

Articles and Sermons :: The True Meaning of Christ's First Coming by Harold S. Martin

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During the Advent Season there are so many things in our communities to distract one's attention, that we have a tendency to miss the true meaning of Christmas.

Some link Christmas with decorated trees, sentimental carols, and office parties. Sometimes folks are so occupied with candy and carols, and tinsel and toys, that the real eternal meaning of Christ's Advent is lost. Christmas often involves spending money people don't have for things they don't need. The average American uses seventy feet of Christmas paper and more than fifty yards of ribbon to wrap an average of thirty-two gifts. All this stands in stark contrast to the birth that took place in Bethlehem nearly two thousand years ago, a birth that was rugged and simple.

The good news of Christmas is not a date in history--for no one knows with certainty when Jesus was born. The good news of Christmas is not a festival, with its gifts, fun, feasting, yule log, and lighted Christmas tree--for these are but vestiges of a pagan culture that knows nothing of the true God. The good news of Christmas centers around a person--God's unspeakable gift, a Saviour who is Christ the Lord.

The Advent Season is a time to search hearts. We must think of Jesus Christ not merely as the baby Jesus, but as the risen, presently-living, soon-coming King of kings and Lord of lords. He makes demands on our lives; He is a threat to our smug and self-centered ways of living. Unconditional surrender to His lordship is the price believers need to pay in order to have a joyous testimony for Him.

Of all the titles attributed to Jesus, the one that should warm our hearts most of all, is the title Emmanuel, which means God with us. When Jesus was born, God became man. The One who flung the stars out into space, came to earth and dwelled among the human family. The tiny arms of that Baby in the manger were the arms of the One who laid the foundation of the universe. The coming of Jesus Christ into the world was the time when God came to earth. God took on a human body and dwelled among us.

There are a number of reasons given in the Bible which help us understand why Jesus came to earth. In this message we will take a look at His purposes for coming nearly two thousand years ago.

1. JESUS CAME TO REVEAL THE FATHER

We read this truth in John 1:18. The Bible says, "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him." Jesus declared one time that those who see Him have seen the Father (John 14:9). Hebrews 1:3 tells us that Christ is the express image of the person of God.

God is a great spirit. He is invisible. He cannot be seen with the physical eye. All of us at some time or another have asked the question, "What is God like?" One of the ways we can know something about the nature of God is to look at Jesus. Jesus came so that we limited human beings might be able to see God, and so that we might better know what He is like. The Apostle John says, "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The Apostle Paul says, "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shone in . . . the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). Ever since the birth of Jesus nearly twenty centuries ago, we have been able to see the glory of God.

A little boy, the child of missionary parents, was attending school in the United States of America more than a decade ago. He had not seen his parents since the preceding summer, and would not see them again until the next summer. A few days before Christmas, the principal of the school said to him, "Jimmy, what would you like to have most of all at Christmas?" There was a picture on the principal's desk of the boy's missionary father. The lad looked at the framed-picture for a little while-and then after a few moments he said to the principal-"I want my father to step out of that frame." And you know, that little boy voiced the cry of all humanity. The Greek philosopher Plato said many years ago that he hoped some day to see God walk down the streets of Athens. In Israel, generation after generation of people looked for the Messiah. Soon after Adam and Eve were driven out of the Garden of Eden, they looked for the promised Redeemer. And then one night nearly two thousand years ago, God stepped out of the frame of the universe, and appeared on earth in the Person of Jesus Christ. Before this, the eternal God had not been seen by mortal eyes. Even the Old Testament patriarchs di

did not see God in His real essence, but only in angelic form, or in what is more properly called a "theophany." Jesus came to this earth so that we might learn to know better what God is like.

2. JESUS CAME TO PUT AWAY SIN

The Apostle John assures us that we can know "that he was manifested to take away our sins" (1 John 3:5). Jesus was speaking of His crucifixion and death when He said, "For this cause came I into the world" (John 18:37). The Apostle Paul says, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief" (1 Timothy 1:15). Jesus Christ came to Bethlehem primarily to die. He came to earth as the Baby of Bethlehem in order that He might later become the Christ of Calvary.

All humans have sinned. Every one of us has fallen short of the standard which God demands. And our sin places a separation between us and God. The gulf between us and God is so wide, and the separation is so great, that none of us by his own efforts is able to close it.

Many seem to think that the gulf between sinful humans and a holy God can be closed by good works. If you say so many prayers, and give so many alms, or make a pilgrimage to some holy place--these things somehow are supposed to erase a sinner's guilt. But this will never do. Take the man who drives his car faster than the speed limit. What can he do to atone for the wrong he has done? If he thinks good works will do it--if he thinks good deeds will atone for the wrong he has done--then he can diligently observe all the traffic laws for the rest of the day. But any policeman will assure us that this is not enough. There is a penalty for disobedience, and no amount of carefulness afterward will atone for the past disobedience. If we fall short of God's standard on Monday, we can never erase that guilt by walking straight on Tuesday. No person can erase his own guilt, and neither can any other human being erase it for him. All persons, no matter how upright and morally clean they are living--still have come short of God's demands and thus need to be saved. Mortal sinful men and women cannot save themselves.

