

CHRISTMAS IS ABOUT WORSHIP

HEBREWS 1:6

Have you seen the latest trend in Christmas trees?

It's the upside-down Christmas tree. That's right, Home Depot's online catalogue advertises several varieties of artificial upside-down Christmas trees.

It's perfect for people who live in cramped quarters, and want to conserve floor space in their living room.

And I'm in favor of it, *for one big reason...* an upside-down Christmas tree provides extra room for the accumulation of gifts. *And who isn't for more presents?*

Actually, I believe our American practice of gift-giving can be traced to a deeper desire. It's a reflection of the longing in our heart to worship God! What is worship, but *receiving a gift from God - and giving a gift to God.*

Tonight, *with presents still to be presented,* I'll make four statements, then elaborate on each... **Christmas is about Worship. Christmas is about Giving. Worship is about Giving. Giving is about Worship.**

Here's my first statement - **Christmas is about worship.** In Hebrews 1:6 we read, **"When He again (when God) brings the firstborn (Jesus) into the world, He says: "Let all the angels of God worship Him."**

Throughout the NT Jesus Christ is known as God's *"firstborn"* - *and not because He was born first...*

Actually, the biblical use of the term has nothing to do with birth order. It was a title of family privilege.

The firstborn was the father's heir. He had special prerogatives, and responsibilities, and authority. Under the father of the family, the firstborn was in charge!

Thus, Jesus is *firstborn, or head* of God's creation.

And according to the writer of Hebrews when Jesus entered the world He did so to the worship of angels!

I'm sure you're familiar with what happened that first Christmas outside Bethlehem. In the cool night air above the shepherds' fields, suddenly, the dark sky glowed. The glory of God illuminated the countryside.

The curtain between the spiritual and the physical - the barrier between heaven and earth - was lifted.

A choir of angels serenaded stunned shepherds.

Luke files this report in his Gospel, "Suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!'"

I've always pictured a heavenly riser - maybe ten rows deep - filled with an angelic choir. A couple hundred voices worshipping God at the Savior's birth.

I figure God did what some colleges do when basketball season rolls around. Rather than suit up the entire marching band, they substitute an ensemble - *a few horns, a couple of drummers, a tuba or two...*

It's a skeleton crew that can play the fight song at times – but a full band and halftime show isn't needed.

That's what I always thought happened that first Christmas. God sent the Pep Band to Bethlehem.

But that's not what we learn in Hebrews 1:6. Let me read this verse over, very carefully, “When (the Father) brings the firstborn into the world, He says: “Let *all* the angels of God worship Him.” *Catch the key word?*

On that first Christmas – the day Jesus entered the world - how many angels worshipped? The answer is “*All*” - *every single angel* throughout God's vast creation lifted up their praise. That's a lot of angels...

There are a couple of passages that try to quantify the number of the angels for us... Hebrews 12:22 makes this statement, “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels.”

Heaven is full of so many angels you can't count them all. The angelic population is “*innumerable.*”

In Revelation 5:11 John sees God's throne in Heaven. “Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing!”

John has been carried to heaven. He's trying to count the angels enthralled in the worship of the Lamb.

But he gives up as soon as he starts. He utters a rough estimate, *“ten thousand times ten thousand.”*

Yet it's obvious that's too small, so he throws in *“and thousands of thousands...”* That's another way of saying, *“There's more angels here than I can count!”*

Apparently, the throne of God has a larger seating capacity than the shepherd's fields outside Bethlehem.

On the first Christmas a mere *“multitude”* was actually on-location at the birthplace, praising God. But the scene in Bethlehem was just the tip of the iceberg.

For at the same time the angelic choir made their announcement to the shepherds, hordes of angels stationed in distant galaxies all across the universe, turned their attention toward planet Earth - toward the little town of Bethlehem - toward a baby in a manger - and worshipped Jesus, as head of God's creation!

On the first Christmas Eve a call went out throughout the angelic ranks and outposts all across time and space. If there are alternative universes with alternative realities the angels there were also put on notice.

Every angel in every sphere, heard the command from headquarters. It was **a worship Code Red**. The writer of Hebrews recites the actual declaration. It was a PO - *not a purchase order, but praise order*. Heaven heralded, **“Let all the angels of God worship Him.”**

Here's what we know for sure... *not a single angel anywhere angels dwell, kept silent that day.* Every angel under God's domain worshipped the Savior who was born in Bethlehem. **Christmas is about worship!**

I love *Mary's Song* – it's called her "**Magnificat.**"

Shortly after being told by the angel that she had been overshadowed by the Holy Spirit - and a child had been conceived in her womb - Mary went to visit her cousin, Elizabeth. There she composed a song of praise, and poured out her soul to God in worship...

