

The Meaning of Christmas

Among the stories associated with the Advent season, ones that seem those we delight to experience each Advent season are Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol (1843)," the melting of Ebenezer Scrooge's heart, and Barbara Robinson's "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever (1971)." The latter is about the unforgettable, crude, yet insightful Herdman children (Ollie, Claude, Gladys, Ralph, LeRoy, and Imogene) and the unforgettable Christmas play at Woodrow Wilson School. The Herdman's could not grasp why you would give gifts of perfume (frankincense and myrrh) to baby in a manger, so they brought a basket of food, a ham.

In a sense, they caught the point of the Christmas story. Christmas is about a child, a very special child, the Son of God's entrance into our world enshrined in humanity for us. To miss Him, is to miss what Christmas is all about.

John, the apostle, begins His narrative about Jesus with a dazzling theological prologue that is not so much fact-oriented as meaning-oriented; it addresses the questions of "who," "why, and "what happened." There is no birth narrative, no genealogy, no record of His earliest years. It begins the collective insight of the apostolic band. John, like the Herdman's, grasped the uniqueness on His person.

That is my desire for a few minutes, as we approach John 1:1-18, to think about who came before we think of the manner of His coming. Let us answer the question

I. The person John wants us to know, vv. 1-5

This brief introductory paragraph summarizes the person of Jesus, establishes His absolute deity, as evidenced by His eternality and the origin of creation. Further, it states His mission (He came to disclose light, bringing life) and the outcome. He was renounced and rejected, but not defeated, for He still "shines" in the "darkness.

a. This person is fully God, vv. 1-2

Phrases like "in the beginning" and "the Word" would take a Hebrew back to Genesis 1. When time began, the One who spoke words ("Let there be light") existed. At the origin of time, God and the Word were in intimate relationship (an

essential claim of Jesus throughout the book). John's point is that the Word was fully God. If John had placed an article before God ("the Word was the God"), he would have been incorrect. The Word and God, though one in character, are distinct in persons. In a sense, God is not one (an issue that confounds Jews and Muslims). John is saying that the Word is God, but He is not alone God. His point is that the Word, later identified as Jesus, is co-equal with God as God. The background for this statement may be Psalm 45, as it is in Hebrews 1 (see also Rom 9:5, Phil 2:5-11, Col 1:15-20).

The reference to Jesus as the "Word" is found only in John's writings (1:1, 14; I John 1:1; Rev. 19:13). "Word" is used of the outer expression of another's thought; Jesus came to reveal the thoughts of the Father.

Verse two is a repetition of verse one; John uses this literary form to create emphasis. There never was a time when Christ was not; in fact, the existence of creation depends on Him.

b. This person is the creator of all things, v. 3

John's literary style is such that he states things positively and negatively so that the point is unmistakable; there are no exceptions. The One who spoke in Genesis was the Word (Col 1:16-17). When God created the world, "wisdom," Jesus, was at His side (Prov 3:19, 8:30) and His agent.

c. This person is the origin of eternal life, v. 4

The Word was light and revelation; the content of that disclosure was life. Of the thirty-seven times John uses the word "life," seventeen times it is preceded by the word "eternal." Clearly, the life the Word disclosed was eternal life.

"Life" does not exist of its own doing; it was created by "the Word."

d. This person came and was misunderstood, v. 5

"Light," a synonym for the Word, shines in the world (John uses the present tense, the action continues). Both "light" and "darkness" are allusions to Genesis 1 (there God spoke light amid darkness as well as here). "Darkness" is an allusion to the forces of evil; it denotes an environment rather than specific people.

"Comprehend" seems to mean a failure to understand, in this case, understand the Word's claims. The verb can also mean, "to overcome." Both nuances are valid.

