



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: A Hope-Filled Christmas

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One of the things that always strikes me this time of year is how absolutely saturated our culture is with the message of Christmas. I mean we may complain about a Nativity scene removed from this place or that place, but frankly, the message is everywhere, mostly carried through the music. These Christmas carols we sing are some of the most theologically rich songs the church has, and they're everywhere. They're in the mall, they're in the stores, they're in the schools, they're on the radio, but I find myself wondering, do you people hear the message of Christmas? I hear these famous singers sing these great theologically rich Christmas songs, and I wonder, how do you not get this? How do you not understand what you're singing?

Think of it this way: do you imagine that this weekend, the mall will be filled with people who would say their lives are boring, mundane and they're cranking it out; who would say that they're confused? They don't know where to turn. Their marriage is falling apart. Their kids have gone south. Their business is falling apart. They don't know who to talk to. They don't know who to listen to: those people whose lives are filled with despair, disappointment, "This isn't what I thought life would be," and those that are filled with anxiety and fear and anger. And yet all around them, the message is right there, that there is One, who has come for the very purpose of changing the stuff that breaks our hearts. That's what we want to talk about today. As a matter of fact, I would consider this my Christmas present to you. My prayer would be that there would be a renewed sense of hope, that no matter what's breaking your heart today, the Savior has come and it's going to be okay.

If you have a Bible, turn with me to Isaiah Chapter Nine, Verse Six, a very familiar passage. Just before we get into it, I want to back up and pick up a little history. Genesis Chapter Two, in my opinion, is the best picture of what God has always wanted for people made in His image. It's a beautiful picture of life as God intended it. Genesis Chapter Three, you know the story, is the story of The Fall. Adam and Eve rebelled against God and everything starts coming unraveled. In the midst of all of that, there is a promise made. The promise is that through the seed of a woman, God would crush the head of the serpent. In other words, when this story is finally told, God wins; God will redeem everything back as He intended it. The seed of a woman is the reference that this will come through a child, one who would be born, who would be human, and somehow, would make things right. There's a hint in Genesis Three that that would somehow include the shedding of blood, to cover the shame of sin. We advance the story to Genesis Chapter 15, and we learn that the One who had shed His blood would be none other than God Himself, that God somehow would shed His blood, because of our inability to keep the covenant.

Therefore, we put together that somehow God Himself would become this seed of a woman, would become a child somehow, to become the Savior of the world.

That's what the Prophet Isaiah then picks up in Chapter Nine, Verse Six:

For a child will be born to us... (*NASB, Isaiah 9:6a)

You hear it right there. That's the language of Genesis Three, the seed of a woman, a child. It's the promised child.

...a son will be given to us;

That's a reference to His deity. That's the other half of the equation that would actually be the Son of God, who would be given to us. This seed of a woman, this God in the flesh would come together.

and the government will rest on his shoulders; And His name shall be called... (Vs. 6b)

It's very important to remind ourselves that names in the Bible are not just labels, they're descriptions, so when we're talking about the names of this One, who is to come, we're talking about His description; we're talking about who He is and what He will do.

...His name shall be called Wonderful...

Now, there's always debate about whether it's Wonderful Counselor, or whether it's Wonderful, comma, and there's no real way to determine this. There's no grammatical secret that you can unpack to figure it out. It's just a constant debate, and it's probably best not to be too dogmatic on it. I like it: Wonderful. Comma. There are a couple of times in the Old Testament, where God uses this same Hebrew word to describe Himself. He says, "My name is Wonderful." I think when we make it Wonderful Counselor, we just skip by the wonderful part too fast.

Is anybody bored with life? ...Just cranking it out, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. It's kind of funny how this goes. We work really hard, so we get what we need to survive, so that we can work really hard, so that we get what we need to survive, so we work really hard, to get what we need to survive, and at some point you have to say, that's it! That's the deal. That's how we're going to pass 60, 70 years. Tell me there's more to life than that!

Now, don't mistake being busy for not being bored. As a matter of fact, I think this is rather counter-intuitive. I think it's backwards. I would suggest to you, some of the people in this life that are the most bored are those that are the busiest. That's why they're busy: they're bored. That's what's driving the energy. There's no sense of meaning; there's no sense of purpose, so they just drive the machinery faster and faster, hoping they won't have to really examine the emptiness of life.

Someone once said, "Beware of the barrenness of a busy life". I think that's right. I think we're way too busy and I think we're busy, because we're bored. It's a little bit like a preacher that has nothing to say, so, if he says it really fast, then maybe nobody will notice. It feels the same way. Those people that have figured it out, live with a sense of meaning, live with a sense of purpose, live with a sense of significance. They find a rhythm. They're not out of control. They don't have that sense that they're just rushing from here to there. There's a sense of purpose. There's a sense of wonder. There's a sense of mystery. There's a sense of mission. I can guarantee you, God did not put you on this Earth and give you life, in order for you to survive, in order for you to crank it out, just waiting for what's next. But if you're going to experience a life filled with wonder, you have to surrender to the One whose name is Wonderful.

