

## *To God Alone Be The Glory*

Way back when I was still practicing my numbers, my teacher would give me these worksheets with dots scattered all over the page. Each dot had a small number next to it, usually 1 through 20. Also on the page was a partially drawn picture of an object. I was supposed to put my pencil on the dot next to the 1, and draw a line to the dot next to the 2, and then draw a line from the 2 dot to the 3 dot, and then to the 4 dot until all the dots were connected. At the top of every worksheet were the words, “Connect the dots.” Connecting the dots completed each picture so you could see a flower or a dragon or a sunset. I wonder if they still make these worksheets for children. Smile if you’ve ever enjoyed connecting the dots.

What a great life-lesson those little worksheets contained! ‘Connecting the dots’ has become a metaphor for ‘understanding the situation,’ for ‘seeing the whole picture.’ “Will you please explain this to me again? I’m having trouble connecting all the dots.” Learning is about seeing connections. Succeeding in your job is about seeing connections. Having great relationships is about seeing connections. And for those of us who believe in Jesus, a living and active faith is about seeing connections.

So how is your personal connection to Christmas? And how many connections do you see between Christmas and

everything else in your life? Tonight let’s COUNT THE CHRISTMAS CONNECTIONS.

The Holy Spirit was trying to help us connect the dots between Christmas and everything else in our life when he caused the apostle Paul to write in Titus 2: <sup>11</sup>*The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to everyone.* <sup>12</sup>*It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age,* <sup>13</sup>*while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ,* <sup>14</sup>*who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.*

Did you spot the Christmas connection? <sup>11</sup>*The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to everyone, or better for everyone.* There’s Christmas! Did you connect the dots? God’s saving grace appeared for everyone. That happened at Christmas! Get it?

If you don’t see the whole picture yet, may I suggest that the world has snuck in an extra 2 dot and an extra 3 dot and an extra 4 dot on your picture of Christmas. “Chestnuts roasting on an open fire.” Fun song to sing. It nicely wishes everyone from 1 to 92 “Merry Christmas.” Is there even one professional musician who has not recorded a version of this song? But not

one word about Jesus' birth in it. So this song could turn into an extra 2 dot on our Christmas Connect-the-Dots.

Christmas gifts. Some of you open gifts on Christmas Eve, some on Christmas Day. Isn't it fun to find just the right gift for someone? It's even more fun than receiving just the right gift—which is also wonderful. But if you're not very good at choosing appropriate gifts, gift-buying can cause frustration. Maybe you feel pressure to give gifts—you don't want anyone to be upset with you. How well do you cover up your true feelings when someone gets you a gift that's not a good fit? "Oh, it's just what I always wanted." Look, there's nothing sinful about giving or receiving gifts, but I rarely hear people connect their gift giving to Jesus' birth. So I wonder if the world hasn't turned our gift giving into an extra 3 dot on our Christmas Connect-the-Dots.

Santa Claus. If the stories about him are true, what an amazing guy! He knows when you've been naughty or nice—just like God. Hmm. Extra 4 dot? I heard Santa say on TV that he can manipulate time and space. Wow! That would make him as powerful as the Almighty. Hmm. Extra 5 dot? Santa can fly as fast as angels. Extra 6 dot? During December you see Santa Claus everywhere. Santa is omnipresent? Extra 7 dot. "Wait a minute. It's God who is present everywhere, and God who is all powerful, and God who knows when we're naughty

or nice." "Yes, but God doesn't have a nice red suit or a jolly belly." Extra 8 dot. Other than during the years Jesus was born and walked this earth, God chooses to remain invisible to human eyes. That makes the real 8 dot kind of hard to see.

Can you picture in your mind what has happened to our Connect-the-Dots worksheet for Christmas? It's got double dots for so many numbers, how can anyone know which 3 dot to draw to and which 3 dot to ignore? If you connect the wrong dots, your Christmas will look quite different from how God originally designed it. And when you try to connect Christmas to your everyday life, I think you're going to get only as far as late December or early January when you take down the Christmas decorations and put them away. If Christmas is good for only a short time each year, what good is it? Fellow believers, let's keep going back to God's original design for Christmas. Then we can COUNT THE CHRISTMAS CONNECTIONS in a way that helps us all through the year.

Paul says, <sup>11</sup>*The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared for everyone.*

That's Christmas. When Jesus was born, God was revealing his loving heart for all sinners. Baby Jesus grew up and, as a full-grown man, took all our sins to the cross, paid the penalty with his life, and rose from the grave to tell us how forgiven we all are through faith in him. Or as Paul puts it here in Titus 2: [Jesus]

<sup>14</sup>*gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify [us] for himself.* See the Christmas connection?

