

The Old has Passed Away

Dear Friends,

Christmas is a special season in the United States. I am sure that Christmas decorations, sweet foods and big presents are popping into your head right now. In the US, Christmas is supposed to be a time of joy. Movies and music, cards and presents are used to reunite families and friends. Whether you are religious or not, Christmas is a special time of year. Why do we consider it special though? What is the religious significance of Christmas? How did the original audience view the Christmas story? This year Christmas is going to look different. Answering some of these questions can help put the holiday into perspective and get us through this trying time.

Christmas is the time when Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. Who is Jesus? In the Jewish religion, God had promised His people, Israel, a messiah. This person would redeem Israel and draw them back to a right relationship with God. He would come from the family of Jesse in the line of David. This king would come to rule the world with justice, grace and mercy. The prophet Isaiah says, **“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understand, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see or decide disputes by what his ears hear but with righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.”** Isaiah 11:1-4 ESV Jews are still waiting for their Messiah to judge the world with the Spirit of the Lord. Christians believe that Isaiah is talking about Jesus Christ. The Christmas story takes place with scriptures like this in the backdrop. God promised His people a messiah, who would come to release Israel from bondage.

When Jews heard this passage read out loud in the synagogues or temple, they felt hope for relief from their enemies. Between the time of Isaiah and Jesus the Israelites experienced a lot of suffering. They were exiled to Babylon for their disobedience to God. When they returned to Jerusalem they were under Persian rule. Alexander the Great conquered the known world including the Persian Empire. When he died, his empire was split into four different sections. The Seleucid empire ruled over much of what is now Palestine, including Jerusalem. These rulers strived to force everyone under their rule to accept Greek culture. The Israelites refused and this led to a revolution. The Jews won several battles and declared independence from Seleucid rule. The Romans played an important role in helping them secure victory and in return set up puppet rulers over Jerusalem. Jesus was born in a very tumultuous time in history. The Israelites had probably forgotten all about the messiah Isaiah prophesied about. Jesus fulfilled the prophecies, but in a way that no one expected.

We read in Luke 2:1-7, **“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”** Caesar Augustus ruled Rome from 27 BC to 14AD. He may have ordered the registration of all able-bodied men in order to tax the families under his rule. Joseph had to travel to register in his hometown. Luke gives us some important details about the circumstances Jesus was born into. Bethlehem was not a big city or an important town. It was small and insignificant, barely more than a small village. The idea that the messiah, the savior of the people of Israel, would come from Bethlehem was crazy. The messiah should come from palaces, not mangers. He should come with great power, wisdom and wealth. That is the kind of Messiah Israel was expecting and hoping for.

Who do you hope for this season? Do you have hope for a brighter tomorrow? It’s hard to focus on celebrating Christ’s birth when there is so much going on around us.

Christmas is a special season, but not for the reason’s society makes it to be. We celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, but do we stop to think about the circumstances he was born in. Angels, wise men, shepherds, a king, fear and death surround Jesus being born. We are very far removed from the danger and wonder of that early morning. Sitting around a colorful tree full of glass ornaments and presents, we must work hard to find common ground between now and then. Many of the Jews had lost hope of ever hearing or seeing the Messiah. Jesus entered the world at a critical moment, shattering all expectations of what power is.

Jesus was a homeless immigrant fleeing for his life from political oppression. When the wise men came to visit Jesus, they spoke to king Herod the Great. They innocently shared their mission of finding the king of Israel. Herod, being shrewd and deceptive, asked them to let him know when and where they had found the king so that he could meet him too. After the wise men left, Herod ordered that any baby boy under the age of two must be killed. Joseph and Mary were warned in a dream by an angel to flee to Egypt. The very first Christmas was not a

happy time full of presents and good cheer. Yet out of that weakness, fear and suffering the Son of God entered the earth.

I am so thankful that I know Jesus can relate with suffering. Imagine if things had been different. Imagine if Jesus had been born in the palace with all the other nobility. What if he had not suffered the temptation in the wilderness or been forced out of towns? What if Jesus experienced wild popularity, fame and wealth? What if he didn't die on the cross, but instead died in a golden coffer? Would you even know his name? The truth is: God works through brokenness and hardship. Jesus came with a meek and submissive spirit, not bold and strong as was his right. Jesus related with the sinners, even though he himself was blameless. I am so thankful that Jesus came as he did, not strong as the world is, but suffering as I do sometimes.

This year is going to look very different from previous holiday seasons. There are loved ones we are not going to be able to see in order to keep them safe. The economic impact of COVID-19 means there may be fewer presents under the tree. Many will have to isolate alone to keep themselves and others safe. There is so much suffering in the world right now, and in the midst of this suffering there is opportunity to love others well. In this season let's remember the suffering of others as we ourselves feel the pressure of these hard times.