You know, one of the problems in our world today, is we are overwhelmed with information. Nobody in the history of the world has ever had the massive information that we have. Every day we amass more information, but information doesn't mean we have knowledge, and knowledge doesn't mean we have understanding. I think we have massive information and we know very little; less and less people live their lives with a sense of mystery, because we think we know it all. I wonder we Google it up, we've got the answer, we know it all. There's no mystery left anymore; Google has solved the world. You know what we know, with all of our technology, with all of our science, with all that we have, what we know now, is that we know very little.

What we know now, is this world is more unbelievably complex and mysterious than anyone a hundred years ago could have possibly imagined.

Why would God make such a mysterious, complex world? And why would He make us as people made in His image, with this sense within us that longs for a sense of mystery, a sense of wonder, for something more than merely the boredom of life? My dog doesn't long for that. My horse doesn't long for that. They're not made that way, perfectly happy eating grass his entire life. I'm not like that. Tell me, there's more to life than that. There's something hardwired within me that says, "Tell me there's a mystery, there's a mission, that there's something to this life more than just wasting it away".

Could it be, that God has made us in such a way, that part of what defines the meaning and purpose in life, is living with this sense of mystery, this sense of wonder, this sense of mission, which involves courage and involves risk, and it involves surrender to the One whose name is Wonderful? His name shall be called Wonderful. This deals with the boredom of life.

...His name shall be called... ...Counselor,

[Did] you ever get bad advice: bad advice on what to do with your money, bad advice on your business, on how to make your marriage work, on how to raise your kids? This is a really confusing world that we live in. There are hundreds and hundreds of voices speaking into our lives, telling us what to do, and how to live, and how to make our lives work, and how to be happy and how to find meaning. It's confusing; it's overwhelming.

Think of all the voices that seek to speak into our lives. I've never understood the celebrity voice. Just because somebody stands in front of a camera, and makes a living pretending to be somebody else, doesn't qualify that person to tell you how to live, yet they do it all the time, and people listen to them all the time. I can have great respect for a world class athlete, but just because you can throw a football a long way, doesn't qualify you to tell me how to live, but these are the voices we listen to in our culture. The marketers of our culture have an assignment to make us dissatisfied with life, in order that we might need something more to be happy. I've been shocked at a Christmas commercial - I guess I shouldn't be shocked, but I think I am - where a couple comes out of the house, and there's a brand-new Lexus sitting in the driveway and there's a bow on it. They're picking up on the old Lexus commercials from years gone by, and just about the time they're celebrating, they both look out into the street and their countenance falls, and you can tell by their faces, they're suddenly really sad. They're sad, because a different make, a Buick Regal, is going down the street, and what they realize is, "We could have had one of those", and I think to myself, "Really, have we come to that? I have a brand-new Lexus in the driveway, and I'm sad, [Laughter] because I could have had that." Where does this end?

You know, we laugh at our children, because two hours after they open a present, they're bored with it. The question is, how are we different? The voices of the marketers speak to us and say, "Be dissatisfied." The only way you're ever going to be happy in life is if you learn to want what you already have, and to appreciate it, and to find meaning in life, in something more than just our stuff.

You know, I talk about the marketers of the world, but frankly the religious world is just as confusing. You turn on the religious channels and they're filled with people waving this book and telling you how to live. I probably watch it more than I should, but I can tell you a lot of what they're saying isn't true. They're promising you things God never promised you. They're saying things that just simply aren't true, so it gets confusing and you find yourself asking, who do I listen to? Who speaks into my life? Who's telling the truth?

I have no problem understanding why people get cynical. I completely understand, but we're still left with the question, "Who do I turn to, to get counsel for my marriage, about raising my kids, about what to do with my money, about how to process this disease? What if I could promise you a Counselor who's always right, who knows the beginning from the end, who knows your story all the way through. He's never given bad counsel. And what if He was available to you personally? 24-seven. No charge. Would you be interested? What if I was to tell you, He's actually written a book filled with counsel?

You know, sometimes I think of the Bible like I think of my phone. If you know me, you know I have no great love affair with technology. I tolerate it at best. I think I should have lived a hundred years ago. I have a cell phone. I use it for email. I love it for that; it's very efficient. And I do a little texting, because it's the only way my kids will talk to me. [Laughter] My phone is amazing. The first computer I ever owned was an Apple 2e, 64k floppy disc. What this phone can do compared to that computer is unbelievable, but I don't ever use it for that. It's there; I just don't access all that stuff. That's how lot of people view the Bible. They would say wonderful things about the Bible, but from Sunday to Sunday, it's never opened. It's never read.

This is like a life GPS. It's all in there: how to save my marriage, how to raise my kids, how to manage my money, how to run my business, how to process the most difficult times in life, how to break the addiction. It's all right here. When David was talking about the Bible, he said, "It's more precious than gold. It's sweeter than honey." In the ancient world, honey was the sweetest of the sweet and gold was the most precious of all metals. You know, God's written us a book full of counsel. This world is confusing. Some of the mistakes are absolutely devastating. What if I was to tell you, not only do you have access to the book, you could actually talk to its author. You could say, "Hey, I've been reading your book. There's some parts of it I just don't get - wondering if we could talk about this?" and what if you had access to that author, 24-seven?

