

## Why Christmas was needed

It really doesn't work to start in the middle of a story. You don't open a novel and begin reading in the middle if you want to make any sense of what's happening. There'll be conversations that make no sense to you. There'll be things that people are choosing to do that confuse you completely. You can't start watching in the middle of a movie and make sense of the story. Some of you have tried, but it doesn't work, does it?

You also can't jump into the middle of a conversation and actually say things that are appropriate without knowing where that conversation has already been. You just can't begin in the middle of a story, and if you start the Christmas story with a baby in Bethlehem, you're not starting at the beginning of the story; you're actually starting in the middle of the story. There will be things that don't make any sense. Why the celebratory songs of the angels? Why the fearful anticipation of the shepherds? Why the inquisitive journey of the kings? Why the political panic of Herod? Why, why, why?

You really have to begin in the roots of the story, and that's what I want to do, at least in part, today. I want to say one thing to you today which is really important: the story of that baby in the manger is actually rooted in grief in the heart of God. And if you don't understand this grief in the heart of God, you won't understand the glory of the story of the baby in a manger. So let me take you all the way back to the beginning, in the book of Genesis.

**Genesis 6:5-8** *"The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. So, the Lord said, 'I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created - and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground - for I regret that I have made them.' But Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord."*

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humanity was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil – all the time. And the Lord was sorry that He had made us - it grieved Him. The Lord said, *'I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created - and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground - for I regret that I have made them.'* But Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord.

Look again at verse 6 (in the NASB), *'So the Lord was sorry that He had made mankind on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.'* Consider, for a moment, the deeply personal nature of these words: The Lord was grieved; the Lord was sorry. What is it that would bring such grief to the heart of God? Those words suggest something that's personal, some kind of personal offense, some kind of personal affront, some kind of personal betrayal; what offense, what betrayal, what personal thing could be that significant that it would literally bring tears to the heart of God? What is it?

**Genesis 6:5** *"The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time."*

Could you get more graphic, more specific, more all-inclusive language than this? God saw that the wickedness of mankind was great. Now, all over the inhabited earth were people who were constantly doing evil in the sight of God, and every intention of the thought of the heart of the people was only evil continually. What powerful words! I wonder if there could be a sadder verse in all of Scripture!

I want you to think about this; you can't really understand the great horror of these words; you can't understand their tragedy; you can't understand this sad thing that would bring such grief to the heart of God if you don't first understand these words relationally. This passage is describing something that's deeply personal, and if you don't understand the deeply personal, the deeply relational aspect of what's being described here, you don't really understand the glory of the arrival that baby in Bethlehem.

Look at the big picture with me. Human beings were created, were hardwired to love God. That love of God, that God-ward way of living, that God-consciousness, was to be the thing that would shape every thought, every motive, every choice, every decision, every word, and every action so fundamentally, that you could ask me in any situation why I'm doing what I'm doing, and I could give you the same answer – God.

I would recognize His existence; I would recognize His authority; I would recognize His grandeur; and as an act of deeply personal love, I would choose to serve Him with all of my time and all of my energy. That's what we were created to do. That's who we were created to be. We were made for God. We were made to love God! I'm not describing first something spiritual; this is what all human beings were made to do – this is the calling of all humanity. Love God!

All of us are lovers. That may sound funny but you were wired to love, everything you would ever do in your life, wherever you do it, is always driven and motivated by love, and the love that was to motivate us was God-ward love. That's how we were meant to live. You see, it's so important to understand that obedience is not some kind of technical submission to a set of abstract rules - that's not what obedience is. True obedience is rooted in the love of God, and because I love God, I find joy in living the way He intended for me to live. I find joy in what He calls me to do. I find joy in serving Him. I find joy in pointing to His glory because I love Him. You know that is true in any relationship. When you love someone, you want to serve them; you desire to please them; you find joy in their joy. That's how every human being who was ever given life and breath was meant to live – that was plan A and there was no plan B.

Now it's very clear in Genesis 6:5, that something happened - there must be some other love that has claimed the heart of human being - because no longer do they delight in serving God; no longer do they find joy in His joy; no longer do they want to stay within His boundaries, but they willingly, purposefully, continually do what is evil in His eyes. What could bring greater distress to His heart? How could it be any worse than that?

