

He's Everything from A to Z

The incarnation is God's message that God the Father holds nothing back in order to make room for us. So common and yet so extravagant! Heaven and earth embraced that night and this is what we celebrate.

It's also is a grand proclamation that if you enter the story, you've got everything you need in the person of Christ. All else becomes trivial in the light of His appearance because He's **EVERYTHING** from A to Z.

"I AM the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End."

AUTHOR of my everything, my story A to Z

BRIGHT AND MORNING STAR above, my blinded eyes can see

COMFORTOR of weary souls, **COMPANION** of the lost

DELIVERER, **DEFENDER** despite the cruel cost

EXALTED ONE who stooped to save, found in a humble place

FAITHFUL ONE of Glory who came to me in grace

GUARDIAN of my destiny, **GOD** in flesh and bone

HEALER of my solitude, I never walk alone.

INTERCESSOR standing tall, speaking for me, still.

JEHOVAH God creator, with hands of grace and skill

KING of all the universe, immortal God of love

LORD in every circumstance, watching from above

MAN OF SORROWS, **MIGHTY ONE** who came to seek and save

NAZARENE of providence whose life He freely gave

ONE AND ONLY Sacrifice, The lamb upon a cross
PIERCED for my transgression, my gain found in His loss
QUIET ONE, a still small voice, whispering His plan
RABBI in my ignorance, Redeemer,
SON OF MAN
TREE OF LIFE, evergreen, The fruit of holiness
UNFAILING LOVE, UNENDING JOY, and UNBRIDLED BLISS
VICTOR of my battles. He fought to set me free.
WARRIOR like none other, battling for me.
X-RAY of the human heart, restorer from the fall
YESHUA, redeemer
ZENITH of it all...

Don't you need Him? Reach out to Him this day and you'll see
that He'll give you everything your wounded soul craves.

Because He's everything...

Your Concerned Friend...

Dear Joseph,

I'm worried about you. I wouldn't be your friend if I didn't

try to speak some truth to you. Please don't get me wrong—I was all for this marriage until the stories started. Reality is hard to swallow when you are in the early months of a relationship. You and I both know it takes two to conceive. It's totally obvious that she is making up stories. She says she loves you. I have no doubt that she wants to be married to you but when someone makes a mistake, they have to face up to it instead of trying to spiritualize it. The theology of her entire story doesn't make sense.

Plus, think of the narcissism! “God has made me pregnant.” Ugh... That she would take that route... To tell you the truth it angers me. We've been buddies since Sabbath School and I know what a stand-up guy you are. And you want to put her away quietly? I think that fornication and lying are doubly worthy of a little Levitical heat (if you know what I mean). But I'm not you. I just want you to be happy. Look at all the ramifications, Joseph and don't get caught in the middle of this.

Anyway, we need to talk. Plus you haven't even seen our baby boy: Judas! He's already taken his first steps. So if you are ever in town, let me know!

Your concerned friend,

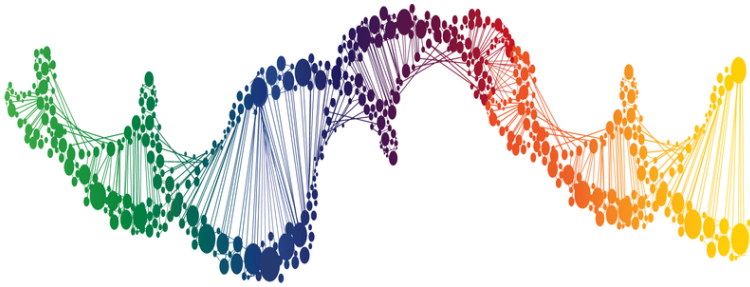
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The Advent of Amazing

He scattered stars to the outer regions of infinity. He separated the dry land from sea. This great God created each cell as intricate, alive and dynamic as a tiny city. The One that created Jupiter and the Milky Way would choose to create

me.

Our skin and the inner workings of the human body... the blood and bones, the pelvis, the pinky, the cranium and the clavicle, the liver that filters our blood, the million miles of DNA, all of this...



*God left his amazing mark on us.
And it astounds me.
It amazes me.*

And more amazing still... His Son
I'm amazed that He would be born in a stable.
Not in a palace.
Not in the lap of luxury

I'm amazed that Ruth, Bathsheba, Tamar, David, and so many other misfits are a part of his chosen family tree.



