

“Three Christmases”

Luke 2:1–7

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You may be wondering where the title Three Christmases came from so here is how this came about. One of the great challenges of the Gospel ministry, particularly when you've been at it now for over 40 years, is the Advent season and how can we come to these glorious truths with freshness and newness of life as we embrace and understand them? It's certainly worth it, because the tentacles from the incarnation of Christ said doctrinally, Biblically, inspirationally, and aspirationally, they flow into all of life and throughout the Scriptures in a glorious way. So it's not all that hard, but it is a challenge, somewhat, so I always do a lot of reading in preparation for it.

For some reason this year I was particularly drawn to C.S Lewis perhaps because my son got me really interested due to the fact it was his major area and the inklings in general in C.S. Lewis in particular. So I went back to my library with my section on Lewis, and I went to that book that I really enjoy reading, the essays of Lewis in what's called *God in the Dock* and I knew that he had a couple of them. Maybe one of the reasons I'm drawn to it is because, as you note, in the Chronicles of Narnia, he makes the platform of father Christmas an instrument to be able to bring people to the Biblical message of Christ, our Savior, being born into this world. He uses a lot of metaphors in this story to give us the message that Aslan is on the move.

One of the essays in this book is called Xmas or Christmas. He is not so much doing an easy shot at Xmas and then exalting Christmas, but he looks at what's behind the Xmas and what's behind the Christmas from a Biblical world in life. It's a short essay, but very interesting. He writes another one where way he looks at the glories of Christmas and what it meant. In it, he has this development of what he calls three Christmases. So while you would probably much prefer to hear what Lewis has to say about three Christmases, I actually have something I'd like to share with you of how that stimulated me to think about Christmas through that framework of three Christmases that we would be confronted with year after year. So, what are they?

You're probably trying to navigate this because it's one of the both excitements and frustrations that Christians face at this time of year. I think you're faced with three Christmases, and you're kind of in and out of them all the time. You're not settled, but you're not repulsed either. One of those is what I would call the cultural, consumer Christmas. It has its mythology that goes with it for it has its secular carols that it plays with it and the heartbeat of the cultural consumer Christian is what a great season that we can up the GNP in our nation. We like this Christmas idea of buying presents because we like that first word in front of it, buying. The idea is to get you to buy a present, and if you buy a present, the person you buy a present for is going to feel bad if they don't buy you a present, and whatever you buy, they're going to try to buy just a little bit better. Then next year we're going to keep ramping this thing up and then we have a lot of platitudes that we can put around it. So that becomes the cultural consumer Christmas.

The second kind of Christmas is the religious, liturgical, obligatory Christmas. That's where certain segments of the church have taken the Advent season and made it not an instrument for instruction and aspiration, but one of obligation, whereby they've gone beyond the Scriptures to lay upon the consciences of people, certain observances that could be embraced voluntarily and healthily, but once they become obligatory, then we have gone beyond the Scriptures, because the scriptures are clear about worship. Worship is something that is

commanded by the Lord that we were created, saved, and providentially upheld to do and when we worship, we are to do what God has commanded. Now it's absolutely fine to make use of instruments, but they can't become matters of conscience. So there is a religious, obligatory, liturgical that has gone beyond what would be an appropriate use.

Then there is the third Christmas, which is the one I love, and that is the Biblical Christian Christmas, where it's all about Jesus and God's love to send His Son. It is the love of God, the Father that gave us His Son, the love of God the Son that gave Himself, and then the love of God the Spirit who brings us to Christ so that we might know Him and make Him known in this world.

You might be wondering how I feel about those other two Christmases and I have to confess, I have a little bit of an allergic reaction to them, but I'm not totally dismissal of them, and there's a couple of reasons why. I believe one of the reasons that the elements of the church have reached to it, is because the Christian Christmas is so effective because it is addressing issues that have far reaching implications, doctrinally and practically, and seeing its benefit has kind of gone beyond its warrant and made them obligatory because they've seen the benefits of focusing once a year on the Incarnation and all the places that it takes us doctrinally concerning the Gospel of grace. So I can understand why they've done it, and I think they've overdone it and done it wrongly, but I can understand why, because of the benefits of a Christian, Christ-centered Christmas, it's almost, "Well, if it's this beneficial, we need to make it obligatory." Then the world gets confronted with the Christian Christmas, and it either has to surrender with repentance, or it has to try to imitate and infiltrate. So, what the world does with Christmas is a reflection of the effect ... and it's the wrong effect, but it's the effect of the Christian Christmas and wanting something like it, but not wanting to repent and embrace its Message. So they get an "unreasonable" facsimile of a cultural consumer Christmas that's all about profit and self, instead of about the glory of God's grace and mercy.

