

**(Play *The Christmas Song*)**

Chestnuts roasting on an open fire  
Jack Frost nipping at your nose  
Yule-tide carols being sung by a choir  
And folks dressed up like Eskimos...

Ah, the sights, the sounds of Christmas. Just sort through the stacks of Christmas cards that have arrived at your house, and note the scenes and symbols that we associate with the celebration of Christmas. The landscape of New England towns buried in snow, usually with the added touch of a horse drawn sleigh. On other cards, animals frolic: not only reindeer, but also chipmunks, raccoons, cardinals, and cute gray mice.

Inside the cards, you are greeted by sunny words, like love, goodwill, cheer, happiness and merriment. Our Christmas greetings suggest warm memories and pleasant thoughts. We think of snuggling up in front of the fireplace with mugs of hot chocolate. On the mantle, Christmas stockings are hung with care. In front of the window is a beautifully decorated tree. Exquisitely wrapped presents are piled beneath it. You can hear Bing Crosby singing “White Christmas” on the radio.

Even our Nativity scenes have taken on the warm and fuzzy feel. We see Mary and Joseph, calm and peaceful, looking adoringly at the baby Jesus. Bright gold halos, like angelic crowns, hover just above their heads. There is no indication of that they are worn and wearied travelers who have come a great distance. There is no sign of the stress of not being able to find a room to sleep in; No hint of the inevitable scandal that would surround these two rural teenagers, pregnant before marriage.

The little, Lord Jesus, no crying he makes. Whatever gave that song-writer that idea I have no clue. I suppose baby Jesus never spit up or had a dirty diaper either. There are the cows, the sheep, the donkeys, and even the birds and mice all seem awed by the presence of the child. Yet with all of this it doesn't seem to be a stinky barn. There are no piles of manure. The livestock don't seem to mind that an infant squatter has taken over their feeding trough.

The shepherds and the wise men are all there too. All at the same time. Heads bowed in worship. Even they seem other-worldly. Unruffled and serene.

Of course, we can't forget about the angels. But these angels certainly aren't the kind of heavenly beings to strike fear into anyone. If one of these cuddly-looking creatures appeared to you, you certainly wouldn't fall to your knees trembling, and the angel wouldn't need to tell you, “Do not be afraid.” No, if one of these angels appeared to you, you'd be more likely to pinch its

cheek and poke it in the belly.

I suppose it's a fine thing that we honor a sacred holiday with such homey sentiments; however, an honest assessment of the gospel accounts will not lead to such serene and pastoral scenes. Our modern views of Christmas, even in the church, are as much rooted in mythology and tradition, as they are in biblical truth.

Beyond the gospel accounts, however, the Bible provides yet another view of the birth of Christ that is totally foreign to our warm and fuzzy feelings. This view of the nativity has no icons stamped in gold foil. There are animals, but they aren't fuzzy sheep, rather it's a vicious dragon bent on destruction. There are angels, but these aren't baby faced cherubs, rather they are battle hardened warriors, and the mere sight of them would make you beg for mercy. If you were to find an appropriate scene to put on this Christmas card, it wouldn't be peace on earth and goodwill to men. Instead, it would be more like these images...

(Show D-Day scenes)

Ah, the sights, the sounds, and the smells of Christmas. Now doesn't that just make you want to snuggle up around the fireplace, and roast chestnuts over its flame? Now what on earth would ever make me want to associate those images with Christmas? Ah, but there's the catch. It's nothing on earth that makes me put those scenes with Christ's birth, but it's something that happened in what the Bible calls the spiritual realm. Listen to these words from Revelation 12:

### **Rev 12**

*Then I witnessed in heaven an event of great significance. I saw a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon beneath her feet, and a crown of twelve stars on her head. 2 She was pregnant, and she cried out in the pain of labor as she awaited her delivery.*

*3 Suddenly, I witnessed in heaven another significant event. I saw a large red dragon with seven heads and ten horns, with seven crowns on his heads. 4 His tail dragged down one-third of the stars, which he threw to the earth. He stood before the woman as she was about to give birth to her child, ready to devour the baby as soon as it was born.*

*5 She gave birth to a boy who was to rule all nations with an iron rod. And the child was snatched away from the dragon and was caught up to God and to his throne. 6 And the woman fled into the wilderness, where God had prepared a place to give her care for 1,260 days.*

*7 Then there was war in heaven. Michael and the angels under his command fought the dragon and his angels. 8 And the dragon lost the battle and was forced out of heaven. 9 This great dragon--the ancient serpent called the Devil, or Satan, the one deceiving the whole world--was thrown down to the earth with all his angels... 17 Then the dragon became angry at the woman, and he declared war against the rest of her children--all who keep God's commandments and confess that they belong to Jesus.*

As Eugene Peterson says, "This is not the Nativity story we grew up with, but it is the

Nativity story all the same.” This is the story of Christ's birth not from the vantage point of shepherds watching sheep on the hills outside of Bethlehem, or of a young couple forced to find shelter in a barn because there was no room for them at the inn. Rather, this is the story of Christ's birth from heaven’s perspective. This is how it was seen through the eyes of an angel.