II. The person who spoke of Him, vv. 6-8

John the Baptist is an example of the light shining in the darkness. “John” means “God has been gracious.” There is a wonderful comparison between Christ and John in these verses. What is found here is John the baptizer’s evaluation of “the Word”

Christ (vv. 1-2, 9)

was from eternity
is the Word
is himself Light

John (vv. 6-8)

came
is a mere man
came to testify to the Light
an agent of testimony for those
who would trust in the light

a. The authority of John, v. 6

Another came sent from God; his role was to call attention to Jesus. There is no need to distinguish John the Baptizer from John the disciple because the author never mentions himself by name.

The word “witness” is a key word in the gospel. It occurs as a verb 33 times (Matthew 1, Mark 0, Luke 1) and 13 times as a noun. John came highly regarded; he was sent from God as Jesus was (16:27).

b. The mission of John, vv. 7-8

John was not the revelation of God (“the light”); he was commissioned to speak of the “light,” the One “coming into the world.”

The “light,” by coming into the world, enlightens all mankind; the universal implications of Jesus’ coming are a theme in the gospel. All human beings will have to decide about the validity of His claims.

III. The irony of His person, vv. 9-13

John tells us of the world’s reaction to “the Word,” Jesus Christ.

a. The unfortunate tragedy, vv. 9-11

The word “enlightens” (v.9) means to illuminate. This is not so much an inward phenomenon as an outward one. This “light” is revealed through creation to all mankind and calls for a decision. Moral responsibility rests in the revelation of God in creation!

Though so much was available in the “light,” most people did not see it. The reason that many missed “the Word” was not a lack of knowledge; it was a lack of willingness. They did not want to receive His claims. “Receive” means to embrace or believe (v. 12). This, in cameo, is the story of the ministry of Jesus. He came to His nation, but they had no time for Him.

A key word in John to understand is “world” (here for the first time). The word does not refer in most cases to the entirety of creation or the universe (the exceptions are 11:8; 17:5, 24; 21:5), but the world of human beings (“world” here [v.10] is the sphere of those capable of knowing).

b. The marvelous news, vv. 12-13

The “but” encompasses the wonder of divine grace; there is simply another side to the story of national rejection. Here we encounter one of John’s great antinomies: human ability and human inability together. Willingness to receive is of man; ability to receive is not (mankind is condemned for unwillingness, not inability). God is the source of ability (v. 12); our duty is to desire the Lord.

“Enlightening” came in the Word, but willingness did not accompany the perception. “Believe” is used four ways by John: a recognition of facts or reports (12 times), a recognition of people or the Scriptures (19 times), a trusting in Christ (36 times), or trust without a specified object (30 times).

In v.13 John describes the origin of those who are “the children of God.” Three factors cannot account for such a status, only one can. The “right” or ability (not power) to believe in the Word comes from God; it is not a fruit of human causation. “Blood” suggests human descent or pedigree; the term is plural denoting the contribution of both parents. “Will of the flesh” suggests sexual desire or human cause related to sexual activity (“flesh” does not have the negative connotation in John as it does in Paul; here flesh suggests weakness), and “will of a man” suggests human desire or volition.

The word “right” is a legal term. It is something that must be given. The duty of the believer is to be willing to “receive” what the “right” entitles, life.

IV. The witness of the apostles to His person, vv. 14-18

In this passage we have the collective witness of the disciples.

a. To the incarnation, v. 14

Here is the clearest passage in Holy Scripture on the incarnation of the Word, assuming human characteristics and living among us. The creator (v. 4) condescended to become a creature! The reference to “dwelling” is from the word often translated “tabernacle.” It would speak of God’s presence, the “shekinah glory,” among His people as in the wilderness journeys. John 1:1 says that the Word was fully God; here that He was fully human!

Some translations have “begotten.” The word means “One and Only” or “the unique One,” reflective of the honor due Him as the obedient Word, the revelation of God to us (see Luke 7:12, 9:42; Heb 11:17). “Full of grace and truth” suggests that He is the perfect revelation of God.

b. To the role of John the Baptist, v. 15

John bore witness to the Word’s preexistence though we know that he was conceived before Jesus by six months (Luke 1:26).

c. To the consequences of the incarnation, vv. 16-18

1) Greater portions of grace: stated, v. 16

“Grace” was added to “grace” in the sense that God’s provisions in Jesus were added to or on top of the gracious provisions of the Old Covenant. The background of the verse seems to be Exodus 33:13.