Luke 1:46 records her words, "**My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior...**"

Her soul "**magnified**" God... This is a great definition of worship and praise - **it's spiritual magnification.**

To worship is to *amplify* God's glory and grace.

Worship sees God through the telescope, instead of just the naked eye. It's the admiration of God for all that He is and does. Worship is a magnification of God.

Worship is like me putting on my glasses...

Details that were obscure come into focus. Any haziness gets dispelled. God's glory becomes clearer.

At times our vision of God can grow distant and feel foreign. The world around us hampers our spiritual awareness. In the midst of the *immediate and tangible*, we lose focus on the God who is *eternal and spiritual*.

It always amazes me that on a foggy day I can drive down Stone Mountain Freeway and not even see the huge chunk of granite. An object as colossal as the mountain gets hidden. Pour enough moisture into the atmosphere and even a mountain can disappear.

And pour enough doubt, or fear, or worry, or lust, or envy into a person's heart and their perception of God will dissipate. They'll end up with a *near-zero visibility*.

Yet worship is the perfect antidote. *Praise cuts through the haze*. It refocuses our eyes on God.

Worship highlights God's graces and attributes.

It brings the God from whom we've drifted back into proportion. He becomes bigger than we had allowed Him to be. Worship rips away the limitations and boundaries we imposed on God's mercy and might.

A season of worship opens the door for a limitless God to once again *fill up my mind, and dominate my outlook, and occupy my heart, and stimulate my soul...*

I think Christmas is about *the moods* of worship...

Remember the shepherds who witnessed the angel's testimony... Luke 2:20 tells us, "Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them."

One of the beauties of the Christmas story is its ability to surprise us, *just like it did the shepherds*.

Christmas *quicken*s our faith. The coming of Christ reminds us that if God is willing to join our predicament, there's hope! *Impossibilities are possible*.

Christmas *quickens us...* but it also *quiets us*.

Christmas is a mystery... that a holy God would dive into our evil world - that the God who's bigger than the universe would make Himself small - **that the infinite became an infant**. This casts over us a *humbled hush*.

God is so much more! He's deeper than we thought.

Remember the postpartum Mary... *After the angelic visitations - after the birth - after the shepherds...* when she had time to think it all through, we're told, **"Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart."**

What a combination... Christmas **quickened** the shepherds who *rushed to praise* the Lord. It **quieted** Mary who *hushed to ponder* all she'd seen and heard.

These are the moods of worship - *praise and ponder, marvel and meditation* - Christmas conjures up both!

This is why I say, *the angels, and Mary, and the shepherds* - all teach us, **Christmas is about Worship**.

But here's a second statement, **Christmas is about Giving**. Granted, this is stating the obvious. Who in the US doesn't understand that Christmas is about giving?

For a month leading up to it we shop until we drop.

Here's some stats, **"Every Christmas Americans use over 28 million rolls of wrapping paper, and almost 17 million packages of tags and bows. And it all goes under 35 million Christmas trees."** *And some of those Christmas Trees are upside down to gather more gifts.*

And guess where I got my statistics?

Interestingly, they appeared in an issue of “Garbage Magazine” – a trade publication for trash collectors.

Witness a Christmas morning around the family tree, *and the pile of garbage* that’s been accumulated, and it reminds us of the truth that **Christmas is about giving.**

Once a lady was in a rush to send out her Christmas cards, she walked into the store and grabbed a box of cards off the shelf without reading the wording inside.

Several days after sending the hundred or so cards in the box, she picked up a leftover, and checked out the message she’d sent. She was horrified to read, “**This card is just to say... a little gift is on the way.**” *For a lot of people Christmas is all about **those little gifts.***

I read of a couple that lives in Anthon, Iowa. Richard and Donna Hamann certainly understand the giving spirit associated with the Christmas season. Anthon is a farming town of 650 people. Rich is a retired farmer.

One Christmas, the Hamann’s gave a most unusual gift. They paid the November electric bill for everyone in their town. The bills totaled \$25,000 and they were due on December 25. The week after Christmas a mound of thank-you cards covered Richard’s desk.

His giving-spirit had touched a whole town.

When asked why he did it, Richard was quoted in USA Today, “**The Lord has been very good to us and so have the people of this community, so I always thought we ought to be doing something in return if we could.**” Richard understands **Christmas is about Giving.**

Isaiah 9:6 is a favorite Christmas passage, “For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given...” Jesus was a child born to Mary, but He’s also a gift given by God. Christmas is the celebration of *God’s great gift!*

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” Jesus is the greatest gift that’s ever been given... **Christmas is about Giving!**

But let me make a third statement... **Worship is about Giving.** True worship is *the giving of my attention and affection.* It’s the *bestowing of honor,* and the *offering of praise.* Worship is the giving of *myself, and what I possess* - to a God who is worthy of it all.

