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“These devotional meditations are deeply soaked in Scripture, rich, vivid, always nourishing, sometimes challenging, often thrilling. I thank God for them.”

CHRISTOPHER ASH, Writer-in-Residence, Tyndale House

“Church history will remember Dr. Ferguson as one of this generation’s most insightful theological writers and biblical preachers. When you read or listen to him, you know he cares for you. And this book illumines his ability to lovingly communicate the grand themes of God’s love-filled redemptive purpose.”

CHRIS LARSON, President and CEO, Ligonier Ministries

“Sinclair Ferguson has written yet another book to bless and build up God’s people. So read it! This devotional will warm your affections for Christ and remind you of your identity in him as a lover of God and a lover of others. Gently convicting and richly God-glorifying, this Christmas devotional is a gospel-saturated delight! Read it and celebrate the living and liberating love of God for his world.”

STEVE TIMMIS, CEO, Acts29

“Amid all the glitter, goo and glow of Christmas, let *Love Came Down at Christmas* warm your heart with the wonder of God’s saving purposes. Sinclair Ferguson’s insightful simplicity will refresh you in the ancient Christmas story, and help you stoke the fire of devotion for God, which should characterise all our Christmas celebrations.”

REV'D DR SIMON VIBERT, Vicar, Christ Church Virginia Water, UK

*Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, love divine;
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and angels gave the sign.*

*Worship we the Godhead,
Love incarnate, love divine;
Worship we our Jesus:
But wherewith for sacred sign?*

*Love shall be our token,
Love be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and all men,
Love for plea and gift and sign.*

Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830-1894)

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

LOVE CAME
DOWN AT
CHRISTMAS



DAILY READINGS
FOR ADVENT


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Love Came Down at Christmas

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CONTENTS

Introduction: Christmas Is Coming	7
1. Of Men and Angels	13
2. Glittering Powers	19
3. The Dead Giveaway	25
4. Anyone for Patience?	31
5. The Milk of Human Kindness	37
6. Happy with Your Lot	43
7. One Great Mystery	49
8. Harmonious Humility	55
9. Love Has Good Manners	61
10. Throw Yourself In	67
11. Easily Irritated?	73
12. The Father's Heart	79
13. Rejoicing: Right or Wrong?	85
14. A Covering	91

15. Believing Everything and Anything?	97
16. Hope Springs Eternal	103
17. Endurance Test	109
18. Everlasting Love	115
19. Future Perfect	121
20. Growing Up	127
21. Face to Face	133
22. The Part Is Not the Whole	139
23. “The Well-Known Three”	145
24. The Greatest	151

INTRODUCTION

CHRISTMAS IS COMING



Christmas time again and, to borrow the words of John Paul Young’s song, “Love is in the air”. (“Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh” was how the chorus eloquently ended, if I remember rightly.)

Love is “in the air” *every* Christmas. It features in the songs we hear as we shop for presents and in the commercials we see on TV (“Show someone they’re loved this Christmas”, as one department-store slogan put it). Love is present in the cards we send and in the words we write on the tags we attach to the presents we give (“With love from...”).

It is a theme that is also likely to feature prominently in the annual round of Christmas interviews in the magazines and newspapers. Each year various famous people are inevitably asked what Christmas means to them. Whether they’re an actor, a musician, or some sort of reality-TV “star”, the answers are usually similar. “Well, it means... I wish people would just love each

other. That's what Christmas is really all about, isn't it? That's what it means to me, anyway. Yes, love."

Everyone seems to agree: Christmas is about love.

As Christians, we can attest that this much is true. Christmas exists only because of love.

But what if the interviewers were to follow up by asking the "why?" and the "what?" questions? "*Why* is Christmas all about love?" and "What do you *mean* by 'love'?"

Imagine for a moment that one of the famous people they were interviewing were a Christian. It might come as a shock to the reporter if their interviewee responded to the "why?" question by saying:

Christmas is about love because Love came down at Christmas. That's why we have Christmas in the first place! The meaning of Christmas is found in the message of Christmas: "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3 v 16).

And what if the interviewee, now on a roll, continued, "And you asked me what love is, didn't you? The apostle Paul tells us in the Bible. He knew what love is because he had experienced God's love for him in Jesus. He wrote that 'The Son of God ... loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 2 v 20). In fact, he devoted an entire section of one of his letters to a church to explaining what love is—I remember learning it by heart a few years ago!" Can you imagine someone reciting these words?

