AHLQUIST

President, Society of Gilbert Keith Chesterton

In this beautifully designed and illustrated book, Ryan Whitaker Smith serves up a feast of G. K. Chesterton's wit and wisdom for Christmas. Even more, in the devotional reflections, Ryan builds on Chesterton's work with memorable expression and striking insight of his own. A holiday treat!

TREVIN WAX

Author of *The Thrill of Orthodoxy* and an annotated version of Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* with guided reading

Some books are keepsakes because of their colorful presentation, some because of the content they present, and some like *Winter Fire* because of both. Smith's seasonal collection is brilliant, and convincing that the prolific Chesterton doesn't just write a lot of things, but a lot of important things.

JERRY PATTENGALE

Founding scholar, Museum of the Bible (DC); University Professor, Indiana Wesleyan University; author, *The New Book of Christian Martyrs*

Lavishly illustrated and brimming with wisdom and whimsy, Ryan Whitaker Smith gives us a lovely Christmas book to be enjoyed by young and old alike throughout the year. Here delightful stories, excerpts, and reflective exercises are jeweled with poems, recipes, traditions, and even games! The charm of a time past illuminates the gift of our Savior ever into our present—in a manner of which Chesterton would have approved. For, in the words of C. S. Lewis, “Is any pleasure on earth as great as a circle of Christian friends by a good [winter] fire?”

CAROLYN WEBER

Professor at New College Franklin, and award-winning author of *Surprised by Oxford*, now a feature film



WINTER FIRE

CHRISTMAS WITH G. K. CHESTERTON



RYAN WHITAKER SMITH

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

© 2023 by
RYAN WHITAKER SMITH

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. The ESV text may not be quoted in any publication made available to the public by a Creative Commons license. The ESV may not be translated into any other language.

Published in association with the literary agency of WTA Media in Franklin, Tennessee.

Edited by Connor Sterchi
Cover design and illustration: Stephen Crotts
Cover and interior design and art direction: Erik M. Peterson

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Smith, Ryan Whitaker, 1983- author.

Title: Winter fire : Christmas with G. K. Chesterton / Ryan Whitaker Smith.

Description: Chicago : Moody Publishers, [2023] | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: Experience the warmth of Christmas through the winsome wit and wisdom of beloved writer G. K. Chesterton. This devotional - perfect for the Christmas season - includes selections of Chesterton's writings, accompanied with commentary, Scripture readings, and reflections. Be encouraged by Chesterton's insight, charmed by the Victorian-inspired artwork, and delighted by the traditional English recipes. Make Chesterton's poetry, short stories, and essays a part of your Christmas tradition! A festive celebration of childlike wonder, the beautifully illustrated Winter Fire is a unique and meaningful gift"~
Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023000383 (print) | LCCN 2023000384 (ebook) | ISBN 9780802429285 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780802473868 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Christmas--Devotional literature. | Christmas--Literary collections. | Chesterton, G. K. (Gilbert Keith), 1874-1936--Criticism and interpretation. | BISAC: RELIGION / Holidays / Christmas & Advent | RELIGION / Christian Living / Devotional

Classification: LCC BV45 .S489 2023 (print) | LCC BV45 (ebook) | DDC 242/.335--dc23/eng/20230309

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023000383>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023000384>

Originally delivered by fleets of horse-drawn wagons, the affordable paperbacks from D. L. Moody's publishing house resourced the church and served everyday people. Now, after more than 125 years of publishing and ministry, Moody Publishers' mission remains the same—even if our delivery systems have changed a bit. For more information on other books (and resources) created from a biblical perspective, go to www.moodypublishers.com or write to:

Moody Publishers
820 N. LaSalle Boulevard
Chicago, IL 60610

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

Introduction	9
--------------	---

DAILY READINGS

Day 1: An Invitation to Walk Backwards Through History	15
Day 2: A Warning to Those in Danger of Celebrating Christmas Prematurely	19
Day 3: In Regard to Certain Objections to the Celebration of Christmas	23
Day 4: Of Paradoxes, Celestial Ladders, and Moving Wheels	27
Day 5: In Celebration of the Utter Unsuitability of Christmas to the Modern World	31
Day 6: On Christmas as a Litmus Test for Spiritual Buoyancy	35
Day 7: Concerning the Inescapable Fraternity of the Family Gathering	39
Day 8: As for Games and the Possible Invention of New Ones	43
Day 9: On Christmas as a Declaration of War	47
Day 10: On Christmas as an Antidote to a Disenchanted Imagination	51
Day 11: A Brief Celebration of the Boomerang	55
Day 12: In Regard to the Enormous and Overwhelming Everything	59

Day 13: On the Juxtaposition of Frightful Weather and Festive Gaiety	63
Day 14: Concerning Hearty Breakfasts and the Pleasures of Being Flung Headlong into the Sea	67
Day 15: A Word on the Word Made Flesh	71
Day 16: On the Significance and Insignificance of Ritual and Routine	75
Day 17: A Word of Gratitude to Santa Claus	79
Day 18: On the Association between Babies and Star-Sustaining Strength	83
Day 19: In Defense of the Material Substance of Christmas Presents	87
Day 20: With Respect to Rot, Riot, and Religion	91
Day 21: As to the Uncomfortable Comfort of Christmas	95
Day 22: Of Barbarians, Philosophers, and a Cave of Dreams	99
Day 23: To Marry, Be Merry, and Make Merry	103
Day 24: In Regard to the Ancient Symbol of the Flame	107
Day 25: Of Secrets, Divine Caps, and Celestial Post Offices	111
Day 26: Concerning the Enduring Fortitude of Christmas	115
Day 27: With Respect to Pudding, Currency, and the Betrayal of Christmas	119
Day 28: Concerning the Liberal and Conservative Balance of Christmas	123
Day 29: On Crackers, Logs, and the Winter Bath of Ecstasy	127
Day 30: After Christmas (an Afterword)	131

POEMS

“A Christmas Carol” (1922)	139
“The Nativity”	140
“A Child of the Snows”	142
“A Portrait”	143
“A Word”	144
“The Truce of Christmas”	146
“The Wise Men”	148
“The House of Christmas”	150
“A Christmas Carol” (1896)	152
“A Little Litany”	153
“Gloria in Profundis”	154

ESSAYS

“The Survival of Christmas”	159
“A Progress from England”	164
“The Rituals of Christmas”	169
“The Vast Anticipation of Christmas”	173
“The Winter Feast”	178

SHORT STORIES

“The Shop of Ghosts”	185
“The New Christmas”	190

RECIPES

Turkey	197
Giblet Gravy	199
“A Turkey Reverie”	200

Sausage Rolls	202
Wassail	203
Mince Pies	204
Brandy Butter	205
Fruit Crumble	206
Hard Sauce	207
Christmas Pudding	208
“A Word on the Wholesomeness of Christmas Pudding”	210

GAMES & TRADITIONS

Christmas Crackers	215
Sixpence in Pudding	215
Wassailing	216
Fictionary	218
Wink Murder	219
Squeak, Piggy, Squeak	220
Up Jenkins	221
Snapdragon	222
Index	225
Acknowledgments	231
Notes	233



INTRODUCTION

G. K. Chesterton, one of the most prolific writers of the twentieth century, wrote more in his lifetime than most people get around to reading in theirs. He wrote so broadly, in so many contexts and genres, that it seems as if, at some point or other, he touched on virtually every subject one could possibly think to write about. He was a novelist, a journalist, a historian, a playwright, a lay theologian, a Christian apologist. He published nearly a hundred books, thousands of essays, a handful of plays, and several hundred poems. A staple of the literary scene in London in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he was a larger-than-life figure in more ways than one: his intelligence was formidable. His wit, inimitable. His girth, remarkable.

