

A LAMB IN THE MANGER

HEBREWS 10:5-10

The Christmas story is a grand epic. It's chalked full of drama, suspense, and majestic moments. God tinkered in time and an avalanche of miracles followed.

The young couple, **Joseph and Mary**, were visited by divine emissaries with mysterious messages.

Shepherds were shocked when the sky opened onto an angelic stage, and the heavenly host played a private performance heralding the Messiah's arrival.

In a far away land **oriental Wise Men** noticed a celestial signal shining in the darkness of the night sky, and they began their trek to worship the King.

Then, after being warned of a **hit-man named Herod**, Joseph smuggled the baby - the assassin's target - down to Egypt. He narrowly averted a disaster of colossal proportions for the whole human race.

I'm just saying the Nativity narrative is full of high drama... but to me the scene that stands out - where the story's intensity reaches a crescendo - is the scene shot on location in heaven itself. The highpoint of the story occurs on the doorstep of heaven when **the Father and His only Son exchange their farewells...**

Think of it this way, a young soldier in military fatigues says good-bye to his parents. He's embarks on a tour of duty - heads straight for the battlefield. This is the picture the Bible paints in Hebrews 10. Jesus is leaving His heavenly home. He's a soldier being sent to a foreign field on a dangerous mission.

Usually when we read the Christmas story we turn to the book of **Matthew** and read of *Joseph and the wise men* - or to **Luke** to recall *Mary and the shepherds*. We usually don't turn to the book of **Hebrews**. But it's here the opening act in the Christmas drama gets recorded.

Hebrews 10:5-9 records the often overlooked conversation that occurred between Jesus and His Father on the day He left heaven and entered our world. Just before Jesus left His *eternal home* for His *embryonic home* He quoted Psalm 40 - a prophecy of His Incarnation... In Hebrews 10:5 we read, ^{10:5} "Therefore, when He came into the world, He said: "Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me. ^{10:6} In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure. ^{10:7} Then I said, 'Behold, I have come - in the volume of the book it is written of Me - to do Your will, O God.' Previously saying, "Sacrifice and offering, burnt offerings, and

offerings for sin You did not desire, nor had pleasure in them" (which are offered according to the law), then He said, "Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God."

When Jesus said His good-byes in heaven He had an understanding of what awaited Him on earth. He knew that the wages of sin had always been death.

For centuries past Jesus gazed down from His lofty perch in heaven. He watched Jewish priests sharpen their knives and slit the throats of innocent lambs.

Jesus had kept one eye on the sacrifices - and His other eye was on His Father. He watched Him *receive sacrifice after sacrifice, yet achieve no satisfaction.*

There was a *reluctance* in His *acceptance*. The look in the Father's eye indicated all was not quite right.

By the time Jesus entered the world, God had tired of animal sacrifices. All the blood of bulls and lambs could do is to cover our sin - *not make us new.*

At best these sacrifices gained for us *a parole*. It required a sinless sacrifice to grant *a permanent pardon... But where would the Father go for such a perfect sacrifice?...* That's when the Son stepped up and said, ^{Hebrews 10:5} *"Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me."* Jesus volunteered to be the Father's stainless, spotless, sinless sacrifice.

God is spirit, and spirit has no blood. A spirit doesn't cut, or bruise, or bleed... From heaven, Jesus saw the life-blood flow from the animal's throat. He imagined what it would be like to bleed - ^{10:5} *a body was prepared for Him.* From day one bleeding was in His future. Cold steel would open the tender skin of the manger baby.

From the moment Jesus left heaven He was headed to the cross. Philippians 2 says of Jesus, ^{2:8} *"Being found in the appearance as a man, He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross..."* For Jesus the *manger* was the beginning of a *mission*. **This babe was born to die!**

Pastor and author John MacArthur makes the same observation. He writes, *"Here's a side to the Christmas story that isn't often told: those soft little hands, fashioned by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb, were made so that nails might be driven through them..."*

Those baby feet - pink, and unable to walk, would one day walk up a dusty hill to be nailed to a cross...

That sweet infant's head with sparkling eyes and eager mouth was formed so that someday men might force a crown of thorns onto it. That tender body, warm and soft, wrapped in swaddling clothes, would one day be ripped open by a spear. Jesus was born to die."

Revelation 13:8 refers to Jesus as the ^{13:8} "lamb slain from the foundation of the world." When Jesus stepped out of heaven He was fully aware where the road would lead. Imagine the courage it took for Jesus to take that first step. GK Chesterton wrote, "Alone of all creeds, Christianity has added courage to the virtues of the Creator." *Jesus, be careful when you take that step, it's a long way down.* Yet Jesus took it anyway!

The Son recalled the look in His Father's eyes. For your sake, and for God's sake - the Father's only Son wanted our forgiveness to be full and free. Jesus knew what had to be done, and Jesus had the guts to do it.

It reminds me of the first-grader who came home from school in tears. The little girl's teacher had asked the students to make a Christmas banner. When the girl showed the class her banner the teacher sneered, and the kids made fun. The little girl was crushed.

