

IMAGES: THE CHRISTMAS SEASON

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INTRODUCTION

Well, we've made it. To one degree or another, we've crossed the "finish line" on another Christmas season. Most celebrations and family get-togethers are completed. Shopping is done, although there may be some returning to do. Pretty soon, decorations will start coming down and our homes will return to their "normal" look — even our house which usually remains decorated from November 1 to Valentine's Day. It reminds me of one day in January, many years ago, when our neighbor was visiting with her two small boys. And the oldest one, maybe 4-5 years old, looked around and saw our decorations still up, lights still shining and, with a very disapproving look, said very matter-of-factly to my wife: "Linda, Christmas is ohh-ver!"

What's odd about all this is that, as hard as people work to make Christmas look wonderful and feel wonderful and ultimately be something wonderful, many of those same people express relief when it's all finally done — like an athlete who has run a race as hard as he can but now, that the race is finished, can't run another step. I'm not sure I can think of any other season where anticipation gives way to joy gives way to such exhausted relief.

What has become unfortunate, however, is that, far too often, the reason for the season — "Immanuel," God with us, everything miraculous and amazing and incredible about that baby in that manger — gets treated like so much else connected with the season: It gets trotted out like our lights and other decorations, it gets thought about like our cards and wish-lists, it gets celebrated for all it's worth, and then: "Christmas is ohh-ver!" Its meaning and, more importantly, its impact on our lives, gets "boxed up" and "put away" like everything else. And then we move on.

We actually do that with a lot of things. One of the characteristics that we humans have is the ability to compartmentalize, to live fully in one moment, in one context, and then go on to another moment and another context without seeing any contradictions or inconsistencies between the two or getting any flow from one context to affect another one.

It is also one of our most dangerous capabilities. It's one of the things I learned from my recent trip to Montgomery, Alabama to see the Legacy Museum, which seeks to tell the story of the African American experience in our country. And part of that story is this: Slave owners from New England to Texas, many of them faithful churchgoers, would rattle the rafters in praise to the Lord on Sunday mornings, and then leave church to sell and beat and abuse their slaves the rest of

the week, and see no contradiction in any of it. It's how preachers in the Jim Crow South could preach fire and brimstone on Sunday morning, and then speak to the righteousness of white supremacy the rest of the week and have no issues at all.

One of our favorite family holiday movies is the 1994 remake of the 1947 classic, "Miracle on 34th Street." In one scene, a man named Kris Kringle, who truly believes himself to be Santa Claus, is speaking with the woman who hired him to be her department-store Santa, who is now preparing him for a TV spot. He mentions that she doesn't believe in him, nor does her little girl. She counters by saying she doesn't see anything wrong in not believing in someone that many do see as a myth. And his response gets to the heart of what we're going to be focusing on this morning; he says to her: "I'm a symbol. I'm a symbol of the human ability to be able to suppress the selfish and hateful tendencies that rule the major part of our lives."

He is of course suggesting that, at Christmas time, our behaviors travel a somewhat higher, more noble road. But his response brings us to an interesting question: Do we have a way of behaving, of thinking, of feeling, of reacting, at Christmas that is different than at any other time of the year? Has Christmas become just a season, a specific block of time, or is it more? Should Christmas maybe be a lifestyle, a way to live out our lives in Christ? And, if that's so, what would such a lifestyle look like? As we think about those necessary questions, let's start the process **with a word of prayer.**

TEXTS

Over the course of the last four weeks, we've looked at some "images" of the Christmas season — things that we might think of when we think of Christmas and how we, and particularly our culture, celebrate. We looked at Christmas lists, the things we put together in some sort of way that people can know what we want for our holiday presents. We looked at Christmas cards, the greetings we send to family and friends. And lastly, we talked about Christmas lights, the bright and brilliant ways in which we decorate that are pretty unique to this time of year.

With each of these images, we were reminded that the Bible contains a version of these that comes from God's own heart, as recorded in the Scriptures. And what were some of those Biblical "images?"

