

CHRISTMAS DOESN'T IGNORE YOUR PAIN

Let's be honest, not all is merry and bright. To some, the season may genuinely feel like the most wonderful time of the year, but all of us know deep down that not *all* is merry and bright in this world — or in us. Some Christmases we feel the burden and weight more than others.

Some buoyant personalities can keep rehearsing Christmas even in hard seasons of life, seemingly unfazed. But for others, all the talk of joy and merriment at Christmas can make our sorrows feel all the more acute, our pains all the more painful. Normal life is hard enough. It's even harder when all the world seems to be singing, ringing bells, and pretending everything's suddenly merry. The pressure to feel the joy of Christmas can make joy all the more difficult.

“He came to bring life to the dead, to rescue the perishing, to heal the sick, to destroy the works of the devil.”

The real Christmas, however, does not ignore our pain. When we open the pages of Scripture and turn to that first Christmas, we find, without doubt, that all was *not* merry and bright. The new glimpses of merriness that do emerge fall against the backdrop of misery and disorder. Those first rays of brightness shone in a land of deep darkness.

For thousands of years, God's chosen people had waited for the fulfillment of his promises, and for four hundred years, God had, so it seemed, gone silent — until he began to cry as a newborn in Bethlehem. Ponder the pains and miseries and fears of that first Christmas.

MARY AND JOSEPH

First, consider Mary. Doubtless much excitement and anticipation came with the angel's announcement — along with great confusion and misunderstanding. Soon she would be showing. Betrothed but unmarried. Soon the watching eyes of her native Nazareth would make her the subject of their whispering and judgments. Even three decades later, her

son's enemies would play the card when outmaneuvered: "We were not born of sexual immorality" ([John 8:41](#)). If Jesus couldn't leave such rumors behind, then Mary all the more. And consider Joseph. His betrothed "was found to be with child" *before their marriage* ([Matthew 1:18](#)). What disgrace would have attended this news for him? How deeply hurt he must have felt to find her pregnant? She had seemed so wonderful, so chaste, so favored by God. What dreams were certainly shattered? What turmoil he must have faced, however long those hours and days dragged on, between learning of her pregnancy and the angel later appearing to him in a dream? Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ([Matthew 1:20](#))

Trusting the angel's word comforted his own soul, but he must have had his momentary lapses. And word of his dream wouldn't stop the gossip around town.

SINS HE CAME TO TAKE

More significant than Joseph's or Mary's pain, however, is the pain and sin and suffering and ruin for which Jesus came. The angel declared to Joseph, "You shall call his name Jesus, for *he will save his people from their sins*" ([Matthew 1:21](#)). Every Jew agreed God's people needed saving — from Roman occupation and dominion. The coming of Christ was at least a reminder of their political subjugation to pagan Gentiles. But the angel's announcement to Joseph didn't even mention Rome. God's first-covenant people indeed needed saving — from their own sins, from the darkness and corruption within them.

"Christmas, in this age, doesn't guarantee merry and bright. Not yet."

If God's people, not to mention the nations, weren't needy — desperately so — there would have been no Christmas. Christ did not come to put on a show or make a cameo in history. He came to bring life to the dead, to rescue the perishing, to heal the sick, to destroy the works of the devil. For centuries, misery and darkness had been compounding. Only in coming to such a depraved and disfigured world would his arrival signal hope for any real merriment and brightness.

HUMBLING BETHLEHEM

When it came time for the child to be born, the town of Bethlehem would offer its own surprisingly modest reception. The angel had said this was the Messiah. This was the long-anticipated king. And yet no royal welcome proved forthcoming. No palace. No Jerusalem. Instead, six miles outside the big city was a little town, known as the lowly hometown of David, the nation's greatest king from a thousand years before — known not because of its own quality, but because it was such a surprisingly humble birthplace for such a great king.

