

Every Ending has a Beginning

John 19:28-30

I absolutely love Christmastime. In fact, I have occasionally been referred to by certain members of my family as “Mr. Christmas.” Anne leverages my love of Christmas occasionally to get me to participate in a 5k along with another 1,000 people who think dressing up as Santa and running 3 miles is normal. If you were to ask me what my favorite season of the year is I would reply, “Winter.” It’s not only because I enjoy snowboarding but also because that is the season Christmas is in. If we were in the southern hemisphere, my favorite season would be Summer. There’s just something about Christmas. I love the festive atmosphere, the decorations, the lights, the trees, the tales, and the traditions. I even love the music so much I’ve been accused of not displaying proper decorum by refraining from listening to it until after Thanksgiving. Really, September is not all that early to start! Just look around us on the stage here. All these things just have a way of instilling so much joy and hope in everyone. It really is one of the common graces God grants to everyone. You need not be a Christian to feel the joy and hope that Christmas brings. Even during war there is something about Christmas. On Christmas Eve of 1914 German and British troops sang Christmas carols to each other across the battlefield. Christmas morning, they left their trenches and exchanged presents of cigarettes and plum puddings. They sang carols and even played a game of soccer. There was something about Christmas that caused these men, who days before had been trying to kill each other, to come together this way. That’s pretty incredible, and it’s a feeling or disposition we often say we will hold onto the whole year through. Along with Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens “A Christmas Carol” we say, “I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year.” But we don’t do so well at that, do we? All these things here, the trees and the lights, give us joy for a time, but then as the season fades so do these things, and frequently, we fail to honor Christmas in our hearts. We try to use the joy and hope of a festive season to fill a void inside us that is a longing for eternity and can only be filled by the babe in the manger, which is where we first begin to grasp the true joy and hope the season brings. Even then, many people hold to the manger as a source of joy and hope in a way not unlike the trees, decorations, and lights. They fail to see the manger for what it really is. They never move from the manger to the cross. Then, as the presence of the manger fades so do the joy and hope attached to it. When Charlie Brown asked the question, “Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?” Linus stepped up with perhaps the most famous scene in all of Christmas moviedom.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this [shall be] a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. [Luke 2:8-14 KJV]

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Linus was not wrong when he said, "That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown," but it is about so much more than that. If we never move from the manger to the cross, we will not fully understand the reason for the joy and hope that it brings, and we will not really be able to honor Christmas in our hearts all the year. Why is the angel's announcement that Linus quoted from Luke such good tidings of great joy? What is it that makes this particular birth so special?

You may have already noticed the passage I'm preaching from today, and some of you may be thinking it's not at all about Jesus' birth! I mentioned earlier that I love Christmas music, but my favorite songs are the ones that grab my heart with the manger then point me to the cross and cause me to reflect on why Jesus came and what this tiny and vulnerable baby would one day endure for me. It may be traditional songs like "What Child is This" that tells us "Nails, spear shall pierce Him through, the cross be borne for me, for you." It may be something newer and intended for kids like Go Fish's song "It's About the Cross" which, in addition to reminding us "It's not just about the presents underneath the tree," also reminds us "It's not just about the manger where the baby lay." It may even be a reworked classic secular song such as Cloverton did with the song "Hallelujah" to create "A Hallelujah Christmas" with the verse, "I know You came to rescue me; this baby boy would grow to be, a man and one day die for me and you; my sins would drive the nails in you; that rugged cross was my cross, too; still every breath you drew was hallelujah." Those are powerful words that cause us to reflect on more than the manger. In fact, this idea is so important to me that some years ago we began placing the nativity scene front and center under the Christmas tree with a simple cross for our tree topper. It's a good reminder for us of what we are really celebrating, what an amazing and precious gift the birth of Jesus was and where it led. In order to truly experience and permanently hold onto the joy and hope of Christmas we must move from the manger to the cross. That's what I want us to do here today. I want us to let this manger grab our hearts and then point us to the cross. That being the goal, let's look at the end of the story to help us ask the right question so we can understand the significance of what we will be celebrating in just a few days. Let's look at John 19:28-30.

After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst." A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. [John 19:28-30 ESV]

This passage begs the question, "What was finished?" What was it that Jesus had accomplished by his death on the cross and why did he do it? If you've grown up in church, you may have a full grasp of this. Or perhaps this is something you've never heard or thought about. Maybe you're somewhere in between. It really doesn't matter where you are in understanding this because we can all stand to think about these things either for the first time or for the thousandth time in order to truly understand and appreciate what this season brings and hold onto it throughout the year. Who knows, maybe in moving from the manger to the cross you will find that there is more you need to do.

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Something deeper from before the dawn of time.