Giving back to God from what He’s given to me is the heart of worship. Whether it’s our money, time, talent, respect - worship acknowledges that all blessing comes from God, and should end up glorifying God.

Worship is the completion of the circle. You’re not a serious worshipper if you don’t have a giving spirit...

As we mentioned earlier, Christmas is about *worship* and *giving* - but we don’t often put these two together.

We worship on *Christmas Eve*... then we give gifts on *Christmas Morning*... But worship and giving are really one in the same. **Real worship is about giving...**

Remember throughout the NT we’re rewarded for our *labors on earth* with *crowns in heaven.* But there’s a special purpose for those crowns. In Revelation 4:10 John is before God’s throne when he sees 24 elders.

These are faithful leaders in the church so you would expect them to have a few crowns – a few rewards – *but it's interesting what they do with their crowns...*

John watched these elders, “fall down before Him who sits on the throne and (they) worship Him who lives forever and ever, and (they) cast their crowns before the throne, saying: “You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created.”

Here's the lesson for us... The elders worshipped God by laying their crowns before His feet. **They gave back to God what He had given to them.** You need to *listen to your elders!* **Worship is about giving.** Worship is the ultimate reason we serve and labor for the Lord!

And I hope you're trying to rack up as many crowns as possible - I sure am! I don't want to finally get to Heaven and get caught empty-handed. I don't want to stand before my Lord Jesus with nothing to give Him.

Imagine, you finally arrive on the heavenly shore – it is wonderful beyond description... words can't express!

You look at the Savior - and you see the scars in His hands, and feet, and face. You're overwhelmed with love and appreciation for all that Jesus did for you.

There you are... reduced to tears - you're nothing but a pile of melted gratitude... And out of the corner of your eye you see elders laying down their rewards. You think, **“That's what I'll do. I'll give my crowns to Jesus!”**

But what if you have no crowns! While on earth you did nothing for Jesus that He could reward. What a sad, empty feeling to come up blank at that moment...

To have nothing with which to thank Jesus! This would be the ultimate embarrassment and frustration.

Several years ago, prior to Christmas, my brother and I agreed not to exchange gifts. *We buy each other piddly junk anyway, so why not save the money?*

Well, apparently his wife didn't get the message. So on Christmas Day she hands me my present – *and I had nothing with which to reciprocate*. I felt like a heel!

And that was just my brother. *He's the one who should've felt like a heel*. Yet if I had those emotions before my kid brother – how will we feel before Jesus?

Never forget, biblical worship is giving back to God, some of what He's given to you. *It's about giving...*

The wise men understood this... when they reached Jerusalem and inquired into the whereabouts of the promised Deliverer, they told King Herod, **“For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.”** Notice their intention... *it was to worship Jesus!*

Yet remember how they did it when they arrived in Bethlehem... Matthew 2:11 tells us, **“And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”**

They see – they *fall down* – they *worship* – **and they give gifts**. The natural outgrowth of their worship was a giving spirit. How could they visit God's chosen – and linger in the presence of royalty – without giving a gift?

Make no mistake about it, **worship is about giving**.

But here's my final statement, and this is the twist I've been leading up to... **Giving is about Worship.**

Even though you might not realize it, our propensity to get caught up in the gift-giving at Christmas time is partly the result of our latent desire to worship God.

I believe the madness of Black Friday - consumerism on steroids - the temporary insanity that overwhelms normally sane people, and drives them frantically around town to buy cheap stuff... is really just a dim reflection of a deeper desire... *our longing to worship!*

This is why I could never be against folks shopping and giving gifts at Christmas. *Trees are a grand idea.*

Turn them upside down if it allows you to get more presents in the house. *I like giving and receiving gifts.*

But sadly, for some people gift-giving around the Christmas tree is as close as they ever get to worship!

I realize some folks give gifts to show-off, or impress others, or one-up the other guy... but aside from obviously tainted motivations, what's really wrong with me taking my hard earned cash and acting unselfish?

Why not buy gifts that bring joy to other people? I believe anytime we **give** it gets us closer to worship...

Don't recoil from Christmas. I don't even worry a lot about its crass commercialism... I take a different approach. I try to recapture the deeper meaning that lies just below the surface of all the gifts and giving...

Presents are great, but greater still is *the presence* - the Spirit of the Savior who inspires all the giving.

When Charlie Brown couldn't get into the Christmas spirit, his buddy, Linus, asked him what was wrong...

Charlie Brown told him, "The season is getting me down. There's too much commercialism, no one is sincere, and there is just too much rushing around!"

Linus takes his friend to task, "Charlie Brown, you're the only person I know who can take a wonderful season like Christmas and turn it into a problem."

There are Christians who act just like Charlie Brown.