2) Greater portions of grace: explained, v. 17

The law was grace shadowed; Jesus is grace consummated. While grace was part of the Old Covenant, it was superseded by the abundance of grace in the New Covenant. Note: this is the first time in the gospel that John refers to Jesus as other than the Word; here He is Jesus Christ. Wiersbe stated the meaning here this way, “John did not suggest that there was no grace under the Law of Moses, because there was. Each sacrifice was an expression of the grace of God. The Law also revealed God’s truth. But in Jesus Christ, grace and truth reach their fullness; and this fullness is available to us.”

3) Greater portions of grace: the ground, v. 18

Jesus provided greater portions of grace, says the apostle, because He has

explained the Father to us; He came to reveal the Father. The law revealed the Father in a shadowed form; Jesus did so distinctly. God revealed Himself to Moses so that Moses could instruct His people; Jesus came from heaven to reveal God to us in Himself. The NET Bible note on this verse is beautiful. “The unique One (John 1:14), the One who has taken on human form and nature by becoming incarnate (*became flesh*, 1:14), who is Himself fully God (“the Word was God,” 1:1c) and is to be identified with the ever-living One of the Old Testament revelation (Exod. 3:14), who is in intimate relationship with the Father, this One and no other has fully revealed what God is like.”

Applications

1. If one wants to know the God of the Bible, He is only accessible through the One who came from heaven with the express purpose of revealing God the Father to us. Why is this so? No human being can grasp the infinite character of God because no of us has an infinite knowledge of God being blighted in knowledge and finite in capacities. Thus, one from Heaven could be qualified to explain heaven to us, not an outsider. This is what Jesus came to do, to reveal the Father to us. He is uniquely qualified to do so because Jesus is God!
2. It is monumentally important to understand who Jesus claims to be. He is “the Word,” the One who describes the invisible; fully God, the creator of the universe and all that is in it, the only One who possess knowledge of eternal life, and the One that most earthlings find unimportant. “Word” also means message or disclosure. Jesus is the message!
3. Eternal life is an absolutely free gift through the One who came to us from the Jesus Christ who has revealed the Father to us. Life is not obtained by a privileged lifestyle or human efforts to appeal to God. While salvation is not free, simply because Jesus purchased the right to be forgiven, it is free to us because Jesus accomplished salvation for us. Salvation is not to be earned by us; we you cannot impress God. He is impressed with His son. Have you stopped recently to ponder the wonder of such a gift?
4. What is the message of the gospel? It is what Jesus taught us about Himself; that is the good news. Simply put, the gospel is the claims that Jesus made about Himself (His origins, His words, His death, His resurrection). The gospel is about Jesus primarily and our response secondarily. Are you telling people what Jesus has accomplished? To know God as He has been explained and revealed in Jesus Christ is eternal life.

5. The duty of humans is to be willing to accept the Father through the Son. Mankind is liable to righteous judgment by God because they are generally unwilling to come to Jesus. It is not that they are unable to do so (Rom 1:18). We can come to Christ in that we can make choices. The most important question as you discuss and explain the claims of Jesus with people is this: are you willing to come to Him? The criteria of choice making for all of us is the maximization of delight and the minimization of discomfort. Do you explain Jesus to people in such a way that can delight in Him?
6. John the Baptizer is a remarkable man and a model servant for all of us for at least two reasons: first, he knows what his duty was; He knew his task on the stage of time in which he lived. He was to be a pointer; he was to explain to others someone far greater than himself. Second, John knew that his place and privilege; he was a servant of another. These are remarkable insights. Do you share them?
7. Jesus came to reveal the gracious character of God to us, yet our passage tells us of something very tragic. People did not believe what He told them. His own, our text says, did not receive Him. However, that is not the end of the story; the door has been open to His message to everyone without regard to ethnicity. Anyone who welcomes Him He welcomes into the family of God. What an amazing truth? Have you welcome Him into your life?