

Introduction: The Inseparable Link Between Christmas and the Cross

Welcome to this final reflection in our series on *Joy*. In a season often defined by festive lights and cheerful carols, we pause to seek a joy that is deeper and more enduring. The true, lasting joy of the Christmas story is not found in the manger alone, but is intrinsically linked to the profound purpose of the cross. Over the past few weeks, we have explored "Joy in the Calling," witnessing how Mary's trust in God's purpose led to lasting joy, and "Joy in the Chaos," recognizing that God's presence shines brightest even when life feels out of control. Now, we turn our hearts to the ultimate source of our hope: the joy found in the cross.

The central theme of our time together is this: *The cradle only makes sense when you see the cross, because the purpose of Jesus's birth was His redemptive work.* The joy of Christmas is not simply that Jesus came—it is *why* He came. As we unwrap the familiar narrative, how can we find the profound joy of redemption woven into the story of Christ's birth?

1. The Prophecy: A Sword of Sorrow Foretold

In the biblical narrative, prophecy serves a strategic and sacred purpose. It is God's way of preparing the hearts of His people for the fulfillment of His divine plan. The prophecies surrounding the birth of Jesus were not merely announcements celebrating a new king; they were also profound declarations that prepared those closest to Him for the difficult and sacrificial path of salvation He would walk. In the temple, just days after His birth, a holy man delivered a message that was both a blessing and a burden.

Scripture Reading

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Reflection

Simeon, a man described as "righteous and devout," had spent his life waiting for this very moment—the arrival of the Messiah. When Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple, the Holy Spirit confirmed that this child was the fulfillment of God's promise. Simeon's blessing begins with beautiful praise, declaring Jesus as a "light" for all nations. But his prophecy quickly takes a sobering turn. He warns that Jesus will be a "sign that will be spoken against," causing division and revealing the true condition of human hearts.

Then, Simeon delivers a hauntingly personal word directly to Mary: "And a sword will pierce your own soul too." Imagine the jarring nature of this statement. Why would you say such a thing to a new mother in a moment of pure joy and dedication? As a pastor, I get the honor of blessing newborns. Imagine if I were visiting new parents—one a huge Tennessee Volunteers fan, the other a huge Georgia Bulldogs fan—and while holding their precious baby, I prophesied, "This child will grow up to be a huge fan of the Alabama Crimson Tide." I would likely be escorted out of their house! Simeon's purpose was not to diminish their joy, but to prepare Mary for what was to come.

She would see Jesus take His first step and say His first word. She would see Jesus play hide and seek with other children. She would see Jesus work hard at his woodworking craft. But she would also one day see Jesus die on the cross. This prophecy directly connects to the suffering servant described over 700 years earlier, who was "despised and rejected" and "pierced for our transgressions" (Isaiah 53:3-5). The Roman soldier's sword that pierced Jesus's side would correspond to the sword of immense sorrow that would pierce Mary's own soul. This encounter reminds us that we cannot separate the joy of His birth from the purpose of His death.

Application for Reflection

How does this passage challenge you to embrace the full story of the gospel, including the parts that involve suffering and sacrifice, rather than focusing only on the celebratory moments?

This prophetic word was a shadow of the cross cast over the cradle, a shadow that would also be seen in the very gifts brought to honor the newborn King.

2. The Present: A Gift That Foreshadowed the Grave

Long after the shepherds had returned to their fields, another group of distinguished visitors arrived to worship the Christ child. The journey of the wise men was an act of profound faith, and the gifts they brought were not merely valuable treasures. They were deeply symbolic offerings that revealed the different facets of Jesus's identity and mission from the very beginning, pointing to His kingship, His purity, and ultimately, His sacrifice.

Scripture Reading

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

— Matthew 2:11

Reflection

Each gift offered by the wise men carried a distinct and powerful meaning, prophesying the life Jesus would live and the death He would die.

- **Gold:** This was a gift fit for a King. It acknowledged Jesus's royal lineage and His rightful authority over all creation. It was a declaration that this child, born in a humble stable, was the sovereign ruler the world had been waiting for.
- **Frankincense:** This was a gift for a Priest. As a fragrant incense burned in temple worship, it was an offering reserved for God. This gift pointed to Jesus's role as our ultimate high priest, the perfect mediator who would bridge the gap between God and humanity.
- **Myrrh:** This gift is perhaps the most startling and profound. Myrrh was a valuable spice, but its primary use was for embalming the dead. To bring an embalming spice to celebrate a birth is like bringing a casket to a baby shower. It was a stark and unavoidable foreshadowing of Jesus's death and burial. This gift declared that Jesus was born to die. Many biblical scholars believe that Mary would have saved this precious ointment, understanding its purpose, and used it to anoint her Son's body after His crucifixion. In the midst of the joy surrounding His birth, the gift of myrrh cast the unmistakable shadow of the cross.

Application for Reflection

In our worship and service, do we acknowledge Jesus in His fullness—as King, Priest, and ultimate Sacrifice—or do we focus only on the aspects that are most comfortable?

These prophetic signs—the word of Simeon and the gifts of the wise men—were not random; they were threads pointing to the divine purpose behind it all: God's ultimate plan of redemption.

3. The Plan: Redemption Through the Cross

We have seen the prophecy of the cross and the presents that pointed to the cross. Now, we must focus on the plan of the cross. The symbols and forewarnings woven into the Christmas narrative were all pointing toward a singular, divine purpose: that Jesus would lay down His life for the sins of the world. A Christmas celebration that honors the cradle but ignores the cross is incomplete. While the cross itself is an instrument of suffering and sorrow, its *outcome* is the source of our everlasting joy.

Scripture Reading

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for

us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

— Hebrews 12:1-2

Reflection

How could Jesus *endure* the cross? The author of Hebrews tells us it was because He was focused on the "joy set before him." What was that joy? It was the salvation of humanity. You. You are that Joy. The cross transforms our sorrow into joy because it changes the ending of our story. As the sermon rightly states, "The cross didn't cancel Joy. It completed it."

This completion comes through redemption, which is defined as "the action of saving or being saved from sin and evil." For redemption to occur, there must be a savior and one who needs saving. Jesus, in His sinless perfection, is the Savior. We, in our sinful state, are the ones in need of saving. The incredible truth of the gospel is that God has already done His part. Everyone on the entire planet has been saved from their sins. It doesn't matter if they have received the message of salvation or confessed their sins. The free gift of salvation has already been given.

Now, that doesn't mean that everyone is going to Heaven. God does His part, but we must do our part. For example, let's say that I placed tickets to the College Football National Championship Game into the mailbox of 10 people. Those ten people have tickets. But let's say that only 9 people opened the mailbox to receive the tickets. Those 9 people are going to the game. The one person who did not open their mailbox is not going to the game. Yes, they were given a ticket. They just did not open and receive it. It's the same way with redemption. Jesus has already paid for your redemption. But it takes you opening your heart to receive your ticket to Heaven.

Application for Reflection

This is a moment for honest self-assessment. Have you simply acknowledged that the "ticket" of salvation is there, or have you opened your heart to truly receive the free gift of redemption that Jesus purchased for you on the cross?

A Concluding Prayer of Surrender

Lord Jesus, thank you for the miracle of your birth and the purpose of your life. We confess that we often celebrate the cradle without fully embracing the cost of the cross. Today, we acknowledge you as our King, our Priest, and our perfect Sacrifice. We surrender our sins to you and ask for the faith to fully receive the gift of redemption you purchased for us. Fill our hearts with the complete joy that comes only from you. Amen.