There is a second reason why I'm not totally repulsed by those other two Christmases, is not only do I see them there out of almost a response of envy to the Christian idea of Christmas, but I also like them because for me, they become a bridge that I can talk about the true Christmas to people when they come to the emptiness of those Christmases. It's nothing new to say that depression and suicides are up at this time of year because these other Christmases don't really do what everybody says they're going to do, so there's unmet expectations. We have a wonderful opportunity in the prevalence of the religious obligatory Christmas and the consumer cultural Christmas to be able to tell people the Biblical message of Christmas – joy to the world, the Lord has come to save His people from their sins! In fact, let me show this to you in Luke 2.

Luke 2:1–7 says [1] *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.* [2] *This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.* [3] *And all went to be registered, each to his own town.* [4]⁴ *And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David,* [5] *to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.* [6] *And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.* [7] *And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.* This is what will be announced after this moment. [11] *For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord* (Luke 2:11).

I know we've only got a couple of days left in the "Christmas season" but I want you to be equipped to realize the multiple Christmases that are out there, make use of the ones that don't

fulfill by bringing the one that fills you to life, Jesus. Understand those are there because of the impact of the Biblical Christmas, but here's what I would really call Christmas. If someone called me and said, (although I don't expect this), "Harry, instead of calling it Christmas, do you have a suggestion?" Yes, my suggestion is the festival of the Incarnation, because I think that's historically kind of the way this thing developed. Now, one of the banes of my life is I love history, and this has been one that has drawn me time and time again, the matter of history behind Christmas.

Christmas wasn't an early observance in the early church. The earliest use of festival was Holy Week—the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. That developed pretty early on as a focus season of praise to God around this greatest week. Other than the week of creation, there's never been a week in history like the week that we call Holy Week, of Christ's passion to save us from our sins on the cross, the empty tomb, His resurrection and His affirmed appearance. Then not long after that, another festival developed, and that was a festival in the New Testament church celebrating the Ascension of Jesus and Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. There wasn't any festival of the Incarnation or Christmas until about the end of the second and third century and by the way, it didn't start around Rome. Now I know you probably hear each year from someone that it's just a Roman pagan holiday that Christians took over with a knock downed version. So instead of the solstice celebration of Saturnalia, Christians started celebrating Christmas.

Here's the problem, Saturnalia was not December the 25th. The solstice was a duel, a fight for two dates, December 19th and December 21st, but not December 25th. So if they were trying to replace Saturnalia, why would you put it on December 25th? Actually, it kind of started in North Africa, probably around Alexandria. Here's the way it developed. They have a reasonable focus upon the date of Jesus' death, in the Passover. When you go back to the calendars and you translate into the Roman calendar, the year of Jesus' death would have took place in the week of Passover, and the Good Friday would have been March 25th. There's no Biblical foundation for this, but in Hebrew cosmology was the notion and the extra Biblical wisdom writings that when a great man died, his death date would be his conception date. So if the death date is the conception date, is there one greater than Jesus? So the early church then just went nine months forward, which would be December the 25th and that's how the date was selected.

The idea was there are three major festivals in the Old Testament. There are really six, but there are three major festivals – the Passover, the feast of Booths, the feast of Weeks. So the early church, while they realized it wasn't obligatory, they said, "Let's reflect that in the New Testament, the New Covenant people, and let's have festivals whereby we can use those as instruments to focus on certain dynamics of who Jesus is and what Jesus did." That is kind of how it got started. Then it moved into this Christmas of religious obligation, which is inappropriate in the binding of consciences in terms of worship, and then eventually the culture grabs on and Saturnalia disappeared. Everything else disappears because this becomes something that everyone starts latching on to, but not the Biblical meaning of it, but just the idea and the sentimentality of it. So that's what begins to happen.

Even though I have that reactions to those Christmases that doesn't stop me from rejoicing in a festival of the Incarnation or Christmas because of its implications. Because when I celebrate the birth of Jesus, every time I celebrate it, I am astonishingly, astoundingly moved concerning the authority, the inerrancy, the supremacy of it. As I think of those 60 plus prophecies and how Matthew brings out for the Jewish people 10 of them in the first four

chapters that are fulfilled in Jesus, and all 60 are fulfilled in Jesus. And it is initiated in the Incarnation from the place He was born, to whom were the parents that were assigned by God for His birth, to where He was born, to all of those things that are there, I am reminded of the inerrancy, the infallibility, the supremacy of Scripture.

