

Christmas as the End of History

by John Piper

Christmas marks the end of redemptive history and the beginning of the age to come, as Jesus Christ is the culmination of God's plan to redeem humanity.

Scripture: Genesis 12:2, Exodus 14:13, John 6:32, Hebrews 11:16, 1 Peter 1:20, 2 Peter 3:8

Topics: "Christmas Theology", "Kingdom Of God"

Description

John Piper preaches about Christmas as the end of history, emphasizing how God's work in history culminates in the coming of His eternal Son into the world. He discusses the rebellion of humanity against God's authority, the redemption of Israel as a lesson-book for all nations, and the fulfillment of God's promises through the lineage of kings leading to the Savior. Piper highlights the profound significance of Christmas as not just another event in history, but as the arrival of the end of history, symbolizing the Kingdom of God pressing back into the river of time to welcome believers into the age to come.

Transcript

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CHRISTMAS AS THE END OF HISTORY This is my tenth and final message in this series on the history of redemption. What I would like to do this morning is to pull it all together and show how God's work in history comes to a climax--and in a sense comes to an end--in the coming of his one and only eternal and divine Son into the world.

The first thing that had to be proclaimed about God was that through the agency of his eternal Son, and by the word of his power God created out of nothing all that is not God in order to display the fullness of his glory among men and among all the hosts of heaven. And he sustains and holds in existence moment by moment the whole universe so that by virtue of creation and providence God owns all things and has absolute right to do with creation as he pleases. There is no higher court before whom we can appeal his decisions. There is no other law than his word. There is no other maker behind the Maker of all. He is simply and awesomely Absolute: no beginning, no ending, no becoming. Everyone, without exception, will have to reckon with this God sooner or later. And there are only two possibilities: we can rebel against his absolute authority over us creatures, or we can bow in lowly adoration and do his bidding.

But the second thing proclaimed in the history of redemption is that our first human parents fell prey to a deception and chose the path of rebellion. The deception for which they fell was that if they ate of the tree

of knowledge of good and evil, they would be like God. Which means: if you stop depending like little children on God to tell you what is good and bad for you, and start making those choices yourself, then you will be like God and much happier. The Fall, therefore, was the desire and effort of man to be self-determining and self-reliant. And as a result God withdrew his special sanctifying grace so that since that first sin, all people have come into the world bent on rebellion. The essence of sin which presses for control in everyone of us is the intense distaste of surrendering all authority to God and becoming like little children in dependence on him. The early history of mankind stands under this sentence from Genesis 6:5: "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."

But the third thing that had to be proclaimed about God in the course of redemptive history was that his purpose to be glorified through the obedience and joy of his creatures was not to be frustrated. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth God chooses one man, Abraham, and makes him a promise: "I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing ... and by you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Genesis 12:2,3). We must learn from redemptive history that it is God's way to pursue great ends through small beginnings. (Is not one of the most captivating things about Christmas that the cosmic business of Christ began with a babe in a manger? God always seems to act that way, lest anyone should boast and give man the glory.) God aims to reclaim the rebellious creation. And he begins his grand plan of reclamation with one obscure, imperfect Aramean whose wife is barren.

From that man and woman came a great people, the people of Israel, named after Abraham's grandson whose children were the twelve tribal patriarchs. And God begins to go to work on this people to make them the lesson-book for the nations about how salvation is to be found. After centuries of bondage on Egypt he displays the unbridled glory of his power in their deliverance through the Red Sea.

Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today, for the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be still. (Exodus 14:13).

With a few changes those could have been the very words that the angel spoke to the shepherds on the night Jesus was born. And that is no mere coincidence, because God intends for everything in his dealing with Israel to point to the righteousness that comes from faith, and finally to the Christ.

When the people come, to Mount Sinai and the law is given through Moses, the basic reason is to show the people how they should act if they have faith in the God of the Exodus (Exodus 20:2). The law is a description of the obedience of faith for that time. The law did not demand that the people try to earn their salvation through works. It did not offer blessing only to perfection. It demanded that people put their hope in the mercy of God (Exodus 34:6); it called for the obedience of faith; and it provided a ritual of atonement so that sacrifices could be offered for sins. All of this--the call for faith and the provision of sacrifices--points to a coming redeemer whose death will fulfill all sacrifices and who will be received by faith alone.

