

T H E J O U R N E Y O F T H E M A G I

The Twelve Days of Christmas



as Twelve Ways to Deepen Your Experience of Prayer

C H R I S E R D M A N

INTRO

The [Twelve Days of Christmas](#) are largely forgotten today. If they are remembered, they're remembered as a song about "Lord's a leaping," and "partridges in a pear tree." The Twelve Days, December 25-January 5, are the true Christmas, the Christmas not of preparation for a single holiday, but of opening our hearts increasingly to the Absolute, the Ultimate, the Eternal Light of God.

These Twelve Days are also in invitation to intensified spiritual awareness. We seek to open further to the Light come into the world in Emmanuel, God-With-Us. And so, the Twelve Days are a journey into prayer, a season set at the beginning of the year that helps deepen our experience with God in the midst of daily life, embracing the sacred in the ordinary tasks of emails and grocery shopping, washing dishes, sitting in staff meetings, and running kids here and there.

At the beginning of the Twelve Days stands the birth of Christ—that great eruption of light into the ordinariness of human life, a slowly expanding fire kindled at the crossroads between East and West, North and South. The end of these Twelve Days hosts the celebration of Epiphany, a word that means "manifestation" in Greek. Epiphany centers on the story of the wise men, or Magi, who journeyed from the east to welcome the Christ.

The Magi stand for those who come to the Light, those awakened by the Light—enlightened in the true sense of the word. They stand for those who return to their daily lives changed, bearers of the Light where ever they may be.

Today, Christmas Eve, I begin my journey into prayer. I turn from all the preparations for Christmas, and instead of closing the door on Christmas as so many will in the next two days, I open my heart to the Absolute, the Ultimate, the Eternal Light of God, willing to go wherever the Light should lead me.

THE FIRST WAY: AWARENESS

Prayer is universal. At all times and in all places people have uttered some kind of prayer. Every human heart yearns to awaken to the Light that radiates from the Center, Source, and Substance of all things. We are restless vagabonds until we come home to this Light manifest in Jesus, who is, astonishingly, Son of God—God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God.

The Magi “observed his star at its rising” ([Matthew 2.2](#)). They had only hints at what this sign in the skies meant. They had no idea where it would take them and what it would do in and through them. They only knew they had to find it . . . come hell or high water.

To pray, you needn’t know anything more than that you’ve seen a great light. And the first step of prayer is to awaken your desire (even desperation!) to move in its direction.

Prayer begins this way, with humble awareness of your need.

Today, Christmas Day, all I must do is to look to the Light and awaken my desire or desperation to find it . . . come hell or high water.

THE SECOND WAY: AWAKENING

There comes a point in each of our lives when we wake up, take a long look at our selves, and wonder what's become of us. We look around ourselves and at the person we've become and realize the life we're living isn't the life we want for ourselves.

There are new questions that old answers don't satisfy. Tattered relationships. An insane pace. You're medicating your pain with work or sex, or by abusing alcohol or drugs. Life as it is isn't working for you, but you haven't a clue what to do about it.

You can avoid the crisis that stares at you from the mirror. You can pray for a miracle. You can keep medicating your pain, but that's likely to keep you in this cul-de-sac, terribly broken, or worse, dead. Or you can embrace your crisis as the path of God—as incongruous as that may seem to be.

The sacred text doesn't tell us why the Magi left the life they once knew ([Matthew 2.1-12](#)). We only know that the light they'd glimpsed in the sky gave them such hope that they left it all behind and set out on a long, arduous, and dangerous journey, not knowing if they'd ever return or what would become of them.

Imagine you're one of them. You look into your mirror with new eyes—eyes filled with a new and holy light. Like them, you turn from what is not working—from the frustration and pain, the crushed dreams, the boredom. You watch as you set out on the path your crisis opens up before you. Someone behind you hollers that you're a fool, but

you no longer believe them. Something else tells you it's the path of wisdom, a path leading to God.

Today, on this second day of Christmas, I will grow still in prayer, taking a long look at myself—no matter how painful that look may be. I'll look long and deep until I see two things about myself: 1. that I am in crisis, and 2. that taking this path may well be the smartest thing I've ever done. Trusting that wisdom, I set out into the unknown.

THE THIRD WAY: COMPANIONSHIP

No one can take this journey for you. The journey toward God is yours—start to finish. Setting out has energized you, and following this Star is the one thing you now know you must do. You are afraid of this journey into the unknown, but you fear more staying put, staying here, stuck in the rut that's been your life.

This journey toward God is yours, but that doesn't mean you have to walk it alone, nor should you. You'll need companionship, for this is neither a safe nor an easy journey.