Her mother threw her arms around her daughter and asked what it was she'd written. The girl answered, "Mary had a little lamb, and named Him *Jesus*." From that year onward, every Christmas that mother made sure her daughter's banner was the centerpiece of their family's celebration. "Mary had a little lamb"...

Jesus' *mission* was no *mystery* - the coming of "*Mary's little lamb*" had been foretold in scores of Scriptures! Verse 7 of Hebrews 10 sums up the OT, ^{10:7} "*In the volume of the book it is written of me - to do your will, O God.*" The Father had served notice that a sinless sacrifice would inevitably be necessary.

But what was clear in the Scripture isn't necessarily palatable to human tastes. It seemed weird to our ears that the Savior *born to us* would ultimately *die for us*.

Likewise to Jesus' contemporaries, the cross was the piece of the puzzle that just didn't seem to fit. It didn't make sense. *Why would God come to die?*

There's an old Appalachian Christmas Carol called, "**I Wonder As I Wander**" that asks this question, "If Jesus had wanted for any old thing, a star in the sky or a bird on the wing, for all of God's angels in heaven for to sing, He surely could have had it for he is their King... I wonder as I wander, out under the sky, why Jesus our Savior, did come for to die, for poor ordinary people, like you and like I, I wonder as I wander out under the sky." *Folks surely wondered in Jesus' day.*

Trust me eyebrows were raised when the wise men showed up at Mary's shower with their gifts. Myrrh was an embalming fluid. *Who gives formaldehyde at a baby shower? What a bizarre present for a newborn...*

And later, when John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, he introduced Him to His subjects, not as king, but as [John 1:29](#) "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" John knew from the outset that before Jesus wore a *crown of glory*, He'd wear a *crown of thorns*.

It's ironic that Jesus was visited by shepherds and probably born in a stable. It's likely, those shepherds brought with them to Bethlehem a few sheep. There may've even been lambs occupying the stable, that earlier had eaten feed from the manger where Mary would lay her baby. And when Mary put Jesus in that feed trough there was now **a lamb in the manger!**

Yet even today we have a hard time grasping that the baby Jesus was born a sacrifice. In fact, sprinkled throughout our Christmas carols are reminders that the baby was born to die, yet we often sing over the words as if we don't hear them - as if they weren't there.

In the British carol "**The Holly And The Ivy**" the song illuminates the meaning of the greenery we use in our Christmas decorations. It reads, "[The holly bears a berry, as red as any blood. The holly bears a prickle, as sharp as any thorn. The holly bears a bark, as bitter as any gall.](#)" *Yet when have you ever looked at a sprig of evergreen at Christmas and pondered that thought?*

In the more familiar song, "**What Child Is This?**" There's an ominous line, "[Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the cross be borne for me, for you. Hail, hail the Word made Flesh, the Babe, the Son of Mary!](#)"

And in the classic carol, "**We Three Kings**" without much thought to what we're singing we plow through the lyrics, "[Myrrh is mine, a bitter perfume, breathes a life of gathering gloom. Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding dying sealed in the stone, cold tomb!](#)" It seems the wise men had a grasp of the somber side of Christmas.

Do you remember the challenge to Mary that came from the lips of the old man, Simeon? Mary was a new mom - just days after delivery. She'd come up to the Temple to dedicate her baby to God, when this old geezer interrupts her with troubling words, [Luke 2:34](#) "Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against [2:35](#) (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."

What a thing to say to a mom still struggling with postpartum emotions. *That a sword will pierce her soul.*

Yet the old man's forecast was true. Flash ahead some thirty years, and there, at the foot of the cross a middle aged Mary is watching the body of God - *the body prepared by the Father for the Son - the body that incubated nine months in her own virgin*

womb... She now sees that body torn, and pierced, and ripped, and bleeding. The final sacrifice has been laid on the altar.

I have no doubt, that on the cross in that moment, again the Son looked into His Father's eyes, but this time He saw *no reluctance* in His *acceptance!* On the altar of the cross the problem was solved, the penalty was fully paid, the demands satisfied once and for all.

This time Jesus saw only approval in His Father's eyes, so He cried out, [John 19:30](#) "*It is finished.*" *And it is finished*, at least from God's end of the deal. Forgiveness is no longer allocated in installments. No longer do sacrifices have to be repeated. Forgiveness now flows with no strings attached! It's offered full and free to you tonight.

Jesus did all that needed to be done too insure for you and I a permanent pardon. All that's left *unfinished* is for us to open up our hearts, and receive it by faith.

Understand, it doesn't matter today that you're willing to say Christ died for the sins of the world. Faith gets diluted - it loses its punch - when it's applied in general.

When Jesus forgives He doesn't look at a globe of the earth, He looks into a set of eyes. This time it's *your eyes!* Jesus always makes His pardon personal.

"The world" in general can't think, or feel, or talk, or act. It doesn't recognize its sin as an act of defiance. It doesn't see that its sin is breaking God's heart. The world feels no remorse. It can't confess. It won't turn from its sin. The world spins, but it stays on the same axis - it never really moves or seeks after God.

But you, *a person made in God's image*, can think about what you've done. You can be moved by His Spirit. You can feel the pain you've caused and the shame you've brought. You can confess your sin, and express your remorse. And you can call out to Jesus to come to you, and forgive you, and change your life. You can look into God's eyes and find His acceptance.