### **The Spiritual Realm is Real**

Revelation can be a mysterious and confusing book, and though Bible scholars disagree over much of the interpretation of Revelation, most agree that Revelation 12 is talking about the birth of Jesus. In his vision, the apostle John, pulls back the curtain to give us a view into a world we rarely see, but of which we are always a part. This world is real, and there are several times in Scripture when we are given a glimpse beyond our veil of flesh to behold the splendor and terror of this world. It is the domain of the spiritual. It is the realm of angels and demons and spiritual forces that we cannot see, but our lives are affected by them.

For instance, there is this incident in the O.T. when the army of the king of Aram surrounded the king of Israel.

2 Kings 6:15-17

*When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. “Oh, my lord, what shall we do?” the servant asked.*

*“Don't be afraid,” the prophet answered. “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”*

*And Elisha prayed, “O LORD, open his eyes so he may see.” Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.*

The reality of that world is always there, but we usually can't see it. The last half of the book of Daniel is a vision into that realm. Paul writes about our involvement in the spiritual realm in Ephesians 6. But the book of Revelation is the most extensive look we have into this world.

It isn't just the Bible that acknowledges the reality of the spiritual realm. Only the most ardent naturalist denies the existence of the spiritual. As human beings created with a soul, we instinctively know deep down that there is more to life than that which we experience with our five senses. Even those who see us as nothing more than a highly evolved animal, believe in right and wrong on some level. They experience a sense of oughtness, purpose, and longing about life. They are moved by concepts such as love and beauty and believe such things should be pursued and protected. This makes no sense if this physical world is all there is and life is

nothing more than chemical reactions.

The best evidence for this spiritual realm isn't found with paranormal investigators listening for voices in the static with EMF recorders. You can see it in your own life. We have all had those transcendent moments where the domain of the spiritual intersects with our own. A prompting to call someone out of the blue which turns out to be exactly what was needed. An inner voice that saves a life by just a split second. The perfect temptation that had to be more than just the worst timing ever. It was almost as if it was designed to take you down. The right words came to you in the right moment though you didn't have a clue what to say. The curious stranger who shows up out of nowhere and disappears just as easily, but he changed your life. Did we just come face to face with an angel and not even know it? We must be careful here. We cannot build theology around anecdotes and speculation. But we've all found ourselves in thin places where the separation of our world and that realm is gossamer thin. Maybe its place: perched on a tree stump next to a burbling stream, or you found your thin place on top of a mountain. Sometimes thin places are a moment: such as when you first hold that newborn baby in your arms, or your friend is baptized into Christ. Relationships can be thin places. Certain people always make you feel closer to God. Maybe you feel it in your most intimate embraces with your spouse—reminders that that world isn't very far away.

Though shrouded in mystery, the spirit realm is not fantasy or imagination. It is quite real. It intersects, intercedes and supersedes our own. It explains the intangible forces that move us, drive us, and hold us back.

The birth of Christ wasn't just a significant event in the physical world. It was a revolution in the realm of angels and demons. In fact, the power, magnificence, fury, and glory of the spirit realm manifested itself fully in our world in the pinpoint of that little baby in a manger. A grandeur greater than the universe, somehow contained in one small sack of skin, born to a Jewish girl, wrapped in cloth, and laid in a feeding trough. Unimaginable. But true!

### **Christ's Birth Led to All-Out War in Heaven**

The angel chorus that announced his birth disturbed more than a few shepherds, it stirred up the entire cosmos. The story in Revelation 12 seems vastly different from the gospels, but it is the same story. Philip Yancey writes in his book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*,

Revelation does not mention shepherds and an infanticidal king; rather, it pictures a dragon leading a ferocious struggle in heaven. A woman clothed with the sun and wearing a crown of twelve stars cries out in pain as she is about to give birth. Suddenly

the enormous red dragon enters the picture, his tail sweeping a third of the stars out of the sky and flinging them to the earth. He crouches hungrily before the woman, anxious to devour her child the moment it is born. At the last second the infant is snatched away to safety, the woman flees into the desert and all-out war begins.

Revelation is a strange book by any measure, and readers must understand its style to make sense of this extraordinary spectacle. In daily life, two parallel histories occur simultaneously, one on earth and one in heaven. Revelation, however, views them together, allowing a glimpse behind the scenes. On earth a baby was born, a king got wind of it, a chase ensued. In heaven the Great Invasion had begun, a daring raid by the ruler of the forces of good into the universe's seat of evil.

The truth is that what was meant to bring “*peace on earth and goodwill to men,*” brought about war in heaven. The birth of the boy was a brilliant, strategic move against the dragon. Spiritually speaking, the birth of Christ was no silent night. It was D-Day. It was an unprecedented invasion. Who would have ever expected God to sneak behind enemy lines disguised as a human baby boy? Satan and his forces were totally unprepared for this.