His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, (Vs. 6c)

Anybody need a Christmas miracle? I know a lot of people that do. Anybody have a marriage that needs a miracle? Anybody have children who have wandered away? You're starting to feel like it's hopeless. Anybody battling a disease that just isn't going to go away? Anybody struggling with an addiction, financial disaster? Anybody need a Christmas miracle? When we operate as our own god, we soon experience hopelessness and despair, because deep down, we know we're not up to the task. I can't save my marriage. I can't fix my children. I can't make this disease go away and it gives me despair, gives me a sense of hopelessness. But what about the One who created the universe, the one named Mighty God?

When the Angel appeared to Mary and said, “Mary, you're going to have a child”, Mary said, “You know, how's that supposed to happen? I've never known a man”. The Angel said, “Hey, with God, nothing is impossible.” There's no reason for despair. There's no reason for hopelessness. The One who came is the One who is the Mighty God. There is no such thing as impossible!

Cara: Bryan, it's so good to be reminded that with God, nothing is impossible. That doesn't mean your life right now isn't hard, but nothing is impossible for God. So, there's always hope. That theme seems to be a big part of what Christmas is all about: The Christmas Story. And I think that gets overlooked.

Bryan: Absolutely right. I mean, Christmas is about hope, and hope requires a belief in the Mighty God. You know, if He created the universe with a spoken word, that's a good question, “What's too big for Him?” And nothing is impossible.

Arnie: Bryan, you talked about working really hard to survive, just to turn around and even work harder. As Christians, we have to guard against getting caught up in that cycle, because it can ruin our witness.

Bryan: So yeah, it ruins our witness. And I think in the process, we lose a sense of wonder. You know, I'm convinced, the pace in our culture's driven by the emptiness of the culture. And so, a life lived with rhythm and purpose is very appealing to others. They do notice.

Cara: Isaiah Nine talks about Jesus being called Wonderful Counselor, or, as you said, Wonderful comma, Counselor. Either way, it's pretty reassuring to know that God understands my need for a Counselor.

Bryan: Yeah, it is. So, we live in a culture where there's no shortage of voices willing to tell us how to live our lives, and we really have to ask ourselves, who we're allowing to speak into our lives. It seems to me God's pretty qualified to be my Counselor.

Cara: Can you talk more about God being Wonderful, and why that matters?

Bryan: I think it's such an important topic to think about in our Google culture. I think we've lost a huge sense of wonder. We don't have to investigate. We don't have to discover; everything's instant. Everything's at our fingertips. Now we have all these machines to do everything for us. There's no real discovery. You talk to people about going to the Grand Canyon and they Google it up, and they think they've been there. There was a day, when you didn't actually see it until you got there. So, you just think about what's changed, and what's changed is, we've lost this sense of wonder that addresses the boredom people experience in their lives. So, where do we find that today? And the one thing that you can't Google up, that will never lose its wonder, is the mystery of God. And so, to recapture this sense of wonder that crashes into the boredom of life is, I think, really important for us as Christians to think about.

Arnie: So, okay, don't we have to be careful though this time of year? Most guys - I don't know if I'm a typical guy - but most of us suffer through this thing called the Hallmark Channel, where you sit with your wife and you don't want to, but you admit after three hours, you get a little tear in your eye, because it has a happy ending. And I know there's nothing wrong with watching it, especially if you want to have a happy wife, but it's not real life. A lot of times there's tragic endings; it's not happy endings. So how do we present Jesus as Wonderful Counselor and Almighty God to people who want their life to be a Hallmark movie? And it isn't?

Bryan: Right. And it isn't for anybody. And I think, part of the challenge, is getting people to face into their lives such as they are. I tell people all the time, you can wish all day long, your life was different. It's not different. It's not a Hallmark movie. But isn't that the whole point? That's why Jesus came. Jesus came to meet us where we are, and He specializes in reality. But I think whatever those kinds of movies tap into, there is coming a world that's much more like that. If they could just understand Jesus has come to get us, to the world that our souls long for.

Cara: Bryan, Isaiah 9:6 also refers to the government being on Christ's shoulders. What does that mean for us today?

Bryan: Yeah, so we tend to read a lot of politics into that, and it's not what it means. It's just the idea that He will be King, and He'll be the one in charge, and He will rule, and it won't be a democracy. It will be a monarchy, and Jesus will be the King. So, it's the idea that it will be the world that we long for. It will be the kind of government we long for at the end of the story. It won't be Republicans in charge, and won't be Democrats in charge, won't be some dictator world leader. It will be Jesus, and it will finally be the kingdom that our souls have always longed for.

Arnie: And you know what's so cool is, He says He's come to prepare a place for us, and we think the King of Kings doing that, it's just got to be, I mean, wonderful. It seems amazing.

Bryan: Wonder-filled is the word wonderful. And it's a moment where we gasp at the wonder of what it is.