I'm amazed that He would come to the little...

(I, too, am among His little ones... so fearful, often stumbling, often obsessed with the wrong things)

I'm amazed that it was Good News when we deserved punishment, He came with great joy to all people.

I'm amazed that He was scorned as an illegitimate son when He could have levitated above them all. I'm amazed that He remained silent.

I am amazed that Jesus would choose for friends and followers— Tax collectors, fishermen, zealots, and outcasts.

Even more, I'm amazed that he would stay to the very end pay the price for the messes we make- all the messes.

And everywhere he went people were amazed.

The amazing thing about grace, you see, is that when I was in the far country, He sought *me!*

When I lost hope in God, He never lost hope in me.

It's His all-surpassing love that drives me...

Amazed that it is laughter and joy- not tears and defeat



Amazed that it is about bread and wine, forgiveness and belonging.

And how I need it!

Everybody needs it.

Amazing- that a God so great would love me this much.
I'm amazed that You would love me with relentless grace
Far beyond all time and space
Relentless stubborn mercy blind
To all that I have left behind.
You loved me in the blinding rain
Even when I've caused You pain.
Amazed by the chasm that separated me from You
All the pain that You went through.

*And when you get a glimpse of this love, it will grab on to
you. It will own you in its bliss.*

And the amazing thing about this grace is that it is what it
is.

It's not earned.

It's grace.

Amazing grace.

It's grace that tore me away from the claws of Satan

It's grace that will lead me home.

It's grace that is greater than all my sin.

He is truth.

He's as right as rain.

In fact he created rain.

And if you take it into your life.

*It will
change your
perspective*



You'll look at your children differently.

You'll eat good food and love it even more.

You'll lose the chip on your shoulder that's been dogging you for years.

You'll breath easier.

No more fear of death, hell and the grave- because life is an everlasting adventure more eternal that far-flung galaxies of deep space.

If you take it in, it will change everything.

It will scatter every self-saving instinct you've ever known.

And it will bring you once again to Bethlehem.

A View from the Manger

Beloved,

Look closer into the manger. I so long for you to look into My eyes.

There was a time you saw Me as Someone who tolerated you and all the messiness of your life, not knowing for a second the depth of the love I offer. I came to you, first, as a baby so that you would know that my vulnerability is complete. I am willing to be born in the world mankind has ruined so that you will know that I am utterly and completely present for you today.

I came to you because life is filled with both risk and opportunity and you, yes singular you, were worth the risk.

I came to you because love is never forced. It can never be. On that night in Bethlehem, I had nothing to offer you except the promise that things would change if you loved Me.

I came to you because I realized that the world had gone mad with all the useless rubbish that men crave in darker shadows.

I came to you because nothing else would work.

There was no way for you to truly see the kind of love I offered without stepping out of Heaven's splendor into the broken world east of Eden's hope.

I came to you so that you could see how I respond to broken people- those whose lives are ruined in the morass of self-defeat.

I came to you because somewhere down the road, life had gotten

so far from love that no one even knew what love looked like.

People viewed achievement, riches, sex, food and notoriety as somehow worthy of their brief time here, when an eternal bliss stood gallantly before them, offering a life they could never even imagine.

I came here to teach you how to love one another.

But greater still, I came to teach you that love is possible. Find this love and the world will be transformed like the opening of a rose.

Lose it, and life becomes obtuse and perplexing.

Do you see what my coming means?

It means that hope is not some mere fairy tale.

It means that I am not some dispassionate deity with an axe to grind when (surprise) you fail at life in solitude.

It means I'm here for you.

Today.

Right now.

It means that I really don't care how bad your story is or how badly you've messed things up.

It means that when you choose Me, everything in life becomes a moveable feast.

It means when you choose Me, ***you get it all***— hope, peace, eternity, connection, time, intimacy, laughter, joy, and belonging.

Don't you want that?

Don't you need that?

It means that everything that happened from Bethlehem to Calvary is a message of the very nature of who I am and how I relate to you.

This child, crying in the night... I Am this helpless Child in swaddling clothes joyfully casting off the garments of heaven to come to you.

Once you see me as that kind of Savior, nothing else will be worth your efforts because I am everything you ever dreamed I could be.

