

The Theology of Christmas

December 22, 1957

Now, I think it can be said without any successful contradiction that the holiday or event which has brought more song to the world than any other is Christmas. You have heard today, you've heard here tonight, you have been hearing over the years what we might call the melody of the Incarnation. But in this chapter, ten short verses, John gives us the theology of Christmas. And there is great danger that we build song on song, and song on song, and find that in the end that we have been singing about our singing. We must sing theology or be silent. And this is the theology of the Advent. I want to notice seven things and I'll point them out to you. You may check them in your Bible if you wish or keep them in your head.

The first is the wonder of that Eternal Life: that which was from the beginning. I pointed out not too many Sunday nights ago that this does not begin with a personal pronoun at all. It begins with the word "that" because he's not talking about a person first. He's talking about Life. The Life was manifested. And that Eternal Life which was with the Father, was manifested unto us. We stand before this Wonder as before a great mountain. There it is. We can't explain it. We can't lift it. We can't go under it. We can't move it. There it stands the great mountain of facts, that Eternal Life. And this Life was in God, and this Life was God. And this Life is the first great wonder of this season. That there is somewhere something we call Life. We have a bit of it in our minds and a bit of it in our bodies, but somewhere there is a great mountain of Life from which the jewel of our lives was digged; somewhere, a great fountain of Life from which the tiny trickle of our life flows. That is the wonder, that Eternal Life.

Now, let's pin that down. Let's mark that. Let's underscore that. And when the Christmas carols are laid aside for another year, and the tinsel is taken down, let's stand and gaze with wandering eyes upon that Eternal Life which was with the Father and was manifest unto us. And that's the second wonder, the wonder of Life manifested. For that is what Jesus did when He came to the world. He manifested That, not who, not a personal pronoun first, but an impersonal something that is beyond personality--That. That which is the key to all the world. That out of which all flowed. That out of which all has come, that Eternal Life. And that Eternal Life now manifests itself as a person. And that Life was manifested. And John said, John could say it, we have seen it he said, and we bear witness of it. And we show unto you that Eternal Life which was with the Father and which was manifest unto us. And our eyes have seen, and we have looked upon, and our hands have handled of that wonder called the Word of Life. Now the wonder is that Word of Life manifested.

Every time you think of the Incarnation you should bow your head for a moment. Every time it comes to your mind, you should utter a prayer. You should utter that inward prayer which the

church has learned long, long ago. The old father named Molinas who went about in Spain saying that it's all right to pray according to your beads; he was an old Catholic. He said, that's all right, pray the way the church tells you to. But then in addition to that, I've got a better way to pray. He said, pray in your heart. They finally put him in prison for saying that. But I recommend it, prison or no prison, that you learn to pray out of your heart. And that you learn to remember that the best prayer is not the formal prayer somebody else's has written. It is your prayer out of your heart.

If your child came to you and read the little word, Mama, I love you. I think you are very kind, and then you folded it back up and put it in her little coat pocket. And then the next day, came to you again and said, Mama, you are nice. I love you. That would get tiresome I think after a while, wouldn't it? Wouldn't your heart hunger for a spontaneous grin that wasn't in print? Wouldn't it get hungry for a little pat that wasn't in print that nobody else had thought out? Wouldn't it get hungry for spontaneity? I think so. And so, while we pray prayers, I read an article just recently condemning printed prayers. How can you condemn printed prayers when the Psalms, 150 Psalms are their printed prayers? You can't condemn them. But you can only say that they teach you how to pray, and you in the spirit of them you can have a spontaneous utterance of prayer.

Well, I got off on that when I said, every time you think about the wonder of the Incarnation, you ought to send up a little bit of prayer. You ought to wake in the night and pray. I suppose five out of seven mornings, I wake up and begin to talk to the Lord before I'm out of bed. The other two, I don't feel well and I have to remind myself I ought to do it and do it. And maybe if I live a little longer, I'll get all seven of them turned over to the Lord so that there'll be seven times and I won't have to remind myself.

