



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: A Hope-Filled Christmas

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Certainly, as a nation we could look back at certain significant times, certain significant battles in our history, but there would be no comparison to the Hebrew people who, for thousands of years, have fought simply to survive. At the end of the Old Testament God in essence tells them that He's had it up to here with them and is not going to speak to them. Silence is always in reference to discipline, and we refer to this as the four hundred silent years—from the end of Malachi all the way to the beginning of the Gospels—the four hundred years where God said nothing. These were very difficult years for the Hebrew people. Understanding what happened in those years helps us understand the response, or the reaction, of the people to the coming of the Messiah in the Gospels.

The Hebrew people were conquered and abused by one nation after another. Probably it reached its most difficult time when the Syrians came in, and Antiochus Epiphanes basically declared a holy war on the Hebrew people. He tried to eliminate everything that defined their Hebrew culture, tried to burn all their copies of Scripture. The culminating moment was when he went into the Temple and the Holy of Holies and offered a sow to the Greek god Jupiter, as a rededication of the Hebrew temple to the Greek gods.

The period that followed—that is known as the Maccabean period—is one of the most heroic in the history of the Hebrew people. There was an elderly priest by the name of Mattathias who just simply couldn't take it anymore. So, he organized a small army and he began coming out of the hills, and they would attack the Syrians, and they would move back up into the hills. Shortly after he started this revolution, he died, and his son Judas took over. His son Judas was nicknamed Maccabees, which means "The Hammer", because his son was a fierce warrior. And the Hammer was a dynamic leader and organized more and more of the Hebrew people and eventually they went into Jerusalem. They conquered Jerusalem; they took it back over, and on December 25th, they offered a proper sacrifice to the Hebrew God and rededicated their temple back to God. It's a celebration today that is known as Hanukkah—the Festival of Lights. It's actually celebrating that day when they rededicated their temple back to the Hebrew God.

The reason we celebrate Christmas on December 25th is because it was illegal for the Christians to celebrate the birth of Christ. So, they figured out that if they did it during the Celebration of Lights (during Hanukkah) they could in essence be pretending to be celebrating that, but really be celebrating the birth of Christ. That's how Christmas came to be celebrated on December 25th.

But to understand some of that history and how difficult and heroic it was, basically the Hebrew people—maintained control of Jerusalem up until about sixty-three years before the coming of Christ—when the Romans came in. So, by the time the New Testament opens, the Romans are in charge. The Hebrew people hate the Romans. They’ve been conquered by one nation after another; it’s just been an extraordinarily difficult time. Most had given up. There was a handful that still believed God would keep His promise and send a Messiah and the Messiah would come and would set them free.

So, imagine after four hundred years of silence, the message finally comes that says the Messiah is here. You would think these people would have been overwhelmed with joy in responding to the Messiah. Yet you know how the story goes. When God became flesh and walked among them, they rejected him; they hated him, and they executed him. It really raises the question: What happened? They were longing for the coming of the Messiah. But once he appeared in their midst, they rejected him, and they executed him.

Here we are two thousand years later. Millions of people around the world celebrate the Christmas season—people celebrating the Christmas season that are themselves in bondage—in bondage to addictions to alcohol, pornography, drugs, materialism—seeking something that will satisfy—in money or status or some sexual relationship. People all around us live in bondage, longing for that thing that will set them free, something that will ultimately satisfy. Yet we just came off the celebration: we sang the songs; we rehearsed the story; we went through the motions, and yet those people will be right back to their addictions, to their struggles, to their despair, to their emptiness. Two thousand years later, nothing has changed. Everything they’re looking for was just rehearsed again in the wonder of the Christmas story. Two thousand years ago a prophet said that this is the way it’s going to be, so I guess it shouldn’t surprise us.

If you have a Bible, turn to Luke, Chapter 2. We pick it up in Verse Twenty-one and we’ll get through Verse Thirty-eight.

And when eight days had passed before His circumcision, His name was then called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.