In the wilderness wanderings God showed that he could spread a table for his people where there was not food and that therefore they should trust him. The manna that he provided was a prefiguring of the true Bread that comes down from heaven (John 6:32-55), Jesus Christ. When Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness for the people's healing (Numbers 21:9) it was a foreshadowing of how Christ would be

lifted up on the cross for our salvation (Jn. 3:14). And all the tests of faith in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 8:2,16) pointed ahead to the time when Christ himself would be tempted in the wilderness, but without sin.

When Israel crossed the Jordan and conquered the promised land and dwelt in it and had rest, it was a partial fulfillment of the promise to Abraham. But since the rest was imperfect, sensitive readers of the Old Testament saw this too as a type of something yet to come: there is still a promised land in the future for God's people, a "better country" (Hebrews 11:16), a "city which is to come" (Hebrews 13:14), a Sabbath rest for the people of God (Hebrews 4:9) in the Kingdom of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Then came the establishment of the monarchy in Israel--sought for evil motives but turned for good by the grace of God. Through this very line of kings God promises to bring the Savior towards whom everything has been pointing. All the history of Israel is a great lesson-book for the nations to read. And the lesson the book teaches is this: God the creator owns and rules the world, his aim is to subdue its rebellion and be glorified through an obedient and joyful people who forsake self-reliance and put their faith and hope in him alone. They cannot attain righteousness through "works of the law" (Romans 3:20) but must count entirely on the mercy of God who will raise up for David a Righteous Branch whose name will be "The Lord is our righteousness" (Jeremiah 23:5,6).

The next thing God did to bring redemptive history to a climax took almost everybody off guard. Only those few people who were most sensitive to the heart of the Old Testament could begin to fathom what God did next. He split the coming of the Messiah into two comings, separated by some 2,000 years. This was incomprehensible to the Jews of Jesus' day. The Old Testament prophets had not been told by God how some of their prophecies fit together in time. 1 Peter 1:10,11 say (literally): "The prophets who prophesied concerning the grace coming to you sought out and searched out about this salvation, searching into which or what sort of time the Spirit of Christ was revealing to them as they testified beforehand about the sufferings of Christ and the glories after them." In other words, some of the prophets foresaw that the Messiah would suffer (e.g. Is. 53) and that he would also be revealed in glory. What they did not see was how the sufferings and glory of the Messiah fit together, namely, that there would be two comings of the Messiah, once to suffer and a second time to gather his people into his Kingdom and judge unbelievers. The prophets, and all Israel with them, looked forward to one great Day of the Lord when the Messiah would come, defeat his enemies, sanctify his people, establish his kingdom and rule in peace and righteousness forever over a joyful and obedient people. The coming of Messiah meant the end of this age and the beginning of the age to come; it meant the establishment of the eternal kingdom of God on earth; it meant the fulfillment of all God's promises.

Is it any wonder then that the disciples were dismayed into speechlessness when they confessed Jesus as the Messiah and heard him respond, "Yes, and the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed" (Mark 8:31). How can you defeat your enemies and establish the Kingdom and fulfill the promises, if you are rejected by Israel and killed like a criminal? It took three years of instruction from Jesus, numerous resurrection appearances and the anointing of the Holy Spirit before the apostles could grasp that it was precisely through his rejection and death that Jesus defeated his enemies, inaugurated the Kingdom and fulfilled the promises.

The meaning of Christmas was a great blur for well over thirty years until the apostles broke through to the insight that this event was the first half of the final act of redemptive history and that the second half remains for the future. When they finally saw that, they were prepared to interpret the meaning of Christmas for us. And they have done it in the writings of the New Testament.

In all that they wrote there is a kind of trademark which tips us off that these men once believed there would be only one coming of the Messiah and that this coming would mark the end of the age. God has seen fit to preserve this trademark for us because there is a very important truth in it, which I think could give a new dimension of joy and expectancy to our Christmas celebration this year. The trademark is this; even though the apostles looked forward as we do to a second appearance of Christ, yet they still say that the first coming happened in the last days or at the end of the age. They do not treat Christmas as just one more bend in the river of redemptive history . With Christmas comes the end. For example, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:11 that the events of the Old Testament "happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction upon whom the end of the ages has come." When the apostle Peter stood up on Pentecost to interpret for the crowds the meaning of what was happening he said, "this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh...' " (Acts 2:16,17). These are the last days. The apostle Peter also wrote that Christ was "destined before the foundation of the world but was made manifest at the end of the times for your sake" (1 Peter 1:20). The appearing of Jesus Christ at Christmas marked the end of the times (or as Paul said "the end of the ages").