Love Came Down at Christmas

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

(1 Corinthians 13 v 1-13)

The poor interviewer might be left lamely asking, “Could you say that in just a few words?”!

In fact, you could do it in two words: Jesus Christ. He shows us what love is. Love is simply being like him.

So, love is a lot more than just having good feelings about someone else. It is the greatest thing in the world, but it is also the most demanding.

The Christian faith has a grammar all of its own. If we mess up the grammar of a language, we will not be able to speak it properly. In the grammar of the Christian faith, what we are called to be and do is rooted in who God is and what he has done for us in Christ. So the resources we need to love others are found in the love of Jesus Christ for us. That is why, when we read Paul's words, we need to keep our ears open for echoes of Jesus' life and look for his shadow falling on every line.

So, before you begin to read this book—which is all about 1 Corinthians 13—take a few moments to read that passage, preferably out loud (it was originally written to be read that way). When you come to the second paragraph, wherever you see the word “love” or “it”, substitute your own name. See how far you get!

Then, read the chapter again. But this time, in the same second paragraph, when you see “love” or “it” substitute the name “Jesus”—and read to the end.

These two ways of reading the passage go together. The first tells us what we are called to be as Christians—and exposes how far short we have fallen. The second tells us what Jesus is like.

In the days leading up to Christmas, we are going to walk through this passage line by line and explore what it means for us.

“Why choose this passage for Advent?” one might ask. 1 Corinthians 13 is among the best-known chapters in the Bible. Quotations from it or references to it appear in some unexpected places. Bob Dylan alluded to it in his song “Dignity” released in 1994. Prince Charles read it at Diana’s funeral service in 1997. President Obama referred to it in his first inaugural speech in 2009. Perhaps no words have been read more frequently at wedding services than these.

But when you slow them down, and read them phrase by phrase, and apply them to yourself, they transpose into a different key altogether. They cease to be rhetorically pleasing and emotionally soothing; instead they become an analysis of your spiritual life. They are deeply challenging.

Perhaps that’s not what we expect at Christmas time. But the real meaning of the Christmas story is challenging as well as heart-warming. It is about love coming down. And it makes us think about love in a new way.

So, let’s take a deep breath and begin to explore how and why *Love came down at Christmas*—and the difference this makes to our lives.

1. OF MEN AND ANGELS



*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels,
but have not love,
I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*

1 Corinthians 13 v 1

Angels are in fashion—at least at Christmas time! Look at any collection of hymns or songs, and you may well find more references to angels in the section marked “Advent” than in all the other sections added together.

The New Testament word for “angel” means a messenger. Every time angels appear in the Christmas story, they are carrying messages from heaven to earth.

In the run-up to Jesus’ birth, angels appeared to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and—in dreams—to Joseph, his adoptive father (like his Old Testament namesake, Joseph was a dreamer). A vast crowd of them appeared to a few shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem. Interestingly, it’s clear that all these angels spoke the local language—which happens to have been Aramaic, a form of Hebrew. Angels can speak in human tongues.

So, what does Paul mean when he begins the “love chapter” (1 Corinthians 13) with a reference to angel tongues as well as human tongues?

This isn’t the first time Paul has talked about tongues in this letter to the Corinthians. In the previous chapter, he writes about their ability to speak in “various kinds of tongues” (12 v 10). In the next chapter he devotes 28 verses to discussing these tongues (14 v 1-28). Clearly this was a big deal in Corinth. Whether these “tongues” refer to foreign languages or ecstatic speech, the Corinthians—or at least some of them—may have believed they could speak “Angel”. Presumably speaking “Angel” carried more kudos than any other language. Imagine being able to speak the language of heaven! Were some of them even claiming that they had spoken with angels?

When one of our grandsons was about eight or nine, he told me how excited he was to be going to France for his summer holiday “because I’ll be able to practise my French on the French!” I said nothing. Despite five (miserable!) years studying French in school, I was silently thinking, “The French are the *last people* on whom I would want to practise my French”—and in my experience they have always agreed with me. But being able to practise your French on the French is nothing compared to being able to practise “Angel” on angels! Imagine it today: a publisher would offer a ghostwriter if need be to get your story. You’d be on the bestseller list and interviewed on TV (“Tonight we meet the author of *I Spoke with Angels*—this year’s number one bestseller”).