Enjoy the season and its festivities, just don't divorce the traditions from their underlying significance.

CS Lewis once made the observation that early in a child's life he can love Santa Claus, and reindeer, and elves, and new toys, and gingerbread houses... *and the baby Jesus in the manger...* all simultaneously. All these images cause no conflict in *a child's mind*.

But when he or she gets old enough to recognize the *factualness of the one* and the *fantasy of the other* – at that point, the child decides which takes precedent.

If the person puts the factual first he can still appreciate the festive aspects of the season... But if he puts the fantasy first – to the exclusion and neglect of Christ – then all the other traditions lose their luster.

The *holiness* of Christmas becomes *hollow-ness*.

Lewis writes about Christmas traditions once they've become divorced from Christ - "They will have taken on an independent, and therefore a soon withering life."

He understood the truth that everything in our lives that we treat independent of Jesus will soon wither.

Christmas should be a *winsome* holiday - chalked full of *wonder* and *wistfulness*. But remove Christ from its center - and all the gifts you'll give, and the cheer you'll spread - won't bring you one slither of happiness.

It's when we recall that all our gifts are a reflection of God's greatest gift... It's when our holiday cheer is a reflection of our worship of God - that's when every gift, both given and received, becomes something sacred.

I've heard it said, "He who has not Christmas in his heart will never find Christmas under a tree."

Ten days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, a group of citizens in North Platte, Nebraska, heard a rumor that soldiers from their hometown would be traveling through town on a troop train, on their way westward.

Five hundred citizens from North Platte turned out at the train depot with gifts of gratitude for their Nebraska boys who were headed off to defend their country.

But when the train pulled into town, it wasn't the Nebraska National Guard onboard. The soldiers on the transport train were from the Kansas National Guard.

Once the townsfolk realized the mix up, there was an awkward moment or two – *until one woman handed a young man she'd never met the gift she'd brought for her son...* The other 499 citizens copied her generosity.

There were hugs, and prayers, and concern shared all around that day. The encounter in the depot was a spontaneous act of genuine love that touched both *the soldiers from Kansas* and *the citizens of Nebraska*.

The people of North Platte thought the gifts they brought to the depot were for their own sons, but in the aftermath of such a moving moment, nobody could argue that God intended those gifts for someone else.

Actually, they honored their own sons, by blessing the boys from another state. *And this is what we should be doing as we exchange our Christmas gifts!...*

A few hours from now, you'll be parked around the tree with the people you love. In those few magical moments when the gifts - and the love that prompted them - are opened and enjoyed... **I hope it hits you!**

All this gift giving is really about someone else!

The happiness and excitement we relish around the Christmas tree is the same thrill God wants us to experience every day when we *give and live* for Jesus.

It's true - **giving is about worship...** What is worship, but opening a gift *from God*, then giving a gift *to God*?

Think about it, *every time we worship Jesus we gather around a tree - another tree - the tree on Calvary* – the old rugged cross... And it too is a tree adorned with bright lights! Come to this tree, and you'll see mercy shine, and righteousness twinkle, and grace glow! That dull, rugged cross is indeed a colorful tree.

And there are gifts there too... Gifts under that tree...

The Savior has gifts for you and me... *forgiveness, and power, and peace, and freedom, and joy, and life, and wisdom, and love...* Oh, lots and lots of love!

And before the bloodstained tree at Calvary, you'll want to give a gift to the Savior who hung there for you.

The problem at Christmas time is not all the shopping and gift-giving that occurs... **Giving is really about worship.** *It's a reminder of something deeper.*

It's when we miss the meaning of the giving – when we see the sign, but refuse to head in the direction to which it's pointing – then all the gifts, and parties, and decorations, and holiday cheer we can muster will leave us empty and hollow. Christmas ends up a drag.

Each year scores of people suffer from *Christmas letdown!* But don't blame Christmas. The problem isn't Santa Claus, and commercialism, and shopping malls!

What spoils Christmas is not that we get caught up in wrong stuff, it's that we don't draw right conclusions.

We fail to recognize that **giving gifts to people we love is really a prelude to our worship of God...** *Where do you think the spirit of Christmas generosity and giving originates?* God is the Giver of every good and perfect gift! And the greatest gift ever given is a Savior!

All our Christmas giving harkens back to Jesus.

Here are four statements I hope you remember...

Christmas is about Worship...

Christmas is about Giving...

Worship is about Giving...

And **Giving is about Worship...**

Let me close with a hot new gift suggestion...

When you think about it, Jesus is a tough guy to buy for... He's the King of Creation, Ruler of the Universe! He's already got everything you can afford to give Him!

Yet the one present Jesus wants most is the one item you *can* give Him... and that's your worship.

Christmas is about family, faith, and **worship!**