I first encountered Chesterton's writing as a teenager, when his novel *The Man Who Was Thursday* was assigned as required reading for an English class. I don't recall it having much of an impact on me at the time, if I did indeed read it in its entirety. A few years later, by what I now consider to be a stroke of divine providence, I stumbled upon a volume of Chesterton's Father Brown stories collecting dust on my shelf and decided, for whatever reason, to give them a go (I have a habit of buying books on impulse, with the sincere intention of one day getting around to reading them. Results vary, but my library continues to grow). I was struck not just by the lucidity of the prose, or its witty inventiveness, but by something

latent beneath the surface of those cleverly constructed stories featuring Chesterton's bumbling-but-brilliant detective priest: they were beautifully written and utterly delightful, but they were also *wise* and *good*—not merely entertaining, but somehow *formative*. It would be disingenuous to say that I found Father Brown that day; it was more like he found me.

In short order, I went on to consume *Orthodoxy*, *The Everlasting Man*, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, *The Flying Inn*, *The Ball and the Cross*, *The Ballad of the White Horse*, a fresh read of *The Man Who Was Thursday*, as well as several others. I've now been journeying with Chesterton for fifteen years or so, and I'm still making my way through his astonishing body of work. Because of his extraordinary prolificacy, he is a gift that keeps on giving. Nearly a hundred years after his passing, his words continue to resonate with brilliance, wisdom, and wit. His pseudo-theological works like *Orthodoxy* and *The Everlasting Man* (which, in C. S. Lewis's words, "baptized his intellect"¹) have influenced Christians around the world (though he famously converted to Catholicism later in his life and remained an ardent defender of the Roman Catholic Church until the day he died, he is the rare Catholic writer with broad readership among Catholics and Protestants alike).

His Father Brown stories are not just popular in their own right, but have inspired one of the most successful and longest-running BBC shows of the modern era, starring the delightful Mark Williams, whom I was fortunate enough to work with on my film *Surprised by Oxford*. As I write these words, I am in the early stages of pre-production on a film based on Chesterton's novel *The Ball and the Cross*. It excites me to imagine how it might, alongside an effort such as this book, introduce yet more people to this delightful mentor I've been journeying with for all these years.

So, why a book based specifically on his writings about Christmas? First, Chesterton was enthusiastic about his love of Christmas and

wrote voluminously about the subject. In fact, this is not the first book to collect some of these writings. *The Spirit of Christmas*, edited by Marie Smith (now out of print), was released in the 1980s and is a cherished title by Chesterton fans. Much of the same content appears in this book, but I've taken a different approach to the material. Here, excerpts of Chesterton's writing are presented in a devotional format as daily readings, alongside my commentary, Scripture passages, and reflection questions—but that barely scratches the surface of what is contained in this volume. The devotional readings make up roughly the first half of *Winter Fire*, while the second half is a compendium of poems, essays, short stories, recipes, and more. In addition to the quotes that are the basis of the devotions, there are many more scattered throughout the book and embedded within my commentary.

There is no doubt in my mind that this is the most comprehensive collection of Chesterton's writings on Christmas ever published—a statement I make with utter humility, because it is not, in any way, exhaustive. Before embarking on this project, I was familiar with much of the material that would find its way into this book, but my research revealed an embarrassment of riches in that department. I knew Chesterton wrote a lot about Christmas; frankly, I didn't know he wrote *that* much. I've done my best to fit in as much as possible without overwhelming the reader. I'm aware that for many, this book will serve as an introduction to Chesterton, and I've tried to keep that in mind. On that note, a word of advice: Chesterton's writing can be an acquired taste. If necessary, read his words slowly, in order to take in all that he's saying (often he's saying several things at once).

