

Russell Kelfer

I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas

182-A

**Series: Fictional Stories:
A Christmas Story**

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas

To Rob Fontaine, Christmas was a dream come true. At least, it was a dream. All year long, he longed for December to come. He loved decorating the Christmas tree. He loved putting up the outside lights, even though one year it cost him a trip to the hospital when that tree limb gave way and sent him tumbling to the not-so-soft asphalt below. He even loved the pushing and the shoving down at Greatville Mall as he spent his hard-earned money buying presents for seemingly everyone he'd ever known.

His family nicknamed him “Rob Christmas” because Christmas seemed to occupy his mind year ‘round. All year long, he greeted people, “Merry Christmas,” instead of “hello” or “Happy Thanksgiving” or “Happy Easter”.

But most of all, he loved Bing Crosby; and more than that, he loved “Der Bingle’s single” I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas. Now, it’s okay to like a song. I guess it’s even okay to be obsessed with a song, if it’s seasonal. But Rob Fontaine played “White Christmas” all winter long, and all summer long, for that matter. You see, the Fontaines lived in South Texas, where as the Chamber of Commerce used to advertise, “The sunshine spends the winter”. Or, as the weatherman would say, “where it never, ever snows.” That, however, doesn’t stop Rob from dreaming, or from playing that infernal song of Bing’s, where he dreams of a wintry snowfall over and over and over.

Rob’s family, his wife, Jenny, his teenage daughter Elaine, and the twins, Buddy and Betty, have had little choice but to accept his fixation with a White Christmas. It seemed to be practically the only imperfection in his personality. Dad Fontaine seemed to possess impeccable credentials as a husband and father. He is one of those “good guys” who only come along now and then. He loves his wife, dotes on his kids, works hard at his job, has lots of friends, pays his bills on time, and generally could be elected “citizen of the year”. You know the type: he may live next door to

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you, and you wish he lived in Australia.

He paints the house before it begins to peel. He washes his car while you can still see what color it was. He offers to do the grocery shopping so his wife can take a nap. You know the type. You hear wives say, "I'll bet Rob wouldn't say that!" (and you'd like to kill him).

So Rob is a "good guy". He goes to church, but only now and then. He considers himself a Christian because he goes to a Christian church, but he has a problem with one of the church's basic tenets. Sin. He considers sin an ugly word, and he doesn't see himself as a sinner, to be sure.

His brother, Fred...now that's a different story. Fred's a sinner. He toyed with drugs in the '60's, left his wife and kids, and has, in general, made a mess of his life. "Fred," Rob would admit, "is a sinner." Sin, however, to Rob, is behavioral. To be a sinner, your behavior has to be such that it radically and consistently affects other people in a negative way.

The rest of the family is a spiritual mixed bag. Wife Jenny is what Rob affectionately calls a "religious nut". She gets up early every day to pray, goes to some kind of a citywide Bible study where 300 women meet in one place to study. Rob's assumption is that it must be interesting because they probably all talk at the same time. Jenny even has little Bible verses pasted on the refrigerator door, and she claims to be trying to memorize them. Rob's conclusion is that they cover the scratches on the door to the fridge, so at least they serve a purpose.

Daughter Elaine, the first teen to pass through the Fontaine assembly line, has been active in the church program since she was old enough to sing "Yes, Jesus Loves Me" in the peewee choir at the age of three. She is president of the youth assembly, serves on the high school council, and in general, spends as much time at the church as she does at home. Her interest in spiritual things, however, is not nearly so keen as her interest in the boys who make those same church activities their place to meet girls. She has somewhat adopted her Dad's concept of sin, and sees God as someone who loves everybody too much to let anyone go to hell. The twins, aged 9, aren't nearly as involved as Elaine, but they make it to church with Mom each week and, in general, try to stay out of trouble.

One more thing about Elaine. This year she has begun to

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demonstrate what her Mom calls “a little hint of rebellion”. She used to clean her room, hang up her clothes, do her homework without nagging and, in general, was the perfect daughter. For the past three months, however, she has taken to challenging almost everything her mother tells her to do. She cleans up only under duress, hangs up her clothes only when Mom tells her she can't go to Youth Club unless she does, and her grades have slipped from all “A's” to about a B+ average. She has started to talk back to her parents and has, on a couple of occasions, been caught lying about where she's been and who she's been with.

