

Christmas is God Shining In

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The first time that Christ came to this earth was not two thousand years ago at Bethlehem, but some six thousand years ago in the Garden of Eden.

An abnormal emphasis has been placed on the birth of Christ at Bethlehem. This emphasis has given us a rather warped conception of the thing that God would have us see in its proper perspective. We will not attempt to remove the luster from Christmas, the glory from Bethlehem, or the halo from the stable story. On the contrary, the birth of Christ will receive a new meaning which will shed new light upon the place where the star shone so brightly.

A pertinent question as we begin this subject is this: What do we mean by Christmas? Our forefathers came to this land of religious liberty in order to have a place where they could worship God according to the dictates of their conscience. Yet as I write this, our children in school are forbidden to hear the Christmas story as it is recorded in the only document, the Word of God. And they are forbidden to sing “Silent Night” and “Joy to the World.” They can sing “Jingle Bells,” however.

It is a pertinent question to ask. What do you mean by Christmas? Christmas means one thing and one thing only. We cannot indulge in some vague and vapid generalities like “the brotherhood of man” or have it dissipated and diluted with some sort of meaningless statement that has to do with “peace in our time.” May I say, specifically, Christmas means the coming of Christ into the world in the flesh. And in particular it means the virgin birth of Christ.

Now our purpose in this message is to show that the first coming of Christ into the world was not two thousand years ago in Bethlehem but six thousand years ago plus! That’s six thousand years at the minimum, and I think it was a great many more thousands of years that Christ came to the Garden of Eden! Christmas today, even as believers celebrate it, makes the coming of Christ to Bethlehem seem to be only a single such event. It’s often said— you’ve heard it, I’m sure—“I cannot believe in the virgin birth because it’s contrary to nature.” Well, my friend, to be sure, it is contrary to nature. That’s the whole point of it! Any manifestation of God’s command is contrary to nature. And to bring up the fact that the queen bee is virgin born, as are certain other insects you can find in the biological world, proves nothing at all. Every time the supernatural touches the natural, it is not according to nature. And when God broke in after four hundred years of silence, it was with the words in Luke 2:10, “Do not be afraid . . . I bring you good tidings of great joy.” Do not be afraid although the supernatural is touching the natural.

Epiphany: God Shining In

Now the real difficulty is not that the virgin birth is contrary to nature. It’s the fact that folk are totally unaware that Christ came to this earth before Bethlehem. And the virgin birth is not just an isolated incident but is one in a series of events when Christ came to this earth. In the Old Testament Christ was there in history, and He was there in prophecy, and today we want to develop that even further.

Now again may I say that the critic has come forward with another objection—he has many, of course. I hear this each Christmas: If the virgin birth is so important, why didn’t the apostle Paul mention it? The critic has made much of this. I heard it in college, I heard it in seminary, and I’ve heard it in the ministry ever since. My beloved, the fact of the matter is Paul *did* mention it, although he used another word, and I wish today we all could use that other word. Those of us who are not in a liturgical church are more or less inclined to push away from some very good Bible words. Here is one that Paul used several times. Notice his use of it in 2 Timothy 1:8–10:

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began, but has now been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

Notice that Paul has written, “but has now been revealed.” The word “revealed” in verse 10 is translated from the Greek *phaneroo*. Then Paul continues, “God has now been revealed by the appearing,” and “appearing” is *epiphaneia*, from which we get our word *epiphany*. Now *epiphany* is a word with which we are acquainted today. In fact, it is this Greek phrase that has been brought over into the English by transliteration. So, according to Paul, God has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ.

The word *epiphany* means a shining in, and that’s exactly the word that Paul uses. He uses other words for the coming of Christ, but *epiphany* is the one on which he dwells.

The fact of the matter is that Paul wrote of the two comings of Christ—His coming at Bethlehem and His second advent—and called each an epiphany when he wrote to a young preacher by the name of Titus: “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.”

“The grace of God that brings salvation *has appeared*”—there’s our word *epiphany*. When Christ came the first time it was God shining in.

Now will you notice God’s instructions for today:

Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age. (Titus 2:12)

Now for the future:

Looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. (Titus 2:13)

And the word “appearing” again is the word *epiphany*. Paul said that when Christ came to Bethlehem some two thousand years ago, He was shining in—God was shining into this world. He’s coming again, Paul reminds us, and when He comes, it will again be God shining into this world.

