

## **“Don’t Leave Jesus In the Manger”**

2 Timothy 2:8

The days leading up to Christmas can be some of the most uplifting and heartwarming of the year. Many experience a renewed love for their Savior, and a renewed desire to be close to Him. However, the days following Christmas, almost to a contradiction, can often strip away those desires and suck away spiritual energy as quickly as the holiday season brought them on. The Jackson family provides a good picture of how this happens.

The Jacksons would qualify as a typical American Christian family, if there is such a thing. The father, known as Thomas to his business associates, Tom to wife and friends, and just "Dad" to his two children, works in real estate, and although there have been a few rough times, he does pretty well overall. He is fairly well respected in the community. He serves as a deacon in his church, and sits on the board, but he really doesn't do much more than serve offering and communion.

His wife, Lisa, is a secretary at the high school, much to the dismay of their 16 year old daughter Rianne who just happens to be a junior at the school. Lisa enjoys her job. It's not terribly demanding work, and it allows her the opportunity to socialize with many of her friends in the community. She is active in the P.T.A. club, and also in her church. She makes plans for the Ladies Activity club for two Saturdays a month, and is the treasurer for the Dorcas society, a ladies benevolent group, which gives food, cards, and flowers to elderly widows in town.

Rianne is a pretty girl, who is involved in several of the school's extra-curricular activities. She is president of the Spirit Club. She just missed being a cheerleader this year as was beat out by one vote by Susan Elliot. But she is sure to make it next year after Susan graduates. Rianne would probably be more bitter to Susan about losing except that she is dating Ron Thompson, the guy Susan would like to be going with. Rianne also enjoys her church youth group, but tries not to appear too religious or anything.

Bobby, their 13 year old eighth grader is an ace student. He is already taking a couple of Freshmen computer courses. His parents think the computer may be his best friend, but really Tim and Josh are. They just happen to all share a love for electronic gadgetry. Bobby is also involved in their church youth group, but it's mostly because it gives him the chance to

play the keyboard during youth praise.

Eight days ago Lisa thought it would be one of the best Christmases in a long time. The rest of the family would have agreed. Recent years have seen more division in the family as the children have grown and sought more independence. This year, however, personal problems have pushed everyone to seek more solace in their family.

Pastor Gerald Scott had preached a series of sermons leading up to Christmas that were right on target. These concluded with a climatic Christmas Sunday sermon that brought many to tears, even dad. This prepared the way for a heart-tugging Cantata. Pastor Scott's sermons had put the ball on the one yard line, and the Cantata brought it in for the score.

That night, following services, the family spent nearly three hours in deep discussion for the first time in years. Everyone admitted to many shortcomings and promised to try harder. Dad even mentioned that they needed family devotions and needed to make church a greater part of their lives, which was surprising, because it was always mom who got everyone up for church. Still more surprising, was the fact that there were no groans or excuses in response to Dad's statement, rather, everyone voiced their agreement.

Christmas day arrived. Instead of tearing right into the presents, Dad read the Christmas story from Luke and everyone prayed a prayed, giving thanks to God. The men didn't watch football all day, but decided to spend the afternoon with the family. The wives were especially pleased.

But that was eight days ago, now its today, and for some reason that feeling is gone, but no one can really tell why. Nothing has happened. There seemed to be nothing too damaging in the images of the last week. It just somehow faded and has almost disappeared.

The day after Christmas everyone chipped in to clean up the mess. All the ripped-up wrapping paper was stuffed into two trash bags and Bobby hauled them out to the curb. But mother rescued all the bows so they could be used next year. Everyone munched on the trays of Christmas goodies until they were only unsightly collections of crumbs. The Christmas feast has again become the New Years's resolution diet. Dad put the Christmas CDs away in the back of the entertainment cabinet.

The next day they made the annual post-Christmas trip to the mall to return gifts. Some

were too small or too big. Others were the wrong color or brand, and still others were just unwanted. Mom, however, would never return unwanted gifts. She said it was rude and insensitive. All her unwanted gifts just found their way to the back of the closet or drawer and would end up at Goodwill 5 years later.

On the trip back home Bobby noted that the streets seemed so depressing without the Christmas lights on the light poles, but dad said it made it easier to see the stop lights. Both had a point, I guess. Mom said she missed the Christmas specials on T.V. the most, but Rianne said most of them were boring anyway. They got home much later than anticipated, so they all went to bed without having devotions like they said they were going to.

A couple of days ago the Visa bill came in with all the charges from Christmas shopping. More was spent than Tom had thought, and he and his wife fought about it more than an hour. As a result they were both grouchy toward the children and they skipped family devotions that night.

Today, the Jacksons threw out the real tree downstairs and packed up the fake one upstairs. Dad carefully unwound the strings of lights so that they would not be tangled next year. Everyone else complained he was taking too long. Mom put the bulbs back in their boxes, wrapping the nice ones in tissue paper, but a couple will be broken next year despite her efforts. Rianne vacuumed the pine needles and some twine got caught in the motor and broke the belt. Dad complained and shouted a lot, but he went to the store to get another one. Bobby took the boxes of decorations back up to the attic, and mom filed away the new batch of Christmas cards. She could never throw them away, even the ones that didn't have a personal note.