Nothing earth-shaking, mind you, but enough rebellion to cause Mom to ask her prayer group to pray with her for her daughter's spiritual condition to change. “It's a matter of the heart!” Mom would say to her friend, Elise, on the phone. “God doesn't have control of her heart!”

And indeed, He doesn't. Dad, however, sees it in a different light. To him, she is a typical teen who needs to spread her wings and make her own decisions. So long as she doesn't get into any real trouble, a few lies will only serve her well, he surmises; and besides, everybody does it. He is actually proud of her creativity when she concocts a really good tale to cover the fact that she hasn't obeyed. “It's no different than what I do to make a sale,” he chortles. “You have to bend the truth in this world, or people will walk all over you.” Jenny bites her lip until it bleeds, and usually says nothing. Occasionally, she will wait until someone lies to Rob and he gets angry about it, and try to use it to put the shoe on the other foot; but Rob is so fast with the words, she can't ever quite one-up him. And since he sees life as having no absolutes, to him a lie is only a lie when the consequences are worse than they would have been had you told the truth. And that, of course, depends on your perspective.

So there are, to say the least, some rather divisive issues hovering over the Fontaine household this year, and there will likely be some philosophical and theological deadlocks before the year is out.

It is a Friday evening now at the Fontaines, in mid-November. Dad is playing “White Christmas” a little louder on the old Fontaine phono, and the twins, who are a little less “Crosby friendly” are finding it hard not to mock their seemingly obsessed father. “He's dreaming of a white Christmas” sings Buddy somewhat

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sacrilegiously, “just like the ones he’s never known. While the family’s weeping, and nobody’s sleeping, he’ll play that song until we’re grown.”

“How rude!” Mom fires back. “He’s your father. He has a right to play whatever music he wants to. At least you can understand the words. That stuff you play sounds like a herd of buffaloes gasping for breath while they’re eating stuffed meatloaf on toast.” She couldn’t believe she’d said it, but she had. The twins were horrified. Their mom had never fired back so quickly before. Usually, she just stayed quiet. “Buffaloes gasping for breath? Meatloaf?” Elaine howled, “Mom, what novel have you been reading? That’s awful.”

“Besides,” Elaine, went on, “Buddy’s right. If he wants a white Christmas so badly, why doesn’t he pack up the whole family and take us to Colorado to ski this Christmas? He’ll have a white Christmas, and we’ll have some fun for a change.” That “for a change” was the key phrase in the statement. It was another of Elaine’s little digs at the status quo in the Fontaine family dwelling, which she saw as just a little more exciting than an evening at Uncle Geronimo’s house. Uncle Geronimo can’t see or hear and all he does is grunt. The kids do anything to avoid that trip, and Elaine is implying that staying home is not all that much better. Her level of rebellion is rising, and Mom’s level of tolerance is getting thinner by the minute.

Dad, meanwhile, is oblivious. “Let’s buy Pop a set of those wireless headphones for Christmas,” Betty suggests. “He can have a white Christmas, and we can have peace on earth, good will towards us,” she concluded. “Good idea,” Buddy chimed in. “Let him play in the snow without burying us in it.” The atmosphere was getting chilly in the house by now, and Mom did what she often did when it got to be more than she could handle. She evacuated the premises, went to her room and began to pray. She prayed for her husband to understand what Christmas was all about, for Elaine to see her rebellion as rebellion to God, and for the twins to begin to hunger for spiritual things. So far, none of her prayers had been answered, and she was getting more than a little weary of the warfare.

The next day was not your typical Saturday. The kids, knowing that Saturdays in November were sacred to Dad, evaporated like steam as soon as breakfast was over. “I’ve got to study for exams,”

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Elaine blurted out, proud to be the first to escape the nest. "I'll be back about supper time." Dad was hurt. You could see it in his eyes. "This is the day we're getting the Christmas stuff out," he countered, "I need your help!" "Dad," Elaine wailed, "it's not even Thanksgiving yet. Give the stuff a little more time to collect dust. We'll help you next month." Buddy and Betty quickly explained that they had been invited to the Osgood's house to celebrate Nancy Osgood's birthday, and they were invited to stay after the party and go skating with some of their friends. "Sorry, Dad," they said, almost in unison, "We'll help you another time."

