

The Foolishness of the Cross

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(Luke 1.26 – 38; 2.1 – 20; 1 Corinthians 1.18 - 31)

Over the past several weeks I have addressed **Key Events in Our History** – events that are pivotal in understanding our origins and the condition of humankind. I began with the beginning – creation, including a focus on God’s creation of Adam and Eve, the parents of all humanity. A cataclysmic event which affected Adam and Eve, and all their descendants was their disobedience of God in the Garden of Eden which plunged everyone and everything into a sinful state. The pervasiveness of that sinful state became readily apparent as death and alienation entered God’s creation and Adam and Eve’s descendants turned from God who continued to manifest His presence to them through His creation. They chose instead to disregard what God had said and do whatever they pleased and embarked on a path of evil and wickedness. God was so grieved with the state of humankind, He chose to destroy all life on earth with a universal flood. However, God in His mercy provided an opportunity for people to be spared from the flood by an ark which Noah built over the course of 120 years. The flood which was cataclysmic in proportion dramatically changed the face of the earth as the water came upon the earth for 40 days and nights and then as the water receded. Next, I jumped ahead in our series of messages some 500 years to God’s call of Abraham, the father of the Jews. Most recently I drew our attention to Joseph the central figure in the migration of God’s people to Egypt.

An Overview of the Reason for Christmas

Given the Christmas season, I thought it would be appropriate to address the supernatural event which changed the course of history, the incarnation of Jesus. The promised coming of Jesus is embedded in God’s words to Adam and Eve after they disobeyed Him in the Garden of Eden. This is what God said to them,

Genesis 3:15 (ESV) 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.”

These words might seem a bit cryptic; however, upon close examination it is apparent that they looked ahead to a confrontation between Eve’s offspring and satan. While the full extent of this prophecy was surely not fully understood when God told it to Adam and Eve, God spoke of the day when His Son, Jesus Christ would pay the price for the sins of humankind. Through the crucifixion of Jesus and the torture which preceded it, satan inflicted enormous pain on Jesus, i.e. he bruised His heel. However, the physical offspring of Eve, Jesus Christ, by means of His death on the cross bruised satan’s head by being victorious over him as validated by the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

The unfolding of that watershed event necessitated Jesus first becoming a man. Some 4,100 years after the Fall of Adam and Eve, the angel Gabriel visited a young virgin named Mary. She lived in the little, and relatively obscure village of Bethlehem located in Galilee on the north side of the Valley of Jezreel. That meeting is described in **Luke 1.26 – 38**. Understandably Mary was troubled, or taken aback, by this very unanticipated and unusual visit by an angel. Gabriel had come with an announcement,

Luke 1:30–31 (ESV) 30 And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

Mary knew that for a woman to conceive necessitated having sexual relations with a man and since she was a virgin that was impossible.

Luke 1:34 (ESV) And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

It was precisely because Mary was a virgin that the role Gabriel was asking her to fulfil was possible. The Holy Spirit would come upon her and she would conceive.

Luke 1:35 (ESV) And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.”

Despite the predictable misunderstanding and accusations she would face from the outset, let alone the unforeseen pain she would bear years down the road, Mary obediently accepted the role asked of her.

Luke 1:38 (ESV) And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

No one would understand that Mary’s pregnancy was a result of the supernatural intervention of God. Not even Joseph, whom she was betrothed to, believed her when she told him what had happened. Instead he decided he would divorce her. Betrothal was the equivalent of what we refer to as *being engaged*. There was a major difference though, while no legal steps need to be followed to end an engagement, such was not the case with betrothal, which required a divorce. It was not until an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him that what was conceived in Mary was from the Holy Spirit that he went ahead and married her (**Matthew 1.18 – 25**).

Some 9 months later, as a result of a decree from Caesar Augustus necessitating Mary and Joseph go to Bethlehem to be registered for the tax, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, just like the Bible said centuries earlier (**Micah 5.2**). In our society, given the distortions surrounding Christmas, it is not surprising that many miss the dynamics of what happened that night in Bethlehem. It is even hard for us to fathom the full magnitude of this event. The challenge begins with trying to understand the

Trinity – one God in three Persons; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ, God's Son, who was, and is, fully God and fully equal with His Father in every way, in response to His Father's will, left the glories of heaven and came to earth where He clothed Himself with humanity when He was humanly born as a babe at Bethlehem. Mary named Him Jesus, as told by Gabriel. That was definitely a **Wow! Moment** in history. It was certainly worth celebrating as the angels did when they announced His birth to the shepherds and thereafter it prompted the wise men, or Magi, from the east, to come worship the newborn babe (**Matthew 2.1 – 12**).

