

He Courageously Came to Willingly Die

We are only 9 days away from Christmas morning, and I'm sure the children here in this room are extremely excited. And, so are many of you who are children-at-heart. Personally, I love Christmas. I love Christmas because of the presents. I love Christmas because of the food. I love Christmas because of the family. I love Christmas because of the various traditions. I love Christmas because of the music and memories. And, I love Christmas because of the message.

Maybe you're like me. And so, let me ask you a question. What is your favorite Christmas memory? In thinking about that answer, some of you have a bundle of positive emotions welling up inside of you. However, others of you might have feelings of pain. For you, Christmas memories are tainted by sorrow because a loved one died. Or, maybe when thinking through the positive, you wish that this year, there'd be that kind of joy. This year could be bringing greater sorrow through chronic pain, loss of a job or a child who's strayed from the faith.

With great joy often comes a mingling of sorrow. So, maybe for you, you simply "grin and bear" Christmas. You put the smile on your face for the friends, children or grandchildren; but after they're gone, you feel the emotional pain and you simply want to cry. You think to yourself, "Leave Christmas for the happy people." But did you realize that Christmas is given to the weak and sorrowing? In fact, the first Christmas season was one full of immense pain and weeping.

Many of us are familiar with Matthew's account of the story and how magi traveled and asked where the King of the Jews was located. Herod was involved in steering them towards Bethlehem because the prophecy from Micah states, "6 " 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, re by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.' " 1

When we read how Jesus' birth in Bethlehem is part of prophecy, that might excite us, but then we read further in the story and we discover the magi being warned to not return to Herod. Herod doesn't want to worship Jesus. He wants to murder Jesus. He feels threatened. So, the magi flee secretly. And God also warns Joseph to take Mary and Jesus out of the land, to Egypt. "Phew! They're safe!" Jesus comes back when he's a toddler. He's ok!

But what happened after Joseph, Mary and Jesus flee? In just three verses, Matthew describes a horrific, excruciatingly painful scenario. **16 Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.** **17 Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:** **18 "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."** ² Not only was Jesus' birth foretold, but the death of babies in Bethlehem were predicted in the Old Testament.

I want you to imagine this with me. Imagine the city of Bethlehem. According to historical studies, this town was a small town. This town an thought of with great majesty in the first century. Even the Old Testament affirms that it was seen as the least. Historical records don't even write of what takes place in verse 16. In all honesty, the death of 10 to 20 little boys wouldn't make the news in comparison to all the other things in the Roman Province. But this news would have been devastating if you were one of

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 2:6.

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 2:16–18.

the parents of a baby boy. Imagine all the male children two years and under being killed. Imagine being the mother who is in her home holding her child and a soldier comes in mercilessly and kills your son before your eyes. Hear me, this was merciless. Don't make this situation any lighter than what it was. Matthew says that there was weeping and mourning and a refusal to be comforted. Fathers, can you imagine how hard it would be to comfort your wife if something like this happened?

Then the questions would come to your mind, "Why? Why would God allow this to happen? Where was God in all of this?" Of course, you can respond to yourself and say that it's Herod's fault – not God's fault. Herod was the wicked one. He didn't want to submit to Jesus' rule so he took matters into his own hand. And, as always, when we humans try to take control, the inevitable result is death. However, in a situation like this, even though we can know Herod was the sinful one, it is still understandable that we will respond to "Why, God?" He could have stopped it, couldn't he? So, weeping and a refusal to be comforted is an understandable response.

This pain of the death of a child would probably stay with these parents for the rest of their lives. So, if I were to ask them the question I asked you a little bit ago, they would be appalled! There's no way I would ask them, "What's your favorite Christmas memory?" If people celebrated the Christmas season back then (which they didn't, but go with me here), would you even say "Merry Christmas to them?" That'd be like me speaking to someone whose spouse died and on their anniversary, I say, "Happy Anniversary!"