Jenny could see the hurt in his eyes. All year long he waited for this day. He would get the train set down, test the engine and sand the tracks. He would get the outside lights out and test each string, then usually go to K-Mart and buy all new ones. It was like a ritual. He would take the tree out of its box, fluff the limbs, dust it off, then put it back in the box where the limbs would get all out of shape again. And, of course, while he did all this, he played...you guessed it, Mr. Crosby himself, on the phonograph. And on the tape recorder. And now, he had found a CD of it to play on his new CD player in the car. The only thing he lacked was a video, and that was expected next.

"I'll help you, Dear," Jenny quietly responded, "I'll call Velma and tell her I can't make the brunch. We'll do it together." And with that, the rest of the family, sighing at Mom's bravery, made for the door almost as one, before someone objected too vehemently to their alternate plans.

Sunday was an unusual one for the Fontaines. Dad, of course, didn't want to go to church. He figured he'd have to make the Christmas musical the kids were in, and if he was really unlucky, would have to make the adult choir program, too, since their neighbors usually sang solos in that one. Too much religion in one month never appealed to Rob, even at Christmas. Mom, however, was what made this Sunday unusual. She agreed, somewhat reluctantly in her spirit, to stay home and help Rob finish his pre-Christmas ritual, rather than attend her own Sunday School and go to church. She had been to a seminar on being a godly wife, and remembered something about how to graciously submit when it would make a difference, and thus make an impact without saying a word. She agreed to stay home, and Rob was both shocked and pleased.

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One of the three trains was whizzing around the track at breakneck speed, while Dad patiently was repairing the other two when the kids came home from church. It was Elaine who blurted it out first. "Mom, look," she cried out, almost in disbelief, "Look at the title of the adult choir's Christmas musical. I'm gonna change churches!" Jenny shook her head. Another sign of rebellion, she guessed. Elaine handed her the church bulletin. There it was in black and white. Or should I say, red and white and green and gold. "The Centerview Community Church invites you to their annual Christmas musical presentation, 'I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas'". "Mom," Elaine wailed, "it was awful; they even played a few bars of Bing Crosby when they mad the announcement."

Dad thought it was a joke, a sick joke his insensitive kids were playing on him to discredit his appreciation for life's finer things, at least life's finest song. But, no, there it was, right before his eyes. Either the church was in on the charade, or this was the real thing. "White Christmas" it said. "Well, it's about time these religious groups came to appreciate the real meaning of Christmas," he muttered under his breath. "We'll be going to that one," he concluded. "We'll just have to see what they do with Bing Crosby."

All three kids were about to decide Christianity was not for them. They had all read the story of the birth of Christ, and none of them remembered Bing Crosby singing in the background, or a hint of snow outside that stable. And besides, they could all just picture dear old Dad standing up in the middle of the musical, hand across his heart, making out like the Christmas crooner himself. They would never be able to darken the door again. What a revolting turn of events, they thought. But as the Scripture said about Mary, Jenny kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. She had been praying that somehow God would make Christmas make sense, real sense, to Rob. Could this be God's incredibly different plan? So she was on a different wave length than the kids were. But, then, she was in a different world than they were, spiritually. "Dear God," she prayed, "I don't know what you're up to, but I'm gonna go along for the ride. Help me to hold on tight."

The weeks passed with virtually no real traumas. Christmas time was usually pretty merry at the Fontaine household. Dad seemed to turn into a mushy kind of Santa Claus, decorating,

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shopping, dropping hints about things he wanted, and taking notes about what other family members might want or need. He even seemed to be looking forward to the church musical, which, of course, was a first. The kids, as kids do, seemed a little more pliable and responsive than usual, possibly because they had asked for some pretty hefty gifts and didn't want to muddy the waters with perceived disobedience.