Suppose an airplane is flying toward a base on the continent of Antarctica and suddenly it crashes into the frigid waters north of the continent. Three men are thrown into the ocean, and the plane sinks at once. Nobody is near the spot, and the closest land area is the country of New Zealand, a thousand miles away. One of the men can swim for ten minutes; the second man can swim for two hours; the third man is the world's champion long--distance swimmer. Which of these three men are going to reach safety? The answer is obvious. None of them will reach safety. The only difference between them is that the one man will drown in ten minutes, another in two hours, and the champion will drown a few hours later. And this is a parable of the human family. The criminal is like the swimmer who is able to keep afloat for ten minutes. The average person is represented by the swimmer who can stay on the surface for two hours. And the honest, usually upright person who is a good citizen and has a tremendous personality, is like the champion swimmer--but is still unable to reach land.

All human beings need a Saviour, no matter how upright and sincere they are, and the message of Christmas is this: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). The brightest message that has ever been delivered to the human family is the glad news that in some mysterious way (which we will never be able to quite fully comprehend), Jesus Christ puts himself underneath our sin, and lifts it off from our souls, and takes it away. The Apostle John declares that Jesus Christ was manifested "to take away our sins" (1 John 3:5). The words "take away" simply mean that He removes the guilt and punishment of sin by paying the price. The angel said to Joseph, "And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

God did not become a man merely to teach us how to live. Christ did not come into the world primarily to perform miracles. Jesus came into the world primarily to journey toward the cross. And Jesus' death on the cross was an act by which He made it possible for us to be delivered from the dominion of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of the beloved Son (Colossians 1:13).

3. JESUS CAME TO DESTROY THE WORKS OF THE DEVIL

We read in 1 John 3:8, "For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil." This message is a sentence filled with good news.

The devil is a murderer and a liar. The Bible says that he is lawless and deceitful and subtle. He alienates from God. He blinds to the truth. He promotes selfishness and jealousy and cruelty. But the Bible says that Jesus Christ came that He might destroy the works of the devil.

The "works of the devil" are the sins which human beings commit. Satan is the one who lures us into temptation, and then we find it easy to let unholy desires give birth to sin (James 1:13-15). The Apostle Paul calls them "works of darkness" in Romans 13:12 and again in Ephesians 5:11. The passage in 1 John 3:8 suggests that the works of the devil (our sins) can become like chains that bind us.

The word translated "destroy" is the Greek word "luo." It does not mean to demolish or "to break up." Instead, it means "to loosen one who is bound," or "to set free." When Jesus raised Lazarus from the tomb, He said, "Loose him and let him go" (John 11:44). The word "loose" is the same Greek word as the one translated "destroy" in 1 John 3:8. Christ came that He might shatter the chains of sin that can bind us, and loose us from them. For this purpose was the Son of God manifested, that He might loosen and set people free from the works of the devil.

Eddie Taylor was once a drunkard that slept off his drunken stupors under the boardwalk at Atlantic City, New Jersey. He was about as far gone as a man can get. He staggered from tavern to tavern at the south end of the city, and then after he had soaked himself with liquor, he flopped beneath the boardwalk and slept off his stupor. He wrapped himself in old newspapers to keep warm. (The devil brings men and women into a sorry state when they once fall under his grip.) But one day Eddie Taylor responded to the Gospel invitation and became a new man in Christ Jesus. From that point onward beer and liquor no longer attracted him. Jesus Christ had delivered him. He had not touched alcoholic beverages during the rest of his days on earth. For this purpose was the Son of God manifested, that He might loosen human beings from the works of the devil (1 John 3:8).

One of the reasons Jesus came to earth was to destroy the works of the devil. And nothing that the devil has ever done is too hard for Jesus to undo. If you find yourself living under the power of the devil's grip, remember that Jesus Christ came to set you free. If you will surrender your life to Him, He will loosen the grip that Satan has over you, and set you free from the bondage of sin. He will give you power to more and more live a new kind of life. Jesus was manifested on earth that He might set people free from the works of the devil.

4. JESUS CAME TO PREPARE FOR A SECOND COMING

We learn by reading Hebrews 9:28 that "Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him, shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation." At this season of the year our thoughts turn with gladness to the first coming of Jesus. We are reminded of the songs that the shepherds heard, and of the hope that filled their hearts. We rejoice to read about the star that shone over the place where the child lay. And yet, we are all conscious of the fact that this present age cannot continue on like it has been going. Sin abounds on every hand. Crime is on the increase. Lawlessness and sexual immorality are sometimes even encouraged. Peace and righteousness have not been established. The weapons which technicians have developed threaten to wipe civilization off the face of the earth. Deep down within we realize that something more is needed.

