

DECEMBER 2019

# JOURNEY

CHRISTIAN MAGAZINE

*Celebrating  
Our Lord*



**In Spite of the Chaos Christ Came**

Max Lucado

**The Story Behind 'Silent Night'**

Ace Collins



# Small Packages

I remember once when my family opened Christmas gifts and my mother had almost nothing under the tree. Finally, she opened the smallest of packages. All it had inside was a piece of paper, telling her to look outside. She opened the curtains to see a new car, gift-wrapped with a bow. The saying fit well: “Good things come in small packages.”

**Let’s carry this thought further. Christ came to us in human form. His body developed in Mary’s womb, beginning with a few cells. That’s a small package. Take a moment to think about its implications:**

**1. God’s gift.** Emmanuel means “God with us.” It is a name given to Jesus. He came to be with us, that He might reside

within us. We know He lives within us because of seemingly small things. The faith to believe may seem almost infinitesimal; it cannot be measured. And yet it is through faith in the work of Christ that we are saved. The prodding and convictions of the Holy Spirit also seem to be a very small thing. Yet, they are reminders that we are sealed for the day of our redemption; our future is secured by God (Ephesians 1:13-14).

*When is the last time you thanked God for the small evidences of your salvation?*

**2. Our giving.** We can easily slip into wrong thinking, into assumptions that God will not be happy with us until we do some magnificent exploits to prove ourselves. But once we realize that Christ came to us out of love, we come to believe that love itself is a very great gift. It is the number one gift we must share with each other. The Lord gave to us the Great Commandment to remind us this is so (see Matthew 22:37-38). Without God’s love in our hearts, everything else

is worthless (1 Corinthians 13:1).

*When is the last time you told your spouse, child, parent, or friend that you love them?*

**3. When it’s all gone.** When we step into glory, our net worth will not be measured by what we had in the bank but by how we used what we had. Beginning with our attitudes, small things will matter in the end. We should then value most not what the world seeks but what God sees in our hearts and lives: our integrity, faithfulness, holiness, and obedience. When we consider God’s honor and glory a big thing, we will be faithful in such “small” things.

*When is the last time you asked God to show you the small things that matter most?*



**WILLIAM P. CAMPBELL**  
Author, President, and Executive Director of Scripture Awakening. Host of Beyond Words Radio.



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SA Media Group, LLC

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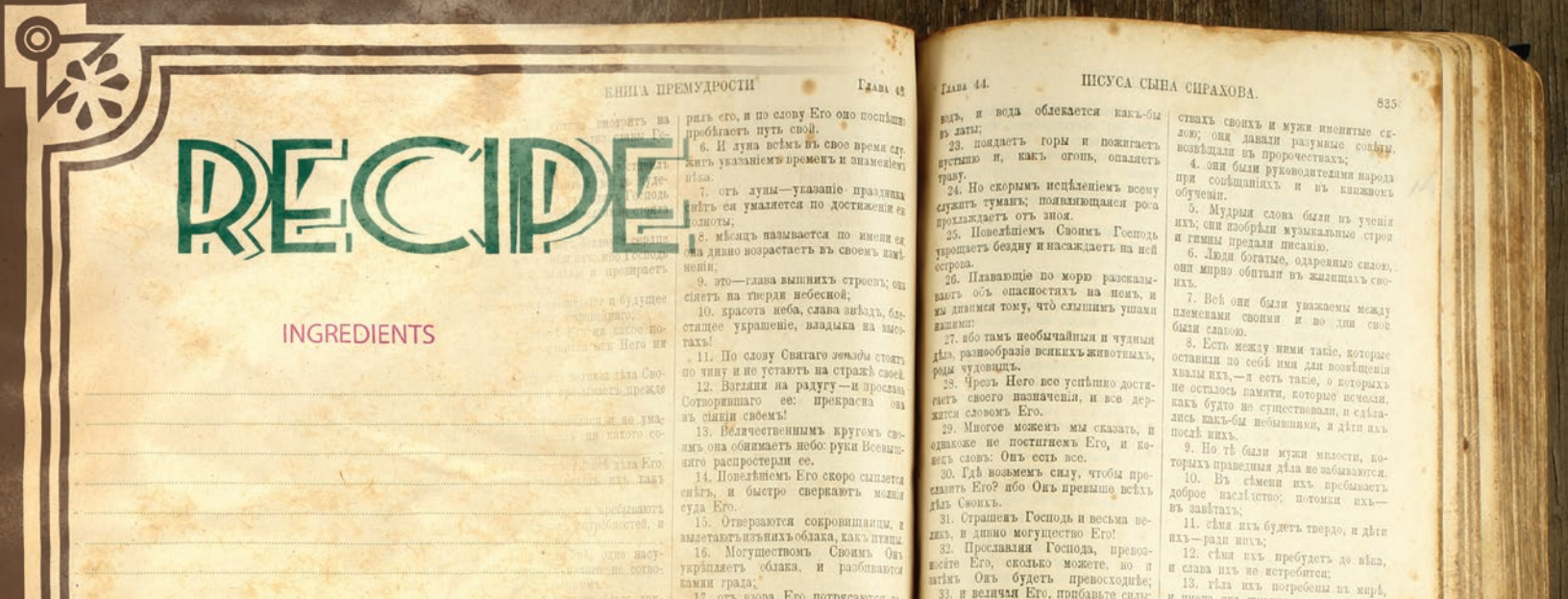
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# Don't Forget the Recipe

This time of year always makes me think of relatives, especially my grandparents who are now home with Jesus. I am thankful to my grandmother for instilling in me a deep love for two things: cooking and family.

Every major holiday, our family would gather together. All of grandmother and grandfather's kids (five total) plus their spouses and children, and my great-grandparents would come together for an incredible meal at a massive row of tables that as a kid seemed to be a mile long. We would stuff ourselves on all the specialties each family brought to the dinner table.

This was followed by the children playing in the massive back yard and the men watching football—pretty much in silence as Morris men are not a talkative bunch. All the women would gather in the kitchen to clean up the piles of dishes, preparing the leftovers for the evening meal, and getting caught up on each other's lives.