It all seemed to come pretty fast. Before long, December 15 was at hand, and the church was packed that evening. As they entered the sanctuary, believe it or not, Bing Crosby could be heard in the background singing (you guessed it) and Dad's eyes nearly popped out of his head. Unfortunately, he began to hum out loud to the tune (which believe it or not, he had down to a science), and the kids, sensing some kind of an unrequested solo was in the making, disappeared the minute they hit the sanctuary and heard their old adversary, Der Bingle himself, on the loudspeakers. The twins lit out for the balcony, where their somewhat spiritually skeptical friends hung out, and Elaine slid past them and went scurrying to the side where Rupert Bellingher, the hefty halfback of the local championship football team, was waiting with a seat just for her. All three were far enough away to be able to somehow pretend they had never met the man who was humming away as though he was part of the cast.

Fortunately, before you could so much as say, "Bah, humbug," the lights in the sanctuary began to dim and everyone scurried to their seats. It was not so fortunate for the Fontaine family, however, for as the lights went down, the music of the volunteer orchestra began to swell, and guess what they were playing? It was the big band sound of the '40's and you somehow expected Mr. Crosby himself to appear at the podium and begin to croon, "just like the ones I used to know". It was all Rob could do to contain himself. Visions of snowflakes danced in his head. Suddenly the choir began to sing, and believe it or not, they began by singing, "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones I used to know." Sure enough, Rob could contain himself no longer. He just had to sing. Not loudly, mind you. But loud enough to cause Jenny to slide so low in her seat that her knees bumped the pew in front of her. Widow Filibree turned and scowled at her for the intrusion, with a stare that would melt even Bing's snowfall. But it didn't stop Rob. Soon the folks in the row in front of them began singing, too. They heard Rob and thought it was a sing-

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along. The next row chimed in, and before the song was over, nearly the whole audience had turned into one big secular choir, singing what appeared to be a tribute to days gone by. The music director, a slender, balding man with a knack for reading the congregation's needs, went along with the flow of things and let it happen. When the choir and its collaborating audience finished, "and may all your Christmases be white," a man slipped out of the choir, walked to the front, and in a deep bass voice said, "This is the song that's become synonymous with Christmas. But what's missing?" Dad was a little offended, but by now he was so "into it" that he didn't even shout out, "nothing's missing".

"Something's missing in our concept of Christmas," the man with the deep voice went on, "What is it?" At that, the orchestra began playing the strains of "What can wash away our sins; nothing but the blood of Jesus", and a chorus of voices, in unison shouted... "What's missing?" (there was a pause) and then they shouted at the top of their voices, "SIN!"

Rob Fontaine jumped nearly out of his skin. Bing Crosby he could handle. Sin he couldn't. But before he could even let his objections surface, the choir began to hum, and Pastor Bill Highlands, a young man with a flair for the dramatic, but with bedrock convictions, stood up and began to speak his well-rehearsed dialogue.

"What's missing from Christmas," he began, "is sin. Sin is the reason for Christmas. Yes, Jesus came to earth on Christmas day. But what we overlook is why He came. Had it not been for sin, there would be no Christmas. Had it not been for sin, there would be no church. Had it not been for sin, there would need be no Savior. But sin entered the world and death by sin, so Jesus entered the world, and took on Himself our sins that we might have eternal life. Today's musical is all about sin, and about how to really have a white Christmas."

Jenny Fontaine was paralyzed. She suddenly realized her forehead was soaked with perspiration. She did not dare look at Rob, but she did feel his arm against hers, so at least she knew he hadn't fled the scene. At this point in time, her faith was wavering, and she was more than a little angry at God for putting her in this predicament. It almost looked like the church framed this presentation to lure her Crosby-loving, sin-hating husband into a well-designed trap. She was, of course, overlooking the

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sovereignty of God, and the possibility that what appeared to be a disaster just might be God's way of getting Rob's attention. Either way, she just wished it was over.

"Sin," Pastor Highlands went on, "just what is it?" The lights dimmed. That was good, Rob couldn't see to escape if he wanted to. On one side of the stage, the spotlight fell on two people, one representing man; the other representing God. In between the two was a huge wall marked "sin". The man was trying to get to God. He tried climbing over the wall, but it was too tall. He tried running around the wall, but it was too long. He tried crawling under the wall, but it wouldn't give. Sin was keeping man from a relationship with the God who made him.