The first coming of Jesus was merely the preparation for a great consummation that is still to come. The text in Hebrews 9:28 says that Christ shall appear a second time. One cannot read the New Testament carefully without coming to the conclusion that the Christ who came is still to come. The angel said at the time of Jesus' ascension into Heaven, "This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go" (Acts 1:11).

One main theme that recurs over and over again in the Bible is the teaching that Jesus Christ is coming to this earth twice. Most people live as if life as we know it today is going to continue on like it has been forever. They say that the grass is still green, cows still give milk, hens lay eggs, and dogs bark at the moon just like they always have done. This is the way things always have been. But we must remember that God's Word declares that the same Jesus who came to Bethlehem is going to come a second time. Life as we know it today will come to an end.

The Scriptures teach that Jesus Christ is coming to this earth on two different occasions for two different purposes. He has already come on one occasion and accomplished the first purpose—that of paying the price for sin. Hundreds of years before Jesus was born, the Bible revealed that He would be born of the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:10), that His mother would be a virgin (Isaiah 7:14) and that there would be a massacre of infants in Bethlehem (Jeremiah 31: 15). The prophet Micah named the very town where He was to be born (Micah 5:2). All these things were foretold about Jesus hundred

s of years before He came to earth. And just so, the Scriptures prophesy that this same Jesus will come to earth a second time.

Jesus is not coming a second time to put away sin. He is coming a second time to complete our salvation. He came the first time as the Author of salvation. He is coming the second time as the Finisher of our faith. He came the first time to atone for our sins. He is coming the second time to execute judgment on earth. When He came the first time, there was no room for Him in the inn. When He comes the second time, the whole world is going to make room for Him, for the Bible says that "every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:10-11). (This does not speak of universal salvation, but of universal recognition that Jesus Christ is supreme over the universe.)

Jesus came the first time to deal with sin, and to pay the price for it. Jesus is coming the second time to set up His kingdom on earth, and to bring peace and order to this troubled planet. These two lines of prophecy are woven all the way through the Bible. The Apostle Peter says that the Spirit testified beforehand "of the sufferings of Christ" and "of the glory that should follow" (1 Peter 1:11). Jesus Christ came nearly two thousand years ago and lived and died to save men and women from Hell. Jesus Christ is coming again to redeem creation, to glorify the church, and to rule with a rod of iron (Revelation 19:15-16).

When Jesus came the first time, the world was ripe for His coming. The conditions on earth were ideal for penetrating the world with God's program of salvation. Alexander the Great, through his world conquests, had spread the Greek culture and language across the Mediterranean world. Greek was the universal language, and so people did not have to spend years studying new languages before they could preach in other parts of the world. The Romans had conquered most of Europe and the Mideast, and had built roads and established a monetary system which eliminated the need for travel visas and money exchanges when going from country to country. People were tired of the philosophies of paganism and as a result were hungering for truth about the great mysteries of life here and hereafter. The world was ripe for the first advent of our Saviour.

Just as the world was ripe for the first coming of Jesus nearly twenty centuries ago, so the world is ripe for the second coming of Jesus in our day. Every sign indicates that our world is ripe for the second coming of Jesus. Jesus predicted that violence would increase and lawlessness would abound as the age draws to a close. He said that people would be eating food and getting married and engaging in business, and not paying much attention to the lateness of the hour (Matthew 24:36-39). Our day might well be described as "The night before the second Christmas." And on that second Christmas day, when Jesus comes again, we are going to be like Him. Our redemption will be complete. Wars will cease and peace will reign on the earth.

As our minds go back across the centuries during this Christmas season to the time and place and setting where Jesus was born, let us try to remember the purposes for which He came:

He came to reveal God the Father.

He came to put away sin.

He came to set us free from the works of the devil.

He came to prepare for the second advent.

If during this Christmas season we concentrate on the real reasons for His coming, surely we will love Him more and we will be able to serve Him better. We can choose not to get caught up with all the frivolous decorations, and the frenzied shopping trips and the wasted weekends traveling to the malls. Instead, we can devote time to visiting friends and family. We can invite almost unknown "strangers" into our homes for a meal. We can sit by a nursing home bed and listen to older folks tell us about the good old days. We can spend time playing with children who need our friendship. It is sad to know that many a heart and home this Christmas will have no more room for Jesus than the Judean innkeeper had in Bethlehem. But each of us has the power of choice, and the greatest thing you can do this Christmas, if you have never done it, is to accept God's unspeakable Gift into your life. He stands at the door of every heart and seeks to enter, but you must open the door. It is not enough that Jesus was born in Bethlehem; He must be born in our hearts.