Song: O Come O Come Emmanuel

God works through weakness. Throughout the Bible, God reveals how He uses broken weak men and women and turns them into tools for His kingdom. Abram was nobody special before he answered God's call to be a pilgrim. He grew wealthy on the journey but trusted in God's strength and not his own. David was a poor shepherd boy born last in a large family. He rose through the ranks of Saul's men by leaning on God's provision and guidance. All of the judges were broken and fallen people, but God used their gifts to bring His people back to Him. The prophets were not mighty men who enjoyed wealth and fame. Instead, they were cast out, beat and abused by their own people. God still used them to draw His people home. You see, God does not need human strength, fame or recognition. He uses normal, broken, sinful people like you and me to accomplish His will. The story of Christmas is a story of brokenness. Jesus, the Messiah, the very Son of God, came from humble origins. He knows the suffering the world is going through right now. This gospel is for everyone.

In Luke 2:8-14 we read, **“And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will**

be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’

God is pleased to reveal His plan to the humble hearted. God came to save all people from the chains of sin and death. The sign He gave us is the same one we celebrate each year at Christmas. A baby, born to a poor family, was born in the place where animals ate food! The message of this salvation is not for the mighty, most knowledgeable people. It isn't for the self-righteous, priestly class. This message isn't for anyone who thinks they can earn a right relationship with God without a price being paid. The shepherds had reason to rejoice. The wise men had reason to rejoice. You have reason to rejoice because the Son of God paid for your sins. Out of weakness and humility, God saved the world.

John and Abby lost their jobs during the lockdown earlier this summer. They both had pretty well-paying jobs with a nice house and two cars. The industry they worked in got hit particularly hard during the lockdown. Most of their coworkers got laid off with them, and there were no promises a job would be waiting for them after the lockdown. They have three kids between ages 10 and 18 and they struggled really hard to provide for them. Unemployment was not enough to cover all of the overwhelming bills that just kept piling on. Friends and family were unable to help because they too were struggling through the summer. Soon John and Abby had to choose between food or bills. They found themselves without any savings, job or help. John and Abby will struggle to celebrate Christmas this year.

There are lots of people like John and Abby right now. There are many people who were in a much worse place to begin with and now are suffering so much more because of the pandemic. COVID-19 is not going away anytime soon. The holidays are times when we like to put on a happy face and forget all of the other stuff going on in the world. We throw large parties and see extended family and friends. This year is going to be a lot different. You have the opportunity to make this hard year something wonderful even in the midst of hardships.

I believe that COVID-19 can remind us why we celebrate Christmas. Believe it or not, we don't celebrate this holiday for the presents. This season of danger, confusion and hardship looks a lot closer to the first Christmas. Like that fateful day, we are experiencing a lot of political turmoil in our country. Everywhere we turn it seems that hate is spewed by one side of the political isle or the other. The Jews did not sit well under Roman rule. Jesus was born into a poor family and was forced to flee for his life to a foreign land. Right now, the global economy is in the tanks, and many are fleeing for their lives to somewhere safe.

On the first Christmas morning, the angels of the Lord delivered a message of salvation to a bunch of humble shepherds. That message is the same today as it was then. The Christ is born! God revealed His plan of saving all people through one humble baby boy! No amount of delicious food, beautiful lights or expensive gifts can compare to God's gift to His creation. So, in this season of hardship, let's get back to the roots of why we celebrate Christmas in the first place.

One of the best ways to celebrate Christmas is to love others well. Encourage your family or friends by reaching out to them and extending love. Remind people the good news of Christ's birth, that something good can come out of brokenness. Your love is a powerful agent for change. The best present you can give someone today is the good news that Jesus is born! He died for our sins and he loves us. No amount of brokenness or sin is too large for Christ's sacrifice.

If this message has moved you, if the Holy Spirit is convicting you and asking you to respond to God's word, I invite you to reach out to us. We would love to talk to you more about who Jesus is and how he saved the world through his death and resurrection. If you have not made the decision to follow Christ, it's still not too late! I would love to pray for you and walk with you down the journey of faith.

Here are some applications you can take away from this message. First, remember the suffering of others during your holiday celebration. Stay safe and keep your group small this year. Listen to your health and government officials and follow their guidance. Now is not the time to think you can beat the coronavirus or just disregard how many people are getting sick and dying. Second, remember that God works through weakness. This season can teach us many lessons about pride and chaos. It is easy to forget God when everything is going well. COVID-19 has forced us to slow down and think deeply. Finally, remember that Christ had to be born in order to die for your sins. Now is not the time to spread hate, apathy or loathing for your brother or sister in Christ. Now is the time to promote healing and health in a world so broken a price had to be paid. Cling to the cross. It is the safest place to be.

God bless,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris A Rice". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Chris Aaron Rice