

The Message of the Manger

by James Blaine Chapman

The sermon explores the profound significance of the manger as a symbol of God's faithfulness, love, and the promise of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Scripture: Genesis 3:15, Psalm 51:7, Matthew 1:21, Luke 2:7, John 3:16, Romans 5:1, Hebrews 2:1

Topics: "Jesus Birth", "Salvation History"

Description

James Blaine Chapman preaches on the significance of Jesus Christ's birth, emphasizing how His coming is the central date and most important event in history. The birth of Jesus fulfilled numerous prophecies, showcasing God's faithfulness and wisdom in bringing about His promise. The manger where Jesus was laid symbolizes the hope and joy of humanity, as without His birth, there would be no redemption, forgiveness, or salvation. The message of the manger includes themes of faithfulness, knowledge of God, love, salvation, regeneration, cleansing from sin, divine fullness, peace, good will, and hope for final victory and glory.

Transcript

And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger (Luke 2:7).

Every occurrence in the history of our world must take its place both as to date and as to importance from its relationship to the coming of Jesus Christ to be the Saviour of men, for that coming of His is the central date and the most important event that has ever taken place on this earth.

The birth of Jesus Christ was the principal subject of prophecy among God's chosen people for hundreds of years before the event came to pass, and in these prophecies the minute descriptions were given of the place where He should be born, of the manner of His birth and of the times in which He should make His appearance. A Jewish Christian was telling one of his own race of the treasure he had found in Jesus, and was answering questions concerning Christ's miraculous conception and virgin birth. At last, no longer able to face the zeal of the Christian, the unconverted one said, "Then if another should be born of a virgin as this one was, would you believe him also to be the Christ"? But the Christian answered, "Yes, if he were so born." But this was said, of course, with the full knowledge that another could never be the subject of prophecy and of miraculous appearance as Jesus was. Anyone is safe to offer to believe on one who is "so born."

About the manger cradle of the newborn Christ gathered all the joys and hopes of the race of man. But for the fact that Jesus Christ espoused our cause, the human race would no doubt have perished with the sin of Adam. The manger was involved in the first promise of redemption, "The seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head" (Genesis 3:15). The manger was involved in the commandment to Noah to build an ark for the saving of his house, and for the replenishment of the new world. The manger was involved in the call of Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees, and in the preservation of the family and the nation which sprang from him amidst the lights and shadows of fifteen centuries. The manger was involved in the authenticity of the genealogical tables which connected Adam and Abraham with David, Joseph, Mary and Jesus. In fact the manger was involved in every promise of a Saviour, Deliverer, Prophet, Priest and King which cheered the hearts of God's ancient people and gave them hope for a golden day to come.

But as the manger was fulfillment of the hopes of those who lived in the days that preceded it, it is also the basis for the realities, the most blessed realities, of those who have lived since. Suppose we should wake up some morning to find that there are no Bibles, no church buildings, no Christian homes, no ideals of brotherly love in all the world. We have these things now, and take them for granted. But they are all ours because of the manger birth. But for the manger birth, we should have sorrow, but no joy. We should have death, but no hope of resurrection. We should have sin, but no pardon and cleansing from sin. Surely we should hasten with the shepherds at this Christmas time to the manger crib of our newborn King, and there in joy and gratitude we should bring our offerings of gold and incense and myrrh.

Jesus is described as "God manifested in the flesh," and as the "Word of God." The manner, therefore, has a message of many phases. Let us think of some of those phases today:

1. The manger speaks to us of the faithfulness of God. God had promised to send a Saviour and Deliverer. The fulfillment of that promise was long delayed, and many difficulties had arisen to hinder its fulfillment. In the case of many, "hope long deferred made the heart sick." But God did not forget, and His wisdom and power found a way. After that first promise, there was a flood. Then the post-flood world sank down in the pit of idolatry, the chosen family "went down into Egypt," the chosen nation was dislodged from its promised land, the chosen people of God made captives and scattered among the nations, the faithful keepers of the law became Pharisees, the Roman eagle replaced the lion of Judah on the banners of world power and the hopes of good men descended to low ebb. But suddenly there appeared a heavenly evangel to announce, "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."