The Baby in the manger was born to die, yet most folks don't want to think about the cross at Christmas. They say, *Christmas should be about birth and light.* The cross is an ugly, tasteless reminder of man's dark ages, when men acted in barbarous ways. The cross is an offense to people like us with dignified sensibilities.

Most people like Christmas to be a time for tinsel, glitter, blinking lights, evergreen trees, warm fires, eggnog, and fuzzy feelings. Christmas is supposed to be about peace on earth and good will toward men.

Why spike the Christmas punch with a reminder of anger and violence? Don't spoil the serenity of the season with images of gore, and suffering, and bloodshed. We all

want Christmas to be the one night of the year when everyone pretends the world is okay!

When my son, Nick, was in third grade his class had a Christmas party. Evidently, a face painter attended the third grade celebration, for Kathy noticed that the kids had Nike swooshes, and gift wrapped presents, and jingle bells painted on their cheeks... On Nick's right cheek was a Christmas tree - on his left a cross.

The Christmas tree was pretty. It had been done in bright green, and had gold balls. The face painter had obviously painted lots and lots of Christmas trees...

But the cross was pale blue. It was a make-shift color - not the color you'd normally choose for a cross. In addition, the strokes looked rushed, and the lines were drawn uneven. *It was also obvious this painter didn't do many Christmas crosses.* To her credit she painted what my little boy requested, but it had taken a child's spiritual insight to add a cross to Christmas!

I hope this year you'll add the cross to your Christmas. If it wasn't for the cross there would be no reason to celebrate at Christmas time, *or at any time for that matter!* The values we treasure at Christmas: love and peace, giving and good will, were purchased and made possible by Jesus on the cross of Calvary.

Whenever you turn on a Christmas light don't forget *the Light* that shined into the darkness, but the darkness comprehended it not. My sin and your sin nailed Jesus to the tree. Jesus was born to die for us!

This is why the crib and cross go together. Manger and martyrdom are His bookends. As Amy Carmichael writes, ["the cross always stands near the manger."](#)

Earlier I mentioned the holly, *have you heard it's legend?* Some traditions say the crown of thorns the Roman soldiers weaved to mock the Messiah was formed from a branch lopped off a holly bush. The cynical soldiers cut off a thorny limb, bent it in the shape of a crown, and shoved it onto Jesus' head.

Today we hang holly wreaths with red berries on the front door of our houses, or on the walls of our churches. They make nice decorations, but they make far better symbols. When you look at a holly wreath remember *the crown of thorns*. Think of the red berries as stained with the drops of blood that dripped from Jesus' brow. *Tonight, how can you say "No," to the King whose love flows as blood down His own face?*

Over the years I've taken groups to Israel. Next year I plan to take another. And the most common question I get asked is... ["What's your favorite site to visit?"](#)

I actually have several favorites... The Garden Tomb is amazing - the site where Jesus toppled death and rose from the grave... The top of Mount Arbel, high over the Sea of Galilee, is breathtaking. You get a panoramic view of the lake and places where Jesus worked miracles... I have a number of favorite sites...

But if I had to pick **one**, it's in Jerusalem. It's an emotional, soul-stirring place called **the Lithostrata**, Latin for "Pavement." It's here you find the stone floor of Pilate's Judgment Hall. You see the stones on which Jesus was beaten and scourged. His blood splattered on these stones, and trickled into their crevasses. As you stand on these stones it's stunning to realize the DNA of our Lord is literally under your feet. To me the Lithostrata is the *holiest ground* in the *Holy Land*.

One year we visited Israel in December, and I was given a special Christmas present. At the Lithostrata, I saw what I had never seen before. On our way out the exit there it was, up against the wall... *a stone manger*.

At the scene of the crime - at the awful, brutal place where the Roman executioners implemented their half-way death, and with rods and whips administered the scourging of Jesus, **there was a manger**. It reminded me of Hebrews 10, ^{10:5} "**A body was prepared for Him...**"

Isaiah said of the Messiah, ^{Isaiah 53:5} "**He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.**" *Remember spirit doesn't bleed.*

In history, and on our calendar, Christmas occurs before Easter, but in our lives God reverses the order. When a heart embraces the cross and believes Jesus died and rose and lives today to forgive my sin and enable me to change - my heart is transformed into a manger. The Son of God is suddenly born in me.

In a spiritual sense, the Christmas miracle happens again, not in Bethlehem, *but in the heart that believes*. Embrace His sacrifice tonight and you'll find the Savior.

Right now I want to lead you in a prayer. If you pledge your allegiance to the Savior, Jesus promises you'll experience His love and forgiveness. This is your opportunity to participate in a life-changing moment.

It's been said, "**If Christ were born a thousand times in Bethlehem, and not born in my heart, I would be lost forever.**" Don't let tonight's opportunity pass you by...

Trust me, all the gift-giving tomorrow will be a little hollow - and not nearly as meaningful - if you walk out tonight without receiving the greatest gift of all. Let's bow our heads. If you need a Savior, pray with me...