Being the oldest grandchild, I was always keen to be sure to get recipes and tips on how to prepare my favorite dishes brought to these gatherings. Grandmother taught me how to prepare

pie crust and pies, not to mention the turkey and gravy (my mom couldn't successfully make any of these). I gathered cake and salad recipes as well but was sure to avoid my mother's in-demand asparagus casserole (which even to this day, I can't stand).

**But my all-time favorite dish was the homemade cranberry salad always made by my great-grandmother. One Christmas, though, it dawned on me that my great-grandmother was really getting old, and if I didn't act quickly, that recipe would die with her. So, sheepishly, I asked her for it.**

My great-grandmother, mind you, was a very large farm woman. She put her hands on her hips and in her very Okie accent proclaimed, "Honey, it's on the back of the package!" Oh my, was I ever embarrassed. It had never occurred to me to look on the back of the cranberry package.

Needless to say, I see this relating to our walk with God. So many professing Christians are quick to tell you they don't understand why they do what they do, or they cannot figure out how to be a better person/Christian. They want a magic formula, a recipe so to speak. But it is simple... look inside the Book! Your walk with God is not going to grow stronger and your life will not change unless you read your Bible—that is our recipe for being a Christian.

*Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes out of the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4:4)*

(And yes, I still make the cranberry sauce from that same recipe on the back of the package every Christmas!)



**SUSIE SHIELDS**  
JCM Executive Editor, Program Director Beyond Words Radio Administrator AWAKE! WNC.

# Relationship Tips for the Christmas Season

**C** **Center** your heart on Christ's birth and mission, the deeper meaning of the holidays. This will help everyone become easier to get along with because the heart of the holiday will remain intact.

**H** **Hear** what your friends and family are voicing as their stress and listen carefully to them—a gift that will lower their stress.

**R** **Reach** out as a family to help others in order to keep the proper perspective on what is really important in life.

**I** **Invest** in memories, not material goods. Make time for family baking, tree decorating, or board games.

**S** **Speak** your love in words. The best gift you can give is for a person to hear their value and worth from your lips.

**T** **Take** time for romance. The greatest gift you can give your children is a happy marriage.

**M** **Make** time to reach out to extended family. Visit or call grandparents, aunts, and uncles.

**A** **Assume** nothing; ask those who are celebrating with you what their expectations are and communicate the plan clearly, so people feel informed.

**S** **Stay** flexible. Don't be a "Christmas boss," ordering family around. Instead slow the pace, gather consensus, and give options so that you create an environment of connecting and sharing.



**PAM FARREL**  
Relationship expert and co-authored 48 bestselling books with her husband. [www.lovetwise.com](http://www.lovetwise.com)

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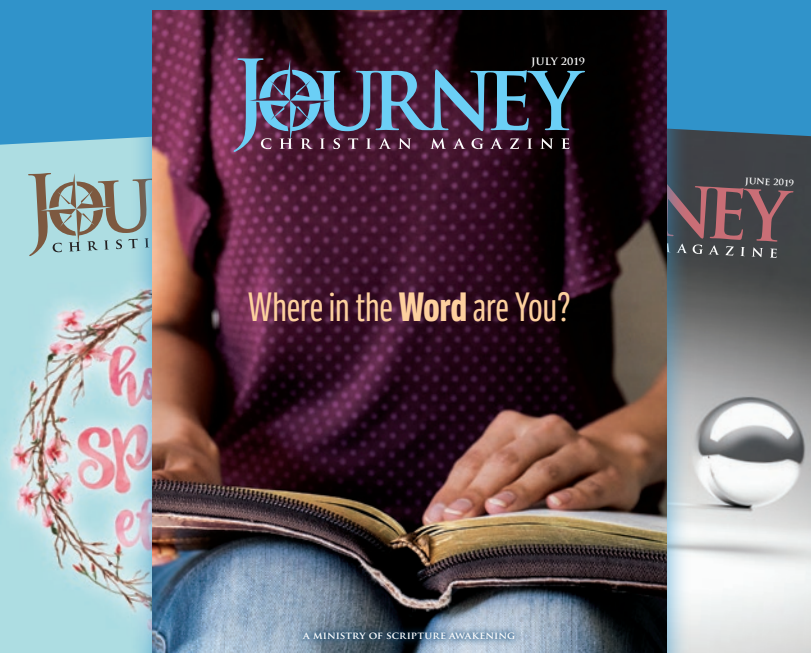
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# Silent Night

**O**n December 24, 1818, in Oberndorf, Austria, twenty-five-year-old priest Joseph Mohr arrived at St. Nicholas Church to get things ready for the Christmas Eve Service—the biggest, most anticipated event of the year—only to discover the organ wouldn’t work. The suddenly panicked young man raced across snow-covered streets to the home of Franz Gruber, praying the school-teacher and accomplished organist had an idea for repairing the ancient instrument. Sadly, Gruber didn’t.

Discouraged, the novice clergyman prepared to face a disappointed community when Gruber offered to play his guitar at the service. A now-morose Mohr tossed cold water onto the suggestion by explaining the program had been built around organ music. Unwilling to throw in the towel, the teacher suggested they write a new song. And, as if struck by lightning, the priest remembered a poem he’d written two years before while on a walk through the woods. Hurrying back to his home, Mohr retrieved the composition, and after Gruber created an elementary melody, the two men taught it to the choir. It was literally the song that saved Christmas in Oberndorf!

In January, Karl Mauracher, who traveled across Europe repairing organs,

arrived to fix the faulty instrument at St. Nicholas. While he worked, Mohr told the story of the song he and Gruber had composed. Mauracher was so impressed with the men’s ingenuity, he had the priest play the original number while he wrote down the words and music. Then Mauracher left to never again set foot in the tiny church.

Almost three decades later, Joseph Mohr was walking along a street in a large German city and heard his song being sung by a cathedral choir. As he had never attempted to have it published, he was naturally confused. Upon talking to the choirmaster, the small-town priest was awestruck.

