

Christmas Footprints

Todd Stiles

Smashwords Edition

Copyright 2010 Todd Stiles

Smashwords Edition, License Notes

Thank you for downloading this free ebook. You are welcome to share it with your friends. This book may be reproduced, copied and distributed for non-commercial purposes provided the book remains in its complete original form. Thank you.

Table of Contents

Preface

Footprints of Faith

Footprints of Courage

Footprints of Hope

Footprints of Love

Afterward

Preface

Christmas has too quickly been hijacked by the commercial world and the postmodern consumer. It's "the most wonderful time of the year," but for all the wrong reasons. Instead of a virgin and a manger, we've been given a Santa and a sleigh ride. Consequently, the journey back to the first nativity can get fuzzy. Inappropriately simple. Too easy.

Hear me out – I'm not arguing for undermining Christmas as we know it. Seriously, I love the Christmas traditions our family has enjoyed, such as a zillion lights on the house, Christmas music playing 24/7 the day after Thanksgiving, and Julie's famous and delicious lasagna on Christmas night. Count me in on all of that!

What I'm urging us to do is understand Christmas as they knew it. For that initial Christmas no doubt looked really different. No river and woods on the way to grandmother's house; probably more like a hilly dirt road heading south out of Jerusalem. No angel named Clarence; more like an angel named Gabriel. And no coming home parties from the hospital; instead, a quick escape to a totally different country.

Yet, in many ways, it probably looked very similar. I'm sure they were afraid of the unknown, just like we are. I suspect they were nervous about facing tough circumstances, just like we are. I bet they had to find a way to look ahead even when their past seemed to pull them back, just like we do.

That's the journey I invite you to take; those are the footprints I want you to see and in which I hope you'll walk. Footprints of faith and courage; footprints of hope and love. Those are the timeless steps that will help each of us every Christmas. Truly, as we understand their journey, I think we'll be able to better undertake ours.

Acknowledgements

Believe me, I'm no prolific author. I'm just a guy who loves to write. But my writing seems to flow from my talking, which means that sometimes the first phase of a book can look pretty, well, wordy. Some of my really nice friends call this tendency of mine a passionate intensity; my less than polite acquaintances call it unnecessarily boring.

Regardless of what it really is, I am thankful for people who help bring out the best in my speaking and writing. Like my physical family, who no doubt endures my endless ideas, quotes, and questions

while I'm trying to find the perfect word or phrase. You guys make me better every day.

Like my spiritual family, the men and women who are part of a body of believers known as First Family Church. They thirst for God like few people I've seen and honor their leaders like the early Christians in Acts. Thank you for letting me have the honor of pastoring among you.

Like the team I work with at First Family Church. All of them bring a set of skills to the table that truly sharpens me daily. Specifically, Lindsay Farmer and Stephanie Trahant have been invaluable in getting this book ready. Kudos to you for your great work on my behalf!

So while Christmas Footprints may bear my name in the author's slot, it is the result of many people giving their best for a cause greater than any one of us – the cause of Christ. He is the deepest reason we all do what we do.

Chapter One

FOOTPRINTS OF FAITH

Announcements are common in church life. In fact, they're so common that most people tune them out within a matter of seconds. Maybe it's because the list of reminders rarely contains anything new; or

perhaps it's because we sense little connection to the gathering at hand. Regardless, the typical church infomercial holds little appeal and hardly captures anyone's attention.

Here's an idea: Get Gabe to handle announcements; he's got the touch. Look at the job he did with a teenage girl named Mary:

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

“I am the Lord's servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:26-38)

While angelic messengers were not uncommon in Old Testament times, they were not common to everyone. Typically, prophets received the angelic messages. In this case, though, an angel interacts with a common teenager. Naturally, she's fearful. But it doesn't stop there, for the remainder of the news brings her life to a halt: “You're going to bear a son, and by the way, he's not just a son, He's God's Son.” You can see why the words “greatly troubled” are no exaggeration.

Translate this into current times and ask yourself: What would you see? How would you feel? There's no doubt fear would start to grip your heart; “greatly troubled” would probably be an understatement about your reaction as well. In the language of today, you'd be stressed!

But notice how her fear is calmed. The angel first begins to address the obvious: “Do not be afraid.” Here's a novel idea: When you have feelings of fear, address the obvious first. Trust me – It pays to know as quickly as possible what you're dealing with.

Gabriel follows the observation of the plain by laying out various Old Testament prophecies from Isaiah 9 as a way to reassure her. “He will be great, He will be from the throne of his father David, He will reign forever, and his kingdom will never end.” Once

you've stared your fear in the face and called it what it is, arrest it with the Word of God.

Remember this phrase: When I feel only fear, biblical faith calms my heart. Why? Because biblical faith rests on God's promises. And God's promises settle my soul and bring peace to my life.

Unfortunately, a number of other "calming" options deceitfully appear on the horizon. You could settle your feet on feelings. But feelings change. You could rest your feet in a relationship. But relationships change. What about circumstances? They also change. Society? Government? Not a good idea; they change as well.

But God doesn't change. Need proof? Look at what he said in the Old Testament – "I am the Lord your God. I change not." In theological terms, it's called the immutability of God – his "unchange-ability."

When things around you are shifting and you have unscripted things surprising you at every turn, do what Mary did: face your fear by standing on the Word of God. Find the only unshakable, unchangeable thing in the universe – God! – and plant your feet right there.

There's something I want you to know about fear: While it is no doubt unfruitful, it is rarely unfounded. In other words, there usually are some natural, human reasons fear raises its ugly head.