God's grace, that is, God's favorable attitude toward us sinners,... God's grace <sup>12</sup>*teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions.* Cheating to get ahead? "Not any more. I'm redeemed. I see no connection between cheating and Christmas." Greed for more money? "Not anymore." Snarl at my neighbor? "Not anymore." Sex outside of marriage? "I don't want to go even a lit beyond what God defines as pure. I am redeemed. Jesus bought me back for God. I see no connection from 'Jesus' birth as my Savior' to 'these worldly passions. I don't want to go there anymore.'"

God's grace, that is, God's unmerited love for sinners,... God's grace teaches us *to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.* "Hey, you want another drink?" "No thanks. One or two is enough. I'm celebrating Christmas every day this year."

"Hey, isn't that the person who spread untrue stories about you? I know a way you can get back at them on the internet." "No thanks. God forgave me. So I decided to forgive too." **COUNT THE CHRISTMAS CONNECTIONS.** If you look for them, you can find them all over your life.

Your whole life. If all that we came to do tonight is to remember for one day

some history about a Jewish baby born 2000 years ago, what's the point? God designed Christmas to be so much more. Paul explains: Jesus <sup>14</sup>*gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own.* Connect the dots with your life. Jesus was born so that you could belong to him. Picture Jesus picking you up and holding you close, the way a little girl plays with her favorite dolly, the way a new father is captivated by his firstborn child when he holds his baby in his arms for the first time. We—repeat-sinners that we are—we are Jesus' very own. That is why he was born. It's a Christmas connection. Take it with you tonight so that the next time you are bothered by your sins, you can have some real peace, instead of just trying to put the guilt out of your mind by way of distraction.

Have you connected enough dots on your Christmas worksheet to be able to see where the Lord is leading you? He wants everyone to love Christmas. It's wonderful to have an emotional connection to Christmas, isn't it? People try to be extra nice at this time of year. Feuding families and former friends find ways to reconcile. People remember the poor. But you don't have to be a Christian to accomplish any of these things. Anyone can. So it's not enough to have an emotional connection to Christmas.

Let's ask God for something better—a faith-connection to Christmas. We want

our faith to grow, don't we? Turns out, God wants our faith to grow too. Paul says it this way. Jesus <sup>14</sup>*redeem[ed] us from all wickedness and...purif[ied] for himself a people that are...eager to do what is good.* Eager. This is grown-up faith. If you think that having only limited contact with God's Word is enough, then the Connect-the-Dots worksheet of your faith isn't complete yet. Your redemption is complete and your sins are fully forgiven through Jesus. But if you're not "*eager to do what is good,*" you've got more dots to connect between Christmas and your life. At least once a year I lay before you the challenge to read or listen to a portion of your Bible daily. Why not take up the challenge during the twelve days of Christmas and carry it through into the new year. If you want to connect Christmas to your life, to celebrate Jesus' birth all year long, I don't know any better way. Conversely, if Jesus is not connected with your everyday life, why bother living? If Jesus isn't your everyday Savior, what's the point of Christmas?

With just a little effort our Christmas can be full of connections to Jesus. Look at the Christmas tree. It's green, the color of life. Jesus was born so we could **live** with God, during earthly life, and eventually in heaven. Ah, heaven is the final dot, the real 20 dot, on our Christmas Connect-the-Dots. Christmas wants to lead us to life that is ever green. Paul says it this way: <sup>13</sup>*we [are] wait[ing] for the blessed hope—the*

*glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.* See how the apostle Paul connects Christmas to Judgment Day? [So do the Psalms that are appointed for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.] Look at the Christmas tree and COUNT even more of THE CHRISTMAS CONNECTIONS. \*The tree has lights. Jesus is the light of the world. Sin makes life dark, hard to see clearly. But Jesus' birth lights up God's love for us, helps us see our final destination, helps us lay hold of God's love each day. COUNT THE CHRISTMAS CONNECTIONS. \*The ornaments can remind us of all the ways God decorates our lives with blessings too numerous to count. \*And despite the fact that gift giving can become a distraction, I'm very much in favor of gifts under the Christmas tree, because giving gifts is a wonderful way to show love. When you give gifts, especially to the people who already know Jesus, or to those whom you would like to know Jesus better, you can say something like this or write it on the tag: "Our Savior Jesus is such an excellent gift, to us, from God. I wanted to remind you about Jesus, so I got this for you." Hmm. I believe the extra 3 dot just got erased from our Christmas Connect-the-Dots. In fact, all the extra dots are gone. The whole picture is clear now. Jesus' birth is a gift for every day because that's how often we need God's love and forgiveness in our lives. The Savior we need is the Savior God gave. May you be blessed as you celebrate Jesus' birth.