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## His simple little carol had somehow become the most popular Christmas song in the world. How had this happened?

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Over the next few years, Mohr and Gruber would discover that Karl Mauracher had become the Johnny Appleseed of “Silent Night” by teaching it to people everywhere he traveled.

The story of “Silent Night” reflects the very nature of Christian faith. Just as Mohr employed something he had

created to put the focus on Christ at a Christmas Eve service, the first followers of Jesus lived lives that reflected the grace, compassion, and love they had seen in God’s Son. These early Christians had no idea their message would spread to places where billions across the globe would worship the Jesus many of them had met, heard, and spoken to. Yet, the seemingly little things they did became the foundation of a faith that changed everything.

Mohr’s poem, written to capture a personal moment he had experienced while walking on a snowy night, was only shared out of necessity. Yet, thanks to the inspiration behind those words, “Silent Night” has become the best known of all Christmas carols. Perhaps more importantly, the carol is an example of why we must never underestimate the potential of sharing our faith in our own words with others. Two centuries ago a young man did just that, and hundreds of millions are still singing his song of love and grace.



### ACE COLLINS

Speaker, storyteller, authored 96 books: novels, biographies, children’s, history, culture, and faith.



# In Spite of the Chaos Christ Came

**M**aybe your Christmas season feels “less than.” More tear than cheer. More yuck than yule.

The sight of happy children is a reminder of a vacant crib. The busy social schedule of some only highlights your empty one. Images of families together reinforce your pain of a family apart.

If this season is hard for you, if you’re looking forward to December 26 more than December 25, then I have a story for you to consider. A story of a young girl.

As much as she tried to keep a good attitude, it was not easy. She was far from home, miles from family and her own bed. She had spent the last few days on crowded roads enduring the winter chill. Money was scarce. Friends were nowhere near. A warm bed and a hot meal? The prospects were slim.

Ask her which was worse, the pain in her heart or the pain in her back, and she’d be hard pressed to make a choice.

Her heart ached for her family. She felt estranged from them. Under normal circumstances they would have been thrilled to learn of her pregnancy. But pregnant before the wedding?

With her conservative family and her bizarre explanation? And to have to tell the man she was to marry that she was carrying a child who wasn’t his? It was a miracle he still married her. And another miracle was what she needed that night.

She’d envisioned giving birth at home: Mom holding one hand, an aunt the other; a midwife, dotting relatives, Joseph, and a crowd of neighbors outside the door. Perhaps if they all could have experienced the birth of her firstborn together, then they would believe her story.

At least that’s how I imagine Mary felt. Of course, I could be wrong. Perhaps the feed trough and stable were her idea. But I don’t think so.

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**I’ve yet to meet a mother-to-be who dreams of using a cow stall for a delivery room and a manger for a bassinet. I doubt Mary did either.**

---

So, when Joseph returned from the inn and asked if she was allergic to sheep, it’s a safe hunch to say she was chagrined. This wasn’t how she had planned to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Joseph led the donkey down a steep path that ended at the mouth of a cave carved out years before by the wind and the rain, used as long as anyone could remember for a barn. He lowered Mary off the back of the donkey. He looked at her face, fatigued and powdery from the road. He apologized for the austere accommodations. She touched his cheek and smiled and entered the grotto.

Joseph built a fire and heated water. Mary cleared a spot on the straw and set about the task of bringing God into the world. With cows as her witnesses and Joseph as her midwife, she did just that.

Within moments the hand of the Star Hanger clutched Mary’s finger. The feet of the Sky Walker lay in Joseph’s palm. No wonder the angels filled the sky with worship. Any doubt of the Father’s love disappeared the night God was wrapped in barnyard towels so the hay wouldn’t scratch his back.

In that moment Mary knew it was all worth it. The ache in her back, the ache in her heart—they faded away. The questions of how, the wonderings of when—they didn’t linger. The inn had no place for her Son; that was all right. He would find a place in people’s hearts. She and Joseph were far from home on the night of Jesus’ birth; that was all right. Jesus was even farther from His. There was no warm bed in which Jesus could sleep? No problem.

In spite of the chaos, Christ came.

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Excerpted from *Because of Bethlehem* by Max Lucado  
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# The Glorious Giver of the Greatest Gift Ever Given

As the holiday season approaches, it's easy to be swept up in the hustle and bustle that accompanies this celebratory time of year. Christmas cards, gatherings and gifts, cooking, crafts, coordinating calendars, credit card chaos, and family festivities; the details and demands can stir us to weariness leaving us longing for peace of mind rather than the Prince of Peace. We can in turn overlook the heart of the holiday, the celebration of Jesus' birth, as well as the Giver of this wonderful, life changing gift: God Himself.

Maybe you'd enjoy the opportunity to shift your focus a bit in order to savor this season in a fresh way. If so, consider setting aside time each day to personally and prayerfully ponder the character and loving kindness of God who gave mankind the greatest gift ever given: His Son. Some of this expression of God's character is demonstrated through His names found in the Bible including:

## **Emmanuel—God With Us:**

*So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will*

*uphold you with my righteous right hand.* (Isaiah 41:10)

## **Deliverer:**

*Do not be afraid of them; the LORD your God Himself will fight for you.* (Deuteronomy 3:22)

## **El Roi—One Who Sees:**

*Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight.* (Hebrews 4:13a)

## **Abba—Father:**

*As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him; for he knows how we are formed, and remembers that we are dust.* (Psalm 103:13-14)

## **Yahweh—I Am:**

*Be still and know that I Am God.* (Psalm 46:10a)

## **Maker of Heaven and Earth:**

*My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.* (Psalm 121:2)

## **Jehovah Mekadesh—the LORD Who Sanctifies You:**

*I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness.* (Isaiah 61:10a-b)

## **Lover of Your Soul:**

*Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you.* (Psalm 143:8a)

## **Shelter in the Storm:**

*Yes, my soul, find rest in God; my hope comes from him. Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken.* (Psalm 62: 5-6)

Many more wonderful names for God are contained throughout the pages of Scripture. To discover these, you can look in the concordance located in the back of most Bibles or google "Names of God." You can also explore via the internet websites that contain "30 days of Praying the Names and Attributes of God;" references designed to lead you to greater awareness of and intimacy with the glorious One who gave us the greatest gift ever given: the gift of salvation through His Son, Jesus Christ.