2. The manger speaks to the troubled in heart today and assures them that God has not forgotten, and that what He has promised He is able also to perform. The mountains may move into the midst of the sea, and the nations of the earth may rise and fall, but God's word is sure, and they are safe who put their trust in Him.

3. The manger speaks of the knowledge of God. Prophecy is just history written in advance, and there are no prophecies so plain, and yet so unlikely of fulfillment as those relating to the birth of Christ. To fulfill the conditions described by the prophecies, all the currents of world trends had to converge upon an insignificant nation, upon a small town in that nation -- upon a stable in that little town -- and upon a poor transient family in that stable. The decree of the Emperor regarding the method of enrollment for taxes must be brought to bear upon these homely subjects. Earnest men from the days of Abraham down longed for the coming of Christ; but the times were not right. The time must wait until the Greeks could

make their fine language the language of the world. It must wait until Roman conquests could bring about an era of world peace. It must wait until the scattered Jews could build their synagogues in all the lands whither they were scattered that there might be a nucleus for the gospel in all the world. It must wait until men had exhausted their resources for religion that they might be ready for the real Priest. It must wait until men had drained their genius for politics that they might welcome earth's true King. It must wait for an age of intellectual prominence, since the gospel must go out in word as well as in power. It must wait until means of travel had come to a point of apparent perfection that permitted gospel evangelists to "go everywhere preaching the word." The knowledge of God foresaw this time as coming in the days of Caesar Augustus, and His wisdom awaited that period and chose it for His purpose.

a) Surely we today can trust to the knowledge and wisdom of the God who could wait two thousand years to order the first Christmas carol, and yet who could bring about that scheduled occurrence without delay -- when the time was fully come. The things we can do and should do we should not postpone, but we should not suppose God has forgotten when He seems to delay. In the midst of the mazes of our lives, God has a plan in us and for us. God is not only master of the telescope and of the stars, He is also master of the microscope and of the molecules. He not only has a plan for the world and for the nations of the world; He has detailed blueprints for your life and mine. The plan is not always apparent. At times it may seem we are about lost in the mazes, but the manger assures us that God is watching from the shadows and that He will bring us out in His own time and in His own better way.

b) The manger brings us a message of the love of God. It is well that the angels shall sing the praises of their Creator, and we may sing that song too. It is well that men of earth shall remember God as their preserver, and in this sentiment we join most heartily, but the manger message is a song of redemption. We may not be sure of all the motives connected with our creation and preservation, but we know that the motive of redemption was pure love. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

Man's sin brought his ruin and the ruin of man's world. All the penalty for sin was deserved, and there was no claim for pity or just demand for help. It was love that moved God to woo and win His lost and erring child. Jesus told the story in the Parable of the Vineyard (Luke 20:9-16). God sent His angels and His prophets, and last of all, He sent His Son. This sending of His Son was the climax of love's reach. "He spared not his Son," in His deep desire to save that which was lost.

Sometimes we turn to the other side and try to ferret out the reason for God's infinite search for man in an analysis of man's dignity and value. But we can never find full justification for the great sacrifice there, for however precious we may discern immortal man to be, the necessity of his standing over against the infinite Christ makes him pale into insignificance, and we must again take refuge in the simple, and yet ample, explanation that God so loved that He gave His only begotten Son.

Poets have tried to describe the love of God in terms of the high heavens and the deep, deep sea. They have employed all men of earth as scribes, all stalks of earth as quills, the far-reaching sky as a scroll and the ocean as an inkwell, and yet at the conclusion they have backed away to say, "Nor could the scroll contain the whole, though stretched from sky to sky." There is only one place where there is adequate expression of the love wherewith God loved and does now love us, and that is in the gift of His Son for our redemption. This gift makes all other gifts but shadows, for in this gift all other gifts are included.

4. The message of the manger is a message of salvation. On the eve of His birth the angel said, "Thou shalt call his name JESUS; for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). The message of salvation is:

a) A message of forgiveness of sins. The sense of guilt is universal among men who have reached the age of responsibility. Wherever men attempt to pray, their sins and iniquities separate them from God, and they draw back with the conviction that their prayers are not acceptable. The heathen attempt to appease their gods with gifts and sacrifices, and men everywhere offer their good works in atonement for their evil hearts of doubt and disobedience.