In the book “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe” from C.S. Lewis’ Chronicles of Narnia we encounter a story in which the four Pevensie children; Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy; discover the land of Narnia. When they discover Narnia, it is under the control of the White Witch who has made it always winter but never Christmas. There’s my Christmas connection. Aslan, the great lion who created Narnia, is rumored to be returning to defeat the White Witch and free Narnia from her enchantment. As his appearance approaches, Christmas finally comes, and the thaw begins. Then, Aslan defeats the White Witch. Earlier in the story she had caused one of the children, Edmund, to betray the others which was punishable by death. The White Witch reminds Aslan that according to the deep magic from the dawn of time, in order to spare Edmund’s life, Aslan must sacrifice his own. Much to the witch’s glee because of the victory it will give her, Aslan willingly substitutes his life for Edmund’s, but the next day, to the amazement of all, he comes back to life. He tells the children that though the White Witch knew of the deep magic from the dawn of time she did not know the deeper magic from before the dawn of time. If you are a fan of Narnia this isn’t the best retelling, but it helps get the point across. C.S. Lewis was not just grasping an idea out of the air to make his story better. It comes directly from the Bible. It is easy for us in answering the question, “What was finished?” to go back only as far as Jesus’ birth and the beginning of his subsequent ministry on Earth or even to go back to the dawn of time when he created all things, but that is not what the Bible tells us. The Bible tells us of something deeper from before the dawn of time. Look with me at a few verses, and I think a picture will begin to form.

[1 Peter 1:20 ESV] He [Jesus] was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you

[Titus 1:1-2 ESV] Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began

[2 Timothy 1:8-9 ESV] Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began,

[Ephesians 1:4 ESV] even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

We see a concept repeated in these verses. Before the foundation of the world and before the ages began. What this is teaching us is that God’s plan, from the manger to the cross, existed before the creation of the world. This is absolutely fascinating to me. In eternity past, before creation, a plan was decreed, and when that creation was brought into existence by Jesus, it was with the full knowledge that his act of creation would lead to his manger . . . and then to

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his cross. So, you see, C.S. Lewis' reference to a "deeper magic from before the dawn of time" was just a pointer to the reality of what God decreed and put into place before the ages began. The manger was not a reaction to a plan gone awry in the garden of Eden; the manger was and always had been the plan. We really can't move from the manger to the cross without understanding that on some level. What an amazing act of love on God's part. We can imagine what inspired the writer of the Christmas hymn "What Wondrous Love is This" to pen the words, "What wondrous love is this, oh my soul, oh my soul! What wondrous love is this!"

The dreadful curse.

So, God's plan for redemption preexisted the creation of Adam and Eve. We don't know how much time transpired between God's creation of Adam and Eve and them taking and eating the forbidden fruit. We do know what happened as a result. Genesis 3 records the curse that came as a result of Adam's disobedience, and it is a most dreadful curse. It is in Romans, however, that Paul reveals to us that the dreadful curse affects us all. Romans 5:12 tells us:

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man [Adam], and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned [in Adam].

When Adam sinned, that sin counted for and was passed on to all of us. In theological terms that is referred to as federal headship. It doesn't really seem fair that a single act by Adam should result in the whole world being considered sinners, but Paul is clear about that so there must be more. Whether it seems fair or not, the resulting effect on us is what Paul says in Romans 3:10-11 and 23.

None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks God . . . for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

That is indeed a dreadful curse that we bear because unless we are perfectly righteous, we can have no relationship with God and the peace, joy, and hope that come with it. There is no amount of being good that can overcome the sin that we bear, and we all bear sin. Not one of us is free from sin. That's not to say that we can't or shouldn't try to be good. The world needs more good people. If we get down to the brass tacks though, we see a true understanding of what it means to be good in Luke 18:19 when Jesus tells the rich young man that no one is good but God. I emphasize this so much it's kind of a joke around my house. So much so that my son got me a Christmas t-shirt that says, "Everybody's on the naughty list." It was good for a laugh at the time and still is, at least around our house, but in all seriousness, it is true; all of us, you and I, are on the naughty list and rightly so.

Good news of great joy!

Fortunately, the story doesn't stop with everyone being on the naughty list and without hope; there is good news! That is what the word gospel means, but good doesn't even begin to tell the story. Even the superlative, best, doesn't do this news justice. A choir of angels only

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begins to elevate the importance of this news! When that dreadful curse came into existence it did not come without hope. If we look back to Genesis 3:15 we see what is called the proto-gospel; it is the first indication of the plan that God had decreed before the ages began. To the serpent God said:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."

A lot of history rolled through the books after that. Then at the time appointed within God's plan from eternity past we come to the glorious manger with the answer to the dreadful curse we are all under.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. [Gal 4:4-5 ESV]

Is it any wonder that a host of heavenly angels appeared on that night singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men?" Hark the Herald Angels Sing. Hark means listen. Stop and listen to the angel's song and think of what is happening. The baby born in the manger is the beginning, on Earth, of a plan that was put into place before the foundation of the world to heal the curse and make peace and good will between us and God possible, to make a way for us to be adopted into God's family. We cannot help but sing, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come!"

Jesus bore the dreadful curse for us.