"Sin is not just something you do," the Pastor went on, "Sin is something you are. You have been born in sin. You are not just a sinner because you have sinned, you sin because you are a sinner. Sin is a disease that has infected the human race, and you are born with it in your blood. No one is immune. No one escapes its impact." Then the choir began to sing well orchestrated choruses of Scripture passages that define sin as a universal condition and two groups of musicians bantered back and forth across the auditorium with questions and Scriptural answers, using such passages as Genesis 6:5, Romans 5:12, Romans 7:20,21, and Romans 3:23.

Rob Fontaine heard, like it or not, that "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God", and that "if we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us". His jaw was frozen in anger. His heart was racing a mile a minute, but he knew that to get up and walk out would almost make these religious hypocrites assume he was one of those "sinners" (and of course, he knew he wasn't).

It all seemed to Rob, anyway, that God was teasing everyone. If all have sinned, and there was no way around that wall, then God was just having fun at man's expense, and Jesus' coming to earth was the ultimate tease. He began forming in his mind the petition he was going to circulate to have this heretic removed as Pastor for ruining such an auspicious occasion with such a cloud of hopelessness. Just then, the orchestra began playing the chorus, "For God so loved the world," and as the choir sang "He died on Calvary, from sin to set me free", down from the ceiling came a huge cross, which landed on the wall that separated man from

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God and crushed it to smithereens. A bright light illuminated the stage, and a voice shouted, "But God commended His love to us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

The choir began to sing "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, sweetest name I know," followed by "Gone, gone, gone, gone, yes, my sins are gone". The lights dimmed again, and the Pastor began to explain what sin is. "You don't need to be an adulterer or a murderer or even a liar to be a sinner," he explained. "Sin is any act or attitude that assumes any degree of independence from God's total control of your life. You were never meant to be in control. You were created in the image of God. With that, the lights on the other side of the stage came on and you saw two people standing, one on each side of what represented a huge mirror. One would wave his hand, the other would do the same thing. "This is what an image does," the Pastor went on; "it does exactly what the source does. But this is what man does." With that, the source of the image waved his arm, but the object of the image jumped up and down. "You see, what Mr. Object is doing is not bad in itself. But he is in total disobedience as an image. He has no right to jump up and down. He only has the right to obey. The moment he makes his own choices apart from the source, he has sinned."

Then different voices from the choir began quoting from the book of John. One recited from John 5:19, "Verily, verily I say unto you, the Son can do nothing of Himself". Another responded with John 5:30, "I can of mine own self do nothing". Still another John 8:28, "When ye have lifted up the Son of Man, then shall ye know that I am he, and that I do nothing of myself." "Jesus never sinned," the Pastor went on, "because He never operated outside the image of His Father. You are a sinner, Beloved," he continued, "not just because of all the bad things you have done. The worst thing you have done is try to live your life outside the will of the one who made you. That, dear friend, is the greatest sin of all. That was the sin that caused Eve to fall. Not the fruit she ate. The fruit she ate was the result of the thought she had...the thought that she could make a choice apart from or in defiance of what God had told her to do."

"Sin is the issue," he went on, "and sin has separated you from God. Unless you have, at some time in your life, specifically and knowingly, come to grips with the fact that you are living apart from the God who made you, and that doing that is sin, you can sing Christmas carols, buy presents, eat fruitcake, take

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back presents, put up trees, take down trees, borrow money to pay for the presents, send cards, even put up electric trains and outside lights, and never understand Christmas. Christmas isn't about giving things to each other. Christmas is about taking the gift God has given you, the gift of forgiveness. But you can't take it until you know you don't have it; and sin is the issue."

At that point, he held up that little wordless book so many people use with children, and began explaining the meaning of each of the colors; black for sin, red for the blood of Christ, white for the purity of God's cleansing, green for growth, and he said, "Are you dreaming of a White Christmas? Here's how you make it happen. Christmas is when Jesus is born, born again in someone's waiting heart. White is the color of that heart when sin is washed away and God makes that heart 'white as snow'. You can have a white Christmas today," he went on. "All you have to do is understand what sin is, understand that you are infected with it and there is no cure apart from that cross; and coming to that cross, ask Jesus to forgive you, cleanse you, and having cleansed your heart as a manger, make it white as snow and come to live there. You can do that, even today," he concluded. "Ask Him to give you a White Christmas." At that point, the choir began to sing,

I'm praying for a white Christmas
(Not like the ones we've always known)
But a time of reflecting,
When hearts are connecting,
With why that baby boy was born...