We are Here Because They Were There

James Frazee was a 90-year-old man in our church. He stood out to me primarily because he was the oldest man in our contemporary service. Not that electric guitars or drums were his preference. He just wanted to be there with his grandkids. It wasn't until he got sick that I learned the backstory of James' life. He'd never tell me but his kids did as we planned for the inevitable funeral. James was a prisoner of war at the end of World War II. He actually escaped and spent a number of days dodging the authorities in Germany. When he finally found his way back to the US forces, he was malnourished, but alive. He was a hero with the medals to show for it and I didn't even know it. All he would ever say about his life and career in the war was this: "Let's take care of our men. We are here because they were there."

A few years ago, I was honored to perform his funeral with the coffin draped in the stars and stripes. He showed me what a hero's life looks like. A hero isn't a big guy on a large

stage. A hero is an average man who has the audacity to believe he can make a change in the world and someone who doesn't care if his name is somehow tied to the achievement. A hero is a result of timing. Right man, right time, right place, right attitude. In other words, heroes are the product of divine appointments and every man has at least one. They become heroes because of their awareness of the divine manifest Presence and they act in accordance to His command.

We have many celebrities but far too few heroes.

Time is too short for me to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets,³³ who by faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions,³⁴ quenched the raging of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, gained strength in weakness, became mighty in battle, and put foreign armies to flight.

³⁵ Women received their dead, raised to life again. Other people were tortured, not accepting release, so that they might gain a better resurrection.³⁶ Others experienced mockings and scourgings, as well as bonds and imprisonment.³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawed in two, they died by the sword, they wandered about in sheepskins, in goatskins, destitute, afflicted, and mistreated.³⁸ The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and on mountains, hiding in caves and holes in the ground.

Hebrews 11:32-38

Hebrews 11 gives you a number of profiles of heroes. Not perfect, but ultimately faithful. That's really what defines a hero: *faithfulness*.

Thanks, James Frazee... You are not forgotten.

7 Reminders during Grief

Throughout Dad's illness and death, I knew one thing. I would learn. God has given me the gift of experience. Yes, gift.

C.S. Lewis said it perfectly:

"Experience: that most brutal of teachers. But you learn, my God how you learn."

This post is a reminder to me. I need to remember this experience as I engage with others who lose a family member or a close friend. Here are observations I've jotted down in my journal as a reminder of the universality and distinct uniqueness of those who grieve.

1. **Realize that my energy level is very low.** I won't suddenly be able to do all the things I used to do with the same verve and passion that I did before my loss. I'm trying to catch up. Lots of things hit all at once during Dad's homegoing and I'm just trying to hang on. I have no doubt that everything will be back to normal. I will be better than I've ever been. There will be a depth and a drive that I didn't have before. Just keep in mind that I'm messy right now and your grace is love personified.
2. **Please try your best not to "should" on me.** It's counterproductive. In other words, don't say *I should be thankful that my loved one is in heaven, not suffering* etc, etc... I know that. But I'm not handling the "should"s of life very well these days.

3. **There will be glimpses of life before loss but, at first, they will be short and they're not maintainable.** You'll see me laugh and you'll think I'm fine. In those moments, I do feel fine but also there will be periods of deep anger and disappointment. Unless you spend a lot of time with me you probably won't see the snot, and sweat and existential angst. Let's both thank God for that but please keep in mind that it is there.
4. **Realize that I struggle with remorse and regret.** It's crazy, but I am reliving every care decision and have haunting notions that if I could have done this or that, that I would not be experiencing the loss. At a recent event, I ran into an old friend of the family. She hugged me and whispered, "You did good." It was the most healing thing for me because I struggled for days about what I could have done better.
5. In the same sense, I've had to make a ton of decisions over the past few months. **My decision-making muscles are fatigued right now.** So if I seem to have lost the ability to give you a straight answer, well then... there's your reason.
6. **If I didn't respond to you during the funeral, I truly am sorry.** I know that I didn't recognize some people right off the bat during the funeral or visitation. I'm a scattered person on a normal day. Royally scattered was I during those first few days.
7. **Death, grief and responsibility have no finish line or period.** Keep in mind that just because one parent died, we're still struggling to care for the other parent who is struggling too and to a much greater extent than we are.

And the journey continues. I'm so thankful for connections that guide me through times of exhaustion and malaise. I'm also thankful for a Savior who is there every step of the way even in our times of unknowing.