Why was the birth of Jesus such glorious news that a host of angels proclaimed glory to God in the highest? What is this good news of great joy? As just mentioned, we get a first glimpse of it in Genesis 3:15, but now we see it burst forth from the manger. God is perfect in his being and requires the same of us. We must be perfect to achieve the righteousness that God requires, but as we have seen, no one is able to do that. The righteousness God requires is not graded on a scale. It is a pass/fail proposition. You are either perfect and righteous or you are not. Also, because God is perfect in his being he is perfectly just, and perfect justice requires that sin be punished. It is a large concept to try to wrap in one concise sentence, but this is the best I can do. The most finite sin against an infinitely holy God is an infinite offense that justly demands infinite wrath. That is justice. There is no way for us to move past our imperfection to God. It is not possible. That is why the birth of Jesus is such marvelous joyful news. Jesus was born to do what we could not do; he lived a life of perfection with no sin. He achieved what we cannot achieve, perfect righteousness that God requires. And then he did what was unimaginable but had always been the plan from before time began. Jesus bore the dreadful curse for our souls. 2 Corinthians 5:21 tells us

For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

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God placed all our sin on Jesus to bear the wrath that God's justice demanded. Jesus, infinite God incarnate, was able to take the infinite wrath we deserved, and in exchange God granted to us the righteousness that Jesus had accomplished. Do you remember the concept of federal headship mentioned earlier in looking at how Adam's sin brought the curse to bear on all of us and how that seemed unfair? This is the other side of that coin. Just as Adam was the federal head for all mankind, Jesus is the federal head for all those who turn to him in faith. Romans 5:19 tells us:

For as by the one man's [Adam's] disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's [Jesus'] obedience the many will be made righteous.

If it still seems unfair to you, which would you rather have? I'd much rather stand on Jesus in faith than not have Adam's sin counted against me and try to achieve the perfect righteousness God requires on my own. Wouldn't you? When Jesus said, "It is finished" and bowed his head and gave up his spirit, God's plan from eternity past had come to fruition. It is finished because everything required had been accomplished which guaranteed that three days later God would raise Jesus from the dead thereby demonstrating both his satisfaction with the work of Jesus and Jesus' victory over death. The fact that God's just requirement was satisfied by Jesus substituting himself for us, bearing the dreadful curse for us while providing to us the righteousness God requires is the greatest news to ever be proclaimed on the Earth. As the Christmas song continues, "What wondrous love is this, oh my soul! What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss to bear the dreadful curse for my soul."

The two promises of the manger.

I hope you can now see the significance of the manger and its place in God's eternal plan of redemption. Linus was right when he said that the announcement and rejoicing over Jesus' birth is what Christmas is all about, but it is about so much more than that. Yes, we should sing, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come," but we should also sing, "What wondrous love is this that the Lord of bliss should bear the dreadful curse for my soul." There is so much peace, hope, and joy to be found in the Christmas season and the things that surround it. God graciously enables everyone to experience some of this, but the true and lasting joy that can satisfy our longing for eternity can only be found if we move from the manger to the cross. Truly, there is no joy, at least not lasting joy, in the manger without faith in the one born there. The manger holds two promises depending on how we respond to the one born there. The reality of Jesus' coming at the manger as savior is evidence that he will return one day as judge. For those who reject Jesus the manger promises something more fearful than anything we could ever experience on this earth, the infinite wrath of God our sin deserves. For those who respond to Jesus in faith the manger holds the promise of true and lasting joy now and for eternity. How will you respond to the one in the manger?

If this is all new to you then I hope the idea of "what wondrous love is this" will draw you to faith. In Romans 3:25 Paul says that the work of Jesus on the cross in taking on our sin

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and imparting to us his righteousness is to be received by faith, and in Romans 10:9 he says that if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved. We try to keep it simple around here with the idea of A B C. Admit you are a sinner. Believe in Jesus and the work he accomplished on your behalf. Then commit to living for him daily as best as you can. In the Christmas song "O Little Town of Bethlehem" verse 3 says, "Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in." That is the importance of admitting our sinfulness and need for a savior. It is a meek and humble heart that recognizes that and turns to Jesus in belief. Verse 4 of the same song says, "Oh holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today." Can that be your prayer of belief today? Could this be the first Christmas where the joy you find in the manger is rooted in what wondrous love God bestowed on you according to his plan from before the foundation of the world? If this has all been a review for you then I hope it has gripped your heart the way mine is gripped when I think about what this humble Christ child was born to do. Regardless of whether you are just now receiving Jesus in faith this season or have been following Jesus for a long time, the words of Ebenezer Scrooge echo back to help guide us in our commitment to following Jesus as we honor Christmas in our hearts and try to keep it all the year. We do that by reflecting not on the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future as Scrooge did, but on the manger, the cross it led to, and how it was all part of God's plan from eternity past to show his love for us and bring us to himself. When we take the time to move from the manger to the cross, that's when we, along with Charlie Brown, learn what Christmas is all about.