## **PATTYSTUMP**

Licensed Christian counselor, author, and speaker for women's events.





# From Suffering Servant to King of Glory

As the decisive revelation of the transcendent God in human history, the Incarnation is the central mystery of the Christian faith. That the Creator God would lower Himself to take on human flesh and bear our guilt, sin, and shame is a historical fact that I will never completely wrap my mind around as long as I live. And yet He did it—He descended that we might ascend.

Not only did the King of Glory take on human flesh, but He suffered in His earthly body—enduring the same types of limitations, temptations, sorrows, and pains we face. As I explain in my new book, *Shaped by Suffering* (centered around Peter’s first epistle and forthcoming in February 2020), Jesus’ suffering had three key characteristics. It was sinless (1 Peter 2:22), silent (1 Peter 2:23), and substitutionary:

His decision to suffer in our place shows a love greater than we can comprehend. His substitutionary death on the cross was the most undeserved suffering ever experienced by a human, and his resurrection—the final triumph over death and suf-

fering—is the greatest picture of the redemptive purpose of adversity.<sup>1</sup>

The Suffering Servant submitted to the authority of God just as you and I are called to do in our own sufferings. As we submit to our loving heavenly Father’s authority over our lives, it helps if an eternal perspective on our sufferings undergirds us. That perspective is summed up well in 1 Peter 5:10 (NASB):

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***After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.***

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In other words, while our suffering feels long-lasting, it’s actually very brief on the scales of eternity. In addition, contrary to the message peddled by prosperity-gospel teachers, our suffering is to be expected as part of our earthly sojourn (“*after you have suffered,*” not “*if you suffer*”); it’s a required course in the university of life. Although suffering will not be part of

our eternal home in heaven (praise God!), He often uses adversity here on earth to prepare us for that home (to “perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish” us). Thus, we shouldn’t be caught off-guard when it comes our way (see 1 Peter 4:12).

As we celebrate the Incarnation, may Christ’s example, especially the example He set in His sufferings, inspire your own response to difficulties in your life. And may you know that, in your pain, He is with you, providing the final, permanent solution to all despair experienced in this world. As the carol says, through Him, God has “open[ed] wide our heavenly home” and “close[ed] the path to misery” at last.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Boa with Jenny Abel, *Shaped by Suffering: How Temporary Hardships Prepare Us for Our Eternal Home* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, forthcoming in 2020), 99.

<sup>2</sup> “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

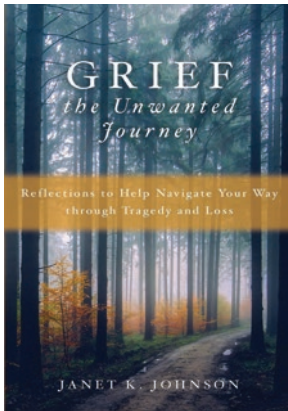


**KEN BOA**

Dr. Boa is an author, speaker, and president of Reflections Ministries. [www.KenBoa.org](http://www.KenBoa.org)

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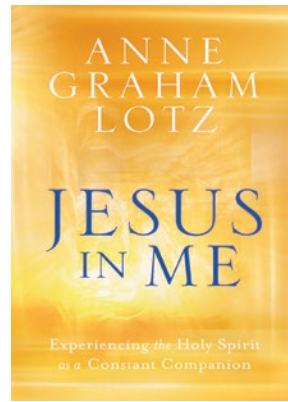
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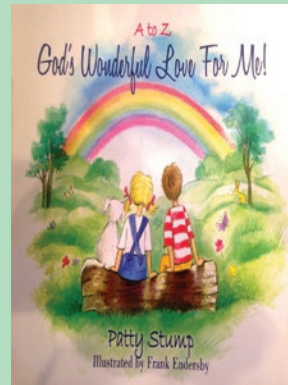
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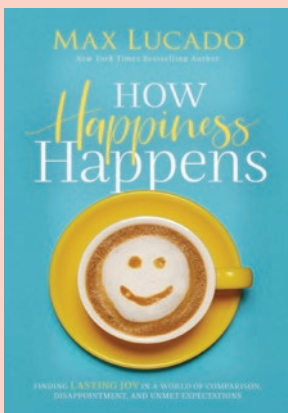
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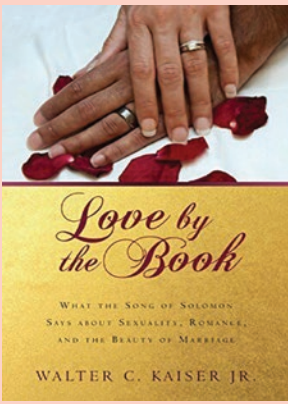
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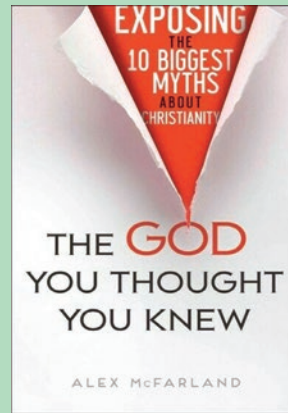
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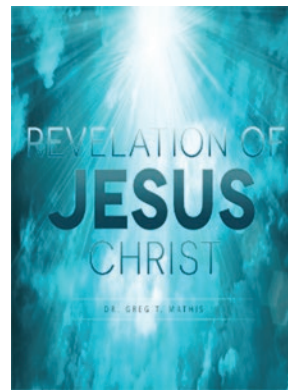
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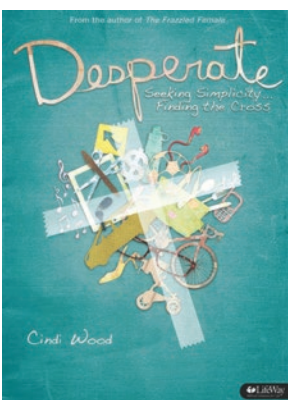
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## Love So Amazing—With a Twist

It's a sad, frustrating story punctuated by Scripture's first glimmer of hope and redemption. Genesis 3 details the fall of mankind in which Adam and Eve plummet from the pedestal of God's creation—His crowning achievement—to the depths of sin and expulsion from Eden. Their disobedience brings sobering consequences of God's judgment, drawing Scripture's first clear picture of the fact that God's righteous character cannot and will not tolerate sin.