And one other text shows that this apostolic trademark is preserved even where the future second coming is explicitly in view: Hebrews 9:26-28:

Christ has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

What this text shows is that even though time had elapsed between Christ's first coming and the writing of this book; and even though the writer looks ahead to an unknown future lapse of time before Christ comes a second time, nevertheless he does not give up the apostolic trademark: Christmas marks the end of the age. And I believe there is a very profound reason why the Holy Spirit has preserved this trademark for us even though 2000 years have passed since that first Christmas. I believe the Spirit preserved this trademark for us to keep us from trivializing Christmas.

Creation out of nothing was an awesome event. Imagine what the angelic spirits must have felt when the universe, material reality of which they had never imagined, was brought forth out of nothing by the command of God. The fall was an awful event shaking the entire creation. The Exodus was an amazing display of God's power and love. The giving of the law, the wilderness provisions, the conquering of Canaan, the

prosperity of the monarchy--all these acts of God in redemptive history were very great and wonderful. Each one was a very significant bend in the river of redemptive history bringing it ever and ever closer to the ocean of God's final kingdom. But we trivialize Christmas, the incarnation, if we treat it as just another bend on the way to the end. It is the end of redemptive history.

And I think the analogy of the river helps us see how. Picture the river as redemptive history flowing toward the ocean which is the final kingdom of God, full of glory and righteousness and peace. At the end of the river the ocean presses up into the river with its salt water. Therefore at the mouth of the river there is a mingling of fresh water and salt water. One might say that the Kingdom of God has pressed its way back up into the river of time a short way. It has surprised the travelers and taken them off guard. They

can smell the salt water. They can taste the salt water. The sea gulls circle the deck. The end has come upon them. Christmas is not another bend in the river, It is the arrival of the salt water of the Kingdom of God which has backed up into the river of history. With the coming of Christmas, the ocean of the age to come has reached backward up the stream of history to welcome us, to wake us up to what is coming, to lure us on into the deep. Christmas is not another bend in the river of history. It is the end of the river. Let down your dipper and taste of Jesus Christ, his birth and life and death and resurrection. Taste and see if the age to come has not arrived, if the Kingdom has not come upon us. Does it not make your eyes sparkle?

But scoffers will say--they have always said--2000 years is a long river delta! Too long to believe in. Christmas was just another bend in the river. The salty taste in the water must have been done to some chemical plant nearby. Who can imagine living in the last days for 2000 years? To such skeptics I say, with the apostle Peter, "Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day" (2 Peter 3:8). As far as God is concerned the incarnation happened last Friday.

I want us to think of Christmas this year not as a great event in the flow of history, but as the arrival of the end of history which happened, as it were, but yesterday and will be consummated very soon by the second appearing of Christ. Let me make one last effort to help you see it this way. Most of you probably know someone who is 90 years old or older--probably a woman. I want you to imagine 22 of these ladies standing here in front, side by side, facing you, each one still alert and able to remember her childhood and marriage and old age. And then instead of seeing them side by side as contemporaries, have them turn and face sideways so they form a queue and imagine that each one lived just after the other. If the one on my far left were alive today, do you know when the one on my far right would have been born? At the same time Jesus was. Jesus was born just 22 ladies ago. That is not a very long time. Just twenty-two people between you and the incarnation. In comparison to the size of the ocean of the age to come, the mouth of the river of redemptive history is small. The delta is not long. It is short.

My prayer for us all this year is that we might see ourselves living between the first and second appearances of Jesus Christ, which together, are the end of redemptive history. That we might see these two appearances united by the overflow of the glorious ocean of the future kingdom of God into the present; and ourselves borne along no longer by the forces of history, but by the power of the age to come. May we feel the undertow of the eschaton and yearn to be there with the Lord forever. Even so come quickly Lord. Amen.

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