In Mary's case, her fear was probably related to some very specific things she knew could happen to her because she was pregnant. For instance, violating the betrothal period, a one-year legal agreement in which there was to be physical separation, probably meant terrible consequences. Most scholars believe that, under the Old Testament law, you could stone someone to death for this kind of trespass. However, capital punishment would most likely not have been executed by the Jewish nation at this time because they were under an occupying foreign government. Still, the fear of punishment was strong.

Then there's the family feud that loomed before her. In fact, I wonder about the first encounter she must have had with her parents. What would it have been like to be the parents of a teenager expressing, "I think I've been impregnated by the Holy Spirit"? Whew! You can see why fear could have easily become her overriding feeling.

Add to that the concept of social disgrace. Joseph could easily have made an accusation of adultery, which would have brought both to a place of dishonor.

How did Mary find peace? Again, we see that she faced her fear through the lens of the Word of God. Check out Luke 1:46 and the surrounding verses and you'll find that her first song of praise is filled with Old Testament quotations. Truly, God's Word brought her to a place of faith when everything around her screamed, "Be afraid! Be afraid!"

How do you respond when life screams the same thing at you? What is your response when circumstances yell, “You’d better watch out! This is unexpected!” and situations shout, “You ought to be afraid of what is coming down the pike!” I encourage you to respond like Mary: in faith. Walk in her footprints, for Mary left us footprints of faith.

No doubt we all want to respond in faith. The problem is, sometimes we don’t. One reason I think this happens is because we don’t understand faith very well. You see, faith is not a blind leap; it is an informed step of trust.

Here’s the difference. A blind leap has no object on which to stop. But an informed step – faith – has a landing place in mind. A blind leap is like a “free-fall fantasy,” but an informed step is a “faith-full reality.” That’s biblical faith – the reality of God’s promises underneath our every step.

Biblical faith has as its objects two certain things – two “faith-full facts” – and it’s from these certainties that we can step confidently into what may appear to be the unknown. The first “faith-full fact” is the Word of God. Get this: God spoke the universe into existence. That’s right – it was his words that brought everything into their place. In fact, Hebrews 11:1 says, “By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the command of God.” Apparently, it is through faith that I understand God’s creative ability. In other words, what God has said provides a foundation I can see. So, first of all, faith has as its

object what God has said. Whether through the visible creation, in fulfilled Old Testament prophecy, evidenced New Testament miracles, or inspired apostolic teachings, what God has said is true and we can stand on it as completely accurate.

In addition to what God has said, our faith relies on what God has shown: the Son of God. The first few verses of Hebrews 1 say it like this: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets . . . but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son . . . the exact representation of [God’s] being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.” There you have it – the Son of God is proof positive God exists. Have no doubt, for Jesus Christ was a real, historical person who lived on a real planet called Earth. Yes, you can believe and trust God, and the life of Jesus is the evidence that leads to that conclusion.

Essentially, our faith rests on the secure and fundamental objects of what God has said in his Word and what God has shown in his Son. And those two things say to me that I have a secure and concrete place from which to take an informed step of trust. It is still a step of trust – from the known to the unknown – but it is a confident, informed one.

This Christmas, as you respond to unscripted events, let God’s Word and God’s Son form your responses. When something you didn’t plan on invades your day, ask “What does God say?” and “What would Jesus do?” As you answer those two

questions, you can be assured your first response will be one of faith, not fear.

Sometimes our faith gets blurred by the facts. We see what God wants to do spiritually, and then our eyes begin to notice only the physical realm. We think, “That can’t happen!” And we get confused by the natural. But God is acting in the realm of the supernatural.

Remember when Mary asked, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” She simply wanted to know how God was going to override the natural laws of the birds and the bees. Fair question, wouldn’t you say? Sure, but it was still centered in the physical. And God was taking Mary to the realm of the spiritual – the sphere of faith. But when fear is met with faith, it moves us beyond facts. God will address our honest questions, and he will turn our natural curiosity to supernatural confidence.

What does it mean to see beyond facts? It doesn’t mean being illogical, but it does mean believing in the impossible. It means trusting in a God who if He wills can override the laws of the natural, which he ordained, and order up the supernatural. Do you need proof? Just ask Mary. She became pregnant without ever knowing a man.

Luke 1:35 gives the answer to her honest and curious question: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.” In essence, the angel said,

“Mary, God’s power is going to impregnate you; the Holy Spirit will overshadow you. So when you have this child, it will have nothing to do with a human person we call man but everything to do with deity.” Think about it – Christ’s DNA was deity.

This fact is critically important. The Bible explains in Romans 5 that it is through the man that the seed of sin is sown. Like it or not, guys, the situation in Genesis 3 (i.e., the fall of humankind) was laid at Adam’s feet. Consequently, every person born since has inherited this thing from Adam called a sinful nature (Romans 5:12, 19). You may not want to admit it, but inside that tiny, two-week-old baby is a corrupt nature from Adam. And the only way it can ever be changed is by the power of God’s Son, Jesus Christ.

That’s right – Jesus exclusively qualifies because only he bypassed the sinful nature through the virgin birth. He was God’s seed, yet born of woman. Totally human, yet totally divine. Fully earthly, still fully heavenly. All man and all God. Had Jesus not been born of a virgin, we’d be doomed to Hell with no hope. Because he was, he emerges as the one and only Savior of all who believe.

This Christmas, relish the virgin birth. Sure, it’s hard to explain. I don’t know how the Holy Spirit did this; I don’t know how the Most High overshadowed her. But at some point, this teenage girl’s stomach began to grow. Her womb enlarged, and inside this womb was a little baby who thirty-

three years later would die to save you from your sins.