You'll most likely want to choose your own companions. But frankly, those who will help you most aren't the ones you'd choose. So don't go looking for your companions. Instead, keep focused on the Star, the One you seek ([Matthew 2.2](#)). Walk in the light that's given you, and remain open to God's mischief along the way. The Holy Spirit will orchestrate surprise meetings with remarkable people traveling the same direction. You'll miss them if you focus on making your own friends. They might not fit in at a dinner party back home, but they are the ones who'll bring you the comfort, humor, wisdom, and safety you'll need on this long journey.

And when the night is darkest and the companions you need are nowhere in sight,

here's the best mischief of all . . . the Light you seek at the end of your journey will walk beside you, though you cannot yet see it.

Today I will trust that the companions I need will come; I don't need to find them. I will wait and watch in faith. And when they're given to me, I will listen with my heart for the gifts they bring.

THE FOURTH WAY: WONDER

To live with wonder is to live with awe and reverence. Wonder is childlike—wide-eyed and innocent before a mystery bigger than you are. You don't have to be a child to know wonder, but most of us grown-ups no longer know what it's like to stand wide-eyed and awe-struck before a mystery that's beyond us.

Beauty is the surest way back into a sense of wonder. Beauty renders your mind temporarily dumb, your thoughts overwhelmed by splendor. There are no words, no thoughts that can pull into your mind the beauty that's before you.

Prayer needs beauty like your camel needs water. Not frequently. But here and there, a taste of beauty will carry you a long, long way.

On this journey, your prayers often become more like a supply list of things you'll need to pick up at the next town along the way, or like a to-do list for God. That's understandable. But take care to get yourself out of yourself from time to time, and into something much, much bigger. Wide-eyed and innocent again before beauty. There's no better way to infuse your prayers with wonder and a sense of the Divine.

Silent, still, and awe-struck before beauty—now you're speaking the language of God.

Today, beauty will cross my path, but I'll miss it if I'm preoccupied. I must watch for it. And when it comes, I'll stand silent and still, drinking deep of wonder.

THE FIFTH WAY: WALKING

Most of us live life mostly in our heads, but our thoughts are not where real life is lived. Your thoughts may be memories of real experience, they may imagine experience yet to come, but they're not real experience. They're interpretations of the past and projections of what may come. They're illusions, fantasies. Powerful, to be sure, but not ultimately real.

The only life you can live is the one that's coming to you right now. [Jesus said](#), "Don't worry about tomorrow, tomorrow has enough worries of its own." You cannot meet God in the past or the future, but only in the present. So, you must find a way to live here, now, "taking every thought captive" as [St. Paul taught](#).

This is why walking is a spiritual practice. When you walk on the earth, your feet touch the ground. You awaken to your senses, and they root to to this moment. But you can't be in this moment when you're galloping along, eyes fixed on the future (or fleeing the past) lost in your anxious, calculating, or ambitious thoughts.

You're a wise woman, a wise man, when you regularly get down off your high horse, get out of your head, and walk the real earth for a while, aware of what's right around you. The feet of the God you aim to meet walked this earth; yours ought to as well.

Today, I'll take off my shoes and feel the ground beneath my feet. I'll wiggle my toes in the carpet, stroll in a garden or to the kitchen or copier—and pay attention while I'm doing it. Remember, "the place beneath your feet is holy ground" ([Exodus 3.5](#)).

THE SIXTH WAY: DESERT

You're walking now. It's night, and away from the city lights you're more able to perceive the haunting beauty of the landscape around you. As you do, two things begin to happen to you.

First, with each step you take, each day and stage along the way, you sense a growing anticipation rising within you. Deep within there's a growing conviction that you've finally set out on the one journey that truly matters; you're pursuing the Ultimate, the Absolute, the Source and Goal of all life. All you were made for and destined to be lies at the end of this journey, bathed in the pure radiance of the star's bright light.

Second, you notice you've begun to enter a new and strange land you've never seen before. The familiar landmarks are gone. You've moved off the map. You're lost to all except the light of the star. Anticipation emboldens you, but the strangeness of this new land unnerves you.

If you've not known something of this eagerness and nervousness, you've not gone far enough in the spiritual journey; your praying's been too safe. At some point, all who seek God are carried into some kind of desert experience, for the desert is the furnace of transformation. In the desert, we're stripped of all that is external. The only thing that remains is the nakedness of the heart's pure trust. This is why every spiritual "athlete," from Abraham to Mother Theresa, was pressed by the Holy Spirit into the desert.

Today, I'll acknowledge that the desert frightens me, but I must not avoid it if I'm to find what I'm looking for.

THE SEVENTH WAY: WORDS

You will, of course, want to pray along the way—that is, you’ll find yourself wanting to speak words to God and about God. Prayer, you think, is about words, and yes, you’re right. It is about words, there’s no escaping that. But prayer is so much more than words.