Whether it was an “inn” as we know them, or something more like a “guest room” at a private residence (Greek *kataluma*; appears also in [Mark 14:14](#) and [Luke 22:11](#)), it's clear that “there was no place for them” in it ([Luke 2:7](#)). *Can this really be the Christ, and there's no place for him?* So Mary laid her firstborn son in a manger. Whether it was a worst-case scenario or not, it plainly was not the ideal.

Further humbling came in who didn't show (and who did). No local or national dignitaries visited, so far as we know. Sometime later, foreign astrologers would come, which at the time may have been as confusing as it was encouraging. No doubt the visit and awe of the shepherds, and the word of a stunning angelic announcement, must have been a tremendous boost to the couple. Mary would treasure these things and ponder them, with great joy, in her heart ([Luke 2:19](#)). And yet the visit of blue-collar shepherds only reinforced, given the promises that this was the Messiah, what a long, humble, and painful road this would be to his long-appointed glory.

SWORD TO PIERCE YOUR SOUL

For Mary, shock must have come soon after the birth, when she presented her newborn son in the temple. An old man named Simeon confirmed his sense that this child was the Christ, but then turned to look Mary in the eye and spoke to her a sobering, prophetic word:

Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed. ([Luke 2:34-35](#))

Her child being the Christ would not mean immunity to controversy, enemies, and great pain — but precisely the opposite. And Mary herself would have “a sword . . . pierce through your own soul also.” What could this mean but that some great tragedy was appointed? Could her own soul be *pierced* by anything other than his premature death?

HEROD AND THE SLAUGHTER

Finally, and most horrifically, related to that first Christmas, came one of the greater tragedies in all the Bible. Dozens of infant and toddler boys, up to the age of two, were ripped from their parents’ arms and slaughtered by an insecure, vicious tyrant.

Herod “became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under” ([Matthew 2:16](#)). This was not the slaughter of the guilty, as we see in various ways throughout Scripture, but like Pharaoh tossing newborn Hebrew sons into the Nile, this was a slaughter of innocents. Oh, what pain would come in the wake of that first Christmas.

“Christmas doesn’t ignore our many pains; neither does it bid us wallow in them.”

Again, commissioning an angel, God rescued his Son from this slaughter, to preserve him for a later and even more horrific one. And Joseph and Mary, though still having their son, would have the pain and discomfort of fleeing to Egypt to save his life from the wicked king — a flight other parents would have been happy to take in exchange for not losing their sons. Yet Mary’s time, as prophesied, would come soon enough.

JOY DEEPER THAN SORROW

The life that came into the world that first Christmas was not to be an easy one. Not at birth, not in infancy, not in adulthood. In fact, the opening words of John’s Gospel capture a particular pang that would be true of Jesus’s life as a whole:

He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ([John 1:10-11](#))

Isaiah had prophesied that the Christ would be despised and rejected, and he was; that he would be a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief, and indeed he was ([Isaiah 53:3](#)). But this life, painful and challenging as it would be, was not unacquainted with [the deep, deep joy](#) that could sustain the Man of Sorrows.

MERRY WILL COME

The great joy the angels announced at that first Christmas can sustain us as well. Christmas doesn't ignore our many pains; neither does it bid us wallow in them. Christmas takes them seriously, more seriously than any secular celebration can, and reminds us that our God has seen our pain and heard our cries for help (as in [Exodus 2:23-25; 3:7-9; 6:5](#)), and he himself has come to deliver us.

Christmas, in this age, doesn't guarantee merry and bright. Not yet. But it does promise that merriness and brightness are breaking in. Christmas, at its best, gives us a peek of the uncompromised joy that is coming, and as we glimpse it, even from afar, we have a foretaste. Like the apostle Paul, and the man of sorrows himself, we are "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" ([2 Corinthians 6:10](#)). We may be overwhelmingly sorrowful at Christmas, and yet in Christ, by his Spirit, God may give us the wherewithal to rejoice

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