Think about the immense amount of power in the virgin birth. It's incredible! It's the same power that brought the worlds into existence. It's the same power that calmed the waters, ceased the winds, and fed the 5,000. The same power that impregnated a teenage girl and raised her Son from the dead is available to God's family today.

As you look at fearful situations in your life, you may be thinking, The facts don't line up. There's no way God can handle this! I don't see any way it can be done! The problem is you're calculating the equation without God. You're letting fear keep your eyes focused on mere facts. But put God into the equation – live by faith in him – and watch the impossible occur. In fact, look around; God is doing wondrous things everywhere that eyes of faith can see.

Mary looked around, and saw her aging relative carrying a child, remember? Astoundingly, Elizabeth was heading into her third trimester! Luke 1:36 says that Gabriel reminded Mary, “Even Elizabeth is pregnant, and she's going to have a baby well past her child-bearing years.” Then he stated the facts as seen through faith, not fear: “Nothing is impossible with God.”

The facts said, “Wait, wait, wait! We can't have babies! Elizabeth is too old, I'm a virgin ... no way! It doesn't work that way.” But faith factors in the

supernatural. And when God becomes the mathematician, everything changes. So in the unexpected, unplanned, and unscripted events of life, don't eliminate God from your equation.

God's power is not, however, a leverage for your selfish desires. It is not something you put under the rock of what you want and begin to strain, exerting spiritual pressure on some type of Santa Claus in the sky. That's presumption – thinking that God should act if you just think positive. But faith is believing God can act if He wills. Do you catch the difference? Faith doesn't hold God hostage and say, "Hey, here's my agenda." Instead, faith holds my life steady while his will is done.

When we try to use our faith as a leverage point, we undermine the timeline of God's work in our life. Delays and detours become common. But biblical faith allows us to walk in step with our heavenly Father, believing if God chooses and wills, He can. Our role is to simply believe He can. That's the kind of faith Mary had – a "He Can!" kind of faith – which is why she responded so humbly at the end of Gabriel's announcement with these words, "I am the Lord's servant."

Mary's life of faith left footprints for us – footprints of faith. This Christmas, and all year long, step confidently in those footprints and watch fear fade, even in the face of known facts. Follow fully, knowing God is able. That he can. Your next step is to simply believe.

Chapter Two

FOOTPRINTS OF COURAGE

Each Christmas I find myself drawn to a contrast rooted in the life of Joseph: males versus men. And make no mistake – you have both in every situation life throws at you.

Think back to biblical times. There were lots of males God could have selected to be the earthly father of Jesus and the earthly husband of the Virgin Mary. But apparently God found one man up to the task. His name was Joseph. And he left some footprints for those of us who call ourselves men. They are footprints of courage.

To be sure, Joseph was more than male; he was a man. And a courageous man at that! For instance, Joseph had personal courage. When informed that his soon-to-be wife was pregnant, he resisted the plunge towards public vindictiveness. When he could have said, “Hey, that’s not my child. She’s not pregnant because of me,” he didn’t. He instead choose a path of dignity and obedience that was rooted in his personal walk with God, not based on polls or popular opinion.

Joseph had spiritual courage as well. Just imagine if you were Joseph. You’re having coffee Jerusalem style, and you’re telling your accountability group,

“This girl I’m betrothed to, well, uhm, she’s pregnant! But, guys, I promise it’s not me.” You know what’s next, assuming they believe you in the first place? Something like this probably: “Well, Joseph, let’s lay out a plan for you, because you’ve got to protect yourself. You can’t be saddled with a kid that’s not yours.” But Joseph had the spiritual courage to hear the right voice rather than the easiest voices. Joseph listened to God’s singular call upon his life.

Joseph also had physical courage, for he continued to abstain from sex until after the birth of Jesus. Think about it – you’re finally married and on your honeymoon night your new wife says, “Not tonight, honey.” Yeah, right. Essentially, Joseph’s whole journey was one of courage.

Have you ever asked yourself, “Where does courage come from?” Look at Matthew 1:18-19:

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

Here is the first step to becoming a man of courage: You must practice personal integrity regardless of public pressure.

I find this principle tucked inside the word “righteous.” And while there is a positional angle to this word, I want to focus on the practical aspect of righteousness.

The root of the word “righteousness” is “right things,” and notice the “right thing” in this text. Most likely, the “right thing,” at least culturally speaking, was to divorce her quietly, as verse 19 indicates. We often think the right thing for Joseph to do was to embrace her, like the knight who comes on his horse and saves the day. And while he did do that after hearing from God, prior to his dream he was on a path to do the “right thing” even when he probably wanted to do the vindictive thing. Sure, he could have exposed her publicly, making a spectacle of her. But instead, because he was a righteous man, he was willing to do the right thing – put her away quietly. Even in his pre-God plan, he was courageous and put Mary above his own reputation.

Enter God, center stage. He gives Joseph the inside scoop, and now Joseph is beyond doing just the right thing. He is now going to do the impossible thing. God has given a new set of orders, and it is beyond simply “right.” It is now God-like. Sacrificial.

From all angles, Joseph’s courage to obey is incredible. He’s a man’s man no doubt. And that kind of courage is birthed in this inner desire to do the right thing all the time. It’s called integrity. Character. And it’s what you are when the lights are

off and nobody's looking. It's how you speak to your wife and kids when your friends aren't around. It's how you treat your coworkers when the boss is not looking or it's not the week before evaluations. It's how you spend your money when no one will know what you did with that \$10.