You’ll find that the two advents, both the first advent and the second advent of Christ, are spoken of as epiphanies. And not only Paul but all the writers of the New Testament do this.

The apostle John, in 1 John 3:5, does as Paul does—he puts the two appearings right together:

And you know that He was manifested [there’s our word *epiphany*] to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin.

That’s the coming of Christ to Bethlehem. John here is making it very clear that it was God shining in, for that’s the meaning of *epiphany*. *Phaneroo* means “to shine,” and *epi* means

“upon” or “into.” *Epiphany* means the shining in of God into a darkened world. That’s the reason John, in his Gospel, introduces the Lord Jesus as the Light. And of John the Baptist he said, “He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light,” and he added that “the true Light [Jesus] ... gives light to every man coming into the world” (John 1:8, 9).

That was the first mention. But in 1 John 3:2 he says:

Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed [there’s our word again, epiphany], we shall be like Him.

When He comes again it will be an epiphany. John and Paul and all the writers of the New Testament say that Christ’s coming to Bethlehem was the shining in of God into this world. And when He comes again, it will be the shining in of God into this world.

It’s interesting to note that historically the Greek Catholic Church refers to the baptism of Jesus as being the Epiphany. And you’ll find that the Roman Catholic Church uses that word in connection with the wise men and especially the appearance of the star they followed.

We find the word *epiphany* used in reference to Christ’s second coming, His second advent. And we find that the word *epiphany* is used at His birth in Bethlehem. Now think of the significance of this, my beloved: The appearance of that special star shining into this world was no accident. It was to be the herald, the sign of Christ’s appearance. And that was the sign that the wise men had seen. It was the event that was to mark our Lord’s shining into the world. His coming at Bethlehem was an epiphany, and the appearance of a star in the heavens was the proper place for it to be, for He had come out of heaven.

Now, friend, follow this carefully. It should give us a new appreciation and understanding of the preexistence of Christ. At His second advent, that is, when He comes again, it will be an epiphany. It will be an appearing from heaven, where He is now, and it will be His shining into this world.

His first advent was an appearing from a preexisting state, and He was shining into this world. Each time He comes from heaven, each time He shines into this world, Paul says He is manifested in the flesh.

May I say, that’s the way we describe the virgin birth. He was manifested in the flesh from an existence in heaven, and He came down to take upon Himself our human flesh. Let me now ask the real question: It is not how could He be born of a virgin, but how could He be born any other way? Could God have come into this world in human flesh any other way? Those who have raised the objection to the virgin birth, come forward now and tell me how God can shine into human flesh, take upon Himself our humanity, and be without sin. Impossible!

So you see that Paul does teach the virgin birth of our Lord, but he uses a different approach than we are used to. Unfortunately, we have dwelt too much on His humble birth in a stable when we should be emphasizing His deity, His shining in. His epiphany was the light of God breaking into the world. And the star was the herald, telling us that a little baby was the container for God!

Christmas Is Christ’s Coming

The Old Testament is filled with appearances of God, and Paul identifies most of those appearances with the titles of Angel of the Covenant and the Angel of His Presence. Let’s go

back to the wilderness with Moses and the children of Israel. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10 that the Rock that followed them was Christ. He sent the Angel of His Presence with them, and the Angel of His Presence was the One who led Israel by the cloud and the pillar of fire. It was none other than the preincarnate Christ who led Israel through the wilderness. This statement of the apostle Paul is of utmost significance, and the implications are tremendous. If Christ was the One in the greatest of the appearances of God in the Old Testament, then He is the One in the other appearances of God. This leads us to conclude that all of these manifestations of Christ in the Old Testament culminate in the Incarnation!

In the life of Jacob, two notable experiences are recorded in Genesis 28–32. One was at Bethel when he fled from home and from his brother Esau, and the other was at Jabbok when he fled from his father-in-law Laban. In the latter experience, Jacob had a very close contact with the Angel of the Lord in the wrestling match in which Jacob had no desire to participate. Later, in recounting the experience to the sons of Joseph, Jacob called him “the Angel who has redeemed me from all evil.” Again, we have an appearance of the preincarnate Christ.

We can push further back in Genesis than Jacob to identify an appearance of Christ. “The Angel of the LORD” appeared to Abraham in his long experience of dealing with God. It is stated:

But the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” So he said, “Here I am.” (Genesis 22:11)

This was during the ordeal of Abraham offering his son Isaac upon the altar. It was our Lord Jesus Christ who appeared to these men.