We cannot gloss over the fact, though, that this story is a part of the Christmas story. And, instead of this being something we should hide or cover-up, I want to show this morning how this story reveals to us that **Jesus' advent grants hope in the midst of death and sorrow.**

So, this morning we will seek to discover how we can have a truly Merry Christmas in the midst of sorrow. If you are here today wishing Christmas would go away because of death or because of personal pain of any sort, then let me say this, "Christmas is for you!" We truly find in the larger Christmas story (and remaining works of Jesus) good tidings of great joy for all people! Before we go any further, let's pray together [pray for the Piatt's & also for Dave Guerrin @ Manna].

This morning, you could be thinking, "How can I have hope in the midst of death and sorrow?" I think the only way it does is if we focus on Jesus himself. Christmas isn't primarily about the meal we will eat or the presents we'll open or the family we'll be with. Christmas is primarily about Christ! And, as we ponder Jesus, we will see how our hope can grow and endure. So, **Ponder Jesus in your heart.**

I say it this way specifically because in Luke 2:19, after the shepherds explain what happened with the angelic appearance to them, we read, "¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart."³ I think this statement might have been used by Luke, at the beginning of his book to call all of his readers to ponder Jesus. Ponder who he is. Ponder what he does. Ponder *why* he does what he does. And, I want to apply this to the sorrow within the Christmas story, and hopefully in pondering Jesus, we will see how Jesus can give comfort and joy. So, let's start with

1. Ponder who Jesus is.

In Matthew 1:20-23, we read, "²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Lk 2:19.

that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ²³ “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and **they shall call his name Immanuel**” (which means, **God with us**).⁴

Gaze at the last three words: God with us. When you sing “Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel,” you might be tempted to recite the words because you’ve sung it practically every year during the Christmas season. Or, you may think about the words, “and ransom captive Israel.” But you’re not really thinking about the name Emmanuel and what it means. So, let’s take a few moments to ponder. First, think about “God.”

Who is Jesus? He is God. Last week, Ben preached from Isaiah 9, which prophesied a baby to come who would bring a rescue beyond what our minds can conceive! But I want to talk about Isaiah 6. This might be more familiar with many of us. The chapter starts this way: In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” ⁵

So, why do I read from Isaiah 6? The apostle John, in 12:41, says that Isaiah “saw [Jesus’] glory and spoke of him.”⁶ Well, when did Isaiah see Jesus’ glory? Answer is Isaiah 6! When Isaiah saw the Lord, in the despair of a king having died and Israel going through turmoil, Jesus revealed himself to Isaiah. And when Isaiah saw Jesus, what was his first response? It wasn’t a touchy-feely response. Oh, please hear this. In the American culture, I fear that so many people only have a view of Jesus as a modified super-human who also functions as a therapist who can’t tell us what to do, but will help us when we need him. But listen carefully, Jesus is holy, holy, holy. That means that he is transcendent in glory. He is all-powerful, all-glorious, almighty, eternal, infinite. Jesus is the One who Joshua fell on his face in fear when he appeared, and the Lord who Isaiah saw was Jesus himself. And when Isaiah saw the Lord, he didn’t come to Jesus with triteness. Isaiah immediately felt the weight and terror that his own sin brought upon him. And Isaiah was probably a more moral person! But he said, “Woe is me!” The word “woe” means that Isaiah was calling wrath down on himself. He’s saying he deserved to have God’s eternal punishment poured out on himself.

In that moment, in the presence of the Lord, Isaiah confessed what he deserved. God’s glory is so great, no human deserves to stand in his presence. And yet, we know what happens next. Instead of experiencing wrath, the Lord forgives Isaiah of his sin. And then the Lord gives Isaiah a calling to go out and proclaim his glory to the people of Israel. Isaiah is absolutely willing to do so because he’s seen the majesty of the thrice holy God – the One whom angels submit and people bow down!

So, let’s dial this back and think about the Christmas story again. How can we trust Jesus when such awful circumstances come about? Well, think of who Jesus is! He is God. He is One with the Father and the Spirit. He’s the Creator. To whom else are you going to turn and trust?