Personally, I think integrity and character are really lacking in a lot of men today. Men make manhood complex. But I don't think manhood is a complicated thing. If you do the right thing every day, you'll be a man. It's called practicing personal integrity. But sometimes we let other voices get into our heads. We let pressure begin to squeeze us. We worry what people think about us.

In the movie *Cinderella Man*, the main character is a boxer who is trying to make his way to the top of the boxing arena. He finds himself incredibly broke with nothing to his name and no food for his family. To help, his son steals a loaf of bread, thinking this would be a way to make a difference. But the *Cinderella Man* takes his son and the bread and goes back to the store. He tells his son, "You turn that back in and tell the man you're sorry. We don't do the wrong thing just because we feel differently or our stomachs are hungry. We do the right thing."

In that moment, the father nurtured a lot more than an appetite; the *Cinderella Man* taught his boy about more than food. He modeled integrity and doing the right thing.

Joseph was a righteous man because he did the right thing. Can the people around you call you a righteous man? Or would their first thought be about ways you've slipped around the corners, cut through here, or took an easy route there? When righteousness becomes a compelling desire inwardly, courage is starting to be birthed.

Where are some of the places we need to practice personal integrity? Here are some prime areas that need a "right thing" kind of man, along with some questions to think about.

Kids. Do you keep your word to your kids? Do you listen when they talk to you? Do you model the kind of lifestyle you want from them?

Work. Do you fulfill your agreements? Are you supportive and loyal to your boss in your words and actions? Are you honest in your reports and fair in your responses? Are you on time, even when no one else will be there?

Family. Is there duplicity in your lifestyle? Does your family see or hear one thing on Sunday and another on Monday? How is the language in your home? Does your family watch you make excuses for inexcusable behavior? Are you honest about where you've been, what you've spent, and who you've been with?

Finances. Do you often say, "I'm broke!" and then eat out four or five nights a week or buy excessive amenities for your home? Are you being truthful to

yourself and each other about your spending habits? Are you being honest about your taxes and your reportable income? What if you get too much change – Do you give it back?

Society. Do you vote for people with biblical values, or do you take the easy route and vote for the lesser of two evils? Do we speak up for what's right even when the culture says we're not politically correct?

Let me be quick to admit that I haven't always done the right thing. You're not surprised I know. Truth is, no one other than Jesus has done the right thing every time. What then? When you don't do the right thing, go to the person to whom you didn't do the right thing and say, "I didn't do the right thing. But it's my desire to be a man of integrity. Will you forgive me?" Do whatever you can to make things right. Then move on. Integrity is compromised when we try to cover up our mistakes.

I've noticed something about cover ups: they build! The first time you fail, that little voice says, "Oh, don't worry about it" or "They're not thinking a thing about what you said" or "It's not that big a deal." So you sweep it under the proverbial rug of your life, and you let it stay there. The next time, you cover up again. And every time you cover up, you sweep it under the rug. You're compromising, and the lump under the rug starts growing.

Soon, that lump under the rug gets bigger and bigger. People have to step over the lump to talk to you, your friends can't help but noticing it when

you're with them, even your neighbors see the lump through your life's front window. How much better to deal with each unrighteous act as soon as you can – when it's a little piece of lint – than to try and clean up a massive lump.

Courage also comes from a pursuing God's vision. So it was with Joseph. He was more than just a man doing the right thing. He was a man who pursued God's vision, not man's wisdom. Look at Matthew 1:20-21:

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

I think the word "considered" indicates Joseph was struggling somewhat. "Do I do the right thing, which takes courage? Or do I give in to fear and do what everyone else says to do?"

But God had other plans. While Joseph was thinking about what was legal, or maybe practical, God was about to tell him what was spiritual. The angel came to him and said, "Listen! This isn't a legal issue. And it's not just about practicality. We're talking about the plan of God to redeem mankind! I need you to get in line with my vision."

On a human level, a lot was resting on Joseph hearing God. I'm glad he was listening. And

obeying. He was tuning in to the vision of God, not just the voice of man. And he was called to follow his Lord, not because of what he saw, but in spite of what he saw. Others saw an unwed but pregnant teenage girl. A bad reputation. A family disaster. But Joseph saw the plan of God in the birth of the Son of God for the people of God.

If you want to be a courageous man, you have to follow something you cannot always see. You have to obey God's vision. Be aware that the world around you will tell you to follow what you can see, things like materialistic possessions and the kind of lifestyle that the American culture says you have to have. But that voice is temporal and short-term. God's vision is eternal. Lasting.

One of the best things you can do for your children is to help them see the unseen. To look beyond cars and houses and jobs. Sure, we may utilize those things, but those things shouldn't define us. God's vision brings us to place where eternity is constantly before us.

I sincerely believe that spiritual vision rests in the laps of men. As a father begins to give vision to his family, they will pick up on what's deep inside him...what's driving him. I suspect every child and every married woman wants to be connected to a man with a transcendent cause for which to live.

Do you want to see what Joseph's transcendent cause was? Look at the last part of verse 21: "[Jesus] will save his people from their sins." Here's my very loose paraphrase: "Hey, Joseph, I've got a

lot more in store for you than just a donkey ride to Bethlehem to pay your taxes. I'm birthing my Son, who's going to save the world, and you're part of that!" Joseph says, "I'm there, God." And I think that made the seen things – a donkey ride to Bethlehem, the line in which they stood to pay their taxes, and the financial stress they were under – take second place to the unseen thing. There was a bigger vision at stake.