Think of Christ's summary of the law when He was asked, *"What's the greatest command?"* He summarized the law by saying, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and your neighbour as yourself."* What's the greatest command? What's the command of all commands? The root command is **love God!** That the love that initiates all the other commands and if love for God is the ultimate command, then the greatest evil is the failure to love God, because when I don't love God, I will not honour Him; I will not live for His glory. When human beings no longer love God as they should, it doesn't mean that they don't love, because you always love; you were hardwired to be a lover. So, if you're not loving God, then you will give that love to somebody else or something else – because no one is completely without love.

So, when we read about this evil and wickedness that brought grief to the heart of God, we should ask the question, *'What love is so seductive and so powerful and so deceptive that it could possibly replace the love that I was meant to have for God?'* What an important question. As the apostle Paul is making a brief comment on the reason for the incarnation of Jesus Christ, this is what he says:

**2 Corinthians 5:15** *"And he [Jesus] died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again."*

The thing that always replaces love for God, the thing that leads to this endless catalogue of evil is love of self. Somehow, in some way, we end up inserting ourselves into the centre of our world. Somehow, all of us ascend to the throne of our lives and no longer find delight in serving God. We're obsessed with *our* will and *our* way. We want to be sovereign over our own lives. We want to set our own rules. We're obsessed with our own comfort and our own pleasure and our own happiness.

When you live for yourself, you will step over God's boundaries again and again and again, because your heart isn't motivated by love for Him. It doesn't take a whole lot; just look around, and you see so much evidence of this dominating, controlling, enslaving, life-shaping self-love. What is it that makes a marriage so hard? It's selfishness; it's self-love. Why is it that we find it so hard to serve; so hard to let a discussion go without it becoming an argument, so hard not to say, "I told you so;" so easy to feed oneself, and have little concern about feeding others; so wanting to have things for ourselves; so much of a struggle with giving ... is it not this insidious love of self that so quickly replaces our love for God?

Every act of murder and violence is rooted in self-love; every moment of greed is rooted in self-love; every kind of gossip is rooted in self-love; every bit of disobedience to parents is rooted in self-love; every moment of adultery is rooted in self-love – every war is rooted in self-love; the evil in the world has happened because we no longer love God as we should.

It's a tragedy; it's a horror; because the world was designed to have at its centre, love for God and when that's not there, things that should work, don't work; things explode into evil and chaos, and we experience that every day – watch the news. What a tragedy it is.

You know that God loves the creatures that He made by the fact that His heart is broken because, if you love someone, and they turn their back on you, they betray that love, and they direct their love to someone else – if your heart isn't broken, you have no love in you. God proves Himself, not just to be sovereign, and not just to be Creator, and not just to be Almighty, but to be a God of incredible love as He weeps over our betrayal because human life was meant, in its fundamental form, to be a beautiful love relationship between God and us.

How sad, when you read this passage, you should let your mind's eye go to see tears in the eyes of God. You should let the imagination of your ears go to hear weeping from the voice of God. God is profoundly grieved. Because not only has that love been taken from Him, that love has been stolen by us. It's the ultimate of human betrayals.

Well, if you get that far in the passage, you have to be asking this question, *"What in the world is God going to do?"* How will God respond to this ultimate betrayal? Because you see, God understands that every sin is vertical first – you have never, ever sinned a purely horizontal sin in your life. Every sin is forgetting Him; every sin is refusing to love Him; every sin is a rejection of His presence and His glory and His authority and His will. Every sin is a sin against God.

That's why David, in confessing his sin of murder and adultery, says this:

**Psalms 51:4** *"Against You and You only have I done this thing."*

What David is saying, listen, *"My failure wasn't first that I didn't love Bathsheba and Uriah as I should, God, my failure was - I didn't love You as I should. And when I didn't love You as I should, I was able to do these horrendous things. This is against You, God"*

How would you respond in the face of such a betrayal? Perhaps like this:

**Genesis 6:7** *"Then the Lord said, 'I will wipe out mankind whom I have created from the face of the land; mankind, and animals as well, and crawling things, and the birds of the sky. For I am sorry that I have made them.'"* (NASB).