Well now, the third thing is, and this mystery is here, this wonder. It is found in the fifth verse. This then is the message which we have heard of Him and declare unto you that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. Here is the wonder of the nature of God. God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. Light, this is the wonder of light. And the Scriptures mix up and don't try to keep separated, light and light. Light and life to all He brings, risen with healing in His wings. When that was written, theology was written. For Life and Life are one. This is that Eternal Life, and it is also the Light, that lighteth every man that cometh into the world.

And I suppose that there's something deeper than morals here. A great German theologian a generation ago wrote a book, has written a book which has become very famous in learned circles. And in that book, he declares that the idea of holiness goes back of personality. That you think of the holiness of God as a strange thing before you think of the person of God. I think he's right; I think I'm quite sure he's right. And he says, that the idea of purity is not the first idea of holiness. The first idea that comes to the mind or that came to the mind when the word "holy" was suggested, was not the word of being pure, not the thought of being pure, but the idea of being

greater than, higher than, beyond, other than, different from, lonely in its self-sufficiency, uncreated substance of like "That" without a pronoun. That, without a personal pronoun, That.

And then later on we attribute purity and holiness to God. So, when God says, be holy for I am holy, He's talking about moral purity. He's talking about spiritual cleanness. But beyond that, in back of that, and prior to that, is the solemn, indescribable something, which cannot be put into words. That there exists a nature, a substance in the universe which is Life and Light, and it is a Thing, and it is That, but It also has personality. And that Personality is God. And the wonder of this, this chapter here, the third wonder is the nature of God. God is Light. God is Light and in Him is no darkness at all.

Now, church history shows us that nobody, this could be said of nobody, except that Eternal Life which was manifested and become flesh. But apart from Him, nobody from Adam on down, including David and Joseph and all the rest of the great Old Testament patriarchs and the New Testament saints. Of not one of them could it be said in him was light and no darkness was in him at all. But it can be said of God.

Does this mean anything to you that in this hour of espionage and of ambassadors going about hiding facts this day, of slanted news and hidden truths and top-secret conferences. In this day when you can scarcely trust anybody. Does it mean anything to you that somewhere, accessible to us now, there is That which never, never, never sinned? That which could not, cannot sin. That which is Light and in It there is no darkness at all.

I listen sometimes to a program called Night Desk. It's just news, only its fresh news phoned in or talked in and on the radio. And the other night that is, I think Friday night, they had a story about a Goldblatts store in the city six stories high I think it was, or five. And that suddenly at 8:30 in the evening when the customers were all in, their lights went out. Went out clear from top to bottom. And it took them a long time to get the customers out. And the reporter said to one of the girls, a clerk there, tell us about it. Well, she excitedly told about it. And he said, was there anything stolen? She broke out laughing and she said they're shopping bags started to get full as soon as the lights went out. She said that they tumbled this and they tumbled that, whatever they could get they tumbled into their shopping bags. And she said they all went out with their shopping bags full.

Now, those people aren't low-down, the dregs of Chicago. They're citizens of our fair city, an average cross-section. That's the way people are. For that reason, I say you can scarcely trust anybody unless he is converted, and then you wait a while. But you can trust God. If that means anything to you, you can trust God. God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all. God will never betray you. He'll never let you down. He will never lie to you. He'll never shade a meaning. You can begin with, in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth and end in Revelation

with, even so come Lord Jesus, come quickly, amen. And you will not find one shaded sentence, not one covered paragraph, not one slanted word. Not one effort to deceive. Nothing in salesmanship. That's why I can't take this modern idea that we're to go sell the gospel. Go sell the gospel. Get the convert's name on the dotted line. Away with you, you children of the marketplace. If Jesus were to come, he'd take a rope and drive all such salesmen out of the church and start over.