But the Christians of the world, in one of the sentences of the Apostles' Creed, say, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." Now sin is against God only. Sin against men is distinguished in being called crime, and if we believe in the forgiveness of sins, we believe that God forgives sins. Such a statement means little unless we mean by it, "I believe God has forgiven my sins." How can anyone come to such a faith as this? Why, he comes to it because he has confidence in the message of the manger. Jesus came expressly to save His people from their sins. The manger message does not bring consolation to those who continue in their sins, for it does not promise to save in sin. It expressly promises to save from sin. The manger message promises that those who quit their sins and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ shall find mercy and pardon. "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon" (Isaiah 55:7).

How continuously irritating and tormenting is the sense of guilt! But how blessed and assuring is the sense of pardon that comes to the truly penitent through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ! And this is not to be just the recollection of a crisis once reached and passed. It is to be a continuous assurance. Not only the sins committed before conversion and baptism, but all the sins of the past, right up to the present hour are to be forgiven. Let none of us tarry under the burden of sin. Come today in genuine contrition and faith and let Jesus Christ make the slate clean right up to this very hour. The devil is the accuser of the brethren and delights in tormenting good people with the charge that their conversion is made invalid by their more recent sins. Let us not argue the case with him. Let us come today, this Christmas Day, and trust for such a supplemental pardon as shall make us clear of guilt from the first of our responsible days to this glad hour.

b) The message of the manger is a message of regeneration and of new life. "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren" (I John 3:14). That is a fine sentiment in the Christmas carol which asks that Christ be born in our hearts. This is the spiritual counterpart of the Bethlehem birth. It is not enough that we should go up to Bethlehem and glory in the wonderful birth that took place there. Christ must now be formed in our hearts the hope of glory.

If we are unable to fully understand the mystery of the new life of God within the heart, let this be no deterrent to faith in its reality. All life is a mystery. Those who work in physical laboratories never find the germ of life. They know life by its manifestations, just as Jesus said we may know the spiritual life. "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).

To the candid observer there is no better evidence of the reality of the Christian experience than that of the changed lives of those who profess that experience. This outward change in conduct is not the life

itself; but it is, like the sound of the wind, evidence of the life within. The world of doubt and infidelity can furnish no such examples of changed lives as Christianity shows in its John Newtons, Jerry McAuleys and Bud Robinsons. In such men one cannot actually see the new life, but he can see its effects in the altered conversation and conduct, and he has every reason to believe that the causes of the changes are what the men themselves claim they are.

But for us individually the new life is subjective. "I know He lives for He lives within my heart." This is the testimony of one who has passed from death unto life and has the witness of the Holy Spirit that the work is done. The Holy Spirit bears witness with the human spirit, bringing what for want of a better name, we call "feeling." That word feeling has been debased by its having been interpreted as emotionalism -- extreme emotionalism -- but this is no fault of the word itself, and it is no good reason for us to abandon it while waiting for a term that bears no objectionable feature. We do "feel" the stirrings of the new life within. There is a witness that is dependable. Real born again people are justified in saying, "I know I have the new life within me," and, being a born again Christian myself, I do acclaim the glad news that I know the new life of God is in my heart today. To God be all the praise and glory!

c) The message of the manger is a message of cleansing from all outward and inward sin. "For this purpose the Son of God was manifested that he might destroy the work of the devil" (I John 3:8). The sins which we have committed, which bring guilt to our consciences and for which we must seek forgiveness are our own works. But back of our sinful works is a sinful nature which we have because we are members of a fallen race. This sinful nature is not a deed; it is a state. It is not our work; it is the work of the devil. It cannot be pardoned; it must be cleansed. The condition for its removal by divine grace is not repentance, but committal. Still the message of the manger covers this deep-seated need, for the Son of God was manifested to do this very thing. The message of the manger is a message of full salvation.

Sometimes those who hold that Jesus Christ can and will deliver from all outward and inward sin are called extremists. If the name is applicable, it is not altogether a slander, for such extremists are extremists for Christ, and that is much more complimentary than being extremists for the devil and sin. Perhaps there is no escape from being an extremist, for either Christ can and will save from all sin or else He cannot or will not do so. In choosing either of these propositions one stands forth as either an extremist for holiness or an extremist for sin.