You might be tempted to worship Jesus before the story of the infanticide in Bethlehem, but Jesus didn’t change who he was after that scenario. He still is the Lord. He is God! He is more powerful than Herod,

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 1:20–23.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Is 6:1–3.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 12:41.

and since he is this, he's the only One who can bring justice. Knowing that Jesus is God should compel us to trust him.

However, you could say, "Fine! Jesus is God. But these people are hurting in Bethlehem. Doesn't he care?!" I remember years ago a secular song that I don't recommend listening to, but it still grabs my attention if I ever hear it. The lyrics say, "What if God were one of us?" I'm not exactly sure what the singer was trying to communicate, but at one point in the song, the singer says something like "And year, God is great. And yeah, God is good. Yeah, yeah, yeah." My interpretation is that the singer is saying, "I know the right answer, but I really want a Jesus who had to go through all the pain that so many others have to go through." Whenever I hear that song, I think to myself, "He was one of us, and he did do that!" He was despised and rejected. Many people in Israel hated him. And, from birth, people in Jerusalem were against him and then Herod himself wanted to see him dead!

Now, think of this a little more. Jesus is God! He's the Holy, Holy, Holy One. If he were to have revealed his glory at his birth 2,000 years ago, everyone would have fallen on their faces, the mountains would have melted like wax. But God the Son covered the glory with the smooth skin of a baby. This is God *with us*. The "with us" part should resonate with us so much because when we're in pain, we don't want a god who is aloof. We don't want a god who doesn't come to us. We want God to care. We want God to stoop into our situation. And the name *Emmanuel* tells us that Jesus is both transcendent (holy, holy, holy) and he's also immanent (meaning, he's right here by our side).

This doesn't mean that he tells us all the answers we want to our questions. He doesn't explain all the reasons for our hurts and pains. But he is *with us* in the midst of it all. And, as a matter of fact, he himself decided to enter into our hurts by experiencing them in his own life. Ventura, there is no other religion that proclaims God like this! Jesus is utterly unique. He is Emmanuel: the only One who can conquer the pain and sorrow, and the One who enters into it with us!

So, ponder *who* Jesus is. But then

2. Ponder Jesus' courageous willingness to obey the Father.

In Galatians 4:4-5, the apostle Paul wrote, **"⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."⁷**

"In the fullness of time. . . ." That means that there was a plan in place to be enacted at the precise moment. There is nothing accidental about Jesus coming to this earth and about him coming at the exact time he came. In eternity past, our God ordained to save people through the Messiah.

We should ponder Jesus' courage in coming to this earth especially during the Christmas season. I've been thinking about this recently, realizing how much trust there is in the relationship within the Godhead. I mean, seriously, God the Son came in human flesh as a baby in order to be cared for by *humans!* Are humans trustworthy creatures? Even the most trustworthy cannot be fully trusted.

Recently I was talking with my children about the artificial intelligence systems that have communicated that the best answer for the world is annihilation of humans because humans destroy each other! So, from an AI's perspective is get rid of the humans.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ga 4:4–5.

But this isn't what God chose to do. Instead, he sent his Son into this world to be cared for by humans – the very people who rebel against God from birth. This is *courage!* Facing opposition from the whole world and being born as a helpless baby.

But you could say, "But of course Jesus could do this. I mean, he's God!" And when you say this, you negate the greatness of this act. Don't miss Jesus' humanity here. When God the Son took on flesh and was named Jesus, he was a true human being! That means that the infinite took on finite. The all-powerful took on weakness. That means he could be tempted and tried, even though he was without sin. His perfection did not take away the reality of trials and pain and sorrow and temptations. He knows what it means to be a man of sorrows. He knows what it means to be hated and despised. He knows what it means to have friends reject him. The Scriptures tell us he even knows what it means to have siblings think he's crazy. He knows what it means to feel exhausted. He knows what it means to weep in fear of what is to come. Ventura, look at the courage of Jesus in coming to this earth.