Why Did Jesus Come

Much is made, and rightly so, of the arrival in the past few days of the Pfizer vaccine and the promise of another on its heels. It will be months until most are vaccinated and protected from the Coronavirus which has held the world in its grip for nearly a year and has been instrumental in the death of nearly 1.7 million so far. Despite the blow COVID-19 has already inflicted and the threat it continues to represent, the peril for which Jesus came to earth was, and is, far more menacing. It necessitated Jesus, the Creator of the universe, to leave heaven to come to earth where He became a helpless babe in His mother's arms. His earthly sojourn culminated with Him being opposed, rejected, and ultimately crucified on a cross at Calvary. Why on earth would anyone choose to do such a thing?

Jesus came because humanity faced a universal problem far deadlier and more horrific than COVID-19 – all humanity was held in the unrelenting grip of sin. It didn't only affect some as is the case with COVID-19, but when Adam and Eve disobeyed God all their descendants became sinners. Everyone thereafter inherited a sin nature, the inclination to sin. And because all are sinners by nature, all disobey God and sin. People think, say, and do what they shouldn't, and don't think, say, and do what they should. It is true that people can give examples of places where they get it right. And while most people can commend themselves by pointing out they aren't guilty of particularly heinous sins, all people nevertheless are still sinners. Because all humans are sinners, they are destined to judgement, punishment for their sins and eternal separation from God. While COVID-19 will only claim a small fraction, sin has its grasp on all.

Throughout history men and women have recognized from the unmistakable evidence in creation and the innate sense within, that God exists. They have been resourceful and creative in how to define God and how they might appease Him. But alas, none of the efforts, all of which are based on human effort offer a solution for sin. It matters not how convinced people are that their proposed solution will satisfy God, nor how passionately they pursue it. Some have gone so far as to sacrifice their children thinking that would appease their god. Others have given up their own lives, believing it would merit great reward from god, but none of them were even as effective as giving the wrong vaccine to protect someone from COVID-19.

It is important to understand Jesus left the glories of heaven and came to earth for two reasons:

1. **All people are sinners without exception. Romans 3:23** (ESV) for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,
2. **It was, and is, impossible for people to save themselves from their sin.**

Sin requires an acceptable sacrifice to atone for it. The requirements for an acceptable sacrifice for sin are twofold:

1. **The sacrifice had to be sinless**, hence no human qualified. The only One in the entire universe who is sinless is God.
2. **The sacrifice also had to be a man**. The innumerable animals that had been offered as sacrifices over the centuries were inadequate; they only reinforced the truth that sin required the sacrifice of an innocent victim. The only possible way to meet the requirement was for God, who alone was, and is sinless, to become a man. God would need to become part of humanity, which Jesus did at Bethlehem with one major exception, He was without sin.

2 Corinthians 5:21 (ESV) For our sake he made him to be sin **who knew no sin**, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

An exceedingly profound and supernatural event took place when Jesus arrived at Bethlehem some 2,000 years ago. Consequently, His arrival remains a legitimate cause for celebration and rejoicing. Jesus came to provide the singular way by which people, all of whom were lost in their sin, could be redeemed from their sin.

Luke 19:10 (ESV) For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

We have much reason to celebrate at Christmas – the arrival of Jesus as our Savior. Nevertheless, it wasn't enough that Jesus became man; He also had to die on the cross and pay the price for our sin. He took our sins upon Himself and He paid the price for them so that all of us who trust in Him don't need to pay for our own sins.

1 Peter 3:18 (ESV) For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,

Colossians 1:20 (ESV) and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

How to Know God

Jesus came to freely offer salvation to all who would accept His invitation to place their faith and trust in Him as the Giver of Life. No one merits salvation; no one will ever succeed, no matter how commendable their efforts, to earn their salvation. Salvation is a free gift to all who believe the gospel of salvation.

Ephesians 2:8–9 (ESV) 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Some mistakenly believe that because Jesus came to earth and paid the price for sin, that everyone is automatically forgiven and it doesn't matter what they do or what they believe. The idea everyone is headed to heaven irrespective of whether or not they accept Jesus as their Savior is quite simply false. If that claim was true there would be no reason to invite people to believe and accept Jesus as their Savior. Consider the reason John gives for writing his Gospel account.