(*NASB, Luke

2:21)

We’re reminded that Jesus grew up in a very orthodox Jewish family. When you read through the Gospels, you quickly realize that Jesus had a lot of conflict with organized religion. It would raise the question, “Was He raised in this kind of anti-religious, rebellious home?” The answer is, “No, just the opposite.” Mary and Joseph were very orthodox in their Hebrew faith. The problem is that over time, the Hebrew people had lost sight of the purpose of their traditions and their celebrations and their holidays and their rules. God gave them the Old Testament Law—the Old Testament traditions and celebrations and feasts—as a way to point to the coming of the Messiah, to remind them that God had made a promise. And one day that promise would be fulfilled when God Himself would become flesh and provide their salvation. But over time, these traditions, these practices, these holy days, these celebrations—rather than pointing to the

coming of a Savior—actually became for them a means of salvation. That is always the challenge with religion.

It continues to happen today. For example, the New Testament church practices things like baptism, which is meant to be a picture of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus for salvation. But religion turns it into a means of salvation. Communion is a reminder that God's body was broken, and his blood was shed, in order that we might experience salvation as a gift, and yet religion turns that into a means of salvation. That's always been the problem with religion.

The name Jesus was not a name that Mary and Joseph gave their son because they had an Uncle Jesus, and he was very meaningful to them. It was because the angel showed up both to Joseph and to Mary and said, "His name shall be called Jesus for He shall save His people from their sins." The name Jesus means "Jehovah Is Salvation". In other words, it was the culmination of a promise that God had made thousands of years before.

You go all the way back to Genesis, Chapter Three, and there was a promise that the seed of a woman would crush the head of the serpent. That would tell us it was going to be a man—a human. You move it up to Genesis, Chapter 15, and God enters into this covenant promise with Abraham. Abraham in essence says, "God, this sounds like a really great promise but what if I fail to keep the covenant? What then?"

Then it enters into this very strange cutting of a covenant, which is how it was done in the ancient world. They took several animals, cut them in half; the pieces of the animals were laid out facing one another on a slight incline so that the blood of the animals would run down into a little trough or valley down below. In the ancient world then the animals would be cut and both kings that were entering into the covenant would walk through the blood and, as the blood splashed up on the ankles and the feet and the legs of the kings, the symbolism was that this is what you may do to me if I fail to keep the covenant.

But in Genesis, Chapter 15, Abraham does not walk through the blood. Only God goes through the blood. It was God's way of saying, "Abraham, if either of us fails to keep the covenant it will be My blood that will be shed to make it right."

So, by Genesis 15, we would know that the promise that was the seed of a woman—a human—would be none other than God Himself and, in some unbelievable way, God Himself would shed His blood because of our inability to keep the covenant. So, the promised "Jehovah Is Salvation" was directly related to that promise. God would become flesh and He would be your Savior. For thousands of years, the Hebrew people believed that one day God would do that for them. So, the name Jesus has great significance in the fulfillment. This is God in the flesh; He will be your salvation.

You skip from Genesis 15 up to Genesis 17 and we're introduced to the sign of the covenant which is circumcision—which is why Jesus is showing up with his parents on the eighth day to be circumcised. This was their tradition and it goes all the way back to Genesis, Chapter 17.

Now perhaps you've asked yourself, "Why this sign of the covenant?" In our culture this seems like such a bizarre behavior. The reason was this: The promise to Abraham was that the seed of a woman would come through the line of Abraham, and ultimately that would be God in the flesh who would bring salvation. Therefore, the sign of the covenant was to be on the male organ through which the seed would travel, and the removal of the flesh of the foreskin was a way of saying that this is not something that can be accomplished with human flesh. In other words, this is not something any person can accomplish on his or her own. It will have to be a work of God. That point is made even more dramatically when it isn't until Abraham is a hundred years old and Sarah is ninety years old that they finally have the promised child. The New Testament says that when Sarah was as good as dead in her ability to have a child, God gave them the promised son. It's a way of saying this is not something that any human being—that any person—can accomplish on his own or her own. It will be an act of God—a miracle from God. Therefore, the flesh is removed and the symbolism of that is we cannot do this ourselves. God will do it for us.