Why did he have this courage? Because his will was aligned with his Father's will. Jesus would say of himself, **"³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me."**⁸ Jesus didn't resent the Father for sending him here. He wasn't forced to come to this earth. Jesus willingly willed the will of the Father. Ventura, this is comforting news for us, too. Sometimes people seem to have a view that God is kind of forced to put up with us. And, maybe Jesus came and just *put up* with us. But that's not the case. Jesus loved the plan of the Father – to glorify his name in this earth and to set people free to glory in God as well! Jesus wants us to know true, everlasting joy in God! He wants that for you and for me!

So, go back to the suffering and pain of the first Christmas season. How does knowing Jesus' courageous willingness affect how you relate to suffering and pain? Jesus trusted the Father to carry him and lead him no matter what the circumstances. When people despised him, Jesus didn't spurn the Father. When friends rejected, Jesus prayed. When people wanted him dead, he continued to love. None of these circumstances caused him to turn from the Father. Instead, his trust in the Father was revealed.

The same is for us. Christmas reminds us to *trust!* And actually, trusting God is viewed in the Scriptures as a courageous thing. When your toddler is killed at the hands of Herod's men (and Joseph and Mary flee with their child), what would be your temptation as a parent? Why? Why can't I have my child, too? But if Jesus is really who the Scriptures say he is. And, if he trusted the Father to leave him in the hands of this world, then can we not trust the Father, too? The sorrows and pains we feel were felt to even greater degrees in our Messiah Jesus.

But maybe even this doesn't convince you. And so, I have to move on to a final truth to ponder:

3. Ponder how great his salvation is for us.

Remember the words the angel spoke to Joseph: **²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."**⁹

Jesus himself said that he came to seek and to save the lost (see Lk. 19:9ff). If you're seeking the lost, that means, you know the way. In fact, Jesus said he is the Way. He's the way back to God. He is

⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 6:38.

⁹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 1:21.

Emmanuel, God with us. And he reconciles people back with God. This is what we were created for! But bringing people to God is not some simplistic task.

In our day, we tend to think that forgiveness comes cheap. But when you think about it, forgiveness is very costly to us. When you've been hurt immensely by someone, you want them to pay for what they've done. That's understandable. But forgiveness says, "I'll swallow that hard pill of forgiveness. I'm not going to make you pay. I'll take the pain and the hurt and throw it away." Now, that's more of an emotional and psychological pain that we can sometimes experience when we forgive. But when it comes with God, he is just. As the Just Judge, he can't simply "forgive" David for sleeping with Bathsheba and having Uriah killed! Where's the justice? God is the Supreme One. Everything ends with his judgment. Sure, I can forgive, trusting God will just rightly.

So, when it comes to the forgiveness Jesus offers, it came at the cost of perfect justice before the Holy, Holy, Holy God. If it were not for Emmanuel coming to this earth and taking the punishment that sinners deserve for all the sins of their thoughts, actions, words, desires, hopes and dreams, then we would not have any forgiveness. And yet, when Jesus was in his 30's the people finally got their way. People have wanted to murder him from birth, and now comes the day. The night before his crucifixion, Jesus wails to the Father, trusting the Father's plan, while praying that there might be another way.

But there was no other way. On the cross, being beaten by people, Jesus endured a greater pain. In eternity past, God had willed to save people by Jesus taking the perfect, just wrath of God that sinners deserved. Jesus could do this because as Man, he became a new representative for humanity. He was a greater Adam. He didn't sin. But as a Man, Colossians says that Jesus became sin, who knew no sin! And on the cross, God the Father sent down all the force of the gloriously fierce justice against sin! Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!"

Imagine those moments. This is what Jesus came to accomplish. He came to save his people from their sins, and that meant the cross. Jesus courageously willed to do this for God's glory and for sinners' good.