There's another component to courage: embracing the opportunity to sacrifice for others. In Matthew 1:22-25, the Bible says:

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"—which means, "God with us."

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Joseph engaged in sacrificial action. Before you think, "That was easy," I'll remind you that the text lays out two ways he obeyed God. First, he took Mary home to be his wife. He did what it took to take care of Mary. Secondly, the Bible says Joseph "had no union with her." That's right guys – he abstained from any sexual contact with her until after Jesus was born. That's sacrifice. And sacrifice takes adjustments. That's why courage is so critical – adjustments are hard.

In case you haven't noticed, men don't like adjustments. Sacrifice isn't what we run towards. But courage changes the landscape for most men. It provides the foundation for doing hard things. Truly, whenever changes are called for, men should step forward and be the first to sacrifice. Joseph did. He said, "Okay, God, I'll take her as my wife, no matter what the other folks say. And I'll abstain from sex with her until she has given birth." Courage is a hidden structural beam in the life of a real man.

There is something I tell my son quite often: A selfless lifestyle is what God calls you to as a man. My little speech goes something like this...For most of your life, you'll be giving up for the sake of people around you. That's just what men do. For instance, I say, if you choose to get married, you're signing up for a selfless lifestyle. After all, you don't add a wife to your life. No, you serve your wife. Hobbies need to be lowered on the priority list so you can focus on your wife.

Being selfless is the hardest thing you'll ever do. At least that's the way it is for me. And my lack of selflessness shows up in the weirdest places: Like at the table. One night at mealtime I realized, We're running low on meatballs tonight. So I started eyeing the last two. So did my son, Brett. Of course, I'm mumbling to myself, "Don't even think about it, buddy." Just then my daughter Bethany comes in from basketball practice, and she's ready to eat. Those meatballs increased in value immediately. See what I mean? Sacrifice is hard.

My story seems small compared to Chris Spielman's saga. Chris played for the Buffalo Bills in the late 1990's. In 1995, he tore his pectoral muscle in the first game of the season, but, because he didn't want to take time for surgery, he played the rest of the season. He didn't want to miss a single game. He just wanted to play through the injury.

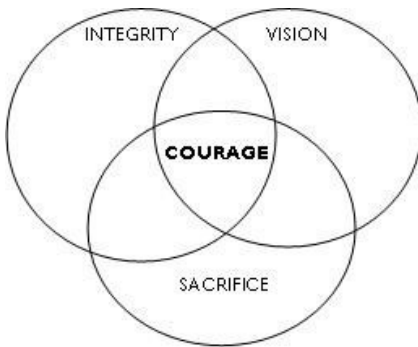
Then, in the 1998 season, Chris Spielman's wife was diagnosed with breast cancer. He walked into his general manager's office and said, "I'm through playing." The manager said, "You can't quit playing football! Millions of folks every Sunday want to see you play. We've got money to make and ratings to get." Chris said, "Wait, you don't understand, Coach. I've got a wife with cancer. If she recovers, I'll come back. Till then, I'll be taking care of her." And he went home to cook the meals and raise their kids.

Regarding this move, Chris said to the Rochester Chronicle in 1998, "I just began to be the man she married." A reporter asked him, "Why not hire a nurse or work something out with a nanny and go back and play football?" Chris said, "Well, that would be kind of crazy, because then I'd be breaking my word to her."

In my experience, when I have been the first to adjust, five other people are quick to join me – my family. And the converse is true as well. When I'm the last to respond, it's like pulling teeth to get

anybody else to do anything. That shows me something: They're looking for me to lead.

Men, you have the opportunity –the responsibility – to be a courageous man. No doubt in the next seven days you'll have an opportunity to practice personal integrity. To pursue God's vision. And to embrace a life of sacrifice. And when all three of these circles intersect, that's when courage explodes. Let me illustrate it in the following diagram:



Yes, you can have integrity, vision, or sacrifice singularly. But it's in the moment when all three come together, as in the life of Joseph, that a hero becomes visible.

Think back to 9-11. There were a lot of guys with integrity. They went to the fire station every day. It was the right thing to do. There were also guys with vision. They were hoping to climb the ladder and save the day. And there were guys with a spirit of sacrifice. I'm sure many of them were already giving up some better career options to fight fires. But on a certain day in New York City, at a certain moment

in time, the three came together; integrity, vision, and sacrifice intersected. And courage exploded.

The same type of explosion occurred in Acts 4 as well. It's the story of Peter and John being persecuted. Let's pick it up in verse 13:

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

It was courage that set Peter and John apart from everyone else. It was courage that let everyone know that had been in touch with Jesus. That day, courage made all the difference.

Integrity was involved: they were practicing the right thing. So was vision: they were responding to the commission of Christ as laid out just before he ascended. And it called for sacrifice: persecution and imprisonment for the sake of the Name. The result? An explosion of courage. Two men who were noticeably more than males.

Look familiar? No doubt – looks like Joseph. And the foot prints they all three leave for us are foot prints of courage. Step boldly today towards integrity, vision, and sacrifice, and watch courage rise up in you.

Chapter Three

FOOTPRINTS OF HOPE

Hope. Even the sound of it rings with promise and expectation. And it's especially vibrant at Christmas.

Webster's definition of hope, based on their online dictionary, is "to cherish or desire with anticipation." Of course, there's nothing wrong with that definition. In fact, this kind of hope, what I call Webster hope, abounds at Christmas. "I hope I get an iPod." Or, "I hope I get some new clothes." Sometimes Webster hope reveals itself in more serious areas of life. "I hope I keep my job next year." "I hope I get married." "I hope I can beat my cancer." For sure, Webster hope is not trivial. It weaves its way into all areas of our lives.

