

The birth of Jesus was one of the biggest disappointments in the history of the world. Israel had been waiting two thousand years for Messiah to come. They spoke about him grandly: he would unify all nations, judge them justly, bring peace, light, freedom, and joy to all. They believed he would actually reorganize geography—raise the valleys, level the hills, straighten the crooked roads, bring clement weather, abundant crops, and rule a land that was both vast and eternal. Expectations were high; they wanted a Messiah who would even do more than your average mother. What do they get? A baby, born in poverty, isolation, and anonymity. Big disappointment. I can hear ancient Israel now. "You mean this is it? We've been waiting two thousand years for this?"

Disappointment about religion still troubles our lives. In our youth, we believe in a big God, a powerful God who can right all wrongs, cure all disease, answer our prayers, and pay the bills. Then as we grow up, God finally reveals himself to us as a God who tolerates evil, sickness, tragedy, and poverty. Big disappointment. A voice inside us cries from time to time, "You mean this is it? All my life I've believed in God and this is who you are? Is this all there is to God? All there is to faith? Is this all there is to family, to career? All there is to Christmas? Are these all the presents I get? I've been waiting so long."

How easily we miss the point. Israel wanted a political leader to conquer the enemy. We want an economic whiz to erase debt. But Jesus came not to head the U.N., nor to balance the federal budget. He came as a baby. Greatness lies not in material wealth or status; it lies in spiritual wealth and status. Even a poor, helpless baby can be great.

Christmas isn't just for all ye faithful, joyful, and triumphant; it's for all ye doubtful, sorrowful, and losers. Christmas comes for people with families in trouble, with cars that run like like donkeys, homes that look like stables—and smell like one, too. Christmas comes for people who fear they've lost their faith, for those who wonder if there really is a God, or worse, who fear the God we have just doesn't care anymore. Christmas proclaims not a God who is detached, but a God who is downright meddling in his involvement, a God who made himself at home with us, whether or not we invited him in.

Disappointment comes when expectations leave. If religion ever disappoints, it's not that God has let us down. It's that we were expecting the wrong God. For ancient Israel, the wrong God got born in Bethlehem. They weren't expecting a baby. If God ever disappoints us, we may want to take a second look. It just might be Christmas.