

GOD. WITH. US  
TAKING BACK CHRISTMAS  
Dec 9, 2007

Introduce the Study Guide and Outline.

As we enter into this Christmas season, we're talking about ways to take back, reclaim Christmas. Last week, Aaron the pirate flailed a flimsy little sword around and talked in pirate voice. I just want to go on the record as saying that we don't play with foam swords out our house...we use these (Pull out the light saber).

Now my son, Andrew, and I have fights all the time with these. I think it's really cute that he calls them light savers! And Darth Vader is Dark Vader. He, of course, is always Luke Skywalker. And he can even do the spin move! And he uses the force to steal my light saver away from me.

You remember the "force" from Star Wars, right?

Some people see God as a "force" like kind of God. They believe there is some force in the universe, maybe a creative force, or a uniting force, but it is distant and impersonal. This is the way some people see God. God is this universal power but is really not connected to people in any personal way...God does not intervene in history.

This is just one conception of God that people have. There are others...Some people may see God as an angry or disappointed parent ready to dish out some punishment...Kind of like Bruce Nolan does at one point in the movie Bruce Almighty. Maybe you remember this scene: **"I'm just a little ant and God is a bully kid with a magnifying glass..."**

Some people may see God as a Judge who is watching their every move, making a list of all the good and all the bad. Then he checks it twice before deciding if we've been naughty or nice enough to get into heaven.

There are lots of conceptions of God out there. And the truth is that the Christmas season of our culture really doesn't do much to clarify or reveal the truth about God...instead it may contribute to confusion and mis-understandings about God. Which is why we're talking about taking Christmas back. There is something true, something real, something God wants us to know about who he really is...and that is why there is a Christmas in the first place.

Going back to the Old Testament, God was revealing his nature bit by bit to all of humanity through the people of Israel. This is going to be the Old Testament in less than one minute. This is the essence of God's revelation through the Old Testament

- God is creator of the universe
- God is a relational God who works in and through history
- God wants his light to shine through the relationship he has with Israel to all people
- God desires to bring order to life through the law to help us live in ways that honor our relationship with him.
- God is faithful in all his promises, but gets disappointed by a faithless people, which lead to pictures of judgment and punishment.
- God redeems his people by forgiving the restoring them.
- God loves justice and mercy.

And all along, God was planning an intervention with his faithless people.

Why did God place this intervention, his coming in the birth of Jesus, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century in Palestine?

There were factors outside of Israel that certainly became benefits to the early church and the spreading of the good news of Jesus. One of these factors had to do with the influence of Alexander the Great. Alexander lived over 300 years before Jesus, and assumed the title of King of Kings, because he had such great success in conquering other nations and tribes and establishing a vast empire.

The way that Alexander held this vast empire together was a process called Hellenization – which basically meant to establish Greek culture and values and language into the mindsets and structures of all

the conquered peoples. This was not a process that the Jews liked at all because it was at odds in many ways with their own laws and culture. The benefit for the spreading of the news of Jesus for the early church is that this process established a universal language. It was so thoroughly established that even during the days of the Roman empire, Greek was more universally spoken.

Around 60 AD, the armies of Rome marched through Palestine, making it part of the Roman empire. By the time Julius Caesar was finished with expanding the empire, it encircled the entire Mediterranean Sea. Augustus Caesar, also known as Octavius, had a long and secure reign, establishing what was called the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome. Now, it must be noted that this peace was held with a ruthless, iron hand that eliminated any threats. Nonetheless, the Pax Romana provided for fairly secure and safe travel routes across the empire. Certainly the apostle Paul's Roman citizenship kept him out of the hands of Jewish leaders in Jerusalem who wanted to kill him (in much the same way that they did Jesus) and able to carry on his ministry at least by letters for several more years. Many of those letters now make up a majority of our New Testament. So there were some clear benefits for the spreading of the gospel in the Greco-Roman world that were not in place prior to their existence.

Now let's take a quick look at why this was a good time for God to send his messiah to the Jewish world of Palestine.

The Jews of Jesus' had fallen significantly from the heights of the kingdom of David and Solomon. For the majority of the 8 or 9 centuries between King Solomon and Jesus, Israel was under the thumb of some dominating super-power. By the time of Jesus, the Jews were so used to greek culture and language and the domination of other powers that most people had given up using the mother tongue of Hebrew in everyday life. Instead, they were using Aramaic, a language used in most of the eastern provinces of Rome. How sad is that, how telling is it that a country that prided itself in being set apart from other nations has given up its language.

And yet, these people held out hope of deliverance. The voices of the prophets fueled the dream of a time when God would come to save them from their miseries, grant them peace, prosperity, and mastery over their own destinies through a saving leader. As you listen to a couple of passages from Isaiah, look for the dream that the Jews still held in their hearts.

***Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.***

**Isaiah 7:14**

***The people walking in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of the shadow of death  
a light has dawned.***

***For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.  
And he will be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.***

**Isaiah 9:2, 6**

The dreams of a time when all wrongs will be righted; the land once promised by God to his people will know everlasting peace; when another David will appear, anointed and empowered by God, and he will lead his nation, and sit upon the throne of Israel and will return her to glory. This is the anointed one, called Messiah in Hebrew and Christos in Greek.

So even though they were demoralized in many ways, this dream was alive. And even though the time was ripe for their deliverer to come, their vision was incorrect. We have to enter into the concept of peace in the mind of anyone, anywhere in the Roman world in the first century. The only way any nation in the Roman era understood peace was through the suffering and destruction of war. Peace was always won and held through military strength and the ruthless willingness to annihilate any opposition. Peace, then, was

always relative. For one people's peace usually meant suffering for another. Therefore peace was also fleeting. They were looking for the peace that would come through a strong leader's sword.

So see, right from the get go with this Christmas thing, there was a story in opposition to true revelation God wanted his people to see. The vision of the messiah that they held was actually a distraction from the truth God wanted them to see and experience through the life and ministry of Jesus. As it turns out for a majority of the Jews, their hearts were distracted and they were not able to recognize Immanuel, God with us.

Our world is filled with distractions too. The desires of our hearts can also keep us from recognizing God with us. The true story of God putting on skin and coming to our world gets easily lost among all the other things we give our hearts to.

I was watching *The Charlie Brown Christmas* this week with our son, Andrew. He's six, and he just loves Snoopy! Every kid seems to love Snoopy. I did when I was a kid. Anyway, I saw something new, something kind of hidden and symbolic in the story that I never saw before.

You remember the story, right. Charlie Brown in directing a Christmas play, but he's all confused about what the story is, what the play should have in it. But at one point, he decides that no matter what, they will need to have a Christmas tree on the stage. Lucy tells him to be sure to buy one of those new, bright, aluminum trees. "Make sure it's aluminum, and pink". So Charlie Brown and Linus go to the tree lot and there are all these new aluminum trees all over the place. And he walks by several of them, including a few pink ones, until he comes to the tree. You remember the tree? This is where I saw something new. This is the only real tree in the lot. The rest were all artificial. This is on purpose, isn't it? Charlie Brown is searching for what Christmas means, and he sees this tree, this scrawny, unassuming tree, and it draws him because it is real! Aaron talked the symbolism in Christmas trees last week. This tree is symbolic. This tree represents the real meaning of Christmas, the true story, standing in the midst of all the artificial, man-made stories.

I never knew before why Charlie picked this tree. I just assumed it was because he really was a blockhead, just like they all called him when he got back with the tree. And they all laughed at him. And then he gets all frustrated and screams out the question, "What is Christmas all about?", which of course is the question we are also meant to ask ourselves. And you know what happens next. Linus steps up and reads, ***And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. (Luke 2:8-14)***

"That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown!"

Is God more than the "force", a distant, impersonal power?

Is God more than the angry parent, ready to punish?

Is God more than the Judge who is keeping score?

Gospel of John put it this way, ***The word became flesh and dwelt among us.*** The Word – that powerful voice of God who spoke all of creation into being. The Word that spoke the law to Moses. The Word, the voice of the prophets. The Word that has been revealing God for centuries...that Word that is the essence and heart of God, became flesh and lived among us.

It's not the picture of the distant "force" He was touchable, personal, and vulnerable, even weak and dependent.

He didn't come in vengeance to punish the evil doers, or in judgment. Instead he came in grace, as John later says, ***For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*** (John 3:16-17) He came to bring us freedom and new life. Life filled with purpose and meaning and infused with power to overcome all our fears, including our greatest, the fear of death.

Remembering what God is doing will help us all take back Christmas. God is coming to us and he's saying, "This is who I AM."

I am the bread of life (Jn 6:35) who will satisfy the deepest hunger of your soul

I am the light of the world (Jn 8:12) that will push back the darkness in your life

I am the good shepherd (Jn 10:14) who will lay down his life for you.

I am the resurrection and the life (Jn 11:25) and in me you will conquer sin and guilt and shame and even death itself.

I am the freedom from your past

I am the hope and the great adventure of your future

I am the King of kings

I am the true prince of peace

I am the ONE.

And I am here!

Be still and know that I am God.

In this world today, there are lots of distractions that steal our focus from the one who came to show us who he really is. And this world isn't going to change. Taking back Christmas is something we do with our hearts and our lives. It's about our choices. Which story do people see in us? The story of God's light coming into our world or something else? If our lives were Christmas trees, would we be aluminum or real?

The eternal God takes on flesh and lives among us.

To help us keep our focus on God throughout this season, I'd like to invite you to be still for just another moment, and watch this.

**"Be Still – Christmas"**

We're taking Christmas back! And we're doing it by keeping our focus on God. With. Us. Immanuel. Will you join me in prayer?