Prayer is Releasing

In every line of the Lord's Prayer, there's a common thread. It's **releasing**. We scan through the words and notice that the Lord's Prayer is radically different from the modern mantras of mortal yearning. Instead of coming to God to change our circumstances, we encounter a releasing of ourselves into the gracious hand of the Father who knows exactly what we need before we ask.

Our Father who art in Heaven

I release my urge to play God with my circumstances.

Hallowed be thy Name

I release any preconceived notion that am better than others in comparison to the reality of You.

Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven

I release my kingdom to embrace yours.

Give us this day our daily bread.

I release the desire to be a self-made provider.

And forgive us our debt as we forgive our debtors.

I release forgiveness to those who've wounded me and I recognize and repent for the wounds I have cause to others and even to myself.

Lead us not into temptation.

I release my long-held belief that I am more powerful than my sins and addictions.

Deliver us from evil.

I release my appetite and familiarity with the evil one.

For thine is the Kingdom, and the power and the Glory forever.

I release my personal possessions, properties, fame, and strength to embrace all that is You.

When we release all these things life becomes much simpler. Even when things are difficult we find rest and release.

- So you are finding yourself in a lonely place? Good. The divine presence of God has been wanting to say something to you.
- So you are financially ruined? Good. Perhaps you are here to discover how illogical reliance on money really is.
- So you are exhausted? Good. It's time to rest. The rest of Christ is the best rest you can have. Breathe. Drink deeply. Find rest for your soul.
- So you are feeling tested? Good. God is setting you up for greater stewardship.
- So you are grieving? Good. God is giving you a glimpse of the cross and his sorrow over lost humanity.
- So you are angry? Good. As long as you are angry about the right things. If you are, knock a few tables over.
- So you are empty? Good. This could be the perfect time for the Holy Spirit to rush into the void.
- So you are confused? Good. There's no better time to cry out to God.
- So you can't sleep? Good. Now is the time to be awake and listen.

Life becomes a celebration and a conversation with our Creator if we are willing to surrender everything over to Him. The

other option is to keep striving when transformation and rest is waiting at arm's length if we would only surrender.

3 things I learned at Louisiana College

Recently I was asked to share about my time at LC. This invitation allowed me to reflect on how this school, from 1981-1985, changed the way I looked at the world, my faith and my call. I thought of three things LC taught me inside and outside the classroom.

1. I learned the value of hustle.

During those days I worked as a...

- *Youth minister*
- *Hay Bailer*
- *Corporate trainer*
- *DJ*
- *Custodian*
- *Resident assistant*
- *Tuxedo Delivery guy*
- *Camp Counselor*
- *Chucky Cheese Mascot*
- *Santa Claus*

Because of the value of this virtue, I paid my way through college apart from a \$325 loan from my mother that I don't think I ever paid back.

2. I learned the value of Connection

I learned that Life is best lived in community...

It's the kind of community that I found through my brothers in TAK and my church. As Solomon wrote:

Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their efforts. For if either falls, his companion can lift him up; but pity the one who falls without another to lift him up. Also, if two lie down together, they can keep warm; but how can one person alone keep warm? And if someone overpowers one person, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not easily broken.

3. I learned the value of Heroes and some of them were on campus:

Welby Bozeman, Frank David Bennet, Connie Douglass, Robert Lynn, Jackie Barton, Mom Holloway, Sarah Francis Anders, Larry Pate, Jerry Reynolds and so many others.

The others were the myriad of voices that shaped my worldview. I am so thankful for a college that introduced me to...

- *Martin Luther King Jr. who taught me the need for justice*
- *St. Francis...a love of simplicity*
- *Will Campbell ...The power of a story*
- *G.K. Chesterton...Zeal in the public square*
- *C.S. Lewis...The power of a good fight*
- *James Weldon Johnson...Lyrical power of suffering and faith*
- *Uta Hagan...Sense Memory*
- *E.E. Cummings...Typography as an art form*
- *Jim Elliot...Sacrifice is more valuable than long life*
- *Fannie Crosby...Disabilities lead to glory*

- *Lottie Moon...that any slow boat to China is worth it when Jesus is your captain*
- *Dorothy Day... that a Christian must be a radical*
- *Teddy Roosevelt... to get in the arena and fight*
- *Calvin Miller... showed me there's a song inside me*
- *John Cowper... that I am not alone in sorrow*
- *Stephen Schwartz... taught me to dance on a Baptist campus even if you aren't graceful*
- *Corrie Ten Boom...to forgive greatly*
- *Detrick Bon Hoffer... that silence is not permitted in the face of Evil*
- *Vincent Vangogh...that art is theology*
- *And Brennan Manning taught me grace, grace, grace!*

But most of all LC fostered a new understanding of the most important One in my life.