Second, it's not just that Chesterton has a lot to say about Christmas; he has something *important* to say. With his virtuosic flair, he eloquently (and often humorously) points us back to the true meaning of Christmas. He revels in the festive traditions of Christmas. He challenges the modern opposition to Christmas. At a time when

Christmas is becoming increasingly commercialized and detached from its Christian origins, Chesterton's words seem more relevant than ever before.

Lastly, a word about the title, which is taken from a quote featured in the reading for Day 13: "Christ is not merely a summer sun of the prosperous but a winter fire for the unfortunate."² The image of a fire burning amid the frosts of winter seemed a fitting image to draw from for a book that not only celebrates the comfort, joy, and revelry of Christmas, but the mercy of God who has called us to His everlasting feast.

A WORD OF INSTRUCTION

The season of Advent, as traditionally observed by the church, is around twenty-five days, beginning at the end of November and ending on December 24 (the four weeks leading up to Christmas). As Chesterton will point out in the pages to come, despite the modern tendency to treat Christmas as a one-day celebration, it is, in fact, a feast lasting for twelve days, beginning on December 25 and ending on January 5.

Though Chesterton does occasionally touch on Advent specifically, he often speaks of Christmas in a more general sense, so rather than arranging the daily readings in the first half of this book into Advent and Christmas categories, I've provided thirty entries total. How you decide to incorporate these into your holiday season is ultimately up to you, but I will offer a few suggestions:

- You can, of course, begin on December 1. In this case, you will get through the devotional readings by December 30.
- Or, if you choose to begin on the first Sunday of Advent, the readings will take you through roughly Christmas Day or late December, depending on the year.

INTRODUCTION

- My recommendation would be to go through the daily readings during Advent and explore the additional content in the back half of the book throughout the twelve days of Christmas—but that is merely a friendly suggestion.

Whatever your approach, the intended purpose of the supplemental material is to provide content to explore at your own pace during the holiday season.





DAILY READINGS



DAY 1

AN INVITATION TO WALK BACKWARDS THROUGH HISTORY

It was in the season of Christmas that I came out of my little garden in that “field of the beeches” between the Chilterns and the Thames, and began to walk backwards through history to the place from which Christmas came.

THE NEW JERUSALEM (1920)¹

So begins *The New Jerusalem*, G. K. Chesterton’s travelogue chronicling his journey to the Holy Land. But before the destination, there is the journey. For Chesterton, it begins in a backyard in Beaconsfield, England, as the large, mustached man unlatches the garden gate and sets off on his adventure. Perhaps yours begins in a kitchen, with a strong cup of black coffee, or in a comfortable corner of the living room, the windows limned with frost. For me, it begins in a home office I affectionately call “the library,” as the fields around my house are blanketed with early morning fog. Regardless of our various points of departure, this book is an invitation to link arms

and set off together, as we “walk backwards through history to the place from which Christmas came.”

Is our celebration of Christmas not an attempt to do this very thing? Is the memorializing of an event not an effort, at some level, to relive it? Our traditions and ceremonies, rituals and feast days, are the inner workings of a psychological and emotional time machine. To sing “while shepherds watched their flocks at night” is to hum an incantation that might, if we allow it, transport us to a grassy hillside in Judea two thousand years ago, when celestial choirs filled the sky and proclaimed good news for all mankind. A box swathed in paper and ribbon is a talisman with the power to spirit us away to a humble home in first-century Palestine, at the moment when visitors from the East arrive, arms laden with gifts, eyes wide with wonder. In celebrating Christmas, we long, in some sense, to be one with it—to enter the story ourselves.

It would behoove us to remember that, as the journey precedes the destination, the season of Advent precedes Christmas. Advent, as observed by Christians for millennia, is a time of expectant waiting, an observance of a time when Israel’s prophets were as silent as their God and their people yearned for a promised (and much delayed) deliverer. As the famous hymn pleads, “O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel . . .” Advent is a desire in the Now for the Not Yet. In the coming days, we will further explore the traditional observance of Advent and Christmas and how we might recover those customs in our modern, distracted age.