At the same time, nestled securely into Genesis 3 is a pivotal turning point that pits divine provision against spiritual poverty. Early Church leaders coined the text of verse 15 as proto-evangelism, otherwise known as *the initial delivery or preaching of the Gospel*. Before the prophets delivered their divinely-inspired visions, before Israel was a nation, before Noah built and boarded the ark with family and animals in tow, before there was a human to be found other than Adam and Eve—God unveiled His promise of One who would come to redeem you and me. This passage delivers two notable pieces of news—one grand; the other not so much—that make it arguably unique.

First the “not so much:” Verse 15 states with clarity that as a result of the first

couple's disobedience to God's command, an ongoing and tireless enmity will wedge itself tightly between two distinct classes of mankind.

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**Go with me into the waters for a moment here because, in a culture grasping for unity, what I'm about to say is a hard-hitting fact. Right here—as a result of the Fall—God divides His creation into two sectors that to this day remain.**

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One sector involves enmity between Eve and the serpent as God tells the serpent (or Satan) that “I will put enmity between you and the woman.” Despite the fact that she and Adam themselves chose to disobey God, why would Eve *not* resent or downright abhor this being? His betrayal and lies forever changed her life. And because humans were now the object of God's love and protection, why would Satan *not* loathe Eve and those who would be forever associated with the human race?

And now the grand news: verse 15 states

that serpent will strike the heel of Eve's descendant or “seed” while that same seed will crush the serpent's head. This prophecy finds complete and utter fulfillment in the very incarnation—the virgin birth—of Jesus Christ! One of the most interesting points of the Advent season reveals that the prophecy issued in this verse spans not only the course of Eve's lifetime; it also spans centuries to the very day when Jesus would be born of Mary.

Genesis 3:15 confirms this theory through its use of the masculine Hebrew pronoun that concludes the statement, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; *he* will crush your head.” That masculine pronoun—rendered as such in its original language—indicates that the fulfillment of this promise would be a human of male gender, Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

That, praise God, is a plot twist worth celebrating!



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## A God-Ordained Season

The leaves are falling; the air is getting cooler; and for some, the most wonderful season is making its way into our lives as 2019 comes to a close. As I think of these things, I am reminded that God has prepared seasons in our own lives. Parents have the season of birth that changes to the season of pre-teens. Before we know it, the season of watching our children become adults and having their own families is upon us.

Parents have the blessed, yet difficult, job of bringing our children into this world only to give them back. Our children will have their own seasons in life. As a mom, I know how hard this can be to watch. Questions flow through our minds and doubt creeps into our hearts. I want to take a moment to remind us that these seasons are God-ordained. He has laid them out for our benefit and His glory.

Daniel 2:21 states: “He changes the times and seasons; he removes kings and establishes kings. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding.” In other words, God has already set in motion the seasons of change that

will happen in our lives. As parents, we are not immune to them; they will come. In the second half of this verse, God tells us that He gives knowledge and wisdom. We only need understanding to receive these gifts.

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**Our children will have seasons in their lives through which we, as parents, will need to guide them. If we are spending time with God and meditating on His word, our seasons will come with knowledge and wisdom that we can pass that on to our children. Our trust in the Lord will only get stronger. Our confidence in Him will only become more grounded.**

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As the seasons of life come and go, our children desperately need us to be grounded in the Word of God. Without His guidance, we cannot effectively help our children through their seasons.

God sent His Son to this earth at the appointed time. He took His Son back at the appointed time: “When the time came to completion, God sent His son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Galatians 4:4). God had appointed a time for this sending just as He has appointed a time for the events in our life.

Seasons of parenting are always changing. Sometimes they are beautiful, and then they turn ugly. In each of these seasons, remember that God ordained them as He told the prophet Daniel. He appointed them for His glory when He sent His Son to this earth to save us from our sins.

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**Cherish your seasons as the appointed time to glorify God.**

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**ASHLEY HOOKER**

Freelance writer, stay-at-home mom, and supportive wife of her husband studying to be a pastor.



# The Key to Celebrating Christ

What is the authentic key to sincerely and excitedly celebrating Christ?

Pastor Harry Ironside reflects on an incident that happened at his father's deathbed that sheds light on the answer. In the last few minutes of his father's life, his dad repeated over and over a phrase:

"A great sheet and wild beasts and, and, and..."

In desperation, he seemed to be searching for the words to finish his thought and could not recall them. Luckily a friend, who was by his bedside, finally caught on and whispered in Ironside's ear the completion of his thought, which was from Acts 10:11-12 (KJV):

*And he (Peter) saw...a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to earth: wherein were all manner of four-footed beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things...*

Whereupon Ironside's father perked up and said, "Oh, yes. That is how I got in. Just a poor, good-for-nothing, 'creeping thing,' but I got in—saved by grace."

While gasping for his last breaths, he was celebrating what Christ had done for him, and he realized exactly who he was, "a creeping thing—saved by grace!" He also understood clearly who Christ was and the wonder of the family he had been adopted into.

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**That is the thought that lies at the center of sincere and excited celebration of Christ: a proper view of oneself, a proper view of Christ, and proper value on the Royal family.**

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I—me, an infinite sinner—through no effort of my own, no merit I have earned, no position I inherited, no knowledge or thinking originating in me, no good deed I have done, have been made right with an infinitely holy, all-knowing, all-powerful God by the life, work, sacrifice, and intervention of the God-Man-Son Jesus Christ. On top of that, I have been joined to God's family with all the rights, privileges, and power that entails.