He's my secret Treasure amidst the lies of gold
 The Captain of my vessel, the Guardian of my soul
 The Champion of my battles, my Warrior in the night
 My Guardian, Provider, within the fiercest fight
 He's Architect and Builder of my forever home
 A Friend that's like none other. I never walk alone.
 He speaks when I am speechless, my Compass when I'm lost
 Forgiver of my cruel debt despite the brutal cost
 His love song is redemption, a Troubadour of grace
 When I'm lost and lonely, He is my Resting Place
 When everyone deserts me, He is a faithful Friend
 The Seer of my journey- beginning to the end.
 The Hero on His stallion, the Warrior on the hill.
 Holy Justice Giver, with a master swordsman's skill.
 My articulate Defender speaks pro-bono in my stead
 My Guide through lands of dragons, and by His hand I'm led
 He is Enough for yesterday and forever more
 My Brother and my Father, my Refuge and my Door.
 He is the holy Poet, His sonnet is the sky!
 The perfect, true Philosopher. He knows the reasons why.

Far more than any force on earth and higher than the sun
And when we think it's over, His story's just begun
He is the Hunter of the lost, the ones who hide in shame
He seeks out every wounded life. He knows each one by name.
He is my great Physician, with a gifted Surgeon's hand
Composer of a masterpiece and Leader of the band.
He's everything that's gallant. His presence makes me free
The Artisan of glory, His love my mystery.

Today is Most Noble

God holds the future and redeems all of yesterday.

But today is closer to me.

What an amazing concept today, right now, really is. Today- I hope you aren't planning a siege on your enemy. I hope you aren't judging the person in the room. I hope you aren't swallowed up in regret. I hope you aren't poisoning your time with trivial, toxic thoughts of your own wealth, vanity or scheming revenge. I hope you are in the moment for this moment fashions eternity.

Today is a gift which is moving forward faster than thoughts or plans

Today is where i am right here and right now.

Today is an opportunity to change the little things

Today is closer. tomorrow is a promise and yesterday is an eternity from anything I could attain.

Today is most noble!

The World's First Smart Phone

Siri and I are having issues. I believe I lean too much on her and I forget that she does *not* have the capability of an administrative assistant, as most commercials would assume. She'll take me to Cracker Barrel when I want to go to Kroger. She'll call my blood donation center when I ask her to call my wife. She scheduled me for a dental appointment for April 17th 2086 when I asked her to put it on my calendar for April 7th, 2018. It embarrasses Darlene. She says that shouting at it will not make it better, especially at the church welcome center. I've tried all the hacks I've heard of. Checking my settings, powering down the phone, tilting the phone at a 40-degree angle, reciting the pledge of allegiance to it ten times. But the phone remains as mystified by me as I am of it.

There's a smart phone in the Bible. Sort of... I found it in Numbers 22 without the aid of the "find-my-phone" app on my computer. Actually it was a donkey-an upgraded smart donkey to be exact. For a few moments, this Shrek-like donkey spoke when his navigation was questioned. The owner of this *smart donkey*, Balaam was commissioned to place a curse on the people of God, but evidently the smart-donkey knew better and refused to go a step forward. He wouldn't cooperate- much like my smart-phone in downtown Dallas.

Balaam shouted words similar to the words I have said to my phone a thousand times:

"You made me look like a fool. If I had a sword in my hand, I'd kill you now!"

Numbers 22:29 (CSB)

And for the first time in the history of the animal kingdom, a donkey replied,

“But the donkey said, “Am I not the donkey you’ve ridden all your life until today? Have I ever treated you this way before?” (Verse 30)

Just a note here- This is exactly the kind of sentence structure Siri uses when I realize that she led me down a dead end road on the wrong side of town. Who knew that a donkey’s first sentence would be so grammatically correct? This causes me to conclude that donkeys are smarter than we give them credit. The next time someone calls me a donkey or other words synonymous to *donkey* during rush hour traffic, I’m going to take it as a compliment.

The entire story is proof me that the real inventor of the smart phone is God. It just came in the form of a donkey 3500 years earlier.