No, no, there's no salesmanship in the gospel, my brother, none in the Bible here. No effort to persuade. No hiding one fact in order to accent another one. Everything in this book is as open as the sky, as pure as the waters that flowed down from the melting snows yonder, by the waters that flow from the mountaintop, so that there is pure, clean light and no darkness at all. God, you have God, my friends. You have God. Somebody said, the Russians have the Sputnik and we have the Salk vaccine. Very, very, very good. But we Christians can add one more thing. We have God. And in God, there is no darkness at all.

Then the fourth wonder here is, the terrible mystery of sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth isn't in us. If we say that we have not sinned, we make God a liar and His Word is not in us. This awful thing we call sin. Sin, this terrible thing that's been renamed and reshuffled and is now understood otherwise. But it's still sin. You can call cancer by a beautiful name, but it's still sin. Maude Smith goes to Hollywood and they rename her Lamour something or other, but she is still Maude Smith. And you can't make her any better by changing her name. They called, what was her name Smith, Mary Pickford, but she was still Miss Smith. Well, Mary Pickford and all that crowd, they are what they are, and a pretty name doesn't make them any better.

And when you call sin by some other name, it's still what it was before. Call a cancer something else and it kills its victim. Call infantile paralysis by the name of poliomyelitis and you have a big word but you still have a killer and a crippler. And call sin by some other name, a complex or something and it's still sin. And if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves. And if we say we have not sinned, we're calling God, in Whom is light and in Whom there is no darkness. We're calling that holy Thing, that holy One, that world-filling mountain of eternal life and light and purity, we're calling That a liar.

So, this terrible mystery of sin. It's here. It's all about us. It flows around us like the, like the bilge water, like an overflowing sewer, slimy and smelly and filled with silt. And it will leach in everywhere, and soaks through, and you scrub and come back the next day and it's there again. Sin is everywhere about us. That awful mystery, the mystery of iniquity Jesus called it, or one of the apostles, the mystery of iniquity. That's the fourth thing in this theology of Christmas.

All these things we have my friends. Don't let's get off on a tangent and be carried away with the sound of pretty bells. There's theology here, something sound and hard. You can come up to it and pound it and it doesn't ring hollow. The world will take any kind of a crazy thing and put a wreath

in front of it and a ribbon around it and they turn it into a Christmas gift, but it's all hollow. Everything the world has is hollow. But you can take this sound doctrine of that Eternal Life and the manifestation of that the Eternal Life, and the fact of God in His everlasting, impeccable purity and the awful fact of sin. These are hard, sound bullets, as hard as cannon balls. And you can't beat them down. You can't get rid of them if you tried. And you needn't fear them. They're there. They're as solid as the Rock of Ages.

And then there's the fifth one. And that follows normally the fourth. And that is the wonder of sin forgiven when confessed. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins. There is the wonder of deliverance from sin. The church is not yet mature and so we're sometimes shocked by seeing Christians lose their temper. Or, we're shocked by seeing a Christian do something that we feel he shouldn't have done, and that reflects on his Christian character. Well, that ought not to get us down brethren. You don't expect of your children, your growing children, the same degree of maturity that you expect of them when they get into their mid-20s. And I think that God does possibly not expect of us quite the degree of perfection that he would expect of us later, so that we may forgive the church and certainly forgive each other. And Jesus said to do that, seventy times a day. And Paul said that if thy brother sins against you, forgive him. Forgive as God for Christ's sake forgave us. So that there is, there's a margin there.

But here we have it, If we confess our sin, He is faithful and just to forgive. Now there's forgiveness with God that He may be feared, the Psalmist said, and there's forgiveness. Now that's a wonder. That's a wonder that this Holy God, in Whom is life and light, and in Whom is no darkness, this One who is immaculate and impeccable, in Whom no shadow of darkness is found, this One can forgive sin in His own creatures. Yes, He can do that and He does do that. And don't ask me to explain how or why. I don't know. I know that He does.