Do we see ourselves the way Iron-

side's father did—creeping things, the lowest on the totem pole of recruits to be in the eternal family of God? Isn't it easy for us to succumb to the world's idea that "I'm a pretty good person?" or "Why wouldn't God want me with Him? Compared to all those other folks, I measure up pretty well."

Do we see our sins as infinite offenses against God—even and especially the smallest of them? Isn't it easy for us to rationalize our own sins as frailties, minor, hereditary, "just the way I am," "God made me this way," or unchangeable? Surely, God couldn't be too troubled with my shortcomings, we may say.

If we truly desire to honor Christ and celebrate Him, we need to ask God for a clear picture of ourselves, a clear understanding of Christ, and an appreciation of the benefits of being in the Family of God.

I sincerely hope we all celebrate Christ well!



**BILL NEWTON**

Pastors a start-up church, writes, and serves on 3 boards. US Naval Academy graduate & Harvard MBA.

# NIGHT *to Shine*

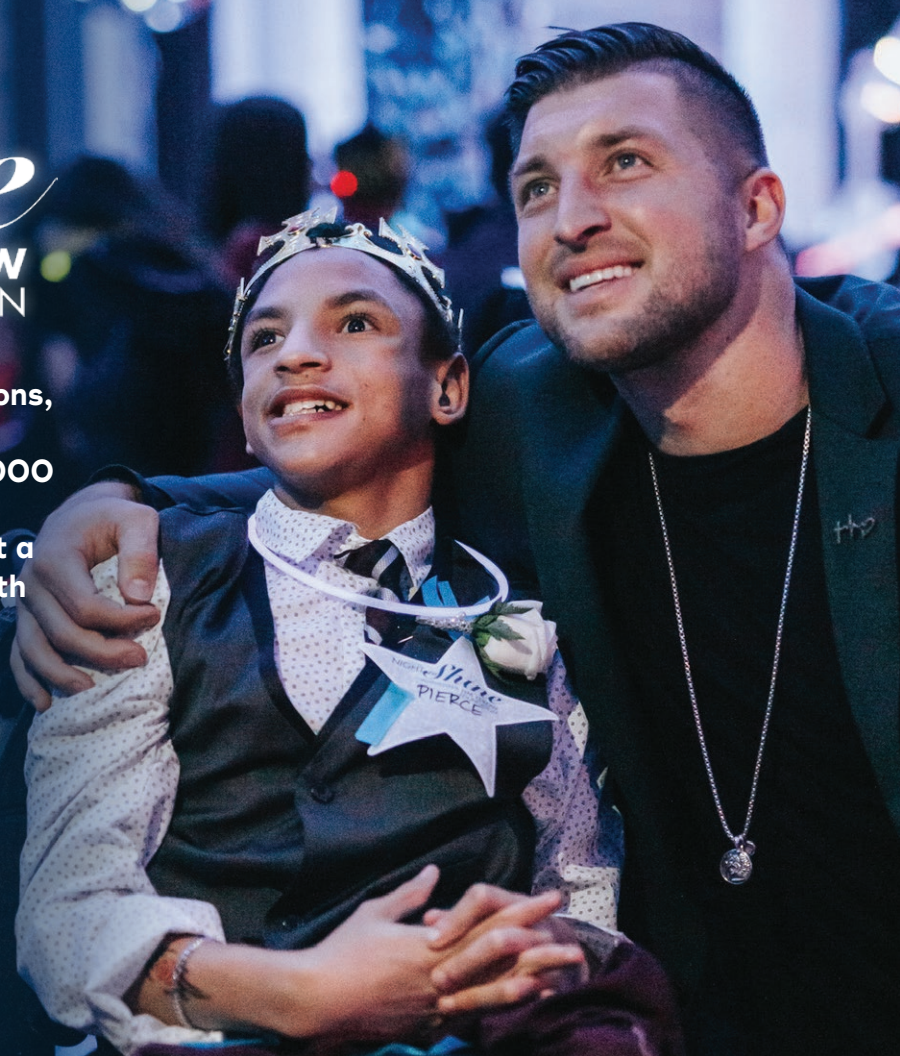
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## Waiting for the Letter Carrier

I love receiving mail in the mailbox. You know, the real mailbox outside of the house. Yes, I enjoy emails and Facebook messages a whole bunch, but there is nothing like opening the door to the mailbox and finding a letter or card. (I am not too happy about getting bills though.)

While sitting in my chair at the computer desk, I can hear the mail truck coming down the street. I know that approximately 10-12 minutes will pass, and then the letter carrier will be at our mailbox. I get so excited!!!! After waiting for the mail to be delivered—because I don't want to scare the letter carrier by running outside right away—I walk outside and greet

the mailbox with joyful anticipation.

This time of year, many people are sending cards to loved ones and even to people they don't know. I love to send cards as much as I love to get them. How wonderful to know that a person's day will be brightened by the thought that someone took the time and effort to write and mail a card or note to them.

I have been asked why I send cards and notes. I believe that God's love is shining through in each card and note that I send. I pray that whoever receives mail knows that they are loved by God and that He sent His only Son, Jesus, to save us from our sins.

John 3:16 is my favorite Scripture. That was the first Scripture my daddy ever taught me.

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*

This Christmas take time to send a note or card to someone and let them know that God loves them and that you love them, too.

*Merry Christmas!*



**MELISSA HENDERSON**

Writes inspirational articles, devotions, and more to draw people into a closer relationship with God.



## It's Time to Take Christmas Back!

*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. (Isaiah 9:2)*

We're all familiar with the complaints. Back-to-school days start up in July, Halloween is a "blip" on the radar, and Christmas begins—on the retail level—before Thanksgiving arrives; in fact, before the fall color fades. Then there's the commercialization of Christmas that has turned it into a Black Friday nightmare. It's no wonder that by the time Christmas morning rolls around, all anyone wants to do is blow through a stack of presents, eat a big meal, and take a nap. (Depending on your age one of those three will match up fine.)