First, with Christmas wish lists, we were reminded that God Himself has a wish list. Certainly, Peter and Paul in the NT expressed God's wishes so well — Peter reminding us that the Lord is *not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance* — *II Peter 3:9b*, and Paul telling Timothy that God *wants all people to be saved* — *Paul, I Timothy 2:4a*. But I love the eloquence of God speaking through Ezekiel in the OT: "*Do I take any pleasure in the death of the*

wicked? . . . Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live? . . . Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die . . . ? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone” — God speaking, Ezekiel 18:23, 30b-32a.

Did you hear the passion in God’s wish? Could you feel the depth of His love for all mankind? So, one way to make Christmas a lifestyle could be to be in the “wish fulfillment” business, meaning to be intentionally designing ministry to see that God’s “wishes” for the salvation of others are fulfilled. And why not? The story of Christmas represents the greatest evangelistic outreach of all time. Why shouldn’t one of our purposes for being be all about continuing that outreach?

Our second image was of “Christmas cards.” And we discovered that God has been sending us greeting cards for literally thousands of years, ever since the Garden of Eden. All His prophecies, all the fulfillments of those prophecies, were in fact Him signing those greeting cards, “Love, God.” Every time we were given a prophecy that contained a promise that a solution to our sin was on the way, it came with the signature, “Love, God.” Every time the ultimate fulfillment of all those prophecies, Jesus Christ, spoke and taught and worked on our behalf — His entire life right up to and through the cross and the resurrection — it was another greeting card signed, “Love, God.” And every promise we were ever delivered concerning what we could depend on in our new life in Christ was also most assuredly a greeting card signed, “Love, God.” And all the wondrous promises of eternity in heaven, every one of them come as a greeting and signed, “Love, God.” There is another way of making Christmas a lifestyle — by intentionally committing to memory God’s greeting cards, His promises, intentionally teaching those greeting cards to our kids, and sharing those cards, those incredible promises, with all those around us who need to receive God’s greetings.

Our third image was of “Christmas lights.” And sure enough, God gave us His take on Christmas lights as well. He promised us through His prophet Isaiah that *a great light* was coming, that *on those living in the land of deep darkness a light* was on its way. And then of course His promise was kept by the arrival of His Son, who confirmed that promise in Himself by telling everyone that He was *the light of the world*.

But, to those who surrendered to that light, He told them that now: *“You are the light of the world. . . . let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:14a, 16.* That’s US — looking for ministry opportunities in which to reflect the light of Christ. Again — Christmas as lifestyle. This is not an accidental light but rather a

proactive, assertive joyous light reflecting the absolute life-changing joy of the life and light of Jesus Christ dwelling in someone's life to such an extent that they cannot keep that light to themselves. These are lives so aware of the incredible difference that Jesus Christ has made in their lives that they simply have to shine that truth to all those around them.

APPLICATION

So, do you get the feeling that to adopt Christmas as a lifestyle means to become intentional in ministry? That's kinda what it looks like. Ultimately, Christmas is about outreach — and it becomes an incredible model of how to reach out to the world around us: intentionally (as in planned), completely (as in holding nothing back), and with a design to grow (as in a commitment to the future).

But pursuing Christmas as a lifestyle reflects something that even extends beyond ministry, as obviously important as that is. Here are three Christmas considerations to hold onto that may profoundly impact our lives moving forward — you might call them “Grade A” considerations since they all come with that letter:

Our first “A”, an AWARENESS to carry: We desperately need to hold onto an awareness of something incredibly important, and it's this: The cross doesn't happen if the manger doesn't happen. Salvation doesn't happen if the manger doesn't happen. We are still trapped in our sins if the manger doesn't happen. We are still separated from God if the manger doesn't happen. The entire NT doesn't happen if the manger doesn't happen. Think about that. Take the time to think about trying to live without the miracle of the manger. What would our lives be then? What would we do with our sins? What hope would we have for eternity? In that context, the manger is everything.