The great dragon, Satan, tried to devour and destroy the child, but was unsuccessful. The immediate consequence of the birth was not Christmas carols, but a great war spread across the heavens. Unable to destroy the child, Satan launches a full assault against heaven. Michael, the commander of the angels, joins battle with the dragon and his demon horde. Back and forth across the skies the battle rages. The fighting was brutal and ferocious, but the angelic forces prevailed. The dragon and his hosts, no match for Michael and his angels, are unceremoniously tossed out of heaven, and forced to the earth.

### **The War Continues On Earth**

With the war in heaven lost, Satan shifts his attack from the Michael and the angels, and instead he attacks the people of God. Look at vs. 17, “Then the dragon became angry at the woman, and he declared war against the rest of her children--all who keep God's commandments and confess that they belong to Jesus.” The efforts of that Great Dragon are now directed at us. We are a part of the same battle fought by Michael and the angels. We are a part of the great cosmic struggle. Merry Christmas!

Christ's birth may make peace possible, but first there is a battle to fight. There is a terrible enemy, bent on our destruction, and he is throwing everything he has at us. We are not insulated from what happens in the spiritual realm. What happens there, has an impact here, and what we do or don't do here, affects what happens there.

The same Satan that tried to devour the child, the same Satan that fought with all the

angels of heaven, the same Satan that seduced Eve, the same Satan that made a case against Job, the same Satan that worked through Peter to try to tempt Jesus, the same Satan that prompted Judas to betray Jesus, the same Satan that persuaded Ananias to keep back some of the money promised to the church, is the same Satan that is attacking you.

1 Peter 5:8 says, *“Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”*

There are times in life you can feel the hot breath of the prowling lion on the back of your neck. Maybe its in your inability to get ahold of your money problems. You have a stubborn sin that no matter how many times you swear it off, you keep falling back into it over and over again. Maybe it’s in those angry words you can’t seem to keep from coming out of your mouth. It’s the lion on the prowl and he’s circling around you.

How can we, who are for the time being, confined to this physical world, have any hope to prevail in this battle that has spilled over from the spiritual realm into ours? This takes us back to the baby in the manger. Philip Yancey writes,

*“As a Christian I believe that we live in parallel worlds. One world consists of hills and lakes and barns and politicians and shepherds watching their flocks by night. The other consists of angels and sinister forces and the whole spiritual realm. One night in the cold, in the dark, among the wrinkled hills of Bethlehem, those two worlds came together at a dramatic point of intersection. God, who knows no before or after, entered time and space. God, who knows no boundaries took on the shocking confines of a baby's skin.”*

### **Jesus Gives Us Victory**

How does that give us hope? Because of what God was able to put in the confines of that baby's skin.

Col 1:13-23

*For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

*15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*

*18 And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. 19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*

*21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. 22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation-*

*Conclusion:*

Because of Jesus we have been delivered from the powers of darkness. Because of Jesus we have been given victory. Because of Jesus we have hope not only in this life and in this world, but in the one to come.

Let me leave you with a story told by J.B. Phillips. A senior angel is showing a very young angel the splendors of the universe. They view whirling galaxies and blazing suns, and then they flit across the vastness of space until they come to a particular galaxy of only 500 billion stars.

As the two of them drew near to the star which we call our sun and to its circling planets, the senior angel pointed to a small and rather insignificant sphere turning very slowly on its axis. It looked as dull as a dirty tennis ball to the little angel, whose mind was filled with the size and glory of what he had seen.

"I want you to watch that one particularly," said the senior angel, pointing with his finger.

"Well, it looks very small and rather dirty to me," said the little angel. "What's so special about that one?"

We've seen the pictures of our planet beamed to us by the Apollo astronauts, who described our planet as "beautiful." They were so moved by this vision that they read the Genesis account of creation. Astronaut Jim Lovell, reflecting on the scene later said, "It was the most beautiful thing there was to see in all the heavens." But that was the viewpoint of a human being.

To the little angel, however, our little globe didn't seem so impressive. He listened in stunned disbelief and the senior angel told him of the special place this dirty little ball held in the Creator's heart, and he was shocked to learn that this insignificant looking planet was the renowned Visited Planet.

"Do you mean that our great and glorious Prince...went down in Person to this fifth-rate little ball? Why should He do a thing like that?"...

The little angel's face wrinkled in disgust. "Do you mean to tell me, " he said, "That He stooped so low as to become one of those creeping, crawling creatures of that floating ball?"

"I do, and I don't think He would like you to call them 'creeping, crawling creatures' in that tone of voice. For, strange as it may seem to us, He loves them. He went down to visit them to lift them up to become like Him."

The little angel looked blank. Such a thought was almost beyond his comprehension.