Think of this book as a travelogue into the heart of Christmas, with the tall, heavyset man as our trusted guide. Let us keep our ears (and hearts) open, for I believe he has much to say to us along the way (he’s loquacious, six feet four inches tall, and nearly three hundred pounds, so he’s somewhat difficult to ignore). In speaking of travel, Chesterton once wrote,

I cannot see any Battersea here; I cannot see any London or any England. I cannot see that door. I cannot see that chair: because a cloud of sleep and custom has come across my eyes. The only way to get back to them is to go somewhere else; and that is the real object of travel and the real pleasure of holidays. Do you suppose that I go to France in order to see France? Do you suppose that I go to Germany in order to see Germany? I shall enjoy them both; but it is not them that I am seeking. I am seeking Battersea. The whole object of travel is not to set foot on foreign land; it is at last to set foot on one's own country as a foreign land.²

The purpose of our journey is not so much to dwell in “the place from which Christmas came,” but to allow that place to dwell *in us*, to return to our own country with christened eyes, to look upon our everyday surroundings with a baptized imagination.

As we exit the garden and turn the corner, the large man's cane clinking along the cobblestones, he mutters under his breath, “Christmas belongs to an order of ideas which never really perished, and which is now less likely to perish than ever.” Just then, he is momentarily stunned into silence by the image of a sparrowcock perched upon the branch of a tall, barren tree, silhouetted against the darkening sky. “It had from the first a sort of glamour of a lost cause,” he says with a twinkle in his eye. “It was like an everlasting sunset. It is only the things that never die that get the reputation of dying.”³

With that, he turns and continues down the street. We hasten to follow, as the first flurries of snow begin to fall . . .




SCRIPTURE READING & REFLECTION

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

JEREMIAH 33:14-16

How might you prepare space in your heart for Christ during this season?

How can you make time for silence and contemplation in the midst of an increasingly busy time of year?

Meditate on some long journeys in your life, when the promise of deliverance seemed far away. Reflect on the mercies of God that were with you in the midst of your “expectant waiting.”



DAY 2

A WARNING TO THOSE IN DANGER OF CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS PREMATURELY

All the old wholesome customs in connection with Christmas were to the effect that one should not touch or see or know or speak of something before the actual coming of Christmas Day. Thus, for instance, children were never given their presents until the actual coming of the appointed hour. The presents were kept tied up in brown-paper parcels, out of which an arm of a doll or the leg of a donkey sometimes accidentally stuck. I wish this principle were adopted in respect of modern Christmas ceremonies and publications. The editors of the magazines bring out their Christmas numbers so long before the time that the reader is more likely to be lamenting for the turkey of last year than to have seriously settled down to a solid anticipation of the turkey which is to come. Christmas numbers of magazines ought to be tied up in brown paper and kept for Christmas Day. On consideration, I should favor the editors being tied up in brown paper. Whether the leg or

arm of an editor should ever be allowed to protrude I leave to individual choice.

THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS (1906)¹

The celebration of Christmas, as traditionally observed by the church, does not, in fact, conclude on December 25. Christmas Day is but the beginning of twelve days of festive celebration (as expressed in the well-known carol “The Twelve Days of Christmas”). That certain ceremonies and publications in Chesterton’s day were rushing to celebrate Christmas prematurely betrayed a fundamental misunderstanding of the Advent and Christmas traditions. As he says elsewhere,

Modern men have a vague feeling that when they have come to the feast, they have come to the finish. By modern commercial customs, the preparations for it have been so very long and the practice of it seems so very short.²

If this sounds familiar, perhaps it’s because we tend to observe Christmas in the following fashion: Immediately after Thanksgiving in America, radio stations begin playing Christmas music. TV networks begin airing Christmas movies. Families begin stringing up decorations. The so-called Christmas season (a somewhat vague designation) is officially initiated. Festivities continue through December 25 (the day when families gather and gifts are exchanged), after which decorations are unceremoniously stripped away, trees are dragged to the curb to be hauled off with the trash, news anchors recap the holiday in past-tense language, talking about how Christmas *was*, how it *went*, what *happened*. In the days following Christmas Day, a general malaise hangs in the air, like dissipating smoke from a fireworks display. Christmas came and went, in grand but short-lived fashion.