The sixth is, the wonder of cleansing from unrighteousness. Now it isn't enough to be forgiven. There must be cleansing, or the work God is not complete. There must be cleansing. Jesus Christ came not to forgive us only, but to cleanse us as well as forgive us. The best illustration I know is that of a man condemned to die. He has been condemned by society as unfit to live because he took a human life say, or betrayed his government say, and was guilty of treason. So, he is sentenced to die. And then some president or governor, or one able to do it, pardons him, pardons him.

And he goes out into society like these poor boys, brainwashed kids that came home from Korea. I haven't a hard word to say about them. Mostly they were ignorant boys who have been brought up in poverty. They had no education. They'd never been taught what a wonderful country America was. They didn't know what democracy was. They didn't know the distinction between democracy and totalitarianism. And when they went over there as kids going out of the woods, they couldn't take the pressure of the subtle damnably diabolical brainwashing techniques of these satanically

clever communists. And so, they said we'll stay will be communists. Now they're filtering home one at a time. And apparently, the government is going to let them do it and say a little to them, and forgive them.

But oh, my friends, there's one thing that no president, no judge, no governor can do. He can't cleanse them. He can't wash them from their brain washing. He can't take out of their hearts the knowledge that they once did that terrible thing. Nobody can cleanse anybody else. You can't reach in and sponge out of their poor minds the fact that once they sinned against that starry, spangled flag. These move around among us the poor follow that in a burst of boyish nonsense killed a Japanese woman over there. He's back home they say. Nobody's noticing him. We made a great international business out of it and now he's home and scarcely anybody knows he's around. They as good as exonerated him over there.

To save oriental face, they sentenced him and then suspended the sentence. That was to save face. But they let him go, and he's gone. He's home. And he's either been or will be soon discharged from the Army. They can't take that out of his heart. It's still there. If he was guilty, even guilty of a foolish burst of boyish carelessness, he is still guilty. And he knows it. He will remember it when he sleeps at night. He will remember it when he stands by a graveside, every time he stands by one.

You can't take out of a man what he's done even though he's pardoned for doing it. But the Scripture says, He's faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us, and wonder of wonders, that cleansing takes out the psychology of having sinned. It changes the psychology of having sinned. Heaven will not be filled with a lot of ex-sinners who can't get over it and who are still walking about looking down afraid to speak. He not only forgives the act, but he cleanses the mind so that there is not a psychology of sin anymore. If I had been ever guilty of treason against my country and had sold say, information to the enemy, and I'd been pardoned by a president, I still could not look at my fellow citizens, on you. We gathered together and people were gathered around and tried to act natural and relaxed and couldn't. And they couldn't look at me and I couldn't look at them. I never could feel right, because I would have the psychology of a traitor. And I would feel that I wasn't fit to be there and didn't deserve to be among them. And when anybody mentioned Washington or Lincoln, I'd suffer inside.

But the wonder, the sixth wonder here, and mystery is how God can take a sinner who knows he's a sinner and knows he's sinned, and so cleanse him that he loses the sense of having sinned. And he can be as though he had not. I've often used another man's phrase here that I borrowed somewhere from the Middle Ages. But they used to call it restored moral innocence. And that is what we have here, restored moral innocence. How is that?

Well, it is verse seven, the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin. Never forget it, my friend. The Babe in the manger never saved anybody. Let us not allow ourselves to be fooled by sentimentality and love a baby. Or even of appreciation to the Eternal Word made flesh. The Babe in the manger, cleansed nobody. But the Man on the cross did. And it was the blood of Jesus Christ.

One of the great cults, one of the major cults, I'll tell you which one, Christian Science. One of the great cults. Now, if anybody here is in that church, don't come to me and start arguing afterwards. There's no use, I know about them. But they have said in one of their great teachers, that is, great to them has said, the blood of Jesus Christ has no more power to deliver from sin now than it had when it flowed in his veins, which is to say that the lamb of Abel had no more power to open heaven and bring the hand of God in benediction upon Abel's head when it was shed than when the lamb gambled among the other lambs in meadow.