Now that the holidays were over, Dad reset his sights on closing several deals he had in the works. He was determined this year was going to be better than last. Mom was late in preparing class lists for the new semester. Rianne got a phone call and was told that Susan Elliot was making moves on her boyfriend. Bobby had already mastered his new Modern Warfare 2 game and was climbing the online rankings. He was already thinking about what game he wanted for his birthday in March. They only had devotions three times since they decided to start having them, and now they didn't seem like such a great idea.

Deep inside, each one wondered what happened to that special feeling they had just a week ago. What they didn't realize is that they had not just wound down from another holiday season, but had run out. They didn't just put away the Christmas accessories, they put away Christmas. They left Jesus in the manger, and the nativity set was nestled away in a box up in the attic somewhere, and on the throne of their hearts, where Jesus should now be, remained themselves, their own desires, their own dreams, and their own plans, and the new year brought nothing new, but a calendar.

**BODY:**

This subtle, yet sad scenario happens to many Christians every year. As Christmas approaches, millions celebrate the birth of Christ: minds are awakened, hearts are softened, better intentions are born, commitments sworn, and promises made.

But after Christmas these all seem to wear thin as the demands of real life catch up and crowd in like black Friday shoppers at a doorbuster sale. And the fire that burned so brightly fades to a few smoldering ashes.

"Why does this happen?" we wonder, and "What can we do about it?" Paul makes a simple statement to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:8 that I think gets to the answer to this problem, *"Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David."* It's a very simple verse. Tempting to just skate right on over it, nothing too profound, stuff we already know, right? Look at it again, closely, "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David."

You see, much of the problem that causes people to descend from their spiritual highs so quickly following Christmas is answered right here, "Remember Jesus!" Well, we don't forget Jesus do we?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the problem is not that we don't remember Jesus. It's how we remember Him. We remember Him as cute and precious little baby lying in a manger, with chubby little fingers and toes, and pudgy, rosy cheeks all wrapped up in swaddling cloths. We're not much better than Ricky Bobby in Talladega Nights only praying to baby Jesus because his favorite Jesus is the Christmas Jesus.

The problem with this is that Jesus didn't stay this way. It isn't the end of the story. It is

only the first chapter. He came as a baby, but he didn't stay a baby, and for our lives to be changed it takes the whole story.

How should we remember Him? Look at the verse again, "*Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David.*" We are to remember Him as raised from the dead. You see, for Jesus to offer hope and help for our lives, it took not only Him coming as a human into this world, but it took His death, resurrection, and ascension as well. If Jesus is not today raised from the dead, and sitting at the right hand of the father in heaven, Christmas means nothing, and we have no hope.

We need to remember Jesus not only as come as savior, but gone above as Lord over life and death. We must remember Him as Savior and Lord. We cannot have Jesus as Savior, if He is not also Lord. In His resurrection, Jesus was victorious, conquering the ultimate foe. The resurrection is the foundation of the Christian faith. Christianity stands or falls on the historical truth of the resurrection. If it happened, Jesus is not just Savior, He is Lord of everything. If it isn't true, then He is neither Lord nor Savior.

We also are to remember that Jesus is the promised descendant of David. It had been prophesied that a descendant of David would rule an eternal kingdom. David was Israel's greatest king, but a greater king was promised to descend from him. The fact that Jesus had descended from David showed that he had power and authority to rule. He is Lord.

But we just remember Jesus as a baby in a manger. What is wrong with this? A baby is cute, but not powerful. A baby is loving, but not authoritative. A baby may give one hope, but no strength. And a baby makes noise, but gives no direction. Jesus, as a baby in a manger makes no demands on our lives. He is a non-threatening presence. As a baby savior, he is comforting and reassuring, but unassuming. He is a sentimental figure, but he doesn't require the total surrender of your life to Him. Accepting this Jesus doesn't require that you change much in your life.

But Jesus raised from the dead, sitting on the throne of heaven is an entirely different story. On the throne He is a sovereign ruler. He can demand our submission, and He deserves it. Accepting this Jesus requires the total surrender of our life to him.

Let me be clear. I have nothing against Christmas and the baby Jesus, but we must remember that it's not the whole story. It's only half the gospel. The gospel begins with a baby in a manger, but it doesn't end there. It ends with Jesus Christ on the throne in heaven!

A gospel that leaves Jesus in the manger or even on the cross is insufficient. It cannot save. Only a crucified and resurrected Lord who has conquered the grave can save.

But many don't want this gospel; they want a non-confronting Jesus in a manger. This gospel is comforting without being commanding. It is assuring without being authoritative. It is caring without being convicting. It is manageable without being managing. The problem with this gospel is that it cannot deliver.

People are quick to accept a savior, but not so quick to accept a Lord, a master, a ruler. Jesus as savior is fine, but Jesus as Lord and Savior is a tougher medicine for many to swallow. But it is the medicine that heals, and thus the medicine that offers real hope, not the empty hope of an impotent savior. Jesus cannot be your Savior unless He is also Lord of your life. Is He the Lord of your life?

When remembered as Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ means real change and makes concrete differences in our lives, and doesn't just create a special, warm, fuzzy feeling inside that quickly fades after the holidays. This is the gospel Paul remembered and look at the difference he said it would make:

*Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. Here is a trustworthy saying: if we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.*

No, it is not an easy gospel. There is no cheap grace here. It is no undemanding truth, but an all-assuming truth that costs us our earthly lives, but gives us a heavenly glory. That's like exchanging a single penny for all the wealth of Fort Knox.

My challenge to you this morning and for this new year is Don't leave Jesus in the manger, but remember Him raised from the dead. Put Him on the throne of your life, for He is Lord and Savior.