Verse 7 sounds like a sad and horrible end to the story. Don't you hate it when you watch one of those movies, and you're hoping for a great ending, and it ends in disaster? It sounds like this is it. That God, not in an act of ugly vengeance, but God in holy, righteous justice says, *"Enough! I made you. I owned you. I provided every good thing you could ever want, a life of beauty that you could've never ever made for yourself, and this is what you do, you turn your back on me. I will wipe you out! I will wipe the earth clean."* God has every right to do that, and it's not unrighteous anger; it is holy and righteous justice that sends the waters of the flood to wipe the earth clean. It would seem like this is the end of the story but it's not, because Genesis 6 has verse 8:

**Genesis 6:8** *"But Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord."*

By an act of sovereign Grace, God placed His favour on Noah and his family. You know the story; they were chosen by God's grace to survive the waters of the flood with some animals there in the ark. It's very important to note what happens after the waters of the flood recede and the earth dries. God makes a covenant with Noah, and God says, *"Noah, I'm going to bless you and not only bless you, but I'm going to bless your descendants."*

If you read through the genealogy that follows, you'll read a lot of names you probably never read before, but you will come to one very familiar name: Abraham. One of those descendants was Abraham, and God also made a covenant with Abraham, and He said to him, *"Not only will your descendants be blessed, but through your seed, all the nations of earth will be blessed."* The apostle Paul alerts us to the fact that the seed of Abraham is Jesus Christ. You see, the only way this horrible brokenness of relationship could be rectified is for God to send His Son.

Now, look at Genesis 6 again. I want to explain to you why it says, *"The Lord saw that the wickedness of mankind was great in the earth."* Now listen to what it says, *"...and every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."* Our big problem is not first a behaviour problem. If all our problem was that occasionally we behave in wrong ways, you could probably reform yourself and get better. But your problem is deeper than that. Your problem is a heart problem. In the Bible, the heart is the control centre of the human being. The heart is the directional system of the human being. The heart is your fundamental core, and whatever controls your heart will then control your words and behaviour. The one thing you are not able to do is escape your heart. And so, we need to be rescued. Someone needs to do for us what we can't do for ourselves if we are ever going to be people who love God in the way that He was meant to be loved. We need to be rescued!

So, God sends His Son, the Lord Jesus, to be exposed to all the harsh realities of life in a fallen world, but to live in the midst of all of that brokenness and all of that temptation an utterly perfect life: That life flowed out of His love for God, His love for the Father. He said, *"I came to do Your will, O Father."*

In every thought; in every desire; in every word and in every action, Jesus perfectly obeyed. He did what we are unable to do. And He died a satisfactory death. He took our sin upon Himself and paid the penalty for our sin with His death so that there would be hope for us, that finally love of self would be defeated, and it would be replaced by the love of God .. so that someday, we would stand before Him, and every cell of our hearts would fully love Him so that every word and every thought and every action would be pleasing in his sight. That's the hope of redemption.

So, as you prepare to celebrate another Christmas; as you focus on that wonderful gift of life, lying there in that manger; I want to encourage you to know that this joyous story actually began thousands of years before with unimaginable grief in the heart our Creator God as He expressed sorrow and regret for even creating us in the first place. We are so often told that we primarily learn about God's grace in the New Testament in the story of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. But I exhort you to go back to Genesis 6 and allow the Spirit of God to show you the depth of God's grace and love in even allowing humanity to continue past that point. If God's love had not been greater than God's grief and sorrow – our journey would have stopped right there!

Let's Pray:

*Lord, may our hearts be stirred this week with the horror of Genesis 6, so that we may be gripped by the celebration of the coming of Jesus to earth, Who would live and die in our place so that we would have hope of a complete restoration of that love for You as it was meant to be - the single, most powerful force of motivation in our hearts. Thank you, Lord for your redeeming, forgiving, delivering love.*

*We ask that you release that love within us afresh at this time so that the world will know the full story of Christmas and why we have so much to celebrate. We ask this in the matchless name of Jesus, our Lord, our Saviour and our redeemer. Amen.*