No, no, my brethren, the life is in the blood. And the mystery is, how that the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross can now come to the heart of a returning sinner and cleanse him so that he is freed from sin. Theologians sit down and try to figure how it cleanses. How do I care how he cleanses. If someone were to come with a bottle of something, or a ray or something else and say, here, I can cure your cancer and someone who withered away to 90 pounds and was ready to die, and take a spoonful of that and in five days be up and back at work. I wouldn't protest that I didn't know how it worked. I would say, I saw it work!

So, I don't know how the blood can cleanse. I only know it cleanses. And I only know that it will populate heaven yet with a company of happy people who have forgot they sinned. And yet, in their memory they know they have and they will sing together about their worthy being the Lamb that was slain to redeem us and wash us, from all kindreds and tongues and tribes and they'll remember it, but They won't remember it with a sneaking feeling. They can look on the face of God, the Scriptures said. They shall look on His face and His name shall be on their forehead. The sinner can't look on God's face because he has the psychology of the traitor. He knows, he knows he can't look on God. Adam couldn't look and ran and hid among the trees of the garden. Peter couldn't look and ran and cried, depart from me, O Lord. I'm an unclean man. Isaiah couldn't look and fell and said I'm undone. But the ransom sinner can look, for there's a wonder of cleansing here. The blood of Jesus Christ takes away the sense of sinning.

And then in the third verse is the seventh, and that is that you may have fellowship with us. And truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. This is the wonder of communion. Communion is more than the Lord's Supper. It's more than a name given to a church. Communion is union or it couldn't be commune. There must be union and there is a union, a union of people from everywhere. If I were to take a poll tonight in this relatively small congregation of your nationality. I suppose I'd have fifteen nationalities right here. And if I were to take a poll of your educational background, I suppose it scarcely be half a dozen of you, that had the same. But

yet, in Christ Jesus, we as Christians have a fellowship. A fellowship that isn't forced, it isn't strained. It doesn't depend on our beating the drum, nor wearing badges, or hating anybody.

You know, some people have a fellowship, a fellowship of hate. They're joined together by their mutual hatred for something. But you and I are joined together by our mutual love for somebody. And so there is a fellowship, and you don't have to ask, what's your background, the fellowship that's as wide as the world. It's the fellowship of saints. It's the communion of the redeemed. And truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ. You know, we stand rather awed in the presence of angels. If we get among angels, we'll be rather awe-stricken and we say, we'll say how wonderful angels are. And that's right. They are and they're so much ahead of us now. They're way ahead of us now. And they, they really, I suppose there's a reason we should think about them with the good deal of awe. But you know, there's going to be a time when they're going to stand at attention and look at us. Because no angel, no angel was ever redeemed.

God did not redeem angels. He took not upon him the nature of angels. He took upon him, the Seed of Abraham, the nature of Abraham, a man. And how God, that Eternal Life, and that Light, and that Holy One in Whom is no darkness, how He can walk arm in arm with men who've walked knee-deep in the slime of sin, whose mouths have been filled with cursing all the day long, whose throats have been an open sepulcher, whose thoughts have only been evil continually, now transformed and forgiven, and renewed and reinstated and cleansed. God convened a fellowship with them. I think the angels are going to stand around in respectful attention and say, we don't understand it. I wonder if that's not what Peter meant when he said, of such things, angels desire to look into. We may be a mystery to them. They are a mystery to us, but perhaps we'll be a deeper mystery to them.

So here we have the theology of Christmas. You can take this with you. And when you take the tree down and run the vacuum over the needles that spilled on the floor. And you put the decorations away for another year and settled down to just living in the United States, you're still have this: hard and solid and big. You can build on it and you can live on it. It will be bread, mountain high to eat. It will be a rock, mountain high to build on. It will be a fountain of light, to light you through all this world and the world to come. Thank God for the melody of Christmas. But thank God more for the theology out of which that melody sprang. For all the melody in the world and all the lovely dreams of beauty would be nothing if they had no foundation. Here's the foundation. They rest as solid as the holy throne of God. You and I can believe them and we dare believe them; stand on them and live on them and when the time comes die on them!