But let there be no rounding of the corners. The message of the manger is a message of full deliverance. Jesus came to save His people from their sins and to destroy the works of the devil out of our hearts, and He can and will do that which He came to do. There is full salvation in Christ. There is no sin so dark but that Jesus Christ can and will save from its guilt and power. There is no defilement so clinging but that Jesus Christ can cleanse it away and make our hearts whiter than snow.

In many lands snow has a special meaning at Christmas. Those who have lived in such lands, even though transported to the tropics, still sing of a "White Christmas." Let us sing today of a white Christmas by trusting Christ to cleanse away all the dross and defilement from our hearts that there may be nothing left in them that is contrary to His will and nature. "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow" (Psalm 51:7). "Whiter than snow, yes whiter than snow. Now wash me and I shall be whiter than snow."

d) The message of the manger is a message promising divine fullness. There never was and never will be another incarnation, but there is for all God's children a Spirit-filled life. The incoming and the indwelling of

the Holy Spirit in the human heart is in the nature of the "Heart of the Gospel." The history of our holy religion is true and wonderful. The doctrines of our holy religion commend themselves to the intelligence of men. Christian ethical standards are the highest known in the world. The sacraments of the Christian religion are simple and beautiful beyond all comparison. But the real heart of Christianity is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the believer's heart. He dwells within to cleanse and keep. He dwells within to comfort and guide. He dwells within to uplift and enable.

The echo of the announcement, "Christ is born," is that joyful word, "The Comforter has come." Jesus offered as a test to those who claimed to love Him the requirement that they keep His commandments. We are all glad for the Christmas season, and if pressed, we would, I think, all claim that we love Jesus. Well, His pressing commandment was that His people should not depart from Jerusalem until they were endued with power from on high. Now there is no better way for us to attest the love we have for Christ than by our insisting on that divine intimacy that comes only to those who "walk in the Spirit."

e) The message of the manger is a message of peace and good will toward men. Perhaps the announcement meant that God offers peace and good will to men, and let us glory in that phase of the message this morning. "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). "And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:7). "And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Thessalonians 5:23).

But let us also come to the subject of peace and good will as it bears upon us as followers of the Prince of Peace at this blessed Christmastide. The basis of true Christian peace and good will is love in the heart. Christ commands His people to love one another, and it is promised that the manifestation of this love shall be evidence to "all men" that these are His disciples. Sometimes people draw back a little from the suggestion that we are to love God's people more than we love others. But love is adapted to its objects. We are to love God only with the supreme love of worship. We are to love our fellow Christians with the love of trusting, confident fellowship. We are to love all men with the love which honors the good in them and pities the evil in them. But all this love is the love upon which peace and good will can rest. It is a love which doeth no ill to our neighbors, and which prays for their highest good always.

Apart from our relation and standing with God, nothing is worthy of such concern with us as our relationship with our fellow men. The world of inanimate nature beneath us may be but an empire of indifference with us, but the world of mankind should be of great concern. Booker T. Washington declared he would not permit any man to so drag him down as to make him hate him. We perhaps may be able to put this saying into positive form and declare we will love men for whom Christ died, no matter what their treatment of us may be.

f) Finally, this salvation message from the manger is a message of hope for final victory and glory. Jesus, as the Son of God, came down very low in the valley when He became flesh and dwelt among us, but the promise is that He shall come again in glory and in power. He was rich in heaven, but for our sake He became poor by coming down to the earthly estate. His very humiliation is prophecy of His coming glory. He is coming back to this world in which He was once a stranger. When He comes the second time He will come as universal King and Lord. We who love Him rejoice in the prospect of His high exaltation.

Connected with the hope of His second coming is the hope that with that coming all things will become new. At that time the nations will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, and learn war no more. Through the Babe of Bethlehem this earth of ours is to become a place of peace and safety. The lion shall eat straw like the ox, the wolf and the lamb shall become fast friends, a little child shall play about the den of the cockatrice without danger, and nothing shall hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain. Hail that blessed day!

Once more we have gathered about the manger crib of our incarnate Lord at Christmastide, and from that manger we have heard a voice that speaketh louder than words, "Let us give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip" (Hebrews 2:1).

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