In truth, you’ve been praying all along—from before you awakened to your deep desire or desperation to follow this star to the End. Prayer is not merely asking God for things. It’s not just using nice words to massage the Divine. It may include these things, but prayer is essentially your awareness of God. It’s not merely the mind or mouth in motion; prayer is an awakened heart, an interior awareness of God. This is why the Bible often shows how the mind and mouth are made dumb—stone silent—when God shows up ([Habakkuk 2.20](#) and [Mark 9.7](#) are just two of many examples).

The problem with words is that we tend to become hypnotized by them. First, we form them and then they form us. We think that once we’ve attached a label to something we know what it is. But consonants and vowels can’t explain a flower, let alone its Maker. I think that’s why God played coy with Moses and gave him a riddle for the divine name rather than a label. “I’m not going to give you a label by which you can think you’ve got Me figured out,” said God, “Just call me ‘I Am Who I Am,’” ([Exodus 3.14](#)).

Of course, you must use words, and words have a beauty of their own. The trick is not to be tricked by them. You must not misuse them or attach too much to them, to over-identify with the words themselves.

So when you speak to God or about God, take up a Psalm or little twig of Scripture and lay it on the fire of your growing love for God. "But take care," says God, "and don't misuse the Book; its only aim is to light the way to Me."

Today, I'll not heap up empty phrases. Instead, I'll light a small fire on the hearth of my heart. A few sacred words are all I'll need for kindling.

THE EIGHTH WAY: HUMILITY

You seek God, but the further you go in this journey the more you keep bumping into yourself.

Let's say you decide to take a few minutes and enter the quiet of prayer; you descend into your heart and journey further toward the intimacy with God you desire. But the moment you do, a riot breaks out within you. Your mind jumps to life and your thoughts leap around inside your brain like a bunch of monkeys on crack. You've come face to face with your ego.

The ego is not pride; rather it's the self-managing faculty within you whose job it's been to take care of you all these years. The ego's not bad; it just thinks it's God. So when you begin to seek God in earnest, it's not amused. It doesn't mind you being religious—if you're religious, it's still in charge telling you how to be good, condemning when you're not, and reminding you of the rules.

So long as the ego still rules the roost, you'll never really know God; your ego can know all about God but that doesn't mean you know God. To advance in the spiritual life your ego must be humbled, and that's no easy task. "Humility," someone's said, "is not thinking less of yourself; it's thinking of yourself less." But that's precisely what the ego can't handle. When you seek God earnestly, it will holler and scream at you, and will try to distract you with a parade of ugly thoughts, fears, even the most beautiful things in the world.

When it does, don't give up; you're moving in the right direction. Concentrate on the light you seek. You're humbling your ego; you're un-selfing yourself. Behind the idol of your humbled ego waits God. Humility, then, is the beginning of wisdom. But know this: it will get darker before it gets lighter; you'll feel more like a fool before you feel wise. You've entered the narrow gate and the way is hard. Only a few walk this way. [\(Matthew 7.13-14\)](#)

Today, rather than just letting my thoughts rule the roost, I'll take a few moments and watch them without following where they want to take me. That ought to infuriate my ego.

THE NINTH WAY: DARKNESS

On Christmas, a Light broke into the darkness of the world's night, and a star—marking the crossroads between East and West, North and South—stood sentinel above the place of Christ's coming. You glimpsed this star while still far way, and awakened by fresh hope, left everything behind, setting out on the one journey that truly matters: find the Light, come hell or high water.

The one thing you underestimated was the darkness—it feels like hell and high water. Out here, between the life you left behind and the Light you seek, it's night. Much of the life of prayer is spent here—in between, in the dark. Here, you have more questions than answers; you feel more of God's absence than God's presence; you've set out for the Light, but it's only gotten darker; you wonder if this wasn't so wise after all.

But darkness is the one great necessity in the spiritual life. The saints will all tell you this. Your ego loves daylight, but night unsettles, even unseats it. The ego—the little self-manager within you—doesn't know how to function in the dark. When you can see, your ego knows just what to do. But in the darkness all your mental faculties are disoriented, and you have only your heart of faith to guide you. ([Isaiah 50.10-11](#))

True prayer must take you by the dark path. Only so can you come to the true Light that is true God and not some projection of your ego. In the darkness you must let go of all but faith—all props and pretension, all assumptions and preconceptions. In the darkness you will be tempted to turn back and return to lesser lights. But if you press forward, blind to all but the faint light of faith, you will find what you're looking for.

Too long I've feared the darkness. Today, I will embrace it as grace—a severe but liberating mercy. I will walk through the darkest valley, and I will be afraid. May my fear strengthen my faith until faith is all I have.