Secondly, I am reminded that every one of God's promises and prophecies are all, yes and Amen in Jesus Christ. All of those that are now fulfilled in Jesus and those that are yet to be fulfilled in Jesus, they are as surely going to be fulfilled as the 60 plus prophecies are in His birth, His life, His death, His burial, and His resurrection. The Bible says He is coming again, and yes He is. The Bible says He is ascended and He is coming at the right time, and yes He is. The Bible says in that day He will judge the living and the dead and yes, He will. Your only hope in that day is to be in Jesus Christ and yes, that's true. God's Word is true in Jesus and yes, He will dwell with His people. Yes, He descended to save us from our sins. He ascended in the victory of His redemption and one day, in accordance with His Word, He will descend again, but He won't ascend the second time. He will dwell with His people and they with Him in a new heavens and a new earth forever.

I am also reminded that He was born to go to that cross. From His name, Joseph called Him Yeshua, Yahweh saves, because He will, not may, not try, He will save His people from their sins and when He is born, He will get wrapped into those linen swaddling cloths. I can already see 33 years later at His death when He will be carefully wrapped tightly again with linen cloths for His burial after His atoning death. I see the myrrh and the spices that are put in front of Him by the kings and in that day, with royal reverence, women will place spices around His body when He goes to a tomb. He will be born of the virgin in a stone cave, laid in a carved out stone trough. After His atoning death, He will be laid in a hewn out stone tomb, and a hewn trough as He is laid aside in that stone tomb with a stone rolled in front of it and the five miles from Bethlehem will be transversed to the temple and even before that, the One who is the temple of God. This One will receive the command that He Himself has given. The One who gave the commands of the law, including circumcision, will be circumcised and the drops of blood on that day will point to the flow of the blood from His side on that last day, when He redeems us.

I love to celebrate the Incarnation. It propels me to the atoning death and resurrection of Christ, who came to save His people from their sins. In my mind's eye through the Word of God as I go back to that moment when He was laid in that animal trough, wrapped in cloths in His initial moments of birth, the Divine Son of God, had for months been wrapped as that developing embryo, pre-born in the womb of the virgin, conceived by the Holy Spirit, to be born, to live a sinless life, to bear my sins on the cross, and to save me from my sins, this includes all who put their trust in Him alone for salvation. This One, who comes to this unknown place in the world is the One who spoke and all the world existed, who spoke and the stars were flung throughout the universe, who spoke and all that is visible and invisible came into being.

Now God has finally spoken in His Son. Here is the Prophet. Here is the Priest who can make the atonement for our sins because He's not only the Priest, but He's the Lamb. Here is the King, who when He rises, will tell us, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20). That's why I love the Christian Biblical Christmas. I'll use those others as bridges, for I know that their emptiness actually opens up a door for me to tell people about this Jesus. But first, it brings me to humility,

as a sinner saved by grace. Then it brings me to the triumph of God's grace, to the glory of Christ.

My dear friends, I know what's going to happen in this next couple of days, somebody is going to give a gift and you're going to be like me. You're going to look at your spouse and say, "Honey, did we buy them a gift? They just gave one to us. Did we buy them one?" I don't believe that Jesus came as the Gift of God so that you would feel guilty and give Him something back. I believe that Jesus came to save you, not because what you would give to Him, but because what He would give to save you. I believe the most rational thing in the world is to turn present and presents from a noun into a verb in light of God's gift for you. Perhaps I could say it like Calvin when he said, "Lord, I offer and give my heart promptly to You, because You gave Yourself savingly for me." But if not like Calvin, just do it like Paul; In light of God's grace and mercy, present yourselves as living sacrifices to Christ (Romans 12:1). Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for these moments that we could be together in Your Word. Thank You for the privilege to celebrate the gift of Your Son, who gave His Spirit so that we, set free, might give ourselves to Him, our Lord, our King, and our Savior. So Father, we give You thanksgiving and we give You praise. Even as we, in the midst of the celebrations of a religious world and a consumer secular world, we would be led by Your Spirit with Your Word to the manger, which points us to the cross, which points us, prepares us, secures us and saves us for eternity with You. Lord, I pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.