



## GUIDELINES DAILY COMMENTARY ON LIVING WITH DR. HAROLD J. SALA

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Subject: Christmas

# CHRISTMAS IN A SHANGHAI PRISON

In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. John 1:4,5

The life of Nien Cheng should be made into a movie. Several times censors in China have turned down the requests of movie producers, who know what a powerful picture her story would make. Nonetheless, her story has been told in her book entitled *Life and Death in Shanghai*, which I heartily recommend.

This frail woman, who eventually was able to come to the US, took over her husband's responsibilities upon his death and soon Cheng was arrested and sent to prison. The year was 1966, and China was being torn apart by the Cultural Revolution. For seven long years she was kept in solitary confinement as her captors attempted to break her indomitable, brave spirit. On December 2, the newspaper she had at first been allowed stopped coming.

Then, and the following are her own words,

I started to make light scratches on the wall to mark the passing days. By the time I had made twenty-three strokes, I knew it was Christmas Eve. Though the usual bedtime hour had passed, the guards were not yet on duty to tell the prisoners to go to sleep. While I was waiting in the bitter cold, suddenly, from somewhere upstairs, I heard a young soprano voice singing, at first tentative and then boldly, the Chinese version of *Silent Night*. The prison walls resounded with her song as her clear and melodious voice floated in and out of the dark corridors. I was enraptured and deeply moved as I listened to her. I knew from the way she rendered the song that she was a professional singer who had incurred the displeasure of the Maoists. No concert I had attended at Christmas in any year meant more to me than that moment when I sat in my icy cell listening to *Silent Night* sung by another prisoner whom I could not see. As soon as she was confident that guards were not there to stop her, the girl sang beautifully without any trace of nervousness. The prison became very quiet. All the inmates listened to her with baited breath.

Finally, the song ended but the melody had penetrated the darkness and the cold of a prison and the message of hope freed the prisoners, at least for the moment, from the strangle hold of despair and gloom. Such is the powerful impact of the reality that into this world—not a make-believe, fairy tale world, a world of princesses and princes—Jesus was born.

He came to an imperfect broken world, and the reality of that silent night long ago can set you free from the weariness, the depression, and the incarceration of your sin and wrongdoing. Isaiah put it so well when he wrote, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned" (Isaiah 9:2). And those words were written 700 years before Christ was born, yet they still drive back the darkness of despair and loneliness.

Perhaps you are in a prison of guilt, loneliness and the darkness of despair. Like Nien Cheng, you will spend Christmas Eve living with thoughts of how you remember past Christmases.

Take time to find a Bible and turn to Luke 2. Read the story of Christ's birth as though you were reading it for the first time. Realize that the message is simple: The Word incarnate, the Word Jesus Christ, became flesh and dwelt among us so that we might follow His light and have the assurance that tomorrow can be different.

John was right: "In him was life, and that life was the light of men (John 1:4). It's still true.

Resource reading: Isaiah 9:1-6.