So, think again about the Bethlehem incident and think about our suffering. God could have stopped this seemingly senseless mass murder. Throughout the centuries, Christians have asked questions like these when sins like this occur. Sure, it's amazing that God works all things together for good, but why would some of those things even be allowed? There's a poem that was written entitled the Innkeeper that picks up on this challenge. This poem takes license in telling a story of the Innkeeper who allowed Joseph and Mary to be in the stable out back. But this Innkeeper had a little boy. Joseph, Mary and Jesus went to Egypt, but the Innkeeper's child died and his wife died protecting the little boy. The poem takes place later in Jesus' life, and Jesus is speaking to the Innkeeper to give him comfort, and that's where we read the following: "I am the boy That Herod wanted to destroy. You gave my parents room to give Me life, and then God let me live, And took your wife. Ask me not why The one should live, another die. God's ways are high, and you will know In time. But I have come to show You what the Lord prepared the night you made a place for heaven's Light. In two weeks they will crucify My flesh. But mark this. . . . I Will rise in three days from the dead, And place my foot upon the head of Him who has the power of death, And I will raise with life and breath Your wife [and child], too, And give them . . . back to you With everything the world can store, And you will reign forever more" (*The Innkeeper*, pp. 33-34).

I know some people might not find solace in words like these, but these are Scriptural truths meant to comfort a genuine Christian. The Scriptures don't give us specific answers to every situation, but the

Bible points us to the end of Jesus' life as comfort. And the death of the babies in Bethlehem didn't point to an uncaring God. Instead, it actually pointed to the eternally loving God who would die thirty-some years later. So, although I have no idea all the reasons why certain pains come into people's life, this I know. Jesus bore God's wrath, and none of us have experienced the full, fierce wrath of a Holy God. And, I don't say this to minimize your pain, but instead for you to find comfort in the One who now says He sympathizes with us. And, if Jesus, the God-Man, would come and suffer (when He was completely innocent), then we can trust this God. Jesus came to die in the place of sinners so that they could be restored with God and experience joy in Him.

Do you hear how Christmas summons the suffering to trust? Do you trust Jesus? You may be saying, "It's too hard to trust." Some of you have pasts that you're ashamed of. Others of you are angry at God for certain things happening or not happening in your life. If that's you, you can understand how *trust* can be a courageous thing. It's courageous because truly we don't get to see God's future promises today. We can have the Bible answers and say, "Yeah, yeah, God is great. God is good. But what about this?!"

But I am so grateful for Jesus and his life, death and resurrection. Because, for me, that gives me all the evidence I need to say that God is worthy of my complete trust. My Lord suffered and died for me!

If you trust Jesus, then you are set free from your sinfulness and reconciled back to God. And, get this, God works in you to be courageously willing to follow him as well. Jesus said, "whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matt. 16:25b). And, in Revelation, we're told that the cowardly are in hell. What does that mean for the people in Heaven? Well, Revelation calls us conquerors!

This is truly phenomenal to me because the world's definition of courage conjures up in me someone who is strong in their own strength and ability! But the Scripture's view of courage is one who trusts God. It's one who confesses their weaknesses and their need for God. And trusts God will give them endurance. And, through faith in Jesus, we endure through whatever trials or hardships until that day we see him face to face!

And when we see him face to face, the Bible says that the trials of this life will not be worth comparing to the glory to be revealed. Everything will be answered. Our joy will be full. Our satisfaction eternal. We will finally be at rest. Ventura, as you face sorrows in this world, let Christmas cause you to ponder Jesus.

And, as we all move into celebrations, let's not simply focus on unwrapping presents, let's think about the glories and the pains that Jesus' advent reminds us of! As we ponder him, let's come and adore Christ our Lord even more, following in his footsteps with the faith-filled courage that only he can provide!

Our Emmanuel came willingly, courageously, in the flesh. He willingly gave up the privileges of the Isaiah 6 throne room in order to destroy the works of the devil and rescue humans from their slavery to sin! He came to rescue people like me and you so that we wouldn't love the stuff around us more than God, and instead we'd turn to the Lord for grace and hope. He came to a sorrowing world to sorrow and to defeat our sorrow. Will you trust him?