Whatever it was, whatever it was for, it is now definitively and categorically over. “This is, of course, in sharp contrast to the older traditional customs, in the days when it was a sacred festival for a simpler people,” Chesterton reminds us. “Then the preparation took the form of the more austere season of Advent and the fast of Christmas Eve. But when men passed on to the feast of Christmas, it went on for a long time after the feast of Christmas Day.”³

The “austere” season of Advent, as we have established, is a time of expectant waiting. Christmas, fittingly, is its own season—a prolonged feast sustained for nearly two weeks. Chesterton reminds us that in the “old wholesome customs” Christmas would not be spoken of throughout the season of Advent. Gifts were kept wrapped until Christmas Day, when they would be opened at last—not all at once in a dizzying blur—but one at a time, over the course of twelve days (I would venture to say most people today lack the patience for such a thing). If this all sounds rather foreign to us, it’s only further proof that the modern Westernized approach to Christmas has been ingrained in us from an early age. Thankfully, we serve a God who invites us to become like children, so there’s always time to unlearn a few things.

The challenge I present to you is this: resist the urge to celebrate Christmas prematurely. Give Advent its proper due, armed with reverent patience and an expectant heart. When Christmas comes, celebrate with prolonged joy “in a crescendo of festivity until Twelfth Night”⁴ (I’ll leave the means of gift distribution up to you). Rebel against our modern culture by joining the ranks of the church, which outlasts all cultures. Or shall Chesterton tie you up in brown paper as well?



SCRIPTURE READING & REFLECTION

So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.

2 THESSALONIANS 2:15

Consider how you might allow the traditions of the church to influence your celebration of Christmas this year.

Consider how you might “unlearn” some modern holiday traditions in favor of a more traditional observance of Advent and Christmas.

What would it take for you to sustain a “crescendo of festivity until Twelfth Night”?



DAY 3

IN REGARD TO CERTAIN OBJECTIONS TO THE CELEBRATION OF CHRISTMAS

It is the greatest glory of the Christian tradition that it has incorporated so many pagan traditions. But it is most glorious of all, to my mind, when they are popular traditions. And the best and most obvious example is the way in which Christianity did incorporate, in so far as it did incorporate, the old human and heathen conception of the Winter Feast. There are, indeed, two profound and mysterious truths to be balanced here. The first is that what was then heathen was still human; that is, it was both mystical and material; it expressed itself in sacred substances and sacramental acts; it understood the mystery of trees and waters and the holy flame. And the other, which will be a much more tactless and irritating assertion, is that while a thing is heathen it is not yet completely human. But the point here is that the pagan element in Christmas came quite natural to Christians, because it was not in fact very far from Christianity.

G.K.'S WEEKLY (1936)¹

Though it might come as a surprise to those of us who celebrate Christmas with gleeful abandon (present company included), many Christians throughout the world, including those from the Quaker and Seventh Day Adventist traditions, choose not to celebrate Christmas at all. Though Chesterton once went so far as to say that “the man who does not keep Christmas is an incomplete human being,”² perhaps we might preserve an ounce of understanding for those who happen to possess a different opinion on the subject. That being said, the objection that Christmas is merely a Christian “spin” on a pagan holiday, that our Christmas traditions are inherited from pagan traditions, that there is nothing inherently Christian about Christmas—is a topic worthy of discussion.