Now the question is, will the New Testament take us as far back as the Garden of Eden? If you follow me now, I’ll take you to Christmas Day in the Garden of Eden. Notice Paul’s language:

But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. (1 Corinthians 11:3)

My beloved, the analogy here is that just as the woman was created from man and in the image of man, yet different, even so man was created in the image of Christ at the beginning. You must remember that our Lord is called “the last Adam.” And back in the Garden of Eden, man had to be made in the likeness of Christ so that Christ might come in the likeness of man.

Christmas Is a Family Affair

Christmas Day in the Garden of Eden. Let’s go back there. It’s no “Jingle Bells” now. It’s none of this modern folderol.

May I call your attention to something that is of tremendous significance and very interesting in Genesis 2:4: “These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth” (KJV). The more I study the Word of God, and the more I study the Book of Genesis, the more I’m convinced that Moses’ concern was not in giving us the story of Creation—it’s too brief to be the emphasis. He was not even concerned about giving details of the Flood—just a few facts; that’s all. The important information he wanted to give us was the families. And what we have in the Book of Genesis, simply stated, is just the families.

As we look at these families, they become all-important. Look at this verse: “These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth.” What does he mean by “the generations of the heavens and of the earth”? Notice that he begins immediately to talk about the creation of man in Genesis 2:7:

And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.

Man on the physical side is of the family of the earth. I repudiate the theory of evolution with all my being because when this man Adam began to look around for someone kin to him, somebody like him, he found none—not one.

And the LORD God said, “It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him.” Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them. And whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name. So Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him. (Genesis 2:18–20)

We are specifically told that among all the creatures that had been created there was not one found that could have fellowship with man, not one. But, my beloved, whether you like it or not, you have been taken out of the dust of the ground, and “dust you are, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19). On the physical side, that’s all you are. The psalmist said, “He remembers that we are dust” (Psalm 103:14), but sometimes we forget it. And when dust gets stuck on itself, it’s mud. You have in you today the same elements that are right out there in the dirt, and someday you’ll go right back to it physically. “These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth.”

But, you see, man is different. Man is not like the animals of the earth. Our Creator made man of the dust of the ground as He did the animals, but He didn’t stop there. He breathed into his breathing places the breath of life, and man became a living soul. He is of the families of the heavens and of the earth.

Man has something of heaven in him, for God created him after His own image: “In the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27).

I do not know in just what way this was true, but man in the image of God made it possible later on for Christ to come down and take upon Himself our human flesh. What a glorious, wonderful picture this is!

Several years ago scientists, after examining meteorites, came to the conclusion that life came from off this planet. Well, that’s what God says in Genesis 2:7. God breathed into his nostrils or breathing places the breath of life, and man became a living soul.

Now follow this very carefully:

And the LORD God said, “It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him.” (Genesis 2:18)

We live in a society that glorifies the independent wife who pursues her own career, but when any woman thinks she's something other than a help-meet for her husband, she has missed her high calling. And too often the breakup of the family is the tragic result. Now that's old-fashioned, isn't it? But it's Bible.

Oh, my friend, how much better is God's plan!

Now will you notice:

And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs. (Genesis 2:21)

That's an unfortunate translation. Actually, the Hebrew words mean He took *one side* of man, implying that He took one half of man to make a woman. Let me give you a more literal translation:

And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept; and He took one half of Adam, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; and with this half, which the LORD God had taken from man, made He a woman, and brought her to the man. (vv. 21, 22)

She's like him, but she's different. And I want to say this: She was the most beautiful creature this world has ever seen. You've never seen any beauty in the daughters of Eve today but what Eve herself didn't combine with everything else. Adam fell for her. It was love at first sight. This is a marriage that I know was made in heaven. Some of them are not—they make them in another place. But this one was made in heaven.

And Adam said: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. (Genesis 2:23, 24)

Marriage is not a union; it's unity. They become one. And the unity is seen in the child. God now has brought to Adam his other half. She is like him, and yet she's different. Paul said that as the man is the head of the woman, so Christ is head of the man. This is because man was first made in the image of God in order that the Son might be able to come down at Bethlehem and become a man.

May I say that when that first man was created, and then that first woman (I do not know this, I'm merely guessing now), I think the angels shouted for joy. It's not a baby now, born in a stable, but it's a man in the Garden of Eden. A man, may I say, in two halves. And he was in the image of God.