But notice what Paul says: if you can speak “Angel” but you lack love, you are “a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal”. You may think you’re special, but in God’s eyes—and ears!—you act and sound like a brass instrument making a loud, unpleasant noise. Actually, he doesn’t say, *You sound like*. He says, *You are*. You are not what you think you are.

Metalworking was a significant industry in first-century Corinth. So, the Corinthians knew all about what Paul meant. Imagine a little Corinthian factory where the craftsmen made gongs and cymbals! All that clanging and banging—the Berlin Philharmonic it wasn’t! You would want to cover your ears with your noise-reducing headphones. That’s what speaking in tongues sounds like in God’s ears if the speaker lacks love.

Some scholars think Paul may have been thinking about the metallic amplification systems that were crafted in Corinth for use in the theatre: *You think you are something? You are just a self-amplifier!*

You probably don’t claim to have the ability to speak “Angel”. But what Paul seems to be doing here is applying a general principle to a specific problem he saw in Corinth. That problem keeps on recurring. You encounter it whenever you meet someone who wants to tell you all about his or her gift (or “gifting”, as people like to say today). Ministers and pastors are sometimes asked, “If I become a member of your church, will I get to use *my gift*?” “Will my gifts be *recognised* by the church?” Or even, “Why aren’t my gifts being recognised by this church?”

Paul valued the gifts of the Spirit, but he wasn't much interested in that approach. His first question at a church-membership interview would not be about your gifts. He'd want to know about your love—about how you want to serve others for Jesus' sake. He'd "sound you out"—perhaps in more than one sense! He knew that any true fellowship of God's people will make room for our gifts when people see we want to serve others because we have come to love them.

Isn't it odd that this chapter about love, which so many people "love", begins by telling us what love isn't? And about who doesn't have it? Not really. One of the best ways of explaining something is by saying what it isn't. Paul often does that. It helps eliminate a great deal of wrong thinking and misunderstanding. Here he says that *love isn't the same thing as having great gifts*. You might be a very gifted teacher. You may be applauded as a musician. You might be admired for your spiritual prayers. But none of that matters if you do not love.

But if 1 Corinthians 13 contains a description of love, it must ultimately be a description of Jesus. And Jesus did speak with the tongues of angels as well as of men.

Jesus not only spoke "Angel"; he spoke *with* angels (Mark 1 v 13; Luke 22 v 43). He is their King. They are his servants and ambassadors. Throughout his earthly life they were—appropriately enough—waiting "in the wings" to do his will. Even on the cross he could have summoned legions of them and they would have come immediately to rescue him (Matthew 26 v 53). But he knew he couldn't rescue us if they came to rescue him.

It was him or us who would be saved, and he chose us. Although he could speak with the tongues of angels, he remained silent—because he loved us so much. Instead he spoke to his Father and asked him to save those who were watching him (“Father, forgive them,” he prayed). That was more important to him than speaking to the angels and asking them to save him.

In fact, Jesus not only spoke angel-language. He spoke the language of God: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with* God” (John 1 v 1). He was face to face with God, in intimate conversation with his Father. But “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (v 14). He came face to face with us, taking our nature so that he might speak to us. As the Nicene Creed, an ancient statement of faith, affirms, “For us and for our salvation he came down”.

Whatever gifts you may have, love always means that you come down. It means that you use those gifts for the good of others, not to make yourself feel good. It means that you are willing to do things that are uncomfortable or inconvenient for you, or that go unnoticed.

For “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal”. If so, I am not like Jesus. And ultimately, love is being like Jesus. It silences all noisy gongs, clanging cymbals and self-amplification systems. Real love always comes down. We know that because *Love came down at Christmas*.

REFLECTION

Are you more concerned with using your gifts, or with loving others? How could you use your gifts in service of others this week?

PRAYER

*Love through me, Love of God;
There is no love in me.
O Fire of love, light thou the love
That burns perpetually.*

*Flow through me, Peace of God;
Calm River, flow until
No wind can blow, no current stir
A ripple of self-will.*

*Shine through me, Joy of God;
Make me like thy clear air
That thou dost pour thy colours through,
As though it were not there.*

*O blessed Love of God,
That all may taste and see
How good thou art, once more I pray:
Love through me—even me.*

Amy Carmichael (1867-1951)