So I'm challenging you men, as husbands and fathers, to take Christmas back this year. Fight for the real reason we celebrate. Change your family's patterns this season and do something different. Over the years our family has done multiple things to try to keep the Reason in focus. You can look for ways to serve others. Have your children pick out a gift for someone their age who is less fortunate.

Help wrap gifts for families in need. Choose an Advent calendar and meet with your family daily in December to remember the Christmas story. If you miss a day or two, catch up or move on; but stay committed to reminding your family why we celebrate. Serve a meal to the homeless together or invite someone who is alone this time of year to your table. There are so many ways we can take Christmas back from the world.

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**On Christmas morning, when your kids can't wait to rip open some packages, stop and read the Christmas story from Luke or turn on Charlie Brown's Christmas and let Linus read it (a classic in our household).**

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If your family is big enough, find some props and assign each one a part and have them act out the story as you read from Luke. We did this with our adult children when our grand girls were younger. We laughed as the "Three Kings" (our three sons) showed up

at the manger where their sister was an angel and their nieces were Joseph and Mary. It was silly, fun, and sometimes embarrassing, but the laughter was in good fun as we reminded each other of just WHY we celebrate.

The world has done a job on Christmas and tried its best to drown out the real meaning. It's up to us as followers of Christ to change that. So take back Christmas this year by leading your family in the celebration and not just sleeping on the couch! When you slow them down on Christmas morning with the story, they may moan and groan; but if you "write it on their hearts," they will never forget the real reason we celebrate!

*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)*



**TIM BRYANT**

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## The Joy of What God Has Done

Take a moment. Pause. Reflect on this past year. How did God use you? Did you experience the joy of leading someone (or many people) to Jesus? Great! Then celebrate what God has done.

In Luke 15, Jesus told us three stories about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. In each one, a great celebration was held when the lost was found. He tells us in verse 10, “In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

That joy is *contagious*.

When Julie joined a team to witness in her community, she literally felt sick. She had never shared her faith and didn't believe she could do it. But that changed when she personally watched someone turn to Jesus. The joy of that moment overcame her fear; her confidence in what God could do began to grow. Today, she is excited at every opportunity to share her faith. She trains other believers how to overcome their fear of witnessing.

Zephaniah 3:17a says that “*the LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves.*” We must remember

that God goes with us when we share His love with others. He speaks to the hearts of those who hear His Word. Our job is simply to share what He has done for us, but we also get to join the celebration when someone prays to accept Him. Every soul that enters His Kingdom is worth celebrating!

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**Joy drives us forward. It breaks our hearts for those who are lost and gives us the momentum to keep sharing the Gospel even when people reject it.**

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Earlier this year, Brian had the opportunity to pray with someone to accept Jesus. He could not contain his excitement. “I was able to stand and look at another individual who has gone through the same things I had and show him the goodness of God and what He's done in my life, and God moved...This was my first time going out, but I'm going to keep going.”

The Apostle Paul urges us to keep going. He says in Galatians 6:9, “Let us not grow weary in doing good, for at

the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”

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**So don't stop. Let the joy of celebrating salvation propel you to keep sharing your faith today and into next year, so that others might come to know Him.**

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If you haven't shared your faith recently, or maybe never shared it, I have good news for you: it's not too late! You can start today. The next person you meet may be desperate to find some hope—the hope that can only be offered through Jesus Christ. May God be with you as you go out and share His love.



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## Celebrating Jesus

It happened for several years. As preparations for Christmas began, we would put out two nativities. The short arms of our children could not reach the one, but their imaginations were engaged as they placed Mary, Joseph, and Baby Jesus in the unbreakable children's nativity.

They decided where the cows, goats, and sheep would stand. Our one son was determined that Jesus should not be in the manger—yet. Not surprisingly, I would come back after a while to find Jesus missing. When questioned about the absence of Jesus, our son would tell me, “Jesus didn’t come yet.”

Then one year our son didn’t take Jesus out of the manger. When I asked him about it, he said with great enthusiasm, “Mom, Jesus is in my heart now!” Our son had personally encountered Jesus and understood what the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus meant for him. The truth was that Jesus had come. While a pretend Jesus lay in the manger, the real Jesus was alive.

I have reflected on the many times I walked by that empty manger and

thought that in a way, it was appropriate. So many people put Jesus in the manger and celebrate His birth; but they forget that just like He is the real Reason for their seasonal celebration, the truths of fulfilled prophecies, and the future reality of Jesus’ return are daily reasons to continue the celebration began at His birth.

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**A friend once told me that J-O-Y was a great acronym for *Jesus On You*. The very fact that God offered His Son for us so we could be forgiven and have a right relationship with Him is a daily reason to celebrate.**

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Just as having Jesus in his heart forever changed our son’s outlook on what was necessary to celebrate, the joy in our relationship with Jesus changes everything about every day. Celebrating that, no matter what, we are sons and daughters of the Most High King Jesus allows us to have

continuous inner joy in our hearts—joy not effected by life’s circumstances or the world. That joy in celebrating Jesus allows Him to use us to be transformational in the world as we share enthusiastically our stories about what the coming of Jesus has meant for us.

Celebrate? Absolutely! There is nothing in this world better than knowing and believing all that God has done for us in the gift of His Son Jesus. Many fulfilled Scriptural prophecies have proven we can trust what has been written—the best is yet to come!

*“I am the Alpha and the Omega—the beginning and the end,” says the Lord God. “I am the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come—the Almighty One.”*  
(Revelation 1:8 NLT)



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# The Christmas Story: The Template for All Other Stories

**G**rowing up in Greensboro, NC, my grade school education included learning about one of the town's more famous past residents, William Sydney Porter. Does this name ring a bell? Perhaps you've heard of his pseudonym, "O'Henry." Porter (1862-1910) left employment in his family's local drug store, established himself as a writer., and is remembered for crafting one of America's best-loved short stories, *The Gift of the Magi*.