THE TENTH WAY: PERSEVERANCE

The light of the star is leading you uphill now. Bethlehem doesn't sit on a plain; it rests on a mountain. The last stage of your journey is a climb—a sweaty, gasping-for-air ascent toward the light of Christ.

Spiritual enlightenment is no walk in the park. You've crossed snow-covered mountains, crossed raging rivers, defeated bandits on the road, overcome thirst and hunger and fear, trudged on in the darkness against the howls of your inner demons. You're thinner than when you set out. Older. Poorer. In pursuit of this great Light, you've left nearly everything along the winding road behind you.

Your lungs burn with each step upward, but as you pause to catch your breath, you become increasingly aware of another sensation within you—pleasure. At first it seems strange, for why should such hard work, such risk, such fear and deprivation and loss result now in pleasure? Then it dawns on you. All you thought you needed, you don't need; all you thought you couldn't live without, you can live without; all you once thought mattered most, doesn't matter. You are free. You shudder with a brief and exquisite happiness.

You own nothing now but faith, and the two gifts that cannot be separated from it—hope and love. Three treasures available to all, but possessed only by those who persevere in this difficult inner journey of prayer, those who traverse their own interior geography through landscapes as beautiful and challenging as anything on Earth. Persevere, and Grace will meet you just beyond the next rise. ([Romans 5.3-5](#))

Today, I will persevere in prayer. I'll yield all I once thought I could not live without. I'll breath-in the brief and exquisite happiness of this holy nakedness. Faith, carry me these last few steps. Hope, hold me. Love, fill me.

THE ELEVENTH WAY: FIRE

You who walk this way toward Christ—long and fearsome as it may be—who persevere in this difficult inner journey of prayer will come face to face with what you’re looking for. Take care though, the life of prayer is not magic—speak the right words, do the right things, and presto, enlightenment. No, you’ll never conjure up a mystical experience; the mystical is not magical.

Instead, you’ll be lead into the fullness of God ([Ephesians 3.19](#)). This fullness is the end of the journey, the goal of all life, the fruit of your spiritual practice. But the moment we say “goal,” we’re tiptoeing close to danger. The ego loves goals, and talking about the goal of prayer arouses your ego and launches you into the kind of grasping, reaching, and achieving that’s the antithesis of true prayer.

So here’s what you’re to do:

The eleventh way is the way of utter relinquishment. There is no further you can travel. You’ve come as near to the Light as you can get on your own. You must now stop and sit still before Christ. Ask nothing. Demand nothing. Accept whatever comes. Open the treasure chest of your heart and keep it open by breathing gently, letting your breath fall into a natural, uncontrolled rhythm. Offer the three gifts that have carried you here: gold of faith, frankincense of hope, myrrh of love. They’re all you have now. And these too you must surrender to Christ. Empty and naked you wait, ready to receive what nothing can buy, earn, or comprehend.

The divine Fire, the Light you've sought from the beginning, will come suddenly and unexpectedly—an exquisite, unexplainable joy. When you no longer care when and how the Fire comes, or what it's like when it does, you're less apt to miss its warmth.

THE TWELFTH WAY: RETURN

You've come at last to the full mystery of Christmas. "Divinity became humanity that humanity might become divinity," said St. Athanasius in the East and St. Augustine in the West. God in Christ and Christ in us, the full presence of God ([Colossians 1.27](#)). Your heart is now the home of God, and God the home within your heart. Before this mystery your mind stands dumb; reason cannot think its way across this chasm and bring you home.

But love can. Love will carry you into the intimate union you were made for. When you love you cannot be anywhere else but present. Up till now you've lived far, far away—always somewhere else, distant from God and from your true self, not present to the Presence. But that's changed now.

You've come all this way to Bethlehem only to realize that what you sought in this far away land was not far away after all. It was in you, but you were outside yourself. You were conscious of everything else but absent to the one thing that really matters. Now you're different—you've entered your inmost self and found the sacred center, the place you can enter wherever you are and whenever you want. You're more present now to the Presence. This is the essence of prayer.

So you needn't stay on this mountain. You can return to writing emails and going to meetings, changing diapers and washing dishes. Go ahead, paint a wall, teach third graders, walk in the woods. But as you do, take another approach ([Matthew 2.12](#)): be present. When you are, everything changes. When you're present, you're no longer

anxiously looking everywhere else for happiness or fulfillment. You're no longer resisting this moment, even if it's awful; it's awful largely because you want to be elsewhere. When you're present, no longer haunted by the past or obsessing about the future, it's very hard to be unhappy. When you're present, you're as near as you can be to God—who's as close as your next breath, near as the beating of your heart.

Today, when I get knocked around or confused or sucked too long into the past or future, I'll return to the present—the face before me, the task at my fingertips, the breath filling my lungs. And in this moment I'll return to the happiness of Christmas: God in Christ and Christ in me.