But the problem with Webster hope is that, at best, it is based on an uncertainty. For instance, let's say a couple says, "I hope we get pregnant soon." That kind of hope is a wish, not a certainty. Granted – you can do everything humanly possible to help that hope along; you can do everything in your power to make that wish come true. But at its fundamental level, it is still simply a wish.

And, unfortunately, sometimes these wishes – our Webster hopes – are left unfulfilled. Do you know why? Because Webster hope, that mere human wish or hunch that something better is just around the bend, is based on an uncertainty.

There is something different about biblical hope. Biblical hope has as its foundation a promise. It is a present confidence about the future based on past promises. I take this from Hebrews 6:19: “We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.” Believe it or not, the Bible says hope is an anchor. That’s a lot more secure than a wish. Why is this true? Hebrews 6:18 explains – because this hope rests on an oath made by God. Truly, our hope as believers rests on someone not something. That’s why we can have present confidence about the future – because it is anchored in the past promises of God.

The Magi in Matthew 2 give us a glimpse into biblical hope, for these wise men had hope in someone. And this hope motivated them to continue their search for the ultimate King, the Christ-child, who was born in Bethlehem.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

Who were these wise men? First of all, the Magi were not kings, but they were advisors to the king. They would be like the Cabinet of our government today – kingly counselors. In fact, they were probably the king makers, the ones who filtered out the pool of kingly candidates, electing and selecting who would be the next king. More than likely they

were from Persia or Babylon, and it is from this geographical region that they saw a star.

It is highly probable that the Magi find their roots in another set of biblical characters. Based on the book of Daniel, Daniel and his three cohorts—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—were at one point Magi, advisors in Babylon and the Persian area after the captivity of God’s people. In fact, in Daniel 2, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were actually referred to as “wise men.”

This is what I think happened: When the Jews were captured and taken to Babylon, the king picked out the best of the Jewish young men. He put them into his group of Magi and had them trained in the sciences and in astronomy. These Jewish men learned all about the heavens, the stars, the atmosphere, the earth, and the physical world. And while there was probably a worldly perversion of these things in Babylon, God somehow put his godly men in the middle of that arena for his purposes. They were able to live as godly Jewish wise men amidst other Gentile Magi.

This trend continued, even when the Jewish people left Babylon and went back to Jerusalem. Magi were still left in the province, even hundreds of years later. They continued to be the atmospheric experts on call for the king.

It is important to note that the only book of the Bible that tells us exactly when Christ was going to be born is the book of Daniel. In Daniel 9, the angel

Gabriel told Daniel the exact date of Christ's birth. Yes, 400-plus years prior to the birth of Jesus, Gabriel told Daniel the same thing he told Mary only a few months before the birth of Jesus: "A Savior will be born." But in Daniel he provided additional details.

In Daniel 9, Gabriel said to Daniel, "Listen here, Daniel, and write this down. About 483 years after the decree to rebuild Jerusalem, a Messiah is going to come forth." So, as a Magi, Daniel wrote all this down; he did his job and "scrolled" under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. After he passed away, then the next group of Magi came, and the next generation, and so forth, each one passing Daniel's writings to the next.

Fast forward with me to months prior to Matthew 2 – the Magi are reading the things that Daniel had written as well as the Old Testament law. And they started piecing together the facts of prophecy. They saw in Numbers 24 that God said a star would rise in the east. (It's a very obscure prophecy, but if you're a Magi and you're trained in Old Testament prophecy, astronomy, and the sciences, you're looking for this stuff.) So they began to figure. "A star is in the east . . . it's been 483 years since Daniel wrote concerning the time of the birth . . . I think that's about now!"

So around the time of Christ's birth, some wise, kingly advisors 'loaded up the truck and moved to Bethlehem.' They knew what God had said in the

past, and they took action in the present with confidence about the future.

That tells me something about the wise men: They didn't leave the east on a hunch; they left in confident hope. They had read God's revealed Word and, based on that, they looked to the future with confidence, which enabled them to make good decisions in the present.

Similarly, when you look at God's Word and with assurance understand God's future plan, you can make confident decisions about your present.

For instance, people often wonder, "What will happen when I die?" Or, "Is hell real?" Questions like "Is there really a heaven?" and "Will I live forever or simply absolve into nothingness?" fill the minds of millions of people daily. You can take them to a self-help book, if you like, that is written on the mere hunch of a man or woman. Here's an eternally better idea: Steer them to God's Word, which lays out God's plan for the future. In it is the certainty upon which we can stand with hope.

I extend to you the hope of God in the pages of Scripture. From things regarding your eternal destiny to how to get along with your spouse to how to spend your money to how to find the right job, God's Word holds the key. That's what makes biblical hope truly biblical – it rests on God's Word. So while the world says, "It's a pretty good bet," God says, "Proceed with confidence."

Remarkably, while the Magi were confident, those who were closest to Bethlehem—the leaders just five miles north in the capital city of Jerusalem—missed it. Wise, kingly advisors thousands of miles away understood and began to travel, but those close by didn't get it. Look at Herod's cluelessness in Matthew 2:

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."

Interesting, isn't it? The same information was available to Herod and his cabinet, yet the response was totally different. The Magi began to hope; Herod began to worry.

A penetrating lesson surfaces from this contrast: Biblical hope finds soil in a seeking heart.

Throughout the Old Testament, God said several times to the Israelites, "You will find me when you seek me with all your heart." In other words, people usually see what they want to see; they find what they're looking for.