You could go all the way back to Genesis 17 and say that was God's statement: Religion doesn't work. Circumcision was the removal of the flesh, which means you cannot do this, you cannot be good enough, you cannot keep enough rules, you cannot follow enough traditions. That's the whole point. Christmas is the ultimate un-religion. If religion worked, God wouldn't have had to send His son. The message has always been, "You can't do this; that's why I will do it for you." So, when Jesus is brought to the temple, you have the name Jesus—Jehovah Is Salvation—and the reminder of circumcision—that the promise was always, "You can't do this; it will be a miracle from God."

But by this time—in the First Century—the Hebrew people had actually turned circumcision into a means of salvation. It was an act of the flesh, in order to somehow merit favor with God, and again religion was replacing God's intended purpose for the traditions and the celebrations of His people.

The struggle has always been that deep down within us there's something that wants to do it ourselves. We want to be able to say, "I can do this; I can accomplish this myself," and God's message back has always been, "You can't. Religion doesn't work; you can't do enough good; you can't do more good than bad; you can't follow certain rituals. It doesn't work that way." The message has always been, "God will do this for you."

So, the reminder: Jehovah Is Salvation—God in the flesh—and circumcision was the reminder that there is no ability within the flesh to accomplish this. This would be an act of God.

Verse 22:

And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "EVERY first-born MALE THAT OPENS THE WOMB SHALL BE

CALLED HOLY TO THE LORD”), and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord, “A PAIR OF TURTLEDOVES, OR TWO YOUNG PIGEONS.” (Vs. 22-24)

Pretty straight forward here: The first born was to be offered to God for service—was dedicated as holy to God. Probably the idea of two young pigeons or turtledoves would have told us that Mary and Joseph would have been relatively poor. This was a gift of somebody in the poorer social class.

And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law, then he took Him into his arms, and blessed God, and said,

“Now Lord, you are releasing Your bond-servant to depart
In peace, according to Your Word;
For my eyes have seen Your salvation,
Which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
A LIGHT OF REVELATION TO THE GENTILES,
And the glory of Your people Israel.” (Vs. 25-32)

What a remarkable statement! So, Simeon has been waiting. The text tells us that the Spirit led him to the temple and led him to the identification of Jesus as the promised Messiah.

Cara: Bryan, it seems like Simeon saw something that the others didn't see, because he was focused and looking for the Savior.

Bryan: Yeah, I think that's exactly right. The text describes him as one who is righteous and devout and looking for the Savior. The other part is the Holy Spirit told him that he would see the Messiah before he died. I mean, you think about after 400 years of silence, what that moment must have actually been like.

Arnie: Bryan. I think Simeon is a good reminder that God doesn't need a majority. He just needs a faithful remnant.

Bryan: That's right. As a matter of fact, it's really important to remember that. God himself is a majority, so He doesn't need numbers. It's never hopeless. The key is for the remnant to remain faithful and to believe God will take care of the rest.

Cara: Bryan, you said that circumcision had morphed from a sign of God's promise to being a means of salvation. How does that happen?

Bryan: Yeah. So how does it happen? I think you have to go back to Genesis 3 and that core issue, and that is the desire to be our own god, which morphs into religion, because religion's

theme is, "I can do this myself." So, I think Galatians teaches that the flesh longs to be self-righteous. The flesh wants to say, "I can do this." You know, I always have to think for those that are like my age, 60-ish and older, there was this commercial on TV years ago, this product called Shake and Bake, and it was a chicken helper [And I helped!] [So good.] Yes. My apologies to those of you in the South. That's my best accent there. But that's what happens is, religion will acknowledge God did this and this and this, but our flesh wants to say, "But I helped." And the message is, "You didn't help at all." It's all 100% done by Jesus and by the grace of God. But that's what happened is, religion takes these practices and starts to make them things that are necessary, in order to earn our salvation. So somewhere along the way, they lose their meaning. And this was such a big deal that in Acts 15, there was the Jerusalem Council. So, this is within the lifetime of the Apostles and they're trying to sort out: is circumcision necessary to be saved? So just think about that. Well, within the lifetime of those who heard the message of the Gospel out of the mouth of Jesus, and they're already forming a council to figure out, if it's works or if it's grace.