For Chesterton, the fact that Christmas might indeed have borrowed something from the dark ages of paganism was not a cause for concern, in and of itself. In fact, he was unequivocal in his preference for the pagan superstition of the ancient world over the rational skepticism of the modern one. Paganism, for its many faults, could not, after all, be accused (like modernity) of treating the world as a disenchanted place. At the very least, paganism recognized that the world is charged with meaning. It understood “the mystery of trees and waters and the holy flame.” This is what he means when he says that paganism “was not in fact very far from Christianity.” What he is implying, in so many words, is that it might be easier to make a Christian out of an idol-worshipping pagan than a secular humanist: that a Druid, well-versed in human sacrifice, might be closer to grasping the atoning death of Christ than a materialist with no framework for spirituality (then again, God makes even the impossible possible).

When Chesterton makes the claim that “the greatest glory of the Christian tradition is that it has incorporated so many pagan traditions” (a statement sure to throw fuel on the fire for those Christians convinced of the heathen darkness at the root of the holiday), he does not mean that Christmas should be viewed as pagan in spirit,

but rather that it has *reframed* and *redeemed* certain pagan traditions with the light of the gospel. Though historians such as Tom Holland challenge the claim that the winter celebration of Christmas (and specifically the date of December 25) originated in paganism,³ Christmas does share certain undeniable similarities with the aforementioned Winter Feast, not least of which the fact that it is a feast that takes place in winter.

But there is a deeper observation here. What Chesterton is implying is that the pagans had somehow “anticipated the supreme miracle”—a concept echoed in the writings of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. After all, why should the redeeming work of Christ not extend to human traditions? If land soaked in the blood of heathen sacrifice could be reclaimed by the kingdom of God (as in the time of ancient Israel), why should feasts and festivals not be reclaimed? As Chesterton says, “It is no controversial point against the Christians that they felt they could take up and continue such traditions among the pagans; it only shows that the Christians knew a Christian thing when they saw it.”⁴

As he wrote in an article published in 1901, “When a learned man tells me that on the 25th of December I am really astronomically worshipping the sun, I answer that I am not. I am practising a particular personal religion, the pleasures of which (right or wrong) are not in the least astronomical. If he says that the cult of Christmas and the cult of Apollo are the same, I answer that they are utterly different; and I ought to know, for I have held both of them. I believed in Apollo when I was quite little; and I believe in Christmas now that I am very, very big.”⁵ This season, let us attempt, however imperfectly, to join him—laying aside childish things while retaining the faith of a child. In the kingdom of God, it’s the only way to grow “very, very big.”

SCRIPTURE READING & REFLECTION

I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

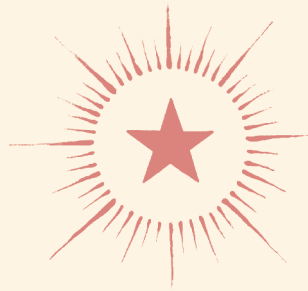
COLOSSIANS 1:25-27

Meditate on Paul's words—that Christ is “the mystery hidden for ages” and “the hope of glory.” How does this connect to the idea of Christmas “redeeming” pagan traditions?

Reflect on your own life and consider some of the ways Christ has redeemed your past.

How might you practice Christ-centered hope during this season?





DAY 4

OF PARADOXES, CELESTIAL LADDERS, AND MOVING WHEELS

The exciting quality of Christmas rests on an ancient and admitted paradox. It rests upon the paradox that the power and center of the whole universe may be found in some seemingly small matter, that the stars in their courses may move like a moving wheel around the neglected outhouse of an inn.

THE DAILY NEWS (1901)¹

G. K. Chesterton was called “the prince of paradox” for good reason. With the skill of a diamond miner, he unearthed paradoxes at every turn. He mused on contradictions, inconsistencies, and incongruities. He reveled at irony, disparity, and absurdity. He spoke of a God “as narrow as the universe.”² Of a cross composed of conflicting angles, opening its “arms to the four winds.”³ Of Christmas resting “on an ancient and admitted paradox”—that the greatest gift the world has ever received arrived in obscurity, in a backwater town