Our second “A”, an ATTITUDE to project: Every day that we live, our world is passing away. Think of our world as if we were dealing with somebody suffering from a progressive, degenerative disease. Today is at this level. Tomorrow is less well. The next day is less well than that — and so on. The world, literally sick to death with sin, is every day becoming more and more degenerate in its actions and attitudes. Every day that passes, Christians are going to be exposed as being more and more distinctively against the grain of popular culture and society. But we are not commanded to hide in Christ, but to live our lives out as the presence of Christ. We are supposed to stick out against the tide of worldly attitudes and actions. And a great foundation for us is just living with the attitude of the manger — of how far a great God would go to pursue sinners, reminding us of how far He went to pursue us. That same God also offers to be intimately with us, every moment of every day, in this life right through to the next.

CONCLUSION

And, as we close, our third “A”, an AWE to embrace: Let me ask you something — How many times has something left you totally in awe, literally speechless it’s so overwhelming? I ask that because, if anything should create a response of awe, a sense of overwhelming “wow,” the manger should. Consider some of these pieces. There is an old Chinese proverb that dates all the way back to the sixth century BC which states: *A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step* — *Lao Tzu*. According to Peter, that “first step” occurred even before creation itself; he wrote that Jesus *was chosen before the creation of the world* — *I Peter 1:20a* for His role as the world’s Messiah.

Now the amazing grace of that choice would eventually become what Paul would so eloquently describe to the Philippian church concerning Christ: [*Although He existed in the form of God, [He] did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men* — *Paul, Philippians 2:6-7 (NASB1995)*]. He willingly left the indescribable glories of heaven for the sin-soaked brokenness of earth.

And He made that choice knowing the consequences. Because of the accuracy of biblical prophecies, we know that Jesus Christ entered into the world knowing what lay ahead, specifically that: *He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces He was despised, and we held Him in low esteem* — *Isaiah 53:3*. Knowing all that, He still came.

He came into this world knowing that He would have to deal with frequent hunger, numbing fatigue and periodic homelessness. He came into this world knowing He would be far more confronted by enemies than comforted by friends. He came into this world knowing that His message would be misunderstood and that His words would be twisted; even His miracles would be dismissed as being of Satan and not of God.

But way beyond that, He came into this world knowing that [He would be] *pierced for our transgressions, [and] crushed for our iniquities* — *Isaiah 53:5a*, [to the point that] *His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and His form marred beyond human likeness* — *Isaiah 52:14b*. And knowing all that, He still came.

You know, what I love about little kids is that they have the ability to be in awe of something, to be “wowed.” And then, as we grow older, we lose so much of that ability. Even if there is something amazing around us, it seems like, if we’re

around it too much, we lose the ability to be impressed, to be “wowed,” to simply be in awe of something.

Anybody of believers, any church, is in trouble if it loses its ability to be “wowed,” to be in awe of God, to be genuinely moved by our Everlasting Father. He has done everything, He is capable of everything, we owe Him everything. Take Him away and we have nothing. How can that not leave us in awe for all He has done, for all the “amazing grace” He has without ceasing poured out on us? It’s what the nation of Israel realized at their deliverance at the Red Sea when they rejoiced and sang: “*Who among the gods is like You, Lord? Who is like You— majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?*” — *Exodus 15:11*. It’s what the psalmist pointed out in Psalm 33: *Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him. For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast* — *Psalm 33:8-9 (NASB1995)*. That last verse should resonate with us, for that’s how Christmas — that baby in that manger — came into being: God spoke, and it was done; God commanded, and it happened. And it was done, and it happened all for us. Does that make you stand in awe? Looking at that baby, knowing what He means, knowing what He would be doing, does that leave you speechless?

As a church family, let’s not get used to the wonders of God. Let us instead pray to become like little children — in awe of everything God has done and continues to do for us. Let us pray that the Lord melt our hearts right down to infancy, that we would learn again how to be in awe of our great Lord and King! Let us pray to be as excited as little kids to tell each other of the wonders we are graced to see each and every day of our lives. Let us pray to learn awed thanksgiving for all that God is, and all the ways we can know Him — all because of the awesomeness of Bethlehem’s manger. And let’s pray to not see Christmas as a season, but as a lifestyle — for the glory of God’s awesome name! Let’s pray!