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**The plotline of O'Henry's Christmas story has captivated readers around the globe: a young couple, deeply in love but financially poor, sacrifices greatly in order to give gifts to each other. The husband sells an heirloom pocket watch in order to buy his wife a set of combs and pins for her hair (a century ago such things were made of tortoise shell, pearl, or ivory, and were very expensive). The wife—whose lovely hair was her pride and joy—sells it in order to buy the husband a gold chain for his beloved watch.**

As a child, this Catch-22 story frustrated me. It took a few years of reading before I understood that the author was renowned for such surprise endings. It would be even longer before I understood the ultimate act of sacrificial love on which O'Henry's story was based.

The Old Testament book of Isaiah points to the coming Savior in a number of key passages. Isaiah famously speaks of the One who would someday be "led like a lamb to the slaughter" (Isaiah 53:7 NLT) and "by His stripes you are healed" (Isaiah 53:5 NKJV; 1 Peter 2:24). Writing around 750 BC, Isaiah amazingly portrays scenes from the Savior's time on earth that we would later read about in the Gospels: He would be born of a virgin (c.f., Isaiah 7:14, Luke 1:34). The Messiah would be God incarnate (c.f. Isaiah 9:6, Mark 14:61-61, John 10:30-33). He would be beaten beyond recognition, even before being put to death on the Cross (c.f. Isaiah 52:14, Matthew 27:26-31).

Here is where the facts about Christmas might seem to be as hard to reconcile as the ending of an O'Henry tale: clearly the Father loves and cherishes His unique and only Son, Jesus. The irony is that Isaiah 53:10 says, "It pleased the Father to bruise

Him" (literally, "to crush Him"). How can this be? How could God possibly have been pleased with the vicious execution of the One called "His beloved Son"? The wording of Isaiah and similar passages like John 3:16 show the compassionate heart of the Father: If it means that you would be saved—restored in this life, saved from hell in the next—the Father's heart in Isaiah 53:10 is essentially saying to all of us, "For your precious soul...I did all of this because I love you."

Unlike even the best human writers, God leaves no holes in the plotline of His amazing drama! There is no unresolved tension in the story God has crafted. Think of it: in Jesus' coming to earth, *the Author wrote Himself into the play*. What makes this even more than just "a great story" is the element that no other dramatist could include: the cliffhanger story of Jesus happens also to be...*reality*.

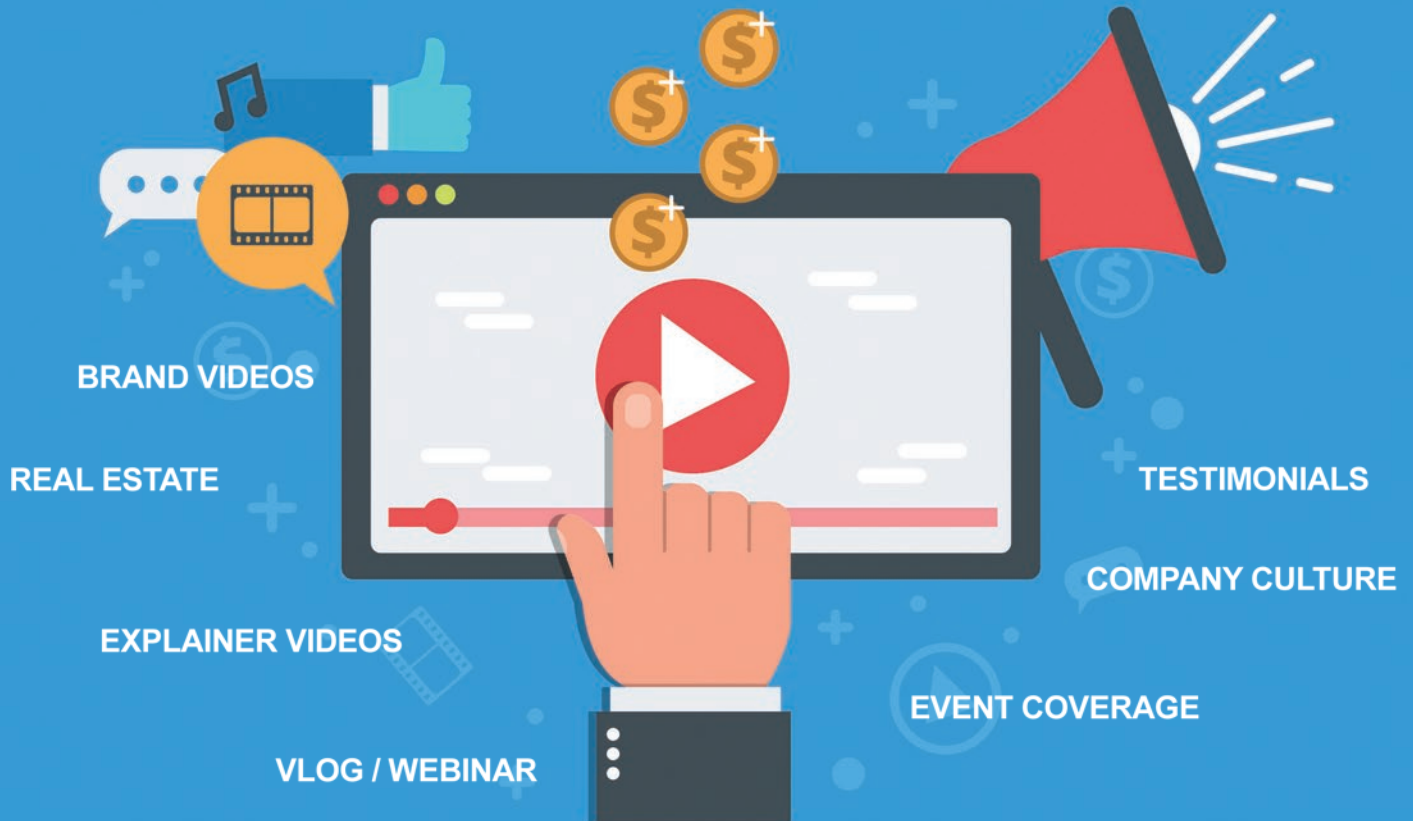


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