The Magi were looking for a King. They were looking to worship the Christ-child. And they found him. But five miles north, in the very hometown of

God's people, leaders refused to see what was plainly written. And they never saw it.

Hope eludes those who do not want to see the truth. Two people could attend a weekend church service with the same passage, preacher, and program. Still, one person will leave laughing and say, "I don't believe any of that. Religion is just a crutch." The other person may leave and say, "Wow! God was really evident. His Word is so clear. We can trust in the Lord." Different responses; same message. Do you know why? You find what you're looking for.

The Magi searched, came with confidence, and found what they were looking for. They found the Christ-child. Matthew 1:7-12 explains:

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

I don't know if that star was a supernova or a combination of several stars. Some think it was a comet. I have a simple explanation: I think it was a miracle. I think God put a star in the sky that was especially bright that appeared and reappeared and moved and guided them. I don't feel a need to explain it astronomically.

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

“They saw the child” – Isn’t that a great phrase? That’s hope fulfilled. And in this phrase I learn something else about hope: Hope finds its fulfillment in Jesus. Imagine being part of that entourage of people! “I knew it!” one might have said. “Just like I thought it would be!” Yes, their journey of hope was confirmed when they saw Jesus.

A bit of urban legend creeps in at this point. Let me explain. We know these wise men and their entourage saw the child, not at the stable, but at the house. And we know that the word used here is “child,” not “infant.” And since their journey probably took several months, it is probably more accurate to say they saw the Christ-boy. Regardless, they worshipped him.

Additionally, I tend to think there was a massive entourage of people accompanying them. Most of these kingly advisors had horses, not camels, and they had servants and slaves and meal preparers. They had lots of people helping them with their work. Rest assured this was not a brief, drop-by visit. I suspect as they came into town word began

to spread, “Hey, look what’s coming!” And I imagine word got to Mary and Joseph. And no doubt Herod. Still, they worshipped him. Part of that worship included gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh – which I believe helped Mary and Joseph financially when they fled to Egypt. But the gifts were also very prophetic. Gold spoke to Christ’s royalty, the frankincense to his deity, and the myrrh to his humanity, more specifically his death. For even though myrrh was often used in biblical celebrations, it was also often an embalming spice, ointment, or perfume.

Here’s the point: These three gifts were futuristic in their nature. All of these gifts probably stemmed from the Magi’s reading of the Scriptures, and as they understood God’s Word about his birth, life, and death, they gave appropriate gifts in response. It was a gift-opening like no other, the kind that finds its joy in a person, not a product. They were hopeful for longer than a holiday for they had found the King of kings. Their hope was fulfilled and their joy would now last a lifetime.

On Christmas morning, when you get your gifts, how long does the excitement last? Maybe 30 minutes? Okay, a Lexus might last an hour. But no matter what we get on earth that fulfills our Webster hope, it is at best temporary. When Jesus Christ is our fulfillment of hope – biblical hope – that’s eternal! Because he is eternal. It’s the joy of Someone at Christmas versus something at Christmas.

Hope didn't end at the manger. Throughout the New Testament, the early writers referred to Christ as "our hope." Paul told Titus that "the glorious appearing of our great God and Jesus Christ" is the blessed hope. Paul calls Christ in us "the hope of glory." And John said, "Anyone who has this hope purifies himself." On earth, until we see Jesus, our hope is, like it or not, left partially unrealized. But there's a day coming when we will see Christ face to face. At that moment, our hope will be realized fully. Completed 100%. That's why the songwriter could write:

It will be worth it all when we see Jesus,
Life's trials will seem so small when we see Christ;
One glimpse of his dear face all sorrow will erase,
So bravely run the race till we see Christ.

Which hope do you have? Webster hope or biblical hope? I encourage you to cling to hope rooted in the Word of God, fertilized by a seeking heart, and fulfilled in Jesus. Walk in the footsteps of the wise men, who knew the hope of heaven was the hope for every heart, not just at Christmas, but all year long.

Chapter Four **FOOTPRINTS OF LOVE**

Christmas is a time when we give, and often the things we give are called presents. In fact, presents

are one of the ways we say, “I love you.” They are the way we extend ourselves and say, “You mean a lot to me.”

And not just at Christmas. Twenty years ago my wife gave me a watch when we were married. I still wear it, with the original band, and, believe it or not, it actually works. It was her first gift to me. When she gave it to me, she was saying, “I love you.” But as much as I like my watch, it’s still only, at best, a present. It’s not her presence. She is why I got married; it was about her, not a wrist decoration.

Likewise, when Christmas becomes only about presents without the significance of presence, it turns into an ugly human event instead of a holy holiday.

When I was a kid, our house was burglarized a few days before Christmas. We arrived home to see the mattresses flipped over, the drawers flung open, and all the presents gone. So a few days later, our family had Christmas in a cart. We strolled along the aisles in the stores, and my parents repurchased most of what had been stolen. Sort of like a rolling, mobile Christmas. Guess what? When I look back at Christmases, that’s the one I remember. It wasn’t as picturesque, nor traditional; but we had presence. I remember dad saying, “The burglar can have the stuff under the tree. At least he didn’t get us.”

In Luke 2, we see how God gave us himself. The footprint of God was stamped upon the earth once and for all when He sent Jesus Christ as a little baby

to this earth. He didn't just send us something like himself; he didn't just forward us a letter about himself; he didn't just drop a picture on us of himself. He actually gave us himself: Jesus, a Savior. And when God gave himself, He showed us just how much He loves us.

Notice the words of Luke 2:1-11:

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."