I wish I could say they lived happily ever after. That's not the way the story ends. It's a sad story. Genesis 3 is probably the most important chapter in the Bible because it tells the story of the entrance of sin and of death into the human family. Genesis 3 is the only way you can explain this world we live in today.

As we contemplate our Christmas this year, my friend, I do not think any person, regardless of how much rosewater he likes to use, can miss the fact that we are living in a crazy, mixed-up world. Constant threat of world war, men at each other's throats, problems that men cannot

solve. Suffering everywhere; starvation; restlessness in the hearts of mankind; hospitals filled; mental institutions filled; homes broken; lives smashed. How do you explain it, brother?

Well, Genesis 3 explains it. We're right now in a struggle for our very existence. Sumner Wells, during World War II, said, "We have lived, and we are living, in a rotten world." He said that—I didn't say it. If that was true back during World War II, what is it today? May I say this, my beloved, if we are not now approaching the end of this age when the Lord intends to remove His own from this earth and begin His program of judgment, which will bring Him to the throne—if God does not intend to do that, I have an awful suggestion to make to you. He may let this world lapse again into the Dark Ages. The entire world can move back behind another curtain, and darkness again can cover this earth. It was back in the Middle Ages that a monolithic religious system of totalitarian dictatorship and darkness spread throughout the world. And if God is not getting ready to move again, we will go back into it, my beloved. It's not a pretty thought, is it?

Why is this true? Because of Genesis 3. This man and this woman doubted God. They didn't believe He'd do the best for them. Then they disobeyed God; they rebelled and ran away from Him. That's the picture, and it's been the picture ever since. That's the picture in your town and my town today. We are not running to God; we are running away from God!

The first Christmas message breaks in now. That first Christmas message was not "Merry Christmas!" It was a question, although it was not the one asked by the wise men, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?" That was man seeking God. But in the Garden of Eden it is God seeking man, and He cries out, "Adam, where are you?" That is the first Christmas message.

Here is the record in Genesis 3:8: "And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day." The Lord Jesus Christ apparently was in the habit of coming at the conclusion of each day to talk with this man and this woman. They could have fellowship with Him, and He could have fellowship with them because they were in His image. The head of the man is Christ. The head of the woman is the man. And so one day He came as usual, but this time it wasn't as usual. This time when they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. And the Lord God called unto Adam and said unto him, "Where are you?" He is not asking what tree he is hiding behind. God knew where he was. Rather, He was asking where he was now in relation to God. Where are you in relation to the world that you're in? Where are you?

Christmas Brings Gifts

God was looking for man. May I say, it was a glorious, wonderful day when, though man was in rebellion against God, had turned his back and run away from Him, God was still searching him out!

No room in the inn—little wonder. Did you expect there would be room for Him in Bethlehem's inn? Did you? No. From the very beginning man has been running from Him. And when He comes to Bethlehem, man shuts the door and says, "No vacancy, go somewhere else!" Well, our Lord is coming in. Even if He has to come in through a stable, He will come, for He's looking for man!

Do you want to know what the first Christmas gift was? We find it in Genesis 3:21: "Also for Adam and his wife the LORD God made tunics of skin, and clothed them."

Eve got a new fur coat for Christmas, and so did Adam. How did they get the coats? They got the coats because an animal was slain. That's the only way you can get the skin of an animal, isn't it? An animal had to be slain. Here's where the sacrificial system begins. This is the first Christmas gift.

Now we're told that this couple has to leave the Garden, they cannot stay there and live forever. Thank God for that!

Let me ask you a question: Would you want to live as you are living now forever? I certainly wouldn't. God says to this man and this woman, "You'll have to get out; you'll not live forever. Death is come now."

So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life. (Genesis 3:24)

Now a great many folk think this means that these cherubim were put there to keep man away. But, no, they were put there to keep the way open to God. And when Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden, they turned and looked back, and when they turned, the sun was going down in the west, and between the two cherubim there was that glory, a shining light. The way to God was open because a sacrifice had been made, and they are now clothed with that which speaks of the righteousness of Christ.

We began with Paul, and we come back and close with him. In 2 Corinthians 8:9 Paul said:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.

What a sublime act of impoverishment! He came down to find man in the Garden of Eden. Epiphany. Any time He breaks through, epiphany! And about two thousand years ago, He broke through again in a stable—an epiphany. But you say, "I think I'm good enough!" Well, if you do, He didn't come for you. He came to seek and to save that which was lost.

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works. (Titus 2:11–14)