John 20:31 (ESV) but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Read through the Gospel of John where he makes it clear **Who Jesus Is, Why He Came**, and the **Difference He Makes** in the lives of those who embrace Him as their personal Savior. The Gospel of John people is an appeal to people to put their faith in Jesus for their salvation.

The Biblical message on how to have a relationship with God hasn't changed over the centuries; it is the very same today as it was when Jesus walked on earth. If anyone reading this message hasn't personally turned from his or her sins and turned to Jesus for forgiveness and placed his or her faith exclusively in Jesus for salvation, do so today.

John 3:16–17 (ESV) 16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

The Foolishness of the Cross

The message of the Gospel is very simple. People are lost in sin. Jesus paid the price for sin. Those who accept His forgiveness for their sins and place their faith and trust in Him for redemption from their sins are born-again. They become children of God. Not only do they become part of an abiding relationship with Jesus throughout their earthly lives, but, they will spend eternity in heaven. On the other hand those who dismiss Jesus and His offer of salvation are headed to hell. We gain a glimpse into what heaven will be like in the following verses.

Revelation 21:3–4 (ESV) 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

When one thinks about the benefits of placing one's faith in Jesus for salvation and the consequences for those who reject it, it is totally illogical for anyone not to accept Jesus' invitation. Despite what the Bible says, multitudes still don't believe they need to be saved. They don't think they are sinners, or they believe their sins aren't great enough in comparison to others to keep them out of heaven. Most are satisfied their efforts and commendable qualities will suffice. Some contend that the claim of a virgin becoming pregnant as a result of the Holy Spirit is preposterous, as is the claim that God became man at Bethlehem. Some view the belief that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ addressed the issue of sin is wishful thinking. Many can't get past the idea that salvation is a free gift. In their way of thinking people are rewarded for their efforts and good deeds. Some argue, "*It just can't be that simple.*" Many contend the claims of Biblical Christianity merely satisfy the weak minded who need some religion to get them through life, but the truly wise have no such need. Many of those who accept the existence of God unfortunately believe that whatever they come up with will be accepted by God, especially if they are sincere in their beliefs.

Paul spoke about the response to the Gospel in his first letter to the Corinthians. He pointed out the two responses to the Gospel.

1 Corinthians 1:18 (ESV) For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

One group considers the Gospel and the cross of Christ as foolishness, while others believe it and are saved by the power of God. Many people in Paul's day, and in the centuries since, thought that one would be able to gain a relationship with God through their knowledge and reason. People place their trust in their abilities and resourcefulness. As well, there were people then, as there are today, who are looking for a miraculous sign, and if the sign they are waiting for, happens, then they say they would believe. However, while people wait for a miraculous sign, they overlook the significance of the most obvious one, the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The self-driven pursuits of people throughout the ages are summed up in,

1 Corinthians 1:21–22 (ESV) 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,

Despite how resourceful and wise, men and women have been, and are, that isn't the way people achieve a relationship with God. Instead a relationship with God is through His Son Jesus Christ. The world considers it foolishness; that one can know God through the preaching of Jesus Christ crucified.

1 Corinthians 1:23 (ESV) but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,

Paul in writing to the believers in Ephesus, commended them for having not only heard the Gospel of salvation, but for believing it, or trusting it.

Ephesians 1:13 (ESV) In him you also, **when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him**, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit,

Everyone is faced with deciding whether he or she will believe what God has said and accept His invitation to be saved.

1 Peter 1:23 (ESV) since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;

The Bible describes the need of humankind and God's provision by which they might gain eternal life.

John 3:36 (ESV) Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

John 5:24 (ESV) Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

Conclusion

This Christmas, if you haven't turned to Jesus Christ for salvation, don't allow the year to end without having done so. For those who know Christ, despite the many disappointments you may be faced with due to the COVID-19 restrictions, rejoice over the fact that Jesus left the glories of heaven to come to earth to clothe Himself with humanity at Bethlehem for the very purpose of dying on the cross at Calvary to pay the price for our sins. It is because of believing the foolishness of the cross that we have light and a legitimate reason to celebrate.

Reflect on what God has done for us and our response to Him as you listen to the hymn fittingly sung at this time of year, *Thou Did'st Leave Thy Throne*, sung by George Beverly Shea.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EOvwptm2ibs&ab_channel=GeorgeBeverlyShea-