In this section of Scripture, the word “Savior” culminates the text. It's how God gave himself to earth. God didn't give us a new home. He didn't give us a nice car or a different president or a new ruler or a better neighborhood. God gave us a Savior, a gift that meets our deepest need. But it wasn't easy. There were obstacles.

Love broke through that night in spite of political obstacles. Herod was king, and he was a very insecure, emotionally unstable ruler. He heard about another ruler being born, so he decided to set up a census, which I think was a covert way to find out where this other ruler was. Herod's instability caused the town to be in great turmoil.

Consequently, Jerusalem at that time was not a place to be born. It was riddled with political unrest. Add to that a man and woman who weren't married yet, and you're ripe for tension. That's the political environment into which God chose to send his Son – himself.

I think about the stress involved when people, during political tension, try to be politically correct. They want to make sure they walk exactly right so no one is offended. Everyone's living on the edge and walking on eggshells. Men and women are so worried about people's feelings that emotions actually end up ruling the atmosphere. Sensitivity becomes the catch word out of fear, not because of love. The end result? No one knows where to step or how to act. I tell you, it can be very difficult to

feel God's love in environments like that. But God's love can break through. It broke through the first Christmas, even amidst political obstacles.

Then there were geographical obstacles. If you were going to choose a city for the birthplace of a king, you would choose a big city, a capital city, like Jerusalem." Make a big deal of your arrival! Why choose a little town five miles south of Jerusalem called Bethlehem? But that's the town that was selected. God had indicated through the prophets that the ruler would come through the line of David, so Bethlehem was the place.

Additionally, when Joseph and Mary were called to register in Bethlehem, it required an eighty-mile trek over mountainous terrain. Grasp this – an eight- or nine-month pregnant lady travelling from Nazareth to Bethlehem probably via some sort of animal transportation (not the Mustang as you know it). That's a serious geographical obstacle. Yet God's love broke through in spite of all the geographical reasons to say, "This can't happen. Why can't we stay home? My wife's really pregnant. That's a long way, and I've got an old donkey." They pursued the call of God anyway.

On that first Christmas, God's love also broke through logistical obstacles. Because "there was no room for them in the inn," Jesus was born in this cave-like structure called a stable. Mary and Joseph were actually right in the middle of cattle droppings, animal saliva on the manger, hay that smelled terrible, as well as much noise and stench. Let's be

frank – no nativity scene in America lives up to what the real nativity scene was like.

Humanly speaking, it was the worst possible place to birth a baby. Ask any nurse. Consult a doctor. You'll never get 'hog pen' as a recommendation for a birthing room. They'd cringe to think about it. Still, in that situation, God's love broke through.

And God's love broke through in spite of occupational obstacles. Personally, if I were going to give myself in the form of a baby – if I were going to come to earth to be a future ruler one day – I would announce it to media moguls or post it on the Internet. Maybe I'd advertise on billboards.

Here's what I wouldn't do – I wouldn't tell shepherds. Shepherding was the lowest kind of job you could get; they had little contact with people, and their work didn't involve deep communication. Truth is, anybody could be a shepherd. Yet shepherds were the first to hear about the Savior being born. They ended up being the best "leak" to date. God's love broke through in spite of occupational obstacles.

On the very first Christmas, even with all of the obstacles and pressures – political, geographical, logistical, and occupational – God gave himself to the world in Jesus, our Savior who would save his people from their sins. I'm glad God didn't give us presents. I'm glad God gave us himself—his presence, his very own Son.

With all the pressures and obstacles facing you this holiday season, here's some good news: "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior. He is Christ the Lord." There's the present that is really all about presence. What a powerful combination!

The question is: Have you opened the present of his presence? The Bible teaches that the way to open this gift is by faith in Christ; by trusting Jesus as the only way to be saved. There is no way to be saved apart from the name of Jesus. So instead of putting confidence in who you are, where you live, what you do or how much you know, I ask you to put your faith in the baby in the manger – Jesus! – who was the Savior born to take away the sins of the world. That's how God's love was shown to the world, and it is how he gave us his presence, the greatest Christmas gift ever.

Afterward

If, after reading this simple book, you are ready to embrace the person of Jesus as the Son of God and believe that only he provides the way to God through his death and resurrection, I want to encourage you to do something to mark this moment.

Would you pray a prayer of gratitude to God thanking him for sending his Son to be your Savior? Remember – saying a prayer won't save you;

believing the truth about Jesus is what saves you. But often prayer is a way we can express to God our desire to believe his truth – that Jesus is in fact his Son and your Savior.

This sample prayer might help get you started:

*Heavenly Father,
Thank you for sending Jesus as the only Savior of the world. I would have no hope were it not for Jesus, and I believe in my heart and confess with my mouth that he is your one and only Son who died and rose again for my sins. I place my faith in him alone. Thank you, Amen.*

For more understanding about this new life you have embraced, feel free to write to me at:

First Family Church
317 SE Magazine
Ankeny, IA 50021

About the author:

Todd Stiles lives in Ankeny, Iowa, where he and his wife, Julie, love the snowy winters and white Christmases! Together, they have four children -- Brett, Bethany, Breanna, and Brooke -- known as the Super B's. Todd is Lead Pastor at First Family Church and has authored numerous articles and three other books: *Meditations of a Young Minister*, *The Big Book of Quick Tips for Youth Ministry*, and *Different (not just better)*.

Connect with Todd Online:

Facebook: www.facebook.com/ToddStiles

Twitter: www.twitter.com/toddstiles
My Blog: www.toddstiles.blogspot.com
My Messages: www.firstfamilyministries.com

####