I'm praying for a white Christmas
Where the world stands mortified by sin;
And that Cross compelling,
Its story telling,
Demands conversion from within

I'm praying for a white Christmas
Won't you join in praying, too
That God's great story
Will bring Him glory
As in men's hearts He's born anew.

The chorus, which the choir director led the congregation in singing after each verse, went like this:

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Make this a truly white Christmas,
Let God fill you with His light;
Let your heart be merry and bright,
As the blood of Jesus makes it white.

As the choir sang, Pastor Highlands extended an invitation for people to come forward and receive the gift of Christmas, something he seldom did in that church, but something he felt compelled to do this year. People began moving down towards the front, many weeping uncontrollably. A thousand thoughts flooded Jenny Fontaine's mind. Suddenly she realized that it wasn't the sins her family committed that were the issue; sin was the issue, and that cross was the answer. As Jenny looked up, she saw a familiar figure moving from the corner of the sanctuary towards the front. It was her daughter, Elaine. For the first time, Elaine understood sin. It was not what she did compared with what others did; it was something she was . . . a sinner. And as she had tried to live her life apart from God's control, she had only revealed that she did not grasp the image of God. A deep conviction had settled on her soul that evening, and though the music in the background was oh, so familiar, the words they were singing were brand new to her ears, and the message seemed brand new to her heart.

Jenny began to cry. She raced down to the front to put her arms around her daughter. As they prayed together, Elaine asked her mom to forgive her for all the anger and rebellion that had surfaced in her life. They prayed together, and Elaine asked Jesus to make her heart as white as snow; to be born there and make her a new person; to make this the first really "White Christmas" she had ever known. The choir continued to sing, "I'm praying for a white Christmas, not like the ones we've always known." Elaine knew the tune. She knew it so well, she just couldn't help singing these new lyrics because now they were hers. Soon others around her at the front began singing, too.

"I'm praying for a white Christmas
Where the world stands mortified by sin;
And that Cross compelling,
Its story telling,
Demands conversion from within."

Most of the people were crying so hard they couldn't carry the tune, but somehow that didn't seem to matter. There was, however,

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one voice that seemed to have the melody down perfectly. It was a man's voice, and it seemed to keep coming closer and closer to where Jenny and Elaine were praying and singing. Soon it was so close they couldn't escape it. It was Rob Christmas himself, and his bright red and green Christmas shirt was soaked with tears. It became apparent that for the first time in his life, this one who had been dreaming all his life of a "White Christmas", was experiencing one for the first time.

No, there were no snowflakes falling. It was about 70 degrees outside and the sun was shining. But inside Rob Fontaine's heart, the SON was shining for the first time ever. This one who so loved Christmas, had just discovered what Christmas was all about. It is all about sin and a Savior. A Savior who wants to make a heart that is black, as white as snow.

All about us, Beloved, are people just like the Fontaines. Maybe you are one of those people. You celebrate Christmas each year; maybe you even look forward to it. You put up a tree, buy presents, maybe even sing Christmas carols that Christ the Lord is born. Oh, dear friend, Christmas is not just about the birth of Christ. Christmas is about sin and the need for a Savior. That is why Jesus had to lay aside His robes of righteousness, take upon Himself the cloak of a servant, and die the brutal death of the Cross.

You can celebrate Christmas all of your life and end up in hell. You can sing carols every December and never experience the joy, the peace, the hope that Christmas is designed to give you. You can be a Sunday school teacher, a preacher, even a missionary, and still die without ever experiencing a white Christmas. It isn't what you do for God. It is what God did for you. God died for you. He had to. Your sins had separated you from His love and only His Son was sinless, so only His Son could pay the price for your sins.

You don't have to do penance. You don't have to join a certain church. You don't even have to walk down an aisle. But you do have to deal with sin or you can never have a white Christmas.

What better time than this to say "yes" to Jesus Christ?

What better time than Christmas to ask the Son to be born in you?

What better time than right now, before the issue escapes you

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again, to recognize that sin is the issue and Christ is the answer;
and Christmas, the beginning of life, can be just that for you?

Won't you trust Him right now?
You can stop